

ANATOMY OF CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING: PERFORMING NATIONAL CULTURE IN KENYA

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Abstract: *Throughout time, performance has been the domain of celebrating the process of being and becoming by rejecting, affirming and consolidating identities and cultures. This article argues that contemporary storytelling performances in Kenya can be viewed as a site for the construction of national culture and identity. Postcolonial theory, used in this article, engages dominant discourses in its endeavour to give credible representation to the colonial subject within situations of unequal power relations. Moreover, the theory's critique of Western pretensions of the universality of knowledge which results in recovery of submerged knowledge systems from the margins enables the article to revive such concepts such as 'national culture'. Consequently, this exploration attempts to examine how culture is created when opportunities for its deliberate construction avail themselves through the performance of contemporary storytelling. Logically, in constructing national culture, contemporary storytelling negotiates postcolonial interventions in the search for coherence, stability and control of this mode of expression and communication. This is observable in the innovative communicative strategies of storytelling in terms of management, organization, production and performance. The findings arise from fieldwork research conducted in Kenya between 2004 and 2007 which sampled performance of contemporary oral storytelling in commercial, corporate and educational institutions (the chief performers are the youth) with a view to determining how national culture is created, negotiated and perpetuated.*

Keywords: National Culture, Contemporary Storytelling, Performance, Performing Space, Post-Colonialism

Research Area: Literature

Paper Type: Research Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of postcolonial studies in engaging dominant to give a credible representation of the colonial subject within situations of unequal power relations is realizable in the way it results in recovery of submerged knowledge systems from the margins. Concepts such as national culture long buried in obscurity, have been revived and engendered controversy for their diverse interpretation in the construction of identity. Throughout time, performance has been the domain of celebrating the process of being and becoming by rejecting, affirming and consolidating identities and cultures. Arguably, the 'performative production of identity' that Butler (2010) observes of gender can be replicated in storytelling performances. This article postulates that contemporary storytelling performances in Kenya can be viewed as a site for the construction of national culture and identity. Notwithstanding, predicated upon an on-going process of exploration of potentialities and negotiation of positions, oral storytelling performance raises discursive issues unsettling the discourse of national culture. Narrative performance theory of Langellier and Peterson (2004) perceives 'performing narrative as a communication practice' which underscores storytelling as a 'communication embodied in a social world and a locus of material action and power' (7-8). Ideally, this imbues storytelling performance as a discourse

that creates power in the thinking of Foucault (1990). The article arises from the fieldwork research conducted in Kenya in 2004 and 2007, but intensively in six months of 2007. The researcher focused on the performance of contemporary oral storytelling in commercial, corporate and educational institutions with a view to determining national culture in Kenya, how it is created, negotiated and perpetuated. More specifically, the article examines the innovative communicative strategies of contemporary storytelling in terms of management, organization, production and performance making it into a syncretic and subversive cultural product.

2. SITUATING THE PROBLEM

Though colonial discourse is responsible for nation-state imagining, the intervention of folklore in national identity cannot be ignored. Disparate examples from those of naming to the ones of performing a culture of resistance and self-determination elucidate the notion of constructedness of identity. The power and potential of folklore as a political tool has for long been recognized in various studies. Songs and poetry, for instance, have often been used for political mobilization, propaganda or political education; notably is the role of songs in Mau Mau war for liberation in Kenya as observed by Finnegan (1977), and TANU's quest for independence in Tanzania as Furniss and Gunner (1995) observe. With the advent of colonialism and its resultant effect on tradition, the imbongi (Nguni praise poet) of South Africa, previously a court poet of traditional chiefs, has found new grounds in post-colonial institutions like presidential functions, graduation ceremonies etc. It is quite clear then, notes Neethling (2002), that oral literature "is indeed flexible enough to sustain its continued existence in new contexts" (309). While colonial intrusion submerged the open space in Kenya with Western theatre, storytelling performance retreated further into the hearth (enclosed space) only to emerge in myriad ways. At first in waves of protest like muthirigu and kanyegenyuri, then into political narrative songs during the Emergency period or muffled performances while working in the settlers farms, and later into sanitized performances owing to colonial supervision in related institutions (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1993).

Presently, the performing arena is a very vibrant scene with contesting perspective and forms. Though storytelling spaces have been swamped by modern technological gadgets of mass media namely television, films computers, internet, the hearth still radiates with warmth as parents or ayahs left with children still tell stories. Certainly, much seems to have left swinidhe (the family hearth) for boi-ini (the community hearth), which is school, church, etc (Odhiambo 2006). Alembe (2008) has observed that churches are today alive with storytelling with preachers mixing folklore with biblical doctrines (Telling Tales). Often times, with some regulatory frequency, spaces are opened up that are carnivalesque in form. Examples abound Kenyatta University Cultural Week which sprung up in the 90s, Maboombboom Festival, SANDD, for Storytelling and Dance, annual cultural festival across provinces, Lamu Maulidi Festival, and National Schools and Colleges Drama Festival, to name a few.

The eruption of contemporary storytelling is subversive in nature. Firstly, these performances arise from traditional folklore (constituted in a native language) but are articulated anew in a different language be English or Kiswahili (official or national languages). Hence there is inordinate borrowing often resulting in a metonymic gap. Beyond language, the contemporary oral narrative allows a synergy of cross-cultural forms to give it an insignia of acceptability in such a complex postcolonial environment. This belies the question: should this be understood as bridging the gap between youth and old, as subverting and challenging dominant/generational hegemony, or as healing the friction caused by

traditional and modernity dichotomy, or as a postcolonial intervention that merely valorises youthfulness while marginalizing African culture?

Secondly, contemporary oral narrative performances exist in-betweenness of cultural flows; interfaces of literacy and technology. It is often a rehearsed oral performance, sometimes assisted by technology, and is finally recorded and disseminated via electronic media. Thirdly, it is subversive in terms of its actor and field of cultural production. Its youthful actors (comprising between 60-75% of the total population) are by nature cosmopolitan attributable to their wide interactional circle by virtue of attending school with others of diverse cultural backgrounds, higher social mobility as they move out of their rural homes in search for employment and quite instrumental, exposure to popular culture. The field of cultural production of this art has an element of 'border crossing': literally, it takes place even in beyond the neighbouring countries of Tanzania and Uganda but also beyond to South Africa and even Europe, metaphorically, enculturation of global culture is actualized in the process. As cultural flows proliferate, it is imperative that negotiation and construction of identity produce a hybrid and syncretic national culture, while still remaining a site for contestation of putative cultural identity.

3. PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING

There are three noticeable types of organization strategies in contemporary storytelling in Kenya. We attempt here a graphical presentation of the design, organization and re-presentation of each one of them.

3.1. (Semi)-Professional Storytelling

The growing democratization of art arising as a form of cultural resistance in postcolonialism allows for diverse experimentations and innovations that challenge long-held artistic norms (Seppa 2010, Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2004). Notions of so-called traditional performance and patterns are disrupted, performing spaces democratized and reconstituted, and the performance spirit reclaimed. Professional, semi-professional and freelance storytelling troupes generally made up of young people have emerged nationwide using art as an occupation and livelihood. This points to the pluralistic interpretation of art, and as much, the political statement inherent in their ingenuous reconstruction of storytelling to suit their ideological orientations. As they arise from the dominant western drama, contemporary storytelling is located within theatrical arenas and among dramatists. Notable groups such as Mizizi (now defunct), Zamaleo ACT, Maarifa Afrika, The Story Tellers, TIED NET organized as professional entities perform for fee-paying audiences. Besides, there are cultural centres, for instance, Riuki Cultural Centre in Kiambu, and Bomas of Kenya, who target organized groups, and tourists. The latter recreate and musealize 'traditional hearths' in their centres and replicate the ancient storytelling performance without alteration. Among the rest are travelling troupes who hawk their wares and hence convert any available space into a hearth. This could be a hotel lobby or conference room, recreational hall, lecture, classrooms, or open-air spaces. One is reminded of one-man guitar performances that arose in the 1990s patronizing beer drinking dens. Any available space for storytelling resonates with the potentialities of the hearth and structural adjustments are attempted, instead, performers and participants are free to imagine and mentally recreate the hearth.

Between the two extremes is a mediating physical and psychical model of contemporary storytelling performance representation formulated by Mizizi Cultural Centre and adopted by Zamaleo ACT. As a way of recuperating 'traditional' performance, Mizizi initially converted a house into a performance arena, with performances being done in a living room and participants forming a semicircle around the performers but without the actual hearth, thus. As constituted, one sees the performing space reclaiming its homily ambience within the enclosed space, breaking down of the alienating space between the performer and audience, and demystification of art by levelling the playing field. Later, the group moved to more ample space at the National Museum of Kenya to disseminate their cultural heritage using storytelling. Here actual reconstruction and renovation appropriate to the ideological orientation of sigana model of storytelling is done. According to their website, **Sigana storytelling performance** is a 'syncretic' interactive performance art form that fuses old and contemporary styles from diverse Kenyan cultural heritage 'consisting of dramatic narration, banter, chant, recitation, song, riddling, music, dance and movement'(2006).

3.2. School-Based Performance

This is organized entirely under the auspices of Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF). As a component organ of the Qualities Assurance and Standards department of the Ministry of Education, like its Music Festival counterpart, KNDF is charged with organization, management and evaluation of dramatic arts as core curriculum in education (KNDF 2000). According to Khaemba Sirengo, it is founded on the recognition of the role that cultural arts play in the strengthening of national culture and social survival in the next millennium (Osiako 2004:133). And its vision is to "provide a means to respect, foster and develop Kenya's rich and diverse cultural heritage" which is realized through its foremost aim, "to tap, nurture and exploit the hidden potential of the Kenyan youth by providing opportunities for self-expression so that they can participate actively in national development" (Osiako 2004: 128).

The festival is a marathon journey that starts off at grassroots, i.e. the school and ends up as a national event bringing together participants from all educational institutions from early childhood school through primary, secondary, colleges to university. **Figure 1** is a graphic presentation of the overall organization system which starts off at the school level with performances at intra-school forums meant to identify artistic talents. Then several schools within the vicinity meet in their zone to select those to proceed to the District Festival, after which the exemplary ones proceed to the Provincial Festival. These regions are formed the administrative regions of the country. The penultimate festival is as exciting as the final one since the nationals are taken as a mere display of talents. As depicted in **Figure 2**, the National Festival brings together the other tributaries of an educational system like colleges and universities expected as well to organize parallel festivals to select representatives. There is hence a confluence of competing layers of festivals merging into a two-week celebration and carnival of talents at a suitable venue, which changes year after year around the eight provinces. A select number proceed to the State Concert erroneously called 'Winners Concert' whose purpose is to entertain the President who is the chief patron of the Festival. Below is the graphic representation.

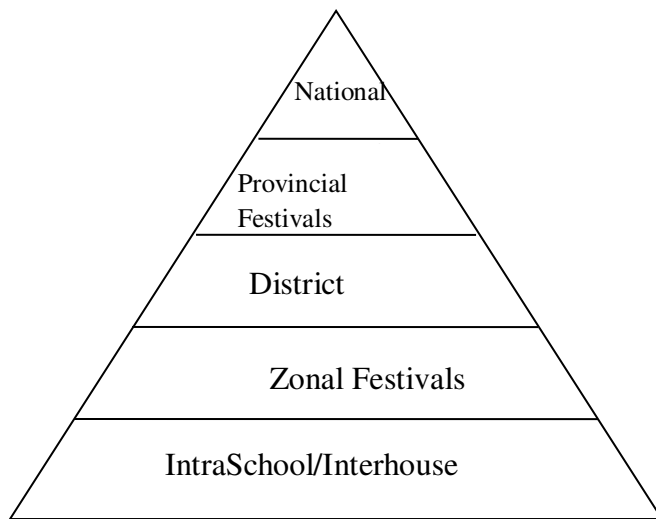


Figure 1. Overall Organization

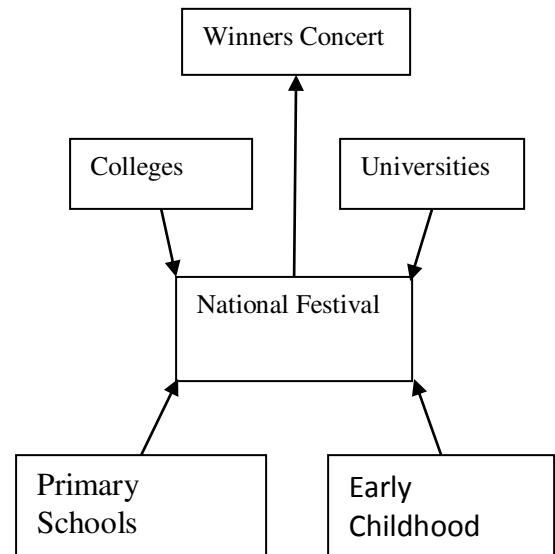


Figure 2. National Festival

While the National festival is ideally meant for the celebration of cultural diversity and its ability counter contemporary challenges, it has degenerated into a cutthroat competition to acquire limited laurels. The hierarchialization of cultural production with few at the top (**Fig. 2**) and majority abandoned at the base is complicit to what may be denounced as “murdering talent” (Osiako 2004: 109) in search for the ‘best’ production. There is concerted effort to ensure a balance is struck between creativity, intellectualism and relevance of the work of in art. The increasing number of participants in the festivals in spite of the limited chances of upward mobility attests to its popularity and effectiveness as a moment of socio-cultural introspection and recuperation (see **Fig. 2**). Likewise, the nature of these performances even at the grassroots in subverting and interrogating the social-political reality express the sensitivity and sensibility of artists in living to their expectations. Festivals are carnivalesque forums which are not necessarily pegged on competitiveness but on utilizing the performative space to imaginatively create new social-political landscapes.

Politics of space in the school narrative has its genesis in the intention to perpetuate ‘universality’ of culture through theatrical canons. As an after growth of school drama, it operates on the proscenium arch known for its alienating effect on the audience by dichotomizing art and society in order to privilege art beyond the mundane and the everyday (see **Figure 3** below). Artists are not only physically elevated but also psychologically more esteemed than ordinary members of the audience and thus effectively raise the significance of dramatic art. Oral narrative performance has had to disrupt this architectural design cognizant with its historical and ideological orientation in order to incorporate African theatre artistry. To enhance and harmonize the conflicting cultural matrix, it has been necessary to make renovations in their representation through images and symbols which result from an engaged and deliberate process of interpretation and demarcation of the stage, choice of props, stage set, backdrop, costume and décor.

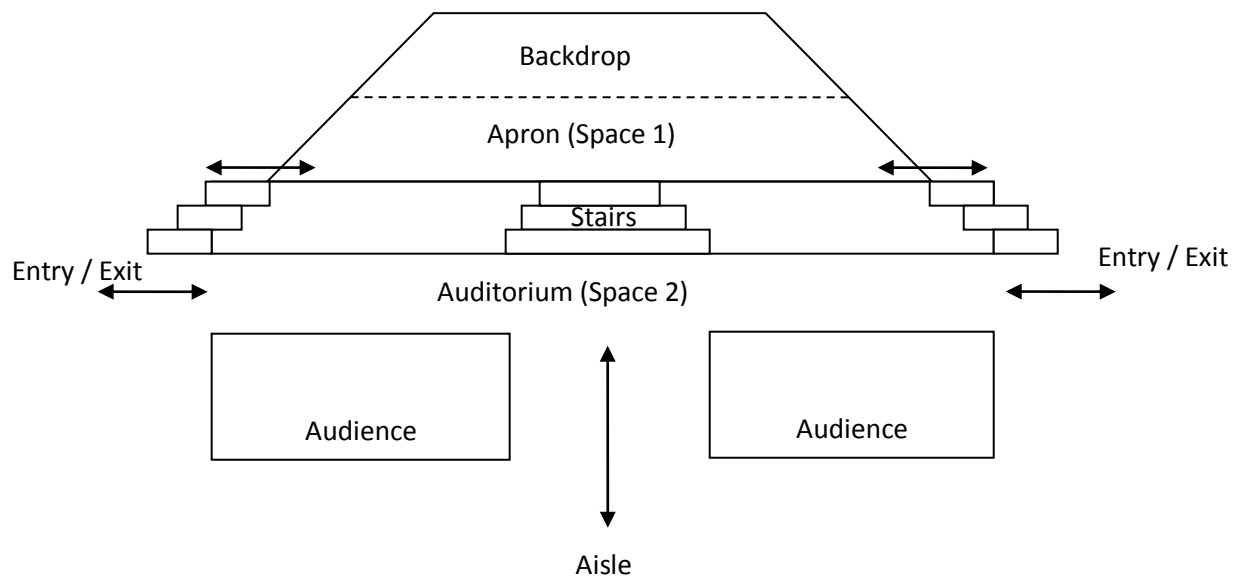


Figure 3. Performance at Proscenium Arch (School Performance)

From “the level playing field” at the hearth (either in the enclosed or open space), the oral narrative finds itself on unfamiliar ground; on a raised stage and completely cut off from the audience needed as participants, but who are now reduced to “peeping toms” through the “fourth wall”. Whereas theatrical improvisation avails space for “breaking the fourth wall”, need for live contact with the audience in oral performance is indispensable, and this has necessitated radial subversion of the performing space to completely collapse the fourth wall¹. Unlike in theatrical production, the audience is not passive but integral to the narrative performance and it is incumbent upon the narrative performer to engage it so as to help compose, recreate and perform the narrative. Structurally, besides the side stairs available, the large staircase is placed at the middle of the apron to enable the performer to access the auditorium with ease. The performer often comes down to share the story directly with the audience, or journeys to and from the stage disregarding the alienating effect. In fact, most telling is done at the apron or right down at the auditorium stage.

3.3. Children’s Storytelling Performance

There is no defined and structured approach to children’s storytelling as it is always an informal activity. Professional and freelance performers take time off to ensure children especially those from the rural and peri-urban areas also benefit. Like the Iziko of South Africa, it is geared toward deepening their cultural heritage (Goodrow & Natland 2002) as well as meeting their present-day struggles and challenges. The target group is primary school pupils of three to fifteen years of age—a very impressionable stage of development. Performance is done in their language of competence which is mostly Kiswahili (sometimes in their first language) but foreigners use English. The performances are free of charge as it is treated as corporate responsibility. Sam Mbure, a re-known Kenya poet and children’s story writer organize such a forum monthly. An example is where American foremost children’s storyteller, writer and librarian, Professor Margaret Read Macdonald as well as internationally famed storytellers the Zamaleo group led by Odero Aghan and Helen Alumbe. Mbure performed. Cross-cultural dialogue is evident as a rendition of stories from the international arena merge and cross-pollinate with the rural Kenyan stories.

Children's storytelling performance is a recreation of the fireside forum and the venue allows for "a level playing field" which augurs with the spirit of contestation and negotiation of identity. The venues for such are churches or school compound or anywhere in an open field where access and free participation is guaranteed. Such venues are ideal at organizing a fireside format where all sit around and only the one narrating stands. The organizers usually perform one or some of their stories and allow others to do the same. There is free participation for all participants (audience) and none is perceived as having a monopoly of stories. Creation and recreation of stories are evident even among children volunteering. One witnesses them retelling stories recreated new through improvisation of available motifs or scraps of dismembered plots. All in all, one finds a positive recall and interest of storytelling from these young minds as they endeavour to grapple with their social cultural and political issues that face them; they even attempt an interpretation of when called upon to do so.

3.4. Corporate Storytelling Performance

This type of storytelling performance takes place in boardrooms and conference rooms where corporate issues appertaining to management, marketing, and sensitization on new and upcoming ideas. Professional storytellers are invited to help participants brainstorm by presenting their artistic reality and problem-solving strategies through narrative performance. It is up to the performer to conjure up or choose a narrative that best exemplifies the audience's predicament. The narrator may out of personal choice adorn a costume or carry any paraphernalia that suits the story, but it is her ingenuity and creativity in delivering the story that carries the day. The adopted venues are usually 'disorganized' by such performers to suit their demands and expectation for narrative performance; audience participation is obligatory. There are total resistance and defiance for the theatrical practice of using the stage and most times storytellers emerge and remain among the audience.

Two unrelated situations may suffice to illustrate this. One instance the researcher attended, trained HIV/AIDS counsellors from the medical profession were taken through a situation that dramatizes the greatest threat and culprit in the spread of this pandemic. Ken Otukho (a solo performer) dressed as a traditional seer, with a fly whisk, a large brimmed hat and seer's robe, gave a powerful rendition of "misusing our pencils" by writing on all surfaces irrespectively. He transformed a modern auditorium into a fireside setting and medical practitioners into ordinary narrative participants engaged in demystifying the world of storytelling and using it to reconstruct their reality.²Obyerodhyambo (2002) describes another example of corporate performance a creative initiative of Mizizi Creative Centre which used storytelling performances in "promoting new forms of dialogue" not to demystify development to the common man but also to subvert long-held notions among leaders. This groundbreaking initiative came at the time of the long and protracted national debate on who should be involved in constitutional change in Kenya from 1998 to 2002.

The first involved the "Public Perception on Budgeting" where they used *sigana* to critique the exclusivity of government budgetary processes by advocating a down-up approach where the common man views are considered. The interactive nature of storytelling used elicited very credible and innovative responses from the listeners in a manner that amazed parliamentarians.

The other case was a national project entitled "Kenya at Crossroads" that brought together corporate managers, intellectuals and government technocrats debating on the envisioned social-political reality in Kenya and where several scenarios emerged. During its dissemination forum on the scenarios arrived at, wananchi "the common people", rejected the

popular paradigms espoused by so-called expats which appeared to hold the key for Kenya to develop beyond the Asian tigers and which were coated with the usual global icing of the free market economy. The listeners, the wananchi, interrogated these scenarios and unearthed their political and economical marginalizing strategies and interestingly they “took the project one step further, by suggesting that [they]together explore possibilities for new visions and models, based on local cultural sensibilities” (Obyerodhyambo 2002).

At the climax of this dissemination forum in 2001, this researcher witnessed the performance of the oral narrative expected to interrogate and re-introspect the scenarios constructed by the economic and political expats. During the performance at the function held in a multinational five-star hotel, the conference hall was converted into a fireside forum and all present became participants in storytelling. In connecting with their fellow participants cum-audience, the group of performers eschewed the already raised dais and mingled with all for their approach to scenarios meant a collective enterprise. They performed “The conference of birds”; a narrative that depicts birds engaged in an involved search for a solution to a national calamity that plagued their kingdom.³ In performing the narrative, one could vividly see the heated arguments of these ‘contesting birds’, and the audience was made to actualize this by participating in suggesting ways in which the birds could find a solution as well as pinpoint the problems the birds encountered on the “grand march” heaven, or even to guess what they expected to find in heaven. Performance became a moment of both personal and corporate introspection, especially owing to its timing of the general election and constitution review. It was quite amazing how complicit everybody is to social-political issues affecting the country.

3.5. Incidental Performances

Storytelling performances replicate itself in the discourses of the everyday. As Alembi (2008) establishes the presence of storytelling in use of sermons (Telling Tales), the researcher stumbled onto storytelling in a funeral service.⁴ The preacher, a Catholic Bishop of Nyeri Diocese then told a moving narrative adapted from *Arabian Nights* about a renowned hero named Abunwas who visited Sultan Haroun Rashid inquiring on how he could avoid death. He was advised to leave that town, Baghdad, as quickly as possible only to reach the next town and meet another person running away as fast apparently from Death. Though told to illustrate the inescapability of death the story helped to lighten the sombre mood in the grieved neighbourhood. The sheer humour of the story and the skilful manner of delivery were a respite to prevailing grieve and anger. The narrative is one of the chain stories celebrating the anti-hegemonic success of Abuwas, a trickster, against power and authority. Unlike during colonialism when missionaries dismissed folk practices as heathenism, this performance resuscitates endogenous cultural production to ameliorate undue contingency. Told from the pulpit in place of a homily, and a performer dressed for sacred mass conflates and subverts the binary opposition of secular and sacred. While religion celebrates tragedy against comedy by the secular world, the Abunwas’ story becomes interstitial by satirizing both, and this depicts the Kenyan society, as situated in the margins negating the hegemonic and constructing new identities.

4. PERFORMING SPACE OF CONTEMPORARY STORYTELLING

4.1. Curtain

School performances are still tied to the proscenium arch for lack of choice, but the curtain is only a requirement of the festival and to enable adjudicators to mark out the beginning and the end of the performance. The main reason is to show that narratives are not

dramatic pieces rehearsed at backstage but live and immediate. As a way of showing the “impossible closure” of oral narrative, we witness numerous cases of narration beginning from the auditorium with the narrators emerging from there and his troupe from all corners while the curtain is still drawn. It is also not unusual to see narrators emerge from the auditorium, through the aisle or from other entries then proceed to the front singing, dancing, or journeying from the audience to take up storytelling roles as in one performance entitled ‘Magdalina’ (see **Fig. 3** above)..In another performance, ‘Mlima wa Mawe’, the curtain becomes a prop, a huge boulder blocking the way to the “Rocky Mountain”, and one, which of necessity, needs to be removed to make way for the animals to proceed. The closure of the curtains at the end of the performance is just a formality as narratives possess their own life which comes to end in its own unique framing mediated by the performer. After curtain close, the performers may exit backstage or often through the audience - to show they are a part of them and that whatever was performed is characteristic of real life.

Professional oral narrative eschews and dispenses altogether with proscenium arch and puts narrators at equal footing with the audience. Their ideal stage is circular in an arrangement where the audience occupies a semi-circular formation and the performers the front part thus completing the circular (see the professional performance, **Figure 4** below). Besides, entries and exits are severally marked among the audience thus creating a broken-up circle allowing for free movement for both the performer and audience.

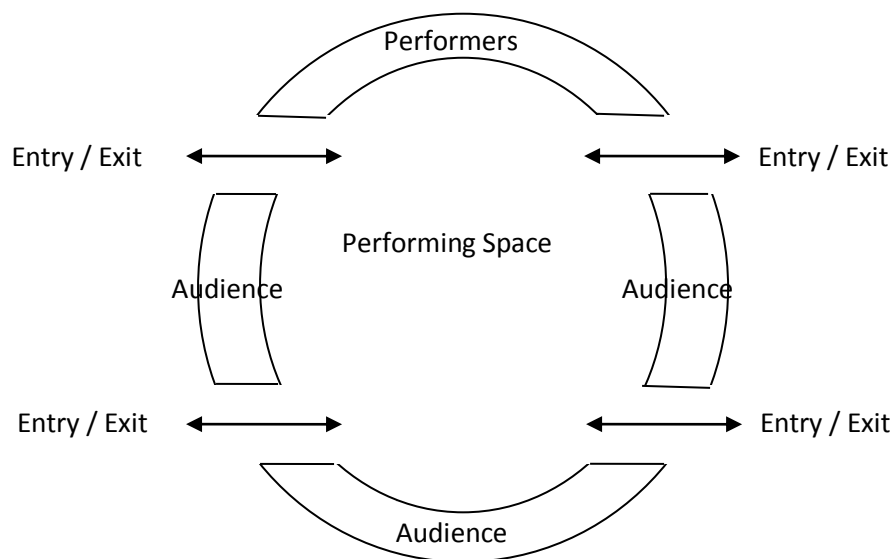


Figure 4. Professional Performance

4.2. The Backdrop

In [semi] professional production, the backdrop is designed from African artwork using cultural artefacts and indigenous aesthetics. It is generally made up of a cloth in African prints either of *kikoi* or *kitenge* patterns folded in numerous artistic designs, an assortment of indigenous artefacts like beadwork, emblazoned calabashes, sculpture, weaponry, musical instruments, and other elements of African visual art borrowed from diverse African cultures. Though seen as merely creating an African cultural ambience upon which the storytelling

takes place, one cannot fail to recognize the emphatic insistence on the local and indigenous, on the 'home-grown' against the modern and the global.

In the school performance, the backdrop is a very fundamental feature facilitating communication and interpretation of the imaginative universe of storytelling. Technically, it is constructed using plywood for portability, adaptability, and versatility especially dealing with poorly equipped performing stages in various educational institutions. Structurally, the backdrop is used to reduce the proscenium arch whereby it is set in such a way as for narrow the acting space and merge it with the apron, thus making the stage only perfunctory.

Besides, it also acts as a prop by either demarcating the performing space or enshrining a graphic prop that a performer uses during her performance. Backdrops convey the conflict in the story and the narrator consciously uses it as a prop to restate, intervene, or mediate the conflict in the story. Generally, it provides scenery of the setting of the story; often times it is set in symbolic language as alternative visual media alongside the verbal performance. For instance, in one story telling performance entitled 'Napukhulu', the décor depicts a prominent seat with stately majesty straddled by a machete and a javelin, symbolic of political violence characteristic of nascent democracies.

In most performances, the décor utilizes before and after techniques to show the intensity of conflict and create more anticipation and suspense. A good example is a narrative performance entitled 'Batuli' where there is a depiction of a water pot stalked by a venomous snake, on one side, and the other a broken pot clearly implicating the snake, and more confounding, the broken pieces are imprinted with marks of human visage. Other examples of before and after technique are 'Magdalena' and another narrative entitled 'Ekhaniafu'.

4.3. Stage Set

The school production utilizes some dramatics dynamics. The stage is often empty save for few props and podiums in form of a portable staircase or blocks of wood set purposely for effective usage by the performer. Podiums are used by the performer to amplify his voice at significant parts of narration or to enact a climb. For instance, in 'Mlima wa Mawe' the performer enacts climbing the "Rocky Mountain" where he narrates and sings upon reaching each rung. In 'Ekhaniafu' the backdrop merges with the set to give the illusion of the performer sitting on a branch as he mimics the character of a Chameleon. Other cases, when enacting a conflict between two groups, the two narrators may mount podiums at opposite sides to dramatically heighten the tension. Or it they may be used to provide rest at intervals thus marking out pauses and breaks in a narrative. And where theatrics emerge in storytelling, props become quite visual, for example in 'The Turbulent Voyage' the performers enact their bus journey using a model bus pushed on stage which they board and narrate as they peep through the window. Also, in 'Batuli' there is the use of an earthen pot to illustrate how the eponymous heroine uses the object and also to symbolically depict her sexual violation.

On the other hand, professional performance eschews being entangled in the theatrics of school drama and hence has only an open space enriched with body politics of the performers. There are no stepping blocks or staircases, no lights, nor physical props but these may feature once awhile. For example, in one instance they had prepared meat for all the participants when performing 'Wacu and the Meat'. A peculiar feature in this performance is the heavy presence of African instruments and music. The musical troupe resembles an African ensemble, but to financial constrains, there may be few drummers while the narrators double cast as musicians when free. The ensemble displays a number of drums of all sizes;

about three mighty ones, two medium, and two smaller ones. There is also have a portable drum (either *msondo* or *sikuti*), *orutu* or *nyatiti* “the African lyre”, the blowing horn, *kayamba*, *zumari* “the African flute”, *marimba* “the Swahili traditional wooden piano”, shakers in decorated calabashes, *karing’aring’a* - the triangular metallic gong, to mention a few. These are used throughout the performance to create sound effect of any kind as well as for music and dance thus making it indispensably integral to the narration. In school productions, the musical troupe is hidden from public view ostensibly to give the narrative sense of spontaneity.

5. CONCLUSION

Suffice it to say, over time, oral narrative performance has had the capacity for “evaluation” and “appropriation” (Murunga 2004) to create a syncretic culture and ultimately construct identity. Kapchan (1995) correctly opines that: “performance genres play an essential (and often essentializing) role in the mediation and creation of social communities, whether organized around bonds of nationalism, ethnicity, class status, or gender”. The immanency of African oral literature, according to Furniss & Gunner (1995), is attributed to its potentiality for change and recasting social reality, as well as commenting on contemporary social and political conditions (5). To this, Kaschulla (2004) demonstrates the instrumentality of contemporary myth in salvaging oral literature from marginalized traditional ambit postulated above.

END NOTE:

¹The concepts “fourth wall” and “breaking the fourth wall” are theatrical terms coined by Denis Diderot to refer to the supposed missing wall in a theatre that is replaced by a curtain and which artists ignore and address the audience directly (Stevenson 1995).

² The function referred to took place at National Hospital Insurance House (NHIF) in Nairobi in June 2007.

³In the story, the bird’s conference called to deliberate on strategies to resolve the issue turns cacophonous with each bird engaged in showdown and a dressing down one another. The conference becomes a festival for bickering, name calling, backstabbing and showboating. A tiny inconspicuous bird saves the day by urging them to undertake a journey to demand a solution from God. Their leaders organize a great pilgrimage to the oracle. However, the journey turns to be a time of great and fatal tribulation, of hunger, famine, quarrels, thirst, fatigue, tribal clashes, election violence, rigging, corruption, nepotism, ignorance, diseases, murder, assassinations, name it. Upon reaching the heavenly gates, their knocking is ignored. They are urged by same small bird to forcefully demand entry. On opening the door, in place of God, was a big mirror and all they could see was their image, themselves: haggard, battered selves, hungry, diseased, angry, bitter, contorted faces but full of determination and optimism.

⁴ The ceremony took place in July 7th in Nyeri, about 200 kms from Nairobi

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