

Shifting Cultural Construction of The Bukusu of Bungoma County, Kenya

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Abstract - The study will appreciate the shifting cultural construction of the Bukusu of Bungoma County, Kenya. It will explore the impact of the contemporary global ecological change on the shifting cultural construction of the Bukusu by analyzing Sokoto's popular poetry and how it depicts the nexus between culture and landscape. To start with, the paper will examine the shift in Bukusu cultural construction through Sokoto's popular poetry. Using ecocriticism theory, the paper investigates the impact of ecological change on the cultural identities of the Bukusu people. It does this through exploring the relationship between landscape and the Bukusu cultural identities. Privileging historical perspective, the study will unveil the shift in cultural construction courtesy of the forces of urbanization, modernity and westernization. The findings of the study will underscore the impact of environmental change on the construction of the Bukusu people's culture as it is the underlying factor in the shift in cultural construction. In construction, Sokoto's popular poetry illuminates the shift in cultural construction due to ecological change, offering valuable insights as we brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation through poetry to restore, preserve and nature and our cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Cultural Construction, Urbanization, Modernity, Westernization, Shifting*

I. INTRODUCTION

Whenever one studies shifting cultural construction of any community, the impact of foreign forces takes center stage. This is attributed to the fact that cultural constructions are dynamic and ever-evolving courtesy of many factors key among them is global ecological change. This is particularly evident in the case of the Bukusu community, who's cultural has undergone significant changes overtime. In this development, one key figure stands out: Sokoto, a popular Bukusu spoken word poet whose poetry touches on almost all aspects of the Bukusu life. This paper explores Sokoto's poetry with a view of examining how urbanization, modernity, and westernization have led to ecological change

impacting the Bukusu culture hence the shift in cultural construction and identities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Deepa and Mishra (2024) study the complex relationship among ecology, culture and society in post-colonial contexts. Through their study, they note that ecological disruption acts as a catalyst for cultural transformation. Deepa and Mishra's study relates to this study in the sense that both delve into the complex relationship between the environment and cultural construction. However, while their study is context around River Congo and the communities around, this paper studies the relationship between the Bukusu community and their environment and how the environment has impacted on their cultural construction.

Nyamwange (2024) notes that transient and evolving cultural identities among the Gusii were influenced by external factors of urbanization and globalization leading to transient and evolving social structures and political transitions. Nyamwange notes that culture are transiting from one cultural space to another as a result of evolving modernity. This study relates to our study in the sense that both explore the role of modernity in the cultural construction and identity. However, while Nyamwange's study is anchored on Abagusii, our current study is contextualized on the Bukusu community.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by ecocriticism theory to analysis and interpretation of the texts. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined in 1978 by Joseph Marker in his essay 'literature and ecology'. Ecocriticism is the study of literature from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism is therefore, a critical approach to

literature and culture that focuses on the relationship between human beings and the natural world emerged in the 1990's as response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet.

Eco critics examine the ways in which literature and other cultural forms represent and interact with the natural world. They are interested in exploring the ways in which environmental issues and concerns are reflected in literary texts considering how literature can be used to raise awareness of environmental issues and promote sustainability and ecological awareness. Ecocriticism explores the complex and dynamic relationships between human beings and the natural world in order to uncover the ways in which these relationships are shaped by social, cultural and historical factors. This study found a footing in this principle in exploring the impact of the contemporary global ecological change on the shifting cultural construction of the Bukusu through analysis of Sokoto's popular poetry and how it depicts the nexus between culture and landscape.

IV. METHODOLOGY

According to Ong'ondo and Jwan (2020) research methodology is the overall plan of the entire process in particular research that explains the choice of a particular approach, highlights specific methods and describes the data generation techniques and analysis procedures. Generally speaking, the aim of the methodology is to explain the 'how' of the study. The study employed descriptive and analytical research designs where the researcher obtained information by watching sampled spoken word poetry performances then analyzing them with respect to this study the question of shifting cultural constructions was adequately addressed. The researcher got primary data through carefully watching of the sampled spoken word performances from You Tube, Facebook, and TikTok. Purposive sampling was employed in identifying the poet and the poems. The choice of the poems and the poet was informed through investigation of spoken word poetry artists whose ordinary performances addresses the issues of environmental degradation. Therefore, the sampled poems were the ones that would respond to the question the study sought to find answers. Content analysis, watching, transcribing, translation and interpretation of data gathered was undertaken with an aim of compiling a comprehensive study.

V. FINDINGS

Ecological disruption

Ecological disruption lies at the heart of Sokoto's spoken word poetry. This assertion is evident in the poems: *memories we lost*, *Sitawa and Sokoto*. The poems serve as potent metaphor for unraveling of balance in both the natural world and human societies. Through depiction of the extinction or rather reduction of animals such as gazelles, hare, insects such as termites, the disappearance of *lufuta* (weed), the shrinking of rivers and their far-reaching consequences, *Sokoto* invites the society and the literary world in general to contemplate the fragility of the ecosystems and the interconnectedness of all life forms. Sokoto vividly portrays the destructive forces at play, that is, deforestation, pollution as they disrupt the delicate balance of the ecosystem. These forces of disruption exist courtesy of modernization, westernization and urbanization in farming, construction, transport and communication.

The ecological disruption depicted in *Sokoto*'s poetry serve as a cosmos of the wider environmental crises facing not only the *Bukusu* community but also the African continent and the world at large. Due to environmental degradation, the river waters diminish stagnating its flow, natural plant species such as *lufuta*, which serves as food for hare died out or decreased in population due to pollution, certain species of animals such as hare, gazelle, insects such as termites decrease or die out. As the ecosystem diminishes and its existence either depletes or stagnates so too do the communities (animals, human beings included and plants) dependent on its bounty for sustenance and renewal.

Sokoto's poetry resonates with contemporary concerns over climate change. The change in climate leads to the loss of natural home or environment of animals, plants or other organisms. It also leads to decline in biodiversity highlighting the urgency in terms of environmental regimentation (management) and sustainable development. This calls for careful examination of Sokoto's poetry to unearth the impact of ecological disruption on the life of the Bukusu community and to the world so as to speak.

As earlier noted in this paper, ecological disruption is caused by deforestation and pollution courtesy of the forces of urbanization, modernity and westernization.

Globalization in this context entails the process of increasing integration and interdependence between the Bukusu community and the world's cultures, populations, economies brought about by trade, technology, people, investment and information. In a nutshell, it is a uniform and linear process of cultural homogenization achieved through cultural imperialism and domination. The juxtaposition of the foreign cultures and the familiar Bukusu culture affected individuals and the society in different ways which includes adoption of foreign agricultural practices and evolution of urbanization (increase in the proportion of people living in towns and cities). All these is attributed to westernization—a process by which the society, the Bukusu community, adopts western culture, customs and institutions.

While the forces of urbanization, globalization and westernization offered a leeway to Bukusu community to transit from their perceived 'barbaric culture' by western societies and availed some venerable sophistication to the urban dwellers and purported civility to the Bukusu nation, their impacts especially on the environment are far-reaching. This is evident in the discussion that ensues.

To start with, ecological disruption in Sokoto's poetry transcends its physical manifestations to encompass deeper themes, imbalance and dislocation in human societies. As the rivers shrink or die out, forests get depleted, land loses its fertility and vegetation cover decreases, so too do the economic opportunities and social cohesion of the communities within the ecosystem. Traditional livelihoods dependent on fishing, agriculture, hunting, and gathering. A change in the ecological composition leads to economic hardships and social upheaval.

For instance, in the poem '*memories we lost*', Sokoto painfully records that gazelles and hares are no longer coexisting with the community like before. He says '*chamulikha*', disappeared. He attributes this situation to the failure by the community to plant trees and conserve the existing forest cover. He notes '*khwebilila khubiala kimisala ne khubikha bichakha*', we forgot to plant trees and conserve forests. The habitat of gazelles and hare has been destroyed through deforestation and failure to plant trees. As a result, the community is suffering economic hardships, key among them is lack of wild game due extinction of the aforementioned.

In the same poem, the persona fondly remembers how greed and ignorance pushed the community to cultivate the riparian land. He says '*bulianga bwa khwikhupamo khwalima khukewa khwetila mupaka khuluchi*', greed made us cultivate the riparian land bordering the river. This act of cultivating the meadow has led to the shrinking rivers, stagnating its flow. In the same vein, Deepa and et al (2024: 2) while commenting on V.S. Naipul's 'A Bend in the River' note '...as the river shrinks so too do the economic opportunities dependent on its bounty for sustenance, trade and spiritual renewal'. This alludes to the far-reaching consequences of destroying the riparian land that will affect the livelihood of the communities around the river. Sokoto alludes to the destruction of the riverine forest as the root cause of current economic hardships of the Bukusu community.

Finally, in the poem '*memories we lost*', Sokoto highlights how laziness made the native Bukusu community apply herbicides in the name of controlling weeds to save growing maize. In the process, a special weed, *lufuta*, used as rabbit food died due to scorching. This has led to starvation among rabbits and because they do not talk (*sechikachula tawe*), we cannot tell when they 'cry' (*nechilila tawe*). Sokoto ends his poem by remarking '*chinduyu luno chikhalilikhasa khumenya sikila chosi chikonelasa busuma nga omundu*', Today, rabbits survive because they also feed on ugali just like human beings. Sokoto's juxtapositioning of the life of rabbits and human beings illuminates the profound interconnectedness of life forms and the collective action to ensure that the activities of one species does not endanger the lives of other species within the ecosystem. For instance, in this context, the life of rabbits is endangered due to man's action on the ecosystem.

Sokoto also nostalgically recalls how his father hunted alongside his dogs when the ecosystem was still 'virgin' in the poem '*sitawa*'. He goes ahead to mention how Naliaka could fetch firewood in the nearly forest as her mother prepares meals at home. However, ecological change has led to deforestation and therefore, there is no hunting in the contemporary society, no forest to fetch firewood like before. He notes '*Naliaka wateka khurenya*', Nalikaka that is good of you for fetching firewood. Nowadays, there are no forests nearby for the girl child to fetch firewood like before. Similarly lack of forests has

'chased away' wild game and therefore, no hunting like it used to be. Sokoto seems to passionately appeal to the society for the return of the old ways where we used firewood from nearby forests. This can only happen if we embrace tree planting, trees or forests being the natural home of wild game for our own and nature's well being.

Lastly on ecological disruption, the persona painfully remembers how Sokoto's prowess in hunting was instrumental in hunting down rabbits and grasshoppers when we used to have natural forests and grass. The persona notes that it was the only survival mechanism they had, having been orphaned at a tender age after the demise of their biological parents. This is evident in the poem 'Sokoto' when the persona says '*bola nge esaba yoo yayetanga...wakuwayiilanga chimuna nokhukatila kamatete nekhulia*', Tell them how your prowess in hunting rabbits and grasshoppers helped us have a meal! This recall helps in illuminating how environmental degradation has changed the ecosystem where animals like rabbits and insects like grasshoppers no longer exists to salvage the hunger related problems like they used to. This is a passionate appeal for restoration and conservation of the natural environment, that serves as a relief when we are stressed and hopeless.

In conclusion, '*the memories we lost*' serves as a powerful reminder of the consequences of ecological and the significance of restoring, preserving and conserving both the natural world and the human societies. Through the poem 'Sokoto', the poet illuminates the profound interconnectedness of all life forms and the urgent need for collective action to address the root causes of environmental degradation. It should not be a preserve of a few individuals like Sokoto's friend who sacrificed for the well-being of Sokoto's brother and himself after the demise of their parents. From the literary perspective in the poem, the failure of the society to care for the orphaned Sokoto and his brother symbolizes the failure of the society to care for the environment it orphaned.

It takes the sole hand of Sokoto's friend to care for them resulting in his rejection by his family and subsequent ex-communication. This is a replica of the situation in as far environment conservation is concerned whereby those few who care or show signs of protecting the environment are fought by the society. It is thus, Sokoto's passionate call for the

hands in protecting the environment. As we confront the challenges of rapidly changing world, Sokoto's poetry offers valuable insights into the far-reaching consequences of environmental degradation and makes a clarion call for restoration, preservation and conservation of our ecological systems.

Cultural Construction

Sokoto's popular poetry intricately interlaces the ecological and cultural landscapes of a post-colonial African community unraveling poetry rich with symbolism, allegory and profound social commentary. Composed and delivered against the backdrop of a community grappling with the legacy of colonialism and the complexities of urbanization, modernity and westernization, Sokoto's poetry offers a compelling exploration of the transformative power of poetry. Through his series of evocative and emotive poetry, Sokoto invites his audience to traverse the turbulent waters of environmental degradation and human sufferings, unveiling the multifaceted dynamics that shape the destinies of communities and individuals like.

For instance, the river in the '*memories we lost*' serve as a powerful symbol that transcends its physical dimensions to embody the essence of life, continuity and change. Initially, depicted as a majestic force of nature the river serves as a lifeline for the Bukusu community, sustaining livelihood and nurturing a sense of collective belonging. However, with the advent of urbanization, globalization, modernity and westernization, the river has undergone a gradual transformation, shrinking, its flow being stagnated by unseen forces of ecological disruption. This state of affairs is attributed to deforestation and greed that has made him cultivate the riparian land. This erosion of the natural order has a bearing on the cultural practices of the Bukusu community. As the river diminishes and stagnates due to ecological degradation so too do the community that depends on it. For instance, Sokoto notes that traditional cultural practices of hunting gazelle and hare has been forgotten due to deforestation, fishing is also gone as the river no longer exists. He says '*chingenelwa ne chikhisi chamulukhe khusialo ..khwelilila khuabiala kimisala..khwelima mupaka khuluchi*', Hare and the gazelles are no longer there because our greed made us cultivate the riparian land.

The decline of the river symbolizes the erosion of cultural identities tied to the river, land and its

resources leading to a sense of displacement and alienation among the indigenous Bukusu people. In this context, ecological disruption becomes not only an environmental crisis but also a social and existential one, challenging the very foundations of human existence. Sokoto's poetry underscore the nexus of ecological and cultural systems, highlighting the need for holistic approaches to environmental conservation and community development.

The Echoes of a Vanishing Past

Sokoto's poetry serves not only as entertainment peace but also as a repository of memories and a conduit for nostalgia. As Sokoto navigates the currents of his own life, nature become a metaphorical mirror reflecting the evolution of societies. Through the lens of memory and nostalgia, Sokoto delves into the complexities of human experience, exploring the tension between the allure of the past and the inevitability of change. Memory in Sokoto's poetry is not merely a collection of events but a powerful force that shapes perceptions of the present and aspirations for the future. As Sokoto reflects on his experiences with nature especially with the river, natural forest, among others, he is confronted with typestry of memories both bitter and sweet-that inform his understanding of self and society. The village once teeming with life and vitality becomes a vessel of nostalgia, evoking a sense of longing for a bygone era of innocence and abundance Sokoto's memory of childhood innocence, youthful idealism and moments of transcendent beauty serve as reminders of the fleeting nature of time and the ephemeral nature of human existence. Moreover, nostalgia pervades Sokoto's poetry as characters grapple with the loss of a vanishing past and the uncertainty of unknown future. The decline of river and natural forest mirror the broader erosion of traditional ways of life, cultural practices and social structures. The disillusionment of the persona and other characters in the poem underscore the profound dislocation wrought by ecological disruption and modernization.

Nostalgia in this context becomes a coping mechanisms a means of preserving a sense of continuity and belonging in the face of profound upheaval. Yet nostalgia is also a double-edged sword, capable of blinding individuals to the harsh realities of the present and inhibiting the ability to change. Sokoto's own nostalgia for his former village life,

indigenous forests and rivers and his romanticized memories of village hunting and gathering expedition, strolling and swimming in the swollen serene riverine niches highlight the new dawn setting the stage for a new complexities of cultural construction and allure of the mythical past. As he grapples with the complexities of ecological disruption Sokoto's forced to confront the limitations of nostalgia and embrace the imperatives of adaptation and renewal.

Ultimately, Sokoto's exploration of memory and nostalgia in his poetry transcends individual experience to offer a broader meditation on the human condition. In a world marked by rapid social, economic, and environmental change Sokoto's poetry reminds as of the enduring power memory to shape our understanding of self and society. Through the ever-changing volume of rivers, forest cover and diminishing number of wild game, Sokoto invites his audience to reflect on the fragility of human experience and the enduring quest for environmental conservation and appreciation of our cultural heritage for our future generations.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

A study on other spoken word artist from the luhya community on shifting cultural construction due to environment change is recommended.

VII. CONCLUSION

Sokoto through his poetry creatively interlaces the themes of ecological disruption and cultural construction inviting the audience to contemplate the profound reciprocity between human societies and natural world. Through his poetry, Sokoto illuminates the multifaceted dynamics of environmental degradation, shifting cultural construction offering a poignant commentary on the fragility of the environment and human condition. His poetry serves as a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural systems, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of environmental degradation on human identities and communities.

As the river diminishes and stagnates, so too do the economic opportunities, social cohesion and cultural traditions of the Bukusu community that lives a long its banks. Similarly, the diminishes forest the

economic opportunities and cultural traditions connected to it. The decline of two natural resources serves as catalyst for cultural transformations as the community grapple with the erosion of traditional knowledge, beliefs and practices leading to a sense of displacement and alienation. Thus, Sokoto's poetry calls for urgent need for holistic approaches to environmental restoration, conservation, community development, stressing the nexus of ecological and human well-being. Sokoto's poetry offers valuable insights as we brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of environmental degradation and enduring power of nature to inspire hope and renewal to the hopeless.

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