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Oral storytelling and national kinship: Reflections on the oral narrative performance in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals

Oral storytelling and national kinship

The story, in the form of the oral narrative, has always been a communalizing genre in the traditional African setting. It then functioned as a tool that brings together not only the artist and the particular audience, but also the entire community within which the performances are derived and performed. However, postcolonial, modern and global situations have greatly impacted on the traditional kinship structures in Africa and kinship fostering tools like the African oral narrative have not been spared. The introduction of the oral storytelling onto the proscenium stage in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals (KSCDF) has contributed to perpetuate the performance of this genre to significant degrees. This move has not only recalled attention to oral narratives, but also has revolutionized the performance and functional aspects of oral storytelling. Various aspects of the oral narrative genre have changed, from the multi-ethnic audience to the elaborate narrative structures and the varying orientations of the oral artists in KSCDF. The dramatic elements of the narrative have also been enhanced to justify its inclusion within the wider dramatic genre. This article investigates the structural and thematic reorientations of the contemporary Kenyan oral narrative and how it influences the reorientations of kinship in a postcolonial reality characterized by heterogeneous consumer audience and the need for national commonality. The aim is to understand the reorientations of oral storytelling and its scripted machinations of multi-ethnicity woven into the narrative as part of its contemporarily requisite features; the question is whether or not these reorientations enable the ideological adoption of some form of kinship across the diverse ethnic groups in Kenya.

Keywords: Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals, kinship, oral narrative performance, textual manipulation.

Introduction

The oral narrative, one of the major genres of oral literary traditions is basically a people's use of the spoken word to evoke an action in temporal sequence. The oral narrative encompasses an alternate understanding of human beings as makers of the mental world that they inhabit. This cosmoplastic power, or world-making or world-assessment ability, characterizes human beings. Storytelling then helps the narrative community to concretize abstractions that would, otherwise, hinder the comprehensive awareness and appreciation of self and society. In essence, the world becomes more real for the person if he/she can tell it. This makes the oral narrative an important creative and creating aspect of reality-making processes of the human person. As such, the narrative becomes an element of signification. This places the oral narrative at the centre of self and societal awareness. With the expansion of literacy and new media across world societies, the oral narrative has shown an

adaptation to contemporary structural, thematic and contextual demands. This essay focuses on the textual manipulation of the oral narrative in the contemporary Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals.

The oral narrative is considered to be one of the earliest prosaic performances in human civilizations where it becomes a cultural tool for the creation of cultural identities through common actions, reactions and consequences woven into the stories in current and dynamic spatial paradigms. White (in Okoth-Okombo and Nandwa 44) observes that oral literature, of which the oral narrative is a major integral part, serves "to draw attention to the sources from which a people gain its identity." In essence, people seek to make sense of their world by recognizing natural and man-made objects in their tales as well as social relationships and their varied contexts. Consequently, storytelling essentially points to who people are in both thematic and structural aesthetics. Oral traditions contribute to create an 'authentic' identity that people, in a context of little or recent diffusion of literacy, perceive as closer to them than a written tradition. The oral narrative in this sense, tells of a people's culture. In the preface to Kaschula's *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Texts*, the assertion is that "orature and other forms of oral communication could be [...] reformulated or even re-created in order to assert values and attitudes." The question therefore is whether or not the cultural change always precedes the narrative re-creation.

The narrative genre, as a retelling of past events or probable events for the sake of entertainment, is popular in all orate communities where the spoken word draws attention to itself through its interactive processes. That the artist performs to a live and active audience who, for the most part, directly influence his performance and creates an action-reaction situation that wholly involves both performer and audience. Due to this nature, the oral narrative has survived the invasion of written literature in varied media, and continues to thrive even in communities that have largely embraced writing as a major vehicle of communication. The length, structure and content of the oral narrative give it a complexity that addresses a variety of the needs of the orate communities. These include entertainment, instruction, caution and presentation of ideology. The narrative plot enables the retelling of a story through several events that can be increased or reduced depending on context, performer, audience or time. The mental images created in the story provide immense opportunities for enjoyment and interpretations. Consequently, form and content work intricately in the oral narrative to strike a concordant cord with the audience. This assumes the narrative's adaptation to the needs of current audiences.

Storytelling provides a sense of history and continuity for the concerned communities. Being a narration of perceptions of past, present and future, the oral narrative in largely orate communities is the link between a people's past and future. The narrative thus creates a sense of community amongst a people who share these pasts and presents. This sense of community eventually leads to the ownership of the

story by the audience. It becomes 'our' story, despite the narration by an individual. The oral narrative enables a mental dialogic relationship between the narrator and the audience for a sustained period. Storytelling thus provides an ideological dialogic platform for the narrator to present a case for the audience to examine and respond to. The narrative becomes a platform for the active exchange of ideas through narration and the audience's acceptance or rejection. This acceptance or rejection will be based on, among other things, the story's appeal to the audience's recognition of cultural paradigms that are acceptable to them. In short, the story has to be culturally relevant and plausible for that acceptance to take place. This is what the scriptwriters of the contemporary oral narratives performed in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals (KSCDF) seem to grapple with.

Oral storytelling in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival

Oral storytelling was introduced to the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals (KSCDF) in the mid-nineteen nineties. The intention, at this time, was the preservation and the continuity of an indigenous oral tradition that seemed to be threatened by literacy. Further, there was the recognition of the use of the oral narrative in the creative reconstruction of self and society. Storytelling as a general pass-time is still common among most indigenous communities across Kenya. However, the contexts are steadily changing as social developments like formal education, out-of-home work situations and urbanization with its attendant cosmopolitanism has seen the oral narrative evolve in both structure and performance. From the somewhat lengthy yarns told by firelight in the evenings in informal family or village settings, the story in the informal setting is today relatively shorter as the children who are the major performers in these settings do not have much time for group entertainment before bedtime.

Much of the little time between coming from school and going to bed is taken up by household chores, school assignments to be done at home and in the urban settings, solitary entertainment from the television shows. The introduction of oral literature studies in the formal curriculum has encouraged the performance of oral literature, particularly the oral narrative in formal classroom settings. This has ensured that the oral narrative performance has been kept alive. It is worth noting that the thematic and structural elements of such narratives change to suit the identity of the audience at hand.

On the other hand, the performance of the oral narrative in the organised competitive festivals has seen a transformation in the conceptualization, composition and delivery of the oral narrative to the audience. The narrative is now scripted and memorised, although room is still given for the inclusion of impromptu elements that may arise during performance. For example, in the performance of the narrative "Marcelina" (2010) by Masinde Muliro University, the narrator exclaims, "like that

child crying at the back there!” to accommodate the real crying of a baby that interrupts his narration. The complexity required of the oral narrative in these festivals emphasises the need for a pre-prepared script. The adjudicators not only look out for a good tale with a twist in it and the dramatic elements that enhance performance (costume and decor, inclusion of song(s), dramatic pauses, dramatic language and speech mannerisms as well as dance), but also the thematic content and social relevance of the narrative are also held in great acclaim.

Apart from being scripted, the narrative performance is rehearsed and memorised, although with much less fixation than that of the lines of a play. This is to accommodate the strict timings—fifteen minutes—allocated to each performance and the strife to address the adjudication requirements of what would be a good and complete story. All these elements point to the importance attached to the tale and the messages to be derived from it as well as its entertainment value. The narrative now has to serve new functional agendas of performance: entertainment, expansion of the festival classes, preservation of indigenous ethnic cultures, adaptation of new forms and themes and competitive functions, hence agreeing with Finnegan’s (73) assertion that “We surely now no longer assume that we can appropriately speak of the stories of one time or ‘culture’.”

Despite the noted changes discussed hitherto, one constant that has been observed in the performance of the oral narratives in the drama festivals is the myth-making processes that result in the tale. Oral narratives as creative explanations of reality form the basis of underlying societal myths which are communal, rather than individual realities. This study is based on the assumption that individual’s stories can be analysed for common consistencies that reveal a collective rather than an individual conceptualization of reality. Further, this paper holds that the myth-making processes inherent in the narratives studied here are for the most part presentations of contemporary social ideals from which unconscious traits of the communal aspects can be analysed. Carl Jung (325), in his proposition of the archetypal theory, explains what he calls the collective unconscious thus:

The collective unconscious—so far as we can say anything about it at all—appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious...

This paper stretches the conceptualization of the primordial images to encompass consistent tropes in the creation of mythic tendencies in the scripted oral narratives performed in the KSCDF platform. The major myth is that of a nation over individual ethnic identities.

The four oral narratives selected for this paper are those that have made it to the finals and have emerged the top two respectively. As winning narratives, they are

representative of the contemporary expectations of the performance of the oral narrative in the annual Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals. The specific narratives are: "Eclipse" by Kijabe Boys High School (2010), "King'ang'i Land" by Kihumbini Girls School (KSCDF Gala, 2011), "For Sale" by Marist University College (KSCDF Gala, 2011) and "Promulgation" by Masinde Muliro University (KSCDF Gala, 2011).

Changes in the audience of the contemporary oral narrative

At the level of the audience, the oral narrator in these festivals has to contend with ethnically and linguistically mixed groups. As the performances move from largely homogenous contexts in the zonal levels to the largely heterogeneous settings at the provincial and national levels of competition, the audience becomes more varied. Although most performers in these festivals attempt to keep to some 'traditional' oral narrative structures: "Once upon a time ..." transportation of audience to alternative reality, long, long time ago. "In the land of ..." to establish location, especially indigenous settings, and "Once there was this man ..." to refer to some character removed from present reality.

It is obvious that modern complexities have to be woven into the texts to appeal to the contemporary multifarious audience. For example, it may seem that today's audience want the story without the illusions of being in a distant past removed from current realities. The story is appreciated more as it occurs in the 'now' and not in the 'then'. The narrator then has to think of how to bring the entire audience into identification with the story from the beginning. The narrator of "Eclipse" by Kijabe Boys (2010) starts with: "Let me tell you the story ..." while the narrator of "Promulgation" by Masinde Muliro University (2011) enters the stage to the accompaniment of song then begins with: "Handsome Ladies and beautiful women seated in the audience, the first born from the family of ... is here to tell you a story ... I want to tell you about Emuho ..." This gives the impression of the immediacy of the story. The events are happening in the now, not in some distant past.

The narrator of "For Sale" by Marist University also enters the narrative by song and then states: "Ladies and Gentlemen, when you see a man tak[ing] his cow to the market, [you] know that he has left problems at home, but when you see the same man tak[ing] his pregnant cow to the market, [you] know that he has left very pregnant problems at home. This is the situation I found myself in ...". The story starts with a proverb—a traditional folkloric style among many ethnic communities in Kenya and in Africa. After this traditional style, the narrator places himself squarely at the centre of the story to bring the audience into the present setting of the events to be narrated. In this case, the audience identifies the narrative as an event of a very recent past, a past that they can comfortably relate with. Further, since the events concern the narrator himself, it could happen to any of them! They are then fully attuned to the story.

This means that the oral text is dynamic and adapts itself to notions and experiences of the moment. The static 'traditional' notion of the oral text proves to be but a myth and Finnegan in *The Oral and Beyond* (181) rightly notes that "this has contributed to an altered vision of oral texts, no longer automatically assigned to some uniform 'Tradition' of the past, but also regarded as creatures of the present."

The audience of the narrative in the contemporary schools' festivals is also mixed. As with the traditional folktale, the audience is there primarily to be entertained, but it also expects to gather the ancestors' wisdom through the cautions, information and education that emerge from the thematic content of the stories. Today, in the KSCDF, the audience is made up of school children, teachers, and artists external to learning institutions; adjudicators—largely drawn from local universities and other related institutions, general spectators—paying audience and other performers. With this mix in composition there is an even bigger variation in expectations. There are students who attend the festivals as participants, so they turn into an audience when not on stage, their motivations would range from simple entertainment to sizing up of the competitor. There are also students at varying levels who attend the festivals as researchers. These are mainly University students taking literary studies in their respective institutions. Similarly, there are students who attend the same festivals as part of a school treat.

Apart from the students, there are teachers, teachers-producers-directors, adjudicators, Ministries of Education and Culture staff and the general public. Given the artistic nature of the festivals, the narrators have to entertain, given the educational expectations of the festivals, the narrators have to educate, while also satisfying the socializing expectations. Over and above these, the narrators have to perform to meet the expected laid down standards, in order to move to the next level or clinch the trophy at the final/national level. These varied audience expectations have played a great role in the composition and delivery of the oral narrative in this context.

The expectations and functions imposed on the oral narrative in the festivals result in the performers' conscious efforts to please the varied audience. In the performance of "Eclipse" by Kijabe Boys School, the performer makes conscious efforts to humour the youth in the audience by introducing the narrative with the hit gospel song "Hela, Hela" accompanied by group routine dance to the latest hip hop dance styles. He also uses *Sheng* (a local slang used principally by the youth) phrases like "jipe shughuli" and corruptions of events or situations and conditions or the names of well-known personalities (e.g. the athletes Tiger Woods and Usain Bolt or the South African President Jacob Zuma) in narratives like "Mpango wa Tiger Woods" (for marital infidelity), "Bolt" (the fast pace of the night runner) and "Zumatology" (for siring children with many different women). These elements resonate well with the young in the audience. The narrator is also conscious of the adjudicating audience and just like the narrator of "Promulgation"; his performance goes through the phases

of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Further, all the narrators studied here make extensive movements across the stage, use varied and pronounced hand gestures, facial expressions and dance movements to enhance their delivery. In this sense, we perceive the manipulation of the narrative text to suit the current and specific audience of the festivals.

In all the performances reviewed here, the narrators are thus conscious of the demand for entertainment and other artistic demands of their art. As Okpewho notes in his *African Oral Literature* (45):

It is in the storytelling performances that we see the maximum use of innovation and manipulation [...] To make the narration more vivid and convincing, the performer must accompany the words of the tale with the appropriate face and body movements to illustrate such things as fear, anxiety, delight and behaviours of various characters in the tale.

As such, the narrators employ various styles to meet this demand. Notably, the styles employed are from varied contexts, both culturally and politically. As said above, in "Eclipse" there is the inclusion of the real Bolt's signature gesture of an aimed arrow, which is alien to all Kenyan ethnic identities, while the dance styles in "Promulgation" by Masinde Muliro University are hip hop in nature and thus Western in cultural orientation. The narrator of "For Sale" makes use of contemporary dance styles in the group routine dances, while the duo narrators of "King'ang'i Land" include calypso and West African dance movements in their performance. This means that the largely Kenyan audience can identify with these movements as they are ethnically removed from any of them.

The artist/narrator in the contemporary oral narrative

The performance of the oral text depends largely for its success on the performer. The individual skills and attitude give the aesthetic differentiation of even the 'same' text delivered by different artists. The quality of artistry is thus important as Okpewho notes in his *African Oral Literature* (20):

Although the artist is exposed to the various forms of cultural and other education available to every member of the society, what generally separates the artist from the non-artist is a more than average sense of what is beautiful and exciting, a high capacity for expressing oneself with effective idioms and images, and a deep interest in practicing a particular kind of art.

The artist manipulates the text, context, audience, time and space to weave a concrete world that embodies the intended narrative. All these elements become resources in his business of communication.

Commonly, narrators from cosmopolitan counties in major towns like Nairobi, Nakuru and Mombasa tend to perform narratives that are drawn largely from any one homogenous community in cultural orientation. This is because the narrators themselves as well as the audiences, while now residing in cosmopolitan towns, have ethnic orientations outside these towns. For instance, a narrator from a primary, secondary, college or university in Nairobi will more often than not perform an oral narrative that will seemingly be culturally contextualised within one of the major ethnic communities, even if they themselves do not come from that particular ethnic group. For example, in the performance of "For Sale" by Marist University, the ethnic placement of both the story and the narrator is quite pronounced. The University is in Nairobi, but the narration draws largely from the Luo community in Western Kenya. This could be attributed to the narrator's origins and maybe the fact that he is more familiar with the linguistic creativity of Dholuo (the indigenous language of the Luo). This points to the fact that the oral narrative is indeed a product of a distinctive cultural setting (read ethnic orientation). To emphasise this, the narrative "King'ang'i Land" by Kihumbini Girls from the Central region of Kenya makes use of the local Kikuyu imagery, language and songs. This is one major aspect of the oral narrative that many contemporary performances of this genre try to circumvent. The goal is seemingly to create not a unilaterally ethnic based oral narrative, but a multi-ethnic narrative that cuts across the varied ethnic cultures in the Kenyan landscape.

One of the attempts in achieving the multi-ethnicizing of the oral narrative is the 'importation' of the oral narrator. This is simply the performance of a narrative within a specific ethnic culture by a narrator who is alien to that culture. This always leads to the performer's expression of various acting abilities like acquisition of linguistic and social mannerisms of the 'borrowed' culture for the performance. This aspect of importing narrative cultures has the effect of breaking barriers that would otherwise exclude the narrator from the narrative's cultural paradigm. The cross-enculturation of the narrators frees the narratives from exclusive ethnic contextualization. This is largely because the narrator has to own the narrative during performance, largely through a process of internalization. This validates their rendition of the narrative and they become one with it. It becomes 'our' narrative as opposed to 'their' narrative.

For the most part, the audience will always be aware of a narrator who is performing a text outside his ethnic culture. This would be due to the distinctive effecting of the alien ethnic 'voice' or the occasional mis-intonation of words from the 'borrowed' language. Due to this, the audience has to muster conscious effort to accept cross-ethnic identities, spanning between the real ethnic identity and the performance identity of the narrator, as 'normal' and to accept the narrator's rendition of the text. Ideally, the expectation of an unconscious acceptance of the bridging of cultures where one is 'allowed' to assume an alien ethnic identity for the period of the performance. A rendition of this will be the incorporation of words from other ethnic

groups. In "Eclipse", the narrator, though wanting to give the notion of narrating a cosmopolitan setting, largely leans toward the Central Kenya ethnic linguistic identity, realized through the names and character of the characters in the tale. However, the narrator twice exclaims "Yawa!," an exclamation from the Luo in Nyanza region of the country now borrowed into the narrative. Being that the former is Bantu and the latter is Nilotic, the divergence of the two languages is vast. An exclamation by its nature is meant to express deep emotions. That an artist performing in one linguistic paradigm expresses deep emotion in another, is a deliberate attempt to parallel the two linguistic cultures within one narrative, that is principally in the uniting English.

Other forms of inclusivity in the contemporary oral narrative performance

Other forms of inclusivity that characterize the modern oral narrative within the festivals context is the cross-ethnic occurrences within the narrative plot. It is not uncommon to find a Mukhobero (originating from the Luhya community) marrying an Atieno (originating from the Luo community). This may not necessarily be intended to point at the likely intermarriage between the two communities but rather to the random selection of names from various communities in an attempt to appeal to the multiethnic audiences. It is not uncommon to 'import' names of places, trees, animals and other tangible objects from one ethnic culture into the one on which the narrative of the moment seems to mainly draw from. An Otieno from the Kanyamwa village can comfortably sit under palm tree which only grows in the coastal regions in Kenya. However, the mixing in cultural orientations may be purposely for the communication of a specific theme.

In the narrative "Promulgation" by Masinde Muliro University, the text is about the political struggles in Kenya over who owns the newly promulgated constitution, but also the country in general. In the story, Emuho—a Luhya marries Gaudensia—a Luo and they get a child—Omwana. The bickering on rites like naming and initiation for the child take on the dimensions of ethnic differences which can then only be solved by 'Solomonic wisdom' in the person of the Speaker who is a striking reminder of Kenya's Speaker to the 10th Parliament. It is also interesting to note that the attendants to the naming ceremony include: "Those from the Coast, our brothers from the higher mountains, cousins from the lakeside and friends from the City." Traditionally, amongst the Luhya community where this naming ceremony is to take place, there is very close attention to who is invited for the celebration. This is to ensure that only those who are trustworthy are invited to prevent calamities like bewitching of the child or family. That all the people from the representative regions of the entire country are invited to this 'sensitive' ceremony bespeaks of the invitation to all ethnic groups in the country to come together in the sensitive naming of the country Kenya. Again, there is the entreaty to break ethnic barriers through the narrative by expanding the

socio-cultural context of the narrative events. This is an attempt at creating new cultural spheres and identities through narrative.

Another distinguishing feature of the popular KSCDF oral narrative performances is the inclusion of contemporary songs from both local and international artists, an act which tends to 'de-ethnicize' the performance. When a performance, supposedly based on a Luhya culture, given the names of the characters, places and cultural mannerisms, suddenly belts out a salsa tune, the audience is immediately alert to a common ground where all ethnicities are equally alienated by the foreign performance. At this time the common alienating factor serves to unconsciously unite all the different ethnic groups represented in the audience. In "King'ang'i Land," the narrators include the lines from "Yori, Yori" and the Jamaican "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

The foreign popular music and songs incorporated in the narratives can be borrowed wholly, that is both tune and lyrics, or partially; tune only or lyrics only. This not only enhances the entertainment value of the performances but at the same time points to the possibilities of intercultural dialogue through blending in. The inclusion of what is alien to all Kenyan ethnic groups would then serve the purpose of not 'elevating' any of the Kenyan ethnic performances at one time, but engaging all of them in the appreciation of the exotic. Psychologically, this places the narrative on the audience' national psyche as opposed to would be ethnic psyche. The narrative is then used to create a contextual identity that ideally should engage the entire audience.

Apart from the songs, there are also inclusions of foreign images through personalities, events and places in the narratives. In "Eclipse," the narrator talks of the character's "Jacob Zumatology" in relation to the latter's siring of children with many women, another character engaging in a "mpango wa Tiger Woods" (marital infidelity), and yet the last character scheduled for enumeration in the census having the alias name of Bolt, a reference to the fast running Jamaican. In "King'ang'i Land," there is the mention of Loliondo, the location in Tanzania famed for its magically healing octogenarian. The narrator of "Promulgation" borrows Biblical concepts like the Solomonic wisdom and Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. The suggested possibilities here would then be possible inter-cultural dialogue as exhibited in the 'borrowing' of foreign images which can blend effectively with local occurrences. The suggestion of a wider international common culture thus points to a possible national culture that all can subscribe to. The story here is then used to tell not a particularly ethnic tale, but a potentially national or even international tale.

Changing motivations of the oral narrative in the KSCDF

The object of an oral narrative is the relaying of reconstituted events for the unconscious purpose of finding meaning. This function of the narrative remains a basic characteristic that still informs the narratives performed in the Kenyan festivals. Helped

along by the fact that the bulk of the consumer audience is situated in educational institutions, most of the narratives for the festivals are scripted with educational objectives in mind. Further, the national outlook of the audience provokes the address of themes of a national concern. These would be common issues like poverty, moral and social corruption, political trends, cultural evolutions and modern developments in the face of traditional structures. p'Bitek in *Artist the Ruler* (38) says of the artist:

His thoughts and actions are guided by the philosophy of life which is instilled in him from childhood. The question is from where do these fundamental ideas come? Who creates the world view that dominates the behaviour of a whole people for generations, which form the basis of a moral as well as aesthetic judgement, who produces them?

The artist is therefore both a product and commentator—hence producer of his society. The performer of the oral narrative in the KSCDF is therefore, ideally, no exception. They are supposed to be conditioned by the experiences around them, which then inform their art. The performer implicitly draws from socio-cultural experiences to adapt old tales to new experiences, or create new tales to depict current experiences. He is the creator just before and during the performance. This aspect of the performer's creation of the tale becomes somewhat questionable in the KSCDF performances. In the spirit of competition, teams strive to put out their best performances. This often calls for the involvement of external 'expert' artists. This would mean that many tales are created and drafted by the expert, then performed on stage by the pupil or student. The performance of an oral narrative primarily assumes the performer's presentation of either an original or an adapted tale for the entertainment and information of the audience.

However, in the KSCDF, the performer presents a specifically pre-prepared script for the audience at hand. It is not necessarily an adaptation of an existing tale, but the scripting of a tale for the particular occasion. The expert who scripts the narrative has to keep to relevant and current issues, and since every composer is faced with the same issues at any one time, the end result is that some themes become dominant in subsequent festivals as the composers try to narrate current events and realities. This raises the characteristic of thematic festivals with different themes each year. This is enhanced by the festival organizers' issuance of a general theme each year, a fact that now shifts the festival's artist's motivation. Finnegan (73) sheds more light on the oral artist's motivation thus:

People emplot their actions and their understandings of the world through the narratives they recount and listen to [...] Whether inside or outside Africa, we construct our own and others' identities and aspirations and meanings through stories. Words—the sustained and meaningful unfolding of narrative words—are not 'mere' words but ways of doing and experiencing, of asserting reality.

The motivations of the artist in the festival are thus directed not by own inclinations toward specific subjects, but by dictated and current themes. This seeming patronage of the narrative makes the narrative prioritize adaptation to external requirements, rather than the artist's individuality. The thematic interest of the narrative in the KSCDF performances is then not of individual artists, but of a wider group whose identity is national, and to an extent, political. This furthers the intentions of using the oral narrative for distinct political gains as far as the identity of the Kenyan audience is concerned.

In a country that has been plagued by negative ethnic exclusivity where the ethnic divide smoulders beneath a fragile veneer of nationhood, this evolution in the performance of contemporary oral narrative within the KSCDF catapults the genre into the 'national' psyche of the audience. Its abilities to narrate both experienced and ideal social self as realized on the wider national platform rather than on the smaller and exclusive ethnic platforms help the creation of idealized national identities, another step in bridging the ethnic divide. Thus "Eclipse" narrates the national census, "Promulgation" narrates the successful adoption of a new national constitution, "King'ang'i Land" narrates the sexual harassment of women, a national concern, while "For Sale" entreats the nation to buy local products and promote the Kenyan economies.

Notable too is the fact that the traditional African oral narrative is not merely for entertainment but a socializing tool as well. The performer deliberately selects the oral material for their informative and entertainment value for his immediate audience:

To the large extent, oral narratives are not art for its own sake. They are largely vehicles through which the society passes down its wisdom and commentary to future generations. Thus, they focus on important facets of our lives. This gives them their thematic focus. (Miruka 22)

The attempts at creation of a national community through the contemporary performance of the oral narrative not only revitalizes this oral literary genre, but cements its vitality in the communal psyche and stronghold in the artistic space of a contemporary community. It presents itself as the perfect creative space for the narration of a national identity. Whether or not the national identity and culture succeeds is now outside the realm of this article.

The incorporation of highly dramatic movements which contemporize narratives from diverse ethnic contexts is also a recent development in the rendition of the oral narrative that has been perfected within the festivals' context. Shifting from the passively seated narrator whose only visible movements would be hand gestures and the audible voice modulation to the agile narrator complete with dramatics on the stage has enhanced the performance nature of the oral narrative. However, the attempt at drama has not killed the African aesthetic inherent in 'traditional' narratives. The somewhat passive narration of the tale has now been overtaken by the theatrically appealing performance seen on the KSCDF stage. The performer of the oral narrative

in these festivals employs more drama than his traditional predecessor. In the performance of "For Sale", the narrator moves across the entire stage, downstage to the audience and extreme upstage to a specific spot on the backdrop which visually illustrates a place he is supposed to be at, at that time in his narration. At appropriate junctures, he joins the accompanying dancers in their commentary jigs. The two narrators of "Kinga'ng'i Land" make rehearsed synchronized movements including short dances, while the narrator of "Promulgation" makes extensive use of hand gestures and dances solo on stage to the musical interludes that comment on and enhance the story. These show the versatility of the performer in contemporary performance of the story.

The drama included in the performances discussed above would satisfy the requirements of the oral narrative's inclusion in a drama festival, hence adaptation to current forms. p'Bitek (23) notes of the African artist that:

The true African artist has his eyes firmly fixed, not on some abstract idea called beauty 'up there' as it were but on the philosophy of life of his society. His voice, the thunder of his drums, the vibrating of her buttocks and the slashing of the air with his horn, the wood or stone curved in a figureless figure—is it a ghost?—are his contributions to the celebrations of real life here and now.

Conclusion

From the illustrations used in this paper, it is clear that in the performance of the oral narrative in the KSCDF is a deliberate manipulation of the narrative text to create a cultural community that exists as an ideology rather than a concrete reality. In their efforts towards creating a national psyche among the diverse ethnic communities in Kenya, both the originators of the Annual Drama themes and the composing artists in conjunction with the performing artists create a narrative of Kenya the nation, which primarily draws from the collective unconscious that desires oneness. The oral narrative in this case is a creation tool as well as a representational instrument. The ideal culture is created in the new mythical narrative which itself becomes a functional tool in the creation of national identities.

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