

The Role of Context in the Composition and Performance of Bukusu Children's Play Songs

SYLVIA WASILWA¹, DR. FELIX ORINA², DR. KENNEDY SIMIYU³

^{1, 2, 3} Department of English, Literature, Journalism and Mass Communication. Kibabii University, Kenya.

Abstract- Singing has been described as the most common and natural phenomenon observed in children as they grow up. The sources of the songs that children sing are drawn from their immediate environment and everyday experiences. The Bukusu community is rich in social, cultural, historical experiences which are celebrated by song and dance. Song and dance is not a preserve for adults, children have their own songs which are enacted in various ways. They use the play songs which add rhythm and enjoyment to their play at the same time socializing with one another. This study is informed by the fact that the artfulness of Bukusu children's play songs is not entirely found in oral texts as conventionally conceived but in live performances. This paper explores the role of context in the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs. It examines how the environment in Bukusu community influences the composition of the children's play songs and also how these songs are performed so that the aesthetics embedded in them is brought out. The children's play songs are not composed and performed in a vacuum rather they take place within specified contexts which brings out the beauty in them. The study is important because it recognizes children's play songs as an important genre that brings out societal values and the organization of the society. Since children are a product of the societal values, their play songs cannot be separated from these values. Data for the study was collected through oral interviews and participant observation. Purposive sampling was employed. Ethnopoetics and Performance theory was employed to investigate the different perspectives from which Bukusu children's play songs are performed and interpreted. The study will enable us gain insight into children's creativity and appreciate the importance of context in the creation of aesthetics in children's play songs. The study will also create a reference for future literary scholars.

Indexed Terms- Aesthetics, Context, Bukusu, Children, Play Songs.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study focuses on Bukusu children's play songs. The Bukusu are a sub-ethnic group of the broader Abaluhya community who inhabit in Kenya's western regions. They currently dwell in Bungoma County alongside individuals from other areas. Teso, Sabao, and Tachoni, for example, are notable communities that either neighbor or live with the Bukusu. Over time, the Bukusu have had to look at themselves as a complete entity different from all these other communities. Each community in Africa, including the Bukusu has its own way of describing itself in its own oral literature. Oral literature, according to Ciarunji, is an art rooted on a people's cultural aesthetics, and it not only provides a sense of direction to a community, but it also reacts to the human impulse to appreciate beauty, and thus contributes to making the world a better place to live in (Ciarunji, 2007).

Oral literature is an artistic performance in which language is used to pass on knowledge and educate the community on diverse principles. Within African cultures, every rite of passage was marked by song and dance. Songs are very important in Africans' lives. Africans, are not only passionately religious but also deeply musical and poetic. From birth to death, Africans sing and dance their way through existence. This song and dance is not only limited to adults; children have their own songs that they perform while playing in their free time, and these songs communicate many parts of the child's community (Alembi, 2003).

Children's play songs are those songs that are sung by children during play. The songs are performed as children play and not sung in a static position, hence the name children's play songs. Finnegan observes

that in most African societies, children do to some extent separate themselves from adults in at least some play activities and have some rhymes and songs of their own (Finnegan, 1970). This is true to Bukusu children's play songs where children isolate themselves from adults and perform the songs as they play. The play songs carry the values and norms of Bukusu community and they also socialize the children in their communities. The Bukusu children's play songs are performed within established contexts which play significant roles in their composition and performance. The concept of context is of great importance in our study because it is the surrounding and the circumstances within which these play songs are composed and performed hence it is the context that determines the aesthetics embedded in the songs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper explores the role of context in the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs. In examining context, the study highlights the place or surrounding within which these play songs are composed and performed. This is aimed at interrogating the role a given context plays in ensuring that the beauty embedded in the play songs is exposed through the composition and performance. The dry river banks and courses provide a fascinating play environment for Turkana children, and it is on these play grounds that youngsters learn their duties, the culture, and values of the community (Ng'asike, 2015). The emphasis on context is key to the current study that investigates the influence that such play grounds have in the composition of Bukusu children's play songs as well as the performance of these songs. Alembi gives a lot of attention to children's literature. He analyses the style and social significance of Abanyore children's oral poetry focusing on context within which they are. In his study, he categorizes the oral poetry into lullabies and play songs. The play songs are structured with characteristic formations on their aesthetic features which include a variety of cognitive features. He opines that the aesthetic features of the play songs reflect various issues in the society performed (Alembi, 1991). This is important to our study which seeks to establish the aesthetics by examining how context influences the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs.

(Orina, 2014) observes that there exists a clear relationship between the prevailing social context and the conception, deployment and appreciation of symbols in the oral literature of Abagusii. Although the study analyses symbolism and transience in the oral literature of the Abagusii, the emphasis on the relevance of context inspires the current research to explore the role that context plays in the creation and performance of Bukusu children's play songs.

Foley (2002, p. 61) describes context as "... a living space unconsciously marked out by the performer and the (often actively participating) observers--often as part of the larger conversation." He goes on to say that "to appreciate a work on its own terms, one must attend the event in the proper arena, the same place (with the same limits) in which it has always been performed." (p. 69). In that it highlights the importance of context in the composition and delivery of Bukusu children's play songs in order to actualize the aesthetics hidden in them, Foley's study is similar to the current research (Bender, 2003, Ammann).

Mwanzi investigates how children's rhymes disclose more about the surroundings (Indangasi et al., 2006). She notices that individuals use song to convey their dependency on the environment. She admires the inventiveness with which children express themselves in singing games, as well as the fact that the singing games impart crucial knowledge that is part of the children's culture of origin. Although this study focuses on children's play games, it inspires us to analyze how the environment influences the composition and delivery of a Bukusu children's play song.

Chesaina (2007) argues that right from the beginning, children are creative and by its very nature, oral literature continuously satisfies the child's creative and educational needs. She observes that play is enjoyable, but it is also in the course of play that children learn about the world around them. This study inspires us to examine how Children in Bukusu community are influenced by the environment around them when it comes to the creation and delivery of children's play songs to bring out aesthetic pleasure in the songs.

Weche (2009) does a comparative study of Luo and Luhya children's singing games focusing on the style, value and aesthetic communication. The study is similar to the current research in that it explores the aesthetic values communicated by the children's play games songs. However it is quite different in the sense that the current research studies children's play songs and contextualizes them by examining how context influences the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs.

According to Ogunjimi and Na'Allah, the aesthetics of any oral literary work are determined by the setting and performance (Ogunjimi and Na'allah, 2005). He underlines that the texts live through performance, which is an axiom in oral literature studies. As a result, the article analyzes how social and cultural environment influence orality and beauty in terms of composition and performance. Bukusu song performances are treated to their cultural surroundings to highlight how important they are in the entire manifestation of aesthetics encoded in them.

Chesaina (1997, p. 40) asserts in her research of Embu and Mbeere oral literature, "...the aesthetic nature of oral literature provides human beings with an avenue through which to channel and develop creativity. As they perform or attend performances of oral literature, they are entertained and at the same time given a chance to test their creative prowess. Chesaina's study is different from the current study in the sense that it explores and classifies the genres of oral literature at the same time emphasizing the social significance of oral literature. This study relates to the current study in that it appreciates the creativity derived from the beauty in oral literature genres including children's poetry.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is anchored on both ethnopoetics and performance theories. The main goal of ethnopoetic text is to show how oral performers enhance the aesthetic value of their performance within their cultural contexts. The theory has various arguments relating to culture and creativity. Hymes argues that word choice and language in an ethnopoetic text is often informed by the social values of a given society (Hymes, 2018). He further argues that the expressions

are founded upon a socially constituted poetic structure that is presented in an organization of experience as well as in the organization of reports on that experience. Alembi (2002) also makes a significant contribution to ethnopoetics theory when he observes that interpretation of words and actions should be within specific cultural contexts. This implies that the meaning of the words and actions in Bukusu children's play songs can only be interpreted within Bukusu community. This theory is relevant to the current study because it aims at exploring how context determines the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs.

Performance theory is generally concerned with interpretation of texts based on the context within which they are delivered. This means that meaningful interpretation of oral texts can only be achieved after attending the context within which they are performed. This theory, therefore, draws heavily from the actual performance of oral literature texts. Bauman provides a detailed historical account of the development of performance theory (Bauman, 1986). The theory can be traced in the 70s when scholars of interdisciplinary nature, from anthropology, linguistics anthropology, sociolinguistics, to folklore, shifted their focus. Mary Magoulick refers to it as a shift from "collecting and classifying "oral literature genres to studying and explaining their relationship with the source community. The current study examines how context determines how children in Bukusu community compose and perform their play songs. Here, the 'source community' is key because it determines the aesthetics in the play songs being studied.

According to Schechner, the instant individual performance begins, that region becomes marked off in some way, and outsiders viewing this are aware that the insiders are engaged in a different demarcated activity (Schechner, 2017). In essence, Schechner lifts the role of the performer above board in oral performances. The study inspires us to find out how this delineated area influences how the performer creates and performs the the children's play songs in Bukusu to bring out the beauty they express.

Kiguli observes that we should carefully examine what is available in the oral literature that we study and incorporate it into meaningful discourse (Kiguli,

2012). She goes on to claim that live performance is extensively practiced in various parts of Africa, and that one approach to recognize its relevance is to examine its practice within its context. This theory is significant because it allows us to interact with the Bukusu children's play songs within the environment that creates them, allowing us to interpret and understand the role the environment plays in composition and performance in order to realize aesthetics embedded in them.

Performance theory is significant with regard to examining the role of context in the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs. Generally, the artfulness of Bukusu children's play songs is not entirely found in oral texts as conventionally conceived but in live performances. The live performances cannot take place in a vacuum but in a context and our study examines how the context helps in the realization of aesthetics by influencing the composition and performance of the play songs. By attending to the actual context where the play songs are created and delivered, the researcher is able to understand the role it plays in bringing out aesthetics in the play songs.

3.1 Research Methodology

This section explains the methodology employed in the field. (Hockings et al., 2014) argue that field research entails asking appropriate questions based on theoretical understanding of communication then collecting and analyzing data in such a way as to advance our knowledge of how humans communicate. The study proceeds from the premise that any creative work of art has its own aesthetics. In order for us to experience aesthetics through examination of the role context plays in the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs. The study adopted a participant observation approach where the researcher closely observed the children sing as they play in order to come up with a clear picture of the aesthetics embedded in the play songs. (Mason, 2006) views the observation method as a tool for generating data and it entails the researcher being so poetically immersed in a research setting that they can experience and observe at first hand, a range of dimensions in and out of that particular setting. Participant observation occurs when the researcher is simultaneously a member of the the group she or he is studying and a researcher

conducting the study (Babbie and Mouton, 2011(Hofisi et al., 2014)). We cautiously participated in the performances, especially the singing, dancing, clapping of various play songs to avoid suspicion among children. Participating in the performances enabled us to analyze the aesthetics of the songs within their contexts hence determined the role contexts play in composition and performance. We were also able to identify with the children and this motivated them to play on and enjoy the play. Through this approach we were able to understand the Bukusu children's creative out-put in relation to the context that creates them and also we were able to identify how the different contexts dictates the performance of the play songs. Being an ethnographic study, The researcher observed, and participated actively in the performance of the Bukusu children's play songs, took photographs, recorded the performances, interviewed them in order to understand the role that context plays in the creation of the play songs and their performance Oral interviews were also carried out where, the researcher interacted with the children face-to-face informally in the context of their play with permission from parents and the teachers. Gubrium and Holstein (2002) advocate the use of face-to-face interviews, arguing that the method is more flexible than the rest in terms of question content and and the target population, usually delivering higher response rates (Jennings, 2005). Face-to-face interviews often deliver more accurate responses owing to the naturalness that obtains within the context. Jeffrey & Troman state that, researchers need to employ an ethnographic study if they are to understand the complexities of what is happening in social situations(Jeffrey* and Troman, 2004). They further observe that this approach captures and records the voices of live experiences, contextualizes experience, goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances, presents details, contexts, emotions and the webs of social relationships that joins people.

The research was carried out in Kabuchai constituency of Bungoma County, where seven Bukusu children's play songs were studied. Twenty children aged six to twelve years participated in the study. The participants were mainly boys and girls. The choice of the children was informed by their familiarity with Bukusu children's play songs. The researcher employed Purposive sampling that accorded her an opportunity

to purposefully target a sample of the children to participate in the study. The researcher's choice of twenty children was informed by the fact that they were most accessible, knowledgeable and more likely to give richer and in-depth information on Bukusu children's play songs. This enabled the researcher to understand the context in Bukusu and examine the role it plays in the creation and performance Bukusu children's play songs.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

- Social context

Context, is a key component in both the creation and actual delivery of Bukusu children's play songs. In analyzing social context, the study focuses on the environment within which the play songs are composed and performed. Bukusu children's play songs cannot be appreciated in isolation from their social context. Ideally, Bukusu children's play songs are embedded in the social fabrics which then calls for a deliberate effort to evoke the atmosphere in which these play songs flourish if aesthetics is to be realized. It is this environment that dictates how the play songs are composed and performed by children.

Foley (2002, p. 60) equally captures the significance of social context when he posits that: "Any oral poem, like any utterance, is profoundly contingent on its social context. To assume that it is detachable- that we can comfortably speak of an oral poem as a free standing item-is necessarily to take it out of context. And what is the lost context? It is the performance, the audience, the poet, the visual aids, the occasion, the ritual and myriad other aspects of the given poem's reality." This underscores the fact that Bukusu children's play songs cannot be composed and even performed outside their contexts. A close examination of S1 for example reveals that children in Bukusu community freely create their own songs, imitate what they observe in their immediate environment and incorporate them in their songs as they play. Here children repeatedly respond "Wabule" this repetition creates rhythm, gives the song a touch of beauty and makes play enjoyable. It was also noted that humour is a major factor in Bukusu children's play songs because children manipulate the language for enjoyment. The play song is sung by boys and girls in the evenings. Evenings is an ideal time because

most of the children are free so they can isolate themselves and play. The song is performed in a circle and children, on their knees tap the group rhythmically as they sing the song. It was observed that singing in a circle symbolizes unity among Bukusu children and boosts their confidence. The ring formation brings out the aesthetics in the song. In the play song, words, phrases, are creatively exploited by children to make the performance lively. For instance, the soloist keeps on calling on participants to dance like 'Lutomia.' 'Lutomia' who is a role model in matters dancing 'kamabeka' is the main source of aesthetics since every child shakes their shoulders so hard in an effort to imitate 'Lutomia.' Kamabeka' (shaking of shoulders) is a traditional dance typical of Bukusu. People dance kamabeka during happy occasions and that is why children observe them and during their free time, imitate what they learnt from the adults. A close analysis of the song shows that children in Bukusu sing about what they hear and see in their immediate environment. The various performance aesthetics employed in the play songs originates from the social environment, for example the tapping of the ground by the children on their knees creates rhythm making play interesting and enjoyable. As the children exercise their body parts they are also being socialized in the community. The mood created reflects the nature of people in Bukusu who are always warm hearted. The song itself encourages values of friendship.

An analysis of S2 reveals that children use the images drawn from their local environment to illustrate certain concepts, condemn vices and appreciate virtues. For instance the image of a hyena is use to illustrate greed. This involves a creative process concerned with the production of imaginative sounds, ideas and visual representation. For instance, 'Namunyu' (Hyena) represent people in Bukusu community who are greedy, opportunists' ungrateful to others for the concerns accorded to them. The mention of 'mwitokho' (valley) clearly brings out the environmental aesthetics in the song. The free rhythm in the song is articulated by dance where children form two parallel lines as they dance to the tune of the song. It was noted that the soloist has many opportunities for improvisation in that he was able to add his own words in order to lengthen the period of play and make play interesting. The freedom to manipulate words gives the play songs beauty. As they sing, they mimic the

sound produced by the hyena ‘Uuui, uuui...’ to enhance the beauty of the performance.

It is the social context that encourages children to improvise songs that encourages virtues and condemns vices. Finnegan (1970, p. 9) asserts that “the scope of the artist to improvise or create may vary, but there is almost always some opportunity for composition.” For instance in S3, the innovative nature of the soloist is brought out when he infuses his own words that are closely related to ‘wameya’ and the chorus respond appropriately. The play song is sung by both boys and girls either at home or in school during games time, when children are free and alone in the fields. The children perform in a circle clapping hands. It is sung during play to ridicule those children who do not follow instructions hence end up being punished. Thus:

Solo: Wameya wameyanga wameya
(Wameya wameyanga wameya)

Chorus: Chokone
(Go and sleep)

Solo: Kimisilu kiamela kirio wameya
(Fools are like that wameya)

The term ‘wameya’ has been used metaphorically to refer to lazy members of the society, in essence, the children in Bukusu community sing the play song as they play to caution themselves and other people against such vices as laziness, disobedience. The children invent their own words to make the song enjoyable and to make ‘wameya’ fit in the society. The repetition of the words ‘Wameya’ and ‘Chokone’ adds rhythm to the performance, The pointing of fingers at one another also carries aesthetic effect in the sense that it creates a sense of immediacy and urgency of the need to change and be good social beings.

4.1 Cultural context

Bukusu children’s play songs are interpreted within their cultural contexts because they are deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the community. Bukusu communal expectations, values and beliefs held dear by the community are passed on to children through the children’s play songs. Sung in Lubukusu language, the language of the Bukusu community, children’s play songs draw heavily their references from the indigenous environment of their creation and these abound in their local imagery and local idioms. It was

observed that children in Bukusu learn some play songs from adults, where important community matters are passed on. For instance, in S4, the boy child is socialized to appreciate the role of defending the community from outside aggression. It is a play song found in a narrative sung by both boys and girls where Sela is resigned to fate singing and asking the ogre to eat her so that the community can be saved from hunger and famine. Mwambu, on the other hand, is seen as Sela’s savior because he reassures her that he’s there for her no matter what happens. Borrowing from a narrative clearly brings out the innovative nature of Bukusu children who pick oral literature genres from adults and improvise to suit them. The children sing the songs freely in their natural settings.

Solo: Mbili mbili Nyanja ×2 Mbili
mbili Nyanja×2
: Mbili mbili Nyanja icha undie Mbili
mbili Nyanja come and eat me
: Omukhana wo omwami efula ekwe The
king’s daughter so it rains

Bukusu children sing about the traditional aesthetics of the environment that communicates the community’s relationship with their immediate surrounding. For instance, S4 reflects respect for the environment and the relationship between humans and the environment. Bukusu children sing about the “Kumusangura tree” an indigeneous tree, dramatizing its relevance in the community. They mention various things they can do with the tree adding their own words to fit the activities they feel they can do with musangura tree. The play song is sung by boys and girls who hold hands together and sing as they move in a circle this brings out the aesthetic value of unity and friendship. Unity is a key value among Bukusu people, they have always strived to live in unity even with the neighbouring communities. The soloist who is inside the circle asks the playmates whether she can pass or not. Thus:

Solo: Mbiriranga musala si? ×2
(Which tree do I use when passing? ×2)

Chorus: Obiriranga musangura ×2
(You use musangura ×2)

Solo: Ano mbira namwe sembira? ×2
(Can I pass through here or not? ×2)

Chorus: Sobira ta! ×2
(You can’t pass ×2)

The soloist then struggles to cut the the bond between any two children and she escapes, this is followed by screams, laughter, and ululations as other children pursue her to show that the soloist has emerged victorious. The soloist's energy is being compared to Kumusangura tree which is a very strong tree that produces hard wood used for fencing. The song is sung any time children are free and they are on their own. Sometimes adults watch them as they play. The aesthetics attached on the value of the "Kumusangura tree" is exemplified by children mentioning different things the tree does, for example it provides wood used for herding cattle.

Use of chants by Bukusu children is a clear indicator that the play songs are deeply rooted in the Bukusu culture. It was noted that children mention animal images to represent certain values and vices appreciated or condemned by the community. S 5 is a play song in form of a conversation between two in-laws, the question answer technique employed by children clearly illustrates the aesthetics the song expresses. Khayusi (mangoose) snatches meat from one of the in-laws destroying the cordial relationship that man has had with the environment. The prevalence of animal images can be explained as the need for a Bukusu child to identify with the environment. They observe the environment and make comparisons with what they have in their songs. The play song was adapted from adults and children sing it during play. Children perform the song in two parallel lines facing one another, taking turns in the conversation. The satisfaction in the performance is achieved when a child is able to give correct and logical responses to questions posed by the in-law, failure to which evokes laughter and mockery from the rest of the children. The shame and frustration is short-lived though because the play has to continue. The eye contact maintained, relevant gestures and facial expressions are all geared towards enriching the aesthetic sensibilities in the songs.

- Historical context

Bukusu children's play songs transmits the historical experiences of the community, informs them about their surroundings as well as socializing them about distant races. We observed that the Bukusu historical context also determines the composition and delivery of the children's play songs. This is evident in S 6

where children make a historical allusion to colonialists and highlight the effects of their presence in Africa. The coming of the whites in Africa brought about western education which was admired by the uneducated, those people who underwent it feel so proud because they can communicate in English. However, the uneducated feel ashamed because they are incompetent in the use of the language of the white man. The play song is an adaptation from adult poetry and reflects the experiences of the general society in matters formal education. The soloists, mostly girls take turns as each one brings a different perspective on education and the embarrassment they go through for not being able to communicate in English. This experience encourages children in Bukusu to seize the available opportunities and realize the fruits of education. The depiction of the plight of uneducated in Bukusu is exemplified in the responses the soloist gives , for example , when greeted "Good morning" the uneducated responds 'kundu mumoni mbamo' (there's no speck in my eyes),when told to " stand up" this sounds like " Lubukusu" words " Sitanda engo mbayo" (There is no bed at home) these evokes laughter hence brings about humour in the play. The resigned mood created emphasizes the shame the uneducated undergo. In the performance of the play song, children form two parallel lines and dance gyrating their waists and clapping their hands. They also use various gestures for instance the words 'Engelekha andi nolayo' (I could have reached Abroad) are sung with hands spread apart like a flying bird running in a zigzag manner .This brings about the aesthetic appeal in the play song , making play interesting. 'Engelekha' (Abroad) refers to foreign English speaking countries where the uneducated admire.

CONCLUSION

The current study was designed to examine the role of context in the composition and performance of Bukusu children's play songs. It has emerged that the social, cultural and historical contexts play a key role in the creation and final delivery of Bukusu children's play songs to give rise to aesthetic pleasure in the songs. It was noted that children perform this songs on playgrounds while at home and school grounds while in school at games time. It was also noted that there's no specific time for play especially when children are

at home, this is because, whenever they are free, they isolate themselves from adults and creatively participate in different play songs that reveal the aesthetics, values and norms of the Bukusu people. Adults sometimes, in an effort to kill boredom, watch the children play as they sing. The songs are performed by both boys and girls. Children in Bukusu community compose their own songs, adapt adult songs and modify them to suit their play and they are also taught play songs by other children. It's also noted that Bukusu children heavily rely on images drawn from their immediate environment to create their own songs. The songs are performed in different movements, dance formations that are in line with Bukusu aesthetics and cultural values. However, the study concludes that efforts should be made to maintain the aesthetics of these songs since they are witnessing changes as reflected in formal education.

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