

# The dramaturgy of *Kalongolongo*: A genre by children

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## **Abstract**

Several approaches to the classifications of theatrical genres are modeled on Western theoretical perspectives, literary analyses and adult viewpoints with less regard for performance dynamics within children's specific cultural contexts. This paper is part of a wider study whose main objective is to establish the place of indigenous theatre in early childhood development (ECD) by analyzing theatrical genres at the disposal of children and caregivers from 33 sampled ECD centres in Ugenya District, Kenya. The study engaged the critical lenses of postcolonial theory to interrogate the homogeneity in the traditional classification of genres to conform only to Western literary discourses and adult perceptions with a view to foreground the authenticity in the classification of genres according to children's ways of knowing and doing. It is evident in this study that *Kalongolongo* exists both as a genre and a performance space that plays host to a whole range of performance aesthetics. Therefore, this paper analyzes the place of *Kalongolongo*, an indigenous theatrical genre based on children's theatrical performances, to demonstrate the significance of strengthening local classifications in research, policy and practice.

**Key words:** *Kalongolongo*, role play, local classification of genres, early childhood

## Introduction

*Kalongo*, an indigenous form of role play by children in Kenya, is analyzed in this paper to foreground the significance of constructing and analyzing theatrical genres in early childhood from a cultural and context specific perspective. The deviation from cultural and context specificity shapes the determination of theatrical genres from a global standpoint which is dominated by Euro-American or Western literary works (Finnegan 2005). The situation is exacerbated by the tendency to perceive theatrical activities in early childhood in terms of stimulating developmental milestones rather than its artistic merits. Fronczek (2009) argues that article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNCRC (1989), which bestows children’s rights to a cultural and artistic life is a ‘forgotten right’, only remembered when other basic rights such as food, clothing, shelter and hygiene have been fulfilled. This has implications for theatre in early childhood a situation that is further complicated by the observation that children’s theatrical activities are overlooked as pastime fancy because the adult yardstick is often used to measure theatre (Hendy and Toon, 2001; Lester, (2012). This explains the underrepresentation of children’s theatrical culture in research, policy and practice. To avoid observance of exclusive standards of dramaturgy, this paper adds voice to Ngugi (2012), Ebrahim (2012) and Nsamenang (2010) who posit that global knowledge should be informed from multiple cultures to capture the diversity and heterogeneity of world cultures. Therefore, children’s ways of knowing and doing is distinguished in this study as a unique and specific culture within the broader category of world cultures.

This paper draws on a study that engaged 1,110 children mostly from low socio-economic backgrounds aged 3-6 and 78 caregivers from 33 sampled ECD centres in Ugenya District, Kenya. Ugenya District is a rural area endowed with a rich resource of people who are potential indigenous theatre practitioners. Like most Kenyan children, the participants in the study were engaged in theatrical activities from three language heritages: *Dholuo*, which is the local language, was most widely used, followed by Kiswahili, which is both a national and official language, and then English, which is considered an official language and the medium of instruction in schools. Participant, non-participant observation and focus group discussion (FGD) were employed to collect data from children and caregivers, respectively. Anchoring on the

critical lenses of postcolonial theory, the study interrogated the homogeneity in the determination of theatrical genres to conform only to Western theoretical literary constructs and adult standards with a view to highlight the place of children as creative and performing artists rather than passive subjects in their own growth and development.

### **The Context of *Kalongolongo***

Role-play is regarded as a theatrical practice by children worldwide, where children take on roles of other characters they know and pretend to be those characters during play. Hendy and Toon (2001) refer to this kind of role play as pretend play. According to Hendy and Toon, pretend play may be observed from 2 year olds and the complexity grows according to the age of participants. In this study, 3-6 year olds were observed during their engagement in a specific category of role play: *Kalongolongo*. Like *Kalongolongo*, more and more culturally and contextually informed constructions and taxonomies of children's pretend play such as *Mandwani* in Zambia addressed by Mukela (2014) deserve investigative inquiry rather than neglect and exclusion.

*Kalongolongo* is a local category of role play by children all over Kenya which captures family matters involving father, mother and children. The entire production is conceived as *Kalongolongo* even though cooking is the core activity. The cooking and the food are also specifically referred to as *Kalongolongo*. The findings reveal that the cooking in *Kalongolongo* is important because meals appear to be one activity which bonds families and children seem to express their desire for one big happy family, the love for good food and fairness in the sharing of the food. Culturally, in the context of the study, one of the worst actions to take against a child or anybody is to deny them food. The findings draw from Finnegan (2005) who posits that local terminologies and principles can also be used to guide the categorization of genres in specific contexts to capture how literary works which dominate academic discourses exist in performance.

According to some caregivers during the FGD, *Kalongolongo* is a local terminology derived from the clatter and clang of cooking tins and utensils during the process of role play. The discourse on *Kalongolongo* extends beyond its dramaturgical aspects. Idiomatically, the term is associated with

child's play, childishness, lack of seriousness, mediocrity or minority. This corroborates concern by Lester (2012) and Fronczek (2009) that theatrical activities by children are taken for granted as daily routine, pastime fancies and child's play instead of being viewed on their own artistic merit and qualities within the particularity of children's culture. Government interventions to improve the status of slum dwellers in Kibera, Nairobi, were reportedly scorned by a critic as *Kalongolongo* to portray that the projects were mediocre and lacked seriousness (Agutu 2014). This then portends the image of *Kalongolongo* as pastime fancy lacking in any artistic creativity; an image that is sometimes applied to overlook initiatives by children as active agents in their own socialization and creativity. Given that the central theme in the role play is cooking in little containers and serving small portions, *Kalongolongo* sometimes means a small portion of food, or an imitation of food in ordinary life.

The caregivers revealed during FGD that the concept of *Kalongolongo* has found its way into sports competitions incorporating multiple games that fill in the gaps and intermissions during major sports events like football matches or athletics. The *Kalongolongo* games include sack races, blindfolding races, running with a spoon in the mouth bearing a potato, running while balancing a ball or basket on the head and head stands. Insecurity and instability in adulthood is blamed on those who never played *Kalongolongo* in childhood. When one says: 'we played *Kalongolongo* together' the meaning derived is that 'we are peers who were ritualized and initiated into adulthood through *Kalongolongo*.'

### ***Kalongolongo*: an Artistic Way of Life**

The reading of *Kalongolongo* as part of children's artistic culture and way of life distinguishes it as an art form which conforms to the characteristic features of indigenous African theatre defined by Ngugi (1996) as part and parcel of life. This is so because the performances are not divorced from daily life and routine as the children become someone or something they already know during the performance. The uniqueness of *Kalongolongo* is its central theme which is cooking and the fact that it is never pre-planned to take place at a specific time and place or to mark a ceremony or event. It grows out of a natural need for children to express themselves and is spontaneous both in the way it begins and ends. Additionally, the roles are played by children

personally without adult facilitation. In this study, the children engaged with their roles in different ways:

- i. Representing the real self in *Kalongolongo*: children explore their individuality in relation to others.
- ii. Assuming the role of another person: children pretend to be someone else they know.
- iii. Assuming more than one role during the role play or role reversal: children explore different characters during the role play.
- iv. Taking on the role of an object like a car, table, chair, door or animal other than their real self.

Everything in *Kalongolongo* has character including the food, toys, car, bicycle, chair, table, door, dog, cow, mosquito or fly. Their characteristics are delineated from the sounds they make, postures they create and how they affect family life. Sometimes they are imagined to have human attributes and asked to stay out of trouble. It is not uncommon to see children engage in conversation with the food they are cooking: for example, stones are assumed to be meat and reprimanded for being too hard and refusing to cook quickly.

The typical *Kalongolongo* characters are: father, mother, children, grandmother, aunties, uncles, house-helps, friends, pastor, teacher and visitors: the findings imply that the characterization is flexible and contextual. Animate characters include dogs, cows, chickens, mosquitoes and flies. Actions and business during play consist of cooking, serving and eating food, washing dishes, fetching firewood, lighting fire, taking care of the family livestock, feeding the family dog and cat with left-over food, driving cars, riding bicycles, washing dishes, faling sick, running errands, children crying, going to school and a whole range of activities which go on alongside the cooking. These activities vary according to the contexts and experiences of the children.

The conflicts encountered are power relationships between children and parents or guardians, gender roles within families are also re-lived, children who refuse to eat are reprimanded, badly cooked food is disapproved and disobedience is not tolerated. Chores around the household and homestead are gender stereotyped such that household chores are relegated to girls. Male roles are also stereotyped and include herding livestock, reading newspapers, being domineering in the family, among other roles. Given that *Kalongolongo*

is also a performance space, the stereotyped roles are not fixed and take different dimensions as they capture children's varied experiences.

### **The Performance Dynamics of *Kalongolongo***

The findings reveal that *Kalongolongo* functions both as a genre and a performance space for children of varied ages, backgrounds and abilities. As a genre, it is a local form unique to children's play culture. As a performance space, it is fluid, elastic and adaptable to multiple performance contexts. For example, *Kalongolongo* engages the following theatrical procedures: process theatre, participatory theatre, improvisation, mime and spontaneous or impromptu theatre. The children express themselves through imitation, dialogue, movement, gestures, facial expressions, improvisation, narration, mime, song, sound effects, and action. Visual elements such as props and costumes are improvised. *Kalongolongo* therefore plays host to what Turner (1977) refers to as a family of performance aesthetics.

The findings reveal that the process determines the genre more than the existence of the genre as a finished and packaged product. The process versus product point of view is in relation to the fact that children at the ECD centres did not perform / produce a rehearsed and finished product with a message for the audience but creatively and artistically re-lived their experiences in the *Kalongolongo* theatrical space. The findings are an indicator that it is not enough just to classify genres into products existing in artistic composition such as song or narrative. One needs to advance to the level of constructing them with the inclusion of their surroundings because they are not self-contained (Jahn 2003).

Boal (1993) conceives process theatre to be where the theatrical means of production lies in the hands of the oppressed people as they use theatrical procedures to explore issues affecting them and figure out how to resolve them. *Kalongolongo* accords children the opportunity to go through the entire dramaturgical process of casting, performing, improvising the script orally as they move through the performance from the beginning to the moment they stop without the pressure to deliver a rehearsed and finished product to an audience within a given time. The children control the role play themselves at the moment of performance without any pre-determined activities or scripted dialogue. It is evident from the study that even process theatre in itself takes variant forms. Children at the sampled ECD centres engaged in a process that

is spontaneous and organic rather than a planned and deliberate stimulus for negotiating issues that affect them like in Boal's theatre of the oppressed where the message is the major driving force in the entire process.

### **The Participatory and Inclusiveness of *Kalongolongo***

Participatory theatre techniques also play a significant role in the process of performance of *Kalongolongo*. The performer-audience relationship is participatory as the performances are not intended for an audience. There are no formal auditions; the children assign themselves roles or join in the action appropriately, the script is cooperatively developed during the process of play and the setting is arranged by the participants according to their imaginations, and tastes. The term *spect-actor* as coined by Boal (1993) refers to the dual role of those involved in the process as both spectator and actor, as they both observe and create dramatic meaning and action in any performance. However, the term *spect-actor* may not adequately represent children's theatrical experiences during *Kalongolongo* because the children are not consciously acting to impress anybody: instead they are living their experiences. The study finds meaning in Boal's argument that the term spectator brands and excludes people and in the case of this study, it may stereotype children as passive, voiceless, dependent and having no agency of their own in theatre. Nsameng (2010) and Ebrahim (2012) position children as agents in their own upbringing with participatory rights as enshrined in the UNCRC (1989), a document that has been domesticated in Kenya through the Children's Act (2001) and the Constitution (2010). The children play participatory performer audience roles during the *Kalongolongo* theatrical process and engage with the roles of creators, performers, *spect-actors*, scene designers, costumiers, directors and choreographers which in the adult world are compartmentalized specializations and renowned as part of exclusive professionalism.

Wilson and Goldfarb (2002: 9) note that theatre requires creators and interpreters. These include playwrights who write plays for actors and actresses, composers who write music for singers and instrumentalists and a choreographer who develops a ballet which dancers will interpret. In the context of children at the ECD centres, the right to ownership and claim to a work of art is irrelevant because performing *Kalongolongo* is both collective and participatory. The composition and development of *Kalongolongo*

conforms to the characteristic features of indigenous African theatre where creative works are the heritage of a community and in many cases no one knows when they were started or how they were created because they are tacit forms which have been handed down from one generation to the next over centuries. The findings show that *Kalongolongo* is an authentic work of art: part of a collective ownership and heritage of childhood in children's contexts in Kenya, spanning generations rather than the creative work of a renowned playwright, choreographer or composer.

The process of performance and participation in *Kalongolongo* gives children the space and latitude to experience theatre without the direction of adult caregivers making their productions authentically child-centred. *Kalongolongo* activities are open, inclusive and democratic without the demands for strict auditions and expertise in performance. Newcomers to the ECD centres are not left out because the models of performance do not require strict and formal rehearsals, time limit, mastery or expertise. There is no limit to the number in the cast as everyone can join and participate. This accessibility enhances participation and demonstrates that the process of participation is holistic, inclusive and timeless. Casey (2001) notes that inclusive spaces and activities in ECD enhance the participation of children with disability and a wider community setting. The empowering and democratic nature of the participatory theatre approaches in *Kalongolongo* demonstrated by children at the ECD centres empowers children to participate more actively and be creative and resourceful.

### **Creativity through Improvisation in *Kalongolongo***

Improvisation plays a significant part in the entire *Kalongolongo* theatre experience. The conventional concept of improvisation is that it is a live theatre in which most of what is performed is created on the spot during the moment of performance (Huck et al., 1993). In its purest form, improvisation requires performers to create the plot, characters, dialogue and the action as the improvisation unfolds without relying on a written text. Due to the fact that there is very little pre-determined dramatic activity, *Kalongolongo* provides a lot of room for improvisation because the players create it at the moment of performance. For young children at the ECD centres, improvisation is more about making up things, such as plot, words, sounds,



action, dialogue, story episodes, endings, props and objects, costumes, theatrical space, time and movements during the moment of performance.

The improvisation of props for cooking involves using empty food containers. There are different levels of *Kalongolongo*: cooking imaginary foodstuffs and pretending to cook foodstuffs that are not edible such as leaves, grass and stones. The children improvise cooking pots, food and utensils. Most of the time, children improvise and imagine fire as they cook. However, according to the caregivers, it is not uncommon to find children cooking real food around their homes.

Given that most children at the sampled ECD centres were exposed to three different languages as indicated above, improvisation enriched their theatrical experiences because of its versatility and capacity to adapt to the different language heritages of the children. Children filled up the gaps in dialogue in the languages that they were most familiar with. It was not strange to hear more than one language featuring during *Kalongolongo*. The flexibility in language use during *Kalongolongo* allows children to experience the cultural diversity inherent in Kenya.

Improvisation of theatrical space led to flexibility in the range and dynamism of theatrical space at the disposal of the children at the ECD centres. Theatrical space was not limited to physical space; it included created or found space, imaginary space, time and democracy or freedom, hence the spontaneity of *Kalongolongo* activities. This finding challenges the dominant notion of theatrical space as physical space such as an architectural structure in Western theatrical constructs with a stage for actors, auditorium for audience and a strict observance of the fourth wall and aesthetic distance. Scenery and settings were improvised by imagining bedrooms and living-rooms and kitchens. Imaginary cars were driven and imaginary doors opened. The critical postcolonial viewpoint in this study concludes from the findings that physical space alone does not necessarily guarantee child participation.

In conclusion, it is evident that role play can take variant forms which capture the multiple contexts of children in early childhood. Given that *Kalongolongo* is contextual, it dispels the notion that childhood is homogeneous and opens space for the multiple childhoods inherent in Kenya and worldwide. This local and contextual approach in defining *Kalongolongo* from a child centred

approach contributes constructively to the determination of genres from a performance perspective rather than a rigid and prescriptive approach.

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