

Significance of Context in Performance of Babukusu Chants, Western Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Oral literature is sub-divided into genres that carry the artistic features like stylistic devices, composition and performance which make oral literature have life and outwit written literature. Chants are among these genres and they carry very vital societal values and norms in African Traditional Society and they are very significant once performed in their right contexts. Their repetitive nature reflects the idea of emphasis and seriousness regarding the purpose or intention of the chant performed. The study categorized these chants according to the four major rites of passage in the *Babukusu* community. These are; birth-naming rite, circumcision rite, marriage rite and death rite that call for the performance of the chants studied in this paper. Methods of data collection used in the study included; observation, Focused Group Discussions and interviews. The paper used phenomenology theory to depict the connection and relevance of the specific chants performed within specific contexts and their significance.

Keywords: Chants, rituals, rites, contexts, passage, chanting, spirits.

INTRODUCTION

Chants are one of the oral literature genres where diverse spiritual traditions consider them as a route to spiritual development. A chant is a commonly used spiritual practice performed in a monotonous repetitive tone. It may be a component of personal or group practice. Chants cannot be performed without relevant contexts in African society. This is the reason why the paper studies the chants and their contexts in the *Babukusu* community.

Context on the other hand refers to the surrounding or condition under which an event occurs whose end result is meaningful, (Musungu, 2006). Chants serve various functions within the *Babukusu* community. Some of them include; educating, criticizing, mourning, honoring and imploring among others. Above all, they give a sense of belonging to an individual of a particular community in relation to culture and traditions.

Context is a source of interpretation, environment of the significance, and outside context there is no understanding, (Glassie, 1989). It is a crucial component when analyzing *Babukusu* chants and without context there is no performance of chants. When dealing with context, (Limón & Young, 1986) posits that it encompasses the physical, social and mental aspects. This is why chants as a form of oral literature is rigid in terms of performance and context unlike other genres, which are flexible and easily manipulated to serve in a particular occasion at a particular time.

Chants provide answers to many questions about traditions and give solutions to various problems beyond human ability and understanding. (Hooper, 1998) note that context is the point of departure in understanding performance. This statement propelled the study of establishing the significance of contexts in *Babukusu* chants. Chants have been mentioned in the works of literary scholars such as (Mwanzi, 2010), (Alembi, 2002) and (Musungu, 2006). To date, no literary scholar has analyzed *Babukusu* chants as

separately and distinctively as a single study.

Modernity and westernization have changed the African way of life, beliefs and traditions. Despite the effects of modernity, chants have survived and performed during ritual incantations and when communicating to God and the ancestors. The contexts in which chants are performed have promoted the existing of the *Babukusu* chants as they are very mandatory in development of an individual's life. These phases include birth, circumcision, marriage and death which are fundamental in human life. Chants are valued and exercised fully in rituals to bring any uncontrolled situation back to normalcy. This study of significance of contexts of *Babukusu* chants can be preserved for further studies on the same. The paper can also act as a lee-way to other related up-coming literary studies as a reference material.

The study used the phenomenology theory which is the philosophical study of structures of experience and consciousness. (Klein & Westcott, 1994) asserts that phenomenology theory works on the principle of direct investigation and description of phenomenon as consciously experienced. (Schutz, 1972) insists that phenomenology and literature share a world which guides the experience of each one of us. It sets its basic principle on experience, observation, and the form of description as things themselves act at an angle of an individual point of view.

In this study, phenomenology theory provides knowledge on how an occurrence of a phenomenon calls for performance of a particular genre (chant), that brings a particular experience on an individual. This indicates how significant context is in performance in the presence of the targeted audience to experience the performance. (Wellek & Warren, 1956) argue that phenomenology manifests our experience from the way we perceive and understand the phenomenon. They also argue that one should be aware of the significance of the phenomenon in the subjective experience. This happens only when a chant is performed in a relevant context, time and before the relevant audience.

METHODOLOGY

Observation was one of the techniques for data collection used in the study. It is a technique which results in direct experience of the researcher and collection of first-hand information which hinder distortion of data. The researcher used systematic observation and observed every part of every chant performed in its context by being present physically from the onset to the homestretch of every performance.

The research also used the unstructured interview for respondents who were elders in the community and chanters of the chants studied in this paper. The interview had open ended questions to enable the respondents to express themselves to the best of their knowledge in terms of the questions asked on contexts of chants. This assisted the researcher to collect rich information that helped in achieving the objective of the study. The interview was conversational, which promoted interactive sessions for better outcome.

Focused Group Discussions included two groups; one with elderly members of *Babukusu* community and the other had the chanters of specific chants. The groups were able to discuss the specific chants, their contexts and the significance they have to the participants. Context was discussed at length as it is a vital element that ascertains any performance of a particular chant. This took place in the presence and guidance of the researcher.

Purposive sampling was administered in selecting eight chants performed within the four rites earlier mentioned. (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999) define purposive sampling as a technique that allows the researcher to choose on instances that suit, propel and provide credible information relevant to the objective of the research. The sources of information during analysis included the elderly in the community, the chanters of every chant, and supported by secondary sources. Secondary sources used were journals, dissertations literary theses together with qualitative technique for data collection and analysis.

SELECTED *BABUKUSU* CHANTS AND THEIR SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

The paper was set to analyze chants in their various contexts within *Babukusu* rites of passage. The four major rites carry the contexts to be discussed in the paper namely; birth rite, circumcision rite, marriage rite and finally death rite. These rites are marked at different time and setting which is collectively referred to as context, which is the paper seeks to analyze.

Birth-Naming rite is accorded the highest dignity in the African society as life is valued and treasured as it is a gift from God. According to the African society, a woman gave birth from their houses or from their parents' houses. In some cases, delivery took place in either outside or within the village constructed specifically for the purpose. The special houses were constructed for the purpose of safe delivery and in the presence of midwives, mostly elderly, mothers-in-law, co-wives and expectant woman's female relatives, (Akaranga, 1986). Birth could also take place in terms of time or season; situation and place of delivery like on the road or farm. These contexts mentioned during delivery were very significant when it came to naming the baby.

It was confirmed that some names were given depending on the context of delivery. For instance, a baby born on the road would be named Wangila or Nangila for a boy and a girl respectively in the *Babukusu* community. Almost all African names have meaning regarding the circumstances in which the baby was born. Seasons were also acknowledged like draught and rainy seasons during naming ceremonies (Akaranga, 1986). This was done in order to commemorate on the particular occurrences that happen in life bearing their children names. An example is when a baby was born after several of them have been dying, a ritual was done to make the newborn live. A respondent added that the baby is taken to an agreeable place away from the homestead and is to be picked by another chosen elderly woman. This symbolizes the detachment or rather disconnection from the evil of loss of babies that has been affecting the family. The chosen woman who picks the baby chants as follows;

A) *Yaya nangala omwana*, Brethren I have picked a baby,

Yaya nama khuangala omwana, Brethren I have just picked a baby,

Nali sisnyeno ewe okhafwa ta, If it is a bad spirit you should not die,

Abo bafwee newe okhafwa ta, Those should die but not you,

Lisina liowo bali Makokha. Your name is Makokha (ash).....

The newborn is given a name depending on the parents' choice. These names are specific and they include; Wanyonyi, Makokha, Masiliokokho, Nambangala, Kundu, Walekhwa among others. The chanting and naming of the baby is done immediately the baby is picked from the spot. The ritual bares the child from dying as the rest did. This particular chant is significant as it is believed to make the baby survive and gives honour to the newborn's parents for having a surviving child.

The male circumcision rite envelopes various stages, which have different contexts that are meaningful and symbolic to the initiate. One of the significant stages is when an initiate visits the maternal uncle's home to be gauged if he is ready for the cut and advised on how to behave before and during circumcision. This is done to avoid shame and disgrace from the outsiders in case the initiate fears or changes the mind which is an unforgivable act. These various contexts are namely; at the shrine (*Namwima*), maternal uncle's home, and finally from the river bank back home (*syetosi*).

The first context to be examined under circumcision rite is at the shrine (*namwima*). The traditional

circumcisers partake in a purification ritual earlier in July before the actual circumcision practice kicks off. This shrine is a holy place where prayers, offerings and oath-taking take place in the *Babukusu* community. The purification exercise involves circumcisers who take an oath to strictly abide in the traditional laws that govern the circumcision exercise. Anyone who goes against the laws is prompt to face harsh punishment by the lawmakers and the ancestors as well.

(Wanyama, 2007) points out that a qualifying circumciser is ordained by the ancestors who give him the spirit of circumcision (*kumusambwa kwe khukheba*). They then undergo a purification exercise at the shrine to purify knives (*khubita kimibano*). During the exercise, the blessing of the knives happens and the ancestors are asked for moral support during the circumcision period. The chanting session is performed by the leader (*Omwiranyi*) who is chosen through divine calling. He chants as follows;

B) *Okhochha khukheba omwana wa bene*, You are going to circumcise someone's child,

Okhacha khumukhasi wa bene namwe owoo ta, Do not have sex in or out of marriage,

Norura ewoo Luokhuranga,

When you leave your home on Monday,

Okalukhe Munyongesa,

Go back on Saturday.

This chant takes place as they hold their knives high above their heads as a form of surrendering as they take the oath. This is a symbol of commitment which is a virtue that should be upheld during the circumcision exercise. The ancestors are hence provoked to help them have self-control during this period.

Another important circumcision ritual is the one at maternal uncle's home (*ebukhochha*). This stage is very symbolic as it depicts the in-laws to the maternal uncle accord him respect for giving them his sister. This is so when dowry has been paid and the uncle (*khochha*) has nothing he holds against them. In return of the good gesture of dowry payment, the uncle gives a bullock to the initiate after chanting to him as the culture dictates. This implies that payment of dowry is an honourable action among the *Babukusu* community. This special visitation takes place on the eve of the circumcision day. If the bullock is slaughtered instead, its stomach refuse is smeared on the initiate's body and part of the bullock's lower part (*luliki*) is put around the initiate's neck. He chants as follows before putting the meat around his nephew's neck;

C) *Bona nakiirire*, I have slaughtered it,

Okhanjanggalasiakho ta,

Do not put me to shame,

Wiime bakhukhebe

Stand still for the cut,

Ese senariakho ta,

I was not scared

Nooria ewe wewaye?

If you fear where are your roots?

Khochha bona nakhuramo luliki. Nephew I dress you this piece of meat.

When the initiate leaves the uncle's home, he is full of excitement, pride, readiness and courage to face the cut. Nowadays alive bullocks or goats are given so as it might help the initiate later in case of any need that arises such as school fees. The bullock will be sold and money used to pay for his fee. This is a clear indication that with time, *Babukusu* community value education in this competitive world.

The last context to be studied under this section is from the river bank (*syetosi*) back home. This is the ritual that is performed to an initiate at dawn, just before circumcision. After the smearing of the initiate's body

with mud to make it numb and ready for the cut, the initiate and his accompany set off. This place is symbolic as the river is believed to be sanctified and does not get dry even during droughts. That is the reason it is not any river but specific ones for such purposes. (Kariithi, 2020) posits that these particular rivers are located in places known as *Lurende* (springs). When the procession leaves the river, a chosen male figure who was circumcised traditionally leads the rest in the *sioyaye* chant.

D) Soloist: *Hooooo musinde wee*, Hooooo you uncircumcised,

Respondents: *Hoooo*, Hoooooooooooo,

S: *Musindewe*, Uncircumcised one,

R: *Hoooooooooooo*, Hoooooooooooo,

S: *Kukwefweekwebakhale kwololoma*, Ours of the ancestors is sounding,

R: *Haahoooooooooooo*, Haahoooooooooooo,

S: *Noli omuria mbalu webele*, If you are a coward give up,

R: *Haahoooooooooooo*. Haahoooooooooooo.....

This *sioyaye* chant makes him long for the cut as they hurriedly walk home in order to disapprove them. The visit to the river bank at dawn is for the initiate to connect with the ancestors, Mango being the first *Bukusu* male to be circumcised in history. It also instills courage and the enthusiasm for the cut. When the whole circumcision exercise is over and successful, it ends with a public feasting. There is rejoicing and making libation and food offering to the living dead. This is a symbol of appreciation and giving thanks to the ancestors for making the exercise end successfully.

Marriage rite (*liselelo*) is another important and remarkable stage in one's life in the African society. Every individual of age, both male and female is expected by the society to find suitors and get married. The reason behind it is for community expansion through siring of children. This rite encompasses various activities like meeting of both families; the bride's and the groom's to know each other, dowry negotiation and payment and finally the actual traditional marriage.

A woman is always talked to by the paternal aunt on issues of marriage before she is married off. This happens at her father's homestead before the actual ceremony kicks off. The context is significant as it helps the bride to come to terms with reality of marriage and what is expected of her while in marriage. Many people were present during such occasions including relatives and friends to the bride and groom. (Nwadiokwu et al., 2016) asserts that marriage is a requirement and social affair in the African society. This is why it was witnessed by a large number of people who were happy for the couple making a new turn in their lives. The aunt could chant as follows;

E) *Senge bon awanyolile enju*, Niece you have gotten a home,

Okalukhasie kimiima, Change your manners,

Oryee omusecha, Respect your husband.....

She proceeds with the chanting while seated on the floor facing the bride. This is the last piece of advice given to the bride from the aunt. She must be married and understands what marriage is all about. The bride leaves her home knowing what awaits her in marriage and to be informed of the pros and cons in marriage.

The society expects her to build her marriage on good and principled foundation.

Death is the last and compulsory phase of any human. When a member of the community died, a number of rites that involved chanting were performed. This was in relation to the nature of death, age, gender and marital status of the deceased. Various death rites were performed at different time and places regarding the nature of death in *Babukusu* community. The very last death rite is performed on the third day after the burial of the deceased (*lufu*). This particular rite is not performed to every deceased but only to those members who qualify for the rite. These qualifications are determined by age, marital status, fertility and moral uprightness of the deceased. This rite is performed at the homestead of the deceased who has led an honourable life worthy emulating and died in old age, (Wasike, 2013).

The chanter, who is a very special man ordained through divine calling brings out very detrimental concerns that affect human life to the audience. These might include issues like history of *Babukusu* people, education, marriage and contemporary issues such as covid 19, unemployment and high living standards. He also dwells on death, which was the main cause of the occasion and asks the bereaved family not to grieve so much as death has existed since time immemorial and it is for everyone. He also mourns the deceased and prays to God to receive the spirit of the deceased to holy eternity. He chants as follows;

F) Wele ewe niwe Khabumbi, God you are the creator,

Bona luno walangile omundu, You have called someone,

Kachile emakombe, He has gone to the spirit world,

Khusaba omwakanile emakombe, Please receive him in the spirit world,

Baramire obawe bunyindafu, The remaining ones give them comfort,

Lifwa lino likhale mala liliefwe, Death is old and it is ours,

Khuli bakeni bauyii khukhache, We are seasoned visitors and we will leave.....

This rite is a symbol of honour to the deceased for living an upright life. The rite is also significant as it is during this occasion that the bereaved together with the other members of the community learn very important issues from the arena (*kumuse*). The oral performer in this particular rite is both an informer and ritualist, believed to be chosen and guided by God to give the message to His people.

Another different context that surrounds death is when one died in a road accident. The *Babukusu* people believe that the spirit of the deceased remains at the scene of the accident until the close family members collect them from the spot back home for eternal rest. This type of death was classified as one of abnormal deaths as they only believed in natural deaths due to old age.

Before the spirit of the deceased was taken back home to rest, a rite was performed at the very place where the accident occurred. This type of death is crucial and it calls for a ritual at the scene of the accident. If the ritual is not performed, the deceased spirit will be haunting the lives of other family members and they will continue losing their lives in accidents.

A number of activities take place at the accident scene like cooking and eating together in order to appease the deceased's spirit. This happens in the evening when it is believed that the spirits are alert and always on the watch. Before leaving the scene, one of the relatives, either an elder brother, father or paternal uncle picks a stone or sand and chants as follows;

G) *Bona nechile khukhubukula*, See I have come to pick you,

Okhasikala eno ta, Do not remain here,

Ese bona ndikho njaa engo, I am leaving to go home,

Narekukhe okhasikala enyuma ta, I am set to go, do not remain behind,

Rangira namwe unondekho, Go ahead of me or follow me.

Immediately the chanting session is over, they depart carrying the stone or sand that they had picked which symbolized the deceased spirit. A respondent explained that context will change immediately the family members reached home as they proceed straight to the deceased grave. The sand or stone carried from the scene of the accident is placed on the deceased grave as the same chanter proceeds chanting as follows;

Bona nakhuosisye mungo, See I have brought you home,

Wikhale enoo niyo ewenywe/ewoo, Rest here, your home.

It is believed that the deceased spirit was pleased to have been brought back home and it rests for eternity. These kinds of rites for abnormal deaths like accidents, murder and suicidal deaths (*lifwa lye kamaraba*) were performed with an aim of cleansing the other members of the family from such deaths to recur in the family. The evil spirit believed to cause such deaths is also disguised not to come for another family member. This was due to the belief that abnormal deaths are attributed to magical and spiritual powers of witch doctors (Alembi, 2002). The belief in Magical powers by the *Babukusu* community is the one that causes fear which prompts the community to ask for assistance from diviners for protection and sanctity, (Musungu, 2006). This is the fact that calls for the ritual performances where chants are performed to implore the spirits and to ask for protection from the ancestors.

Suicidal spot is a context that comes up when an individual commits suicide. It is an abomination and unforgivable act not only in *Babukusu* community but also the entire African society. It was further revealed that all the death rites were performed with the conviction of family purification and to disguise the bad spirits to go and never to return. For instance, for those who hanged themselves were given strokes of canes, chanted to before being brought down from where the body was suspended. Everything that was present on the suicidal spot was burnt to ashes as a way of disconnecting themselves with the evil spirit of taking life of oneself. The chanter (one to bring the deceased body down) could chant as follows;

H) *Sendi ese okhwirire ta*, I am not the one who killed you,

Ochiile okhwuo, Go for good,

Ese oyoo nakhusungula. I now bring you down...

It was noted that sometime a sheep would be slaughtered and be burnt as sacrifice to the ancestors at the same spot. This was a way of pleading for mercy and forgiveness as it was a sin of one of their kin had committed. The actual burial for the deceased was unceremoniously done as no respect was accorded to such a person. It could also take place at the wee hours of the night where it only involved close family members and relatives and no food was cooked. The grave could be left flat so that the deceased could be forgotten very first and no newborns were named after them.

FINDINGS

It was established that birth-naming rite has various contexts depending on time, seasons and nature of birth.

Newborns were named according to these elements in order to commemorate various happenings that marked a particular impact in the family or community.

Circumcision rites were marked at different times and place depending with the stages of the circumcision period with each stage portraying its significance. This marks from the purification exercise, calling friends and relatives by the initiate himself, visiting the maternal uncle's home and finally the actual circumcision day. All these stages were observed and led to a successful circumcision exercise to all who participated. These included the initiate, circumciser and the relatives and friends to the initiate.

Marriage was accorded honour and the context of marriage rite was at the bride's home. This context was significant as it depicted that the bride is being married off formally and with the consent of the bride's parents. It also symbolized that the parents to the bride had released their daughter wholeheartedly and gave them blessings for a fruitful marriage. Dowry was also brought to the same homestead of the bride's parents.

Death rite brings out various contexts depending on the nature of death. Normal deaths were honored and the deceased was given a ceremonious send off. It was found out that old age was considered as an achievement in life and this is why the *khuswala kumuse* ritual was performed to the deceased that died in old age at the deceased home, three days after burial. Abnormal deaths were believed to have been caused by an evil eye and witchcraft and rituals were performed at the scenes of death to cleanse the family and implore the evil spirit never to haunt any life of another family member. It was concluded that *Babukusu* community accorded only the natural death and the rest were caused by man through black magic.

CONCLUSION

The paper has shade light on both the *Babukusu* chants and their specific context for the performance. This was successful through identifying and concentrating on the four major rites of passage in *Babukusu* community. It is clear and confirmed that there is no chant that can be manipulated to suit in a particular context unlike other genres of oral literature. When looking at *Babukusu* chants, context is therefore a critical aspect as it forms the bedrock of any study of any particular chant. Context, regarding the four major rites of passage discussed in the paper, contributes to the significance of a chant performed in a particular occasion (phenomenon). In summary, context in chants is a key element in any literary works on chants and without context there is no performance and the chant ceases to have meaning.

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