

## School Music Festivals and the Rights of Children: The Case of Uganda

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### Abstract

*In order to make up for the social effects caused by many years of under-development as a result of dictatorship, ethnic conflict and civil wars, the current government of Uganda decided to promote national unity and national pride through primary school music festivals as part of reforms in the education sector. The government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) sponsored music competitions amongst schools whose objective is described by the mutual process of socialization and educating the masses about children rights and the country's constitution. With a total of 198 participants (n=198), including music teachers (n=60), students (n=80), parents (n=40), and administrators (n=18), this research examines the role of school music festivals in fostering awareness and advocacy for children's rights. It illustrates how music festivals accord children the opportunity to participate in social change and in developing a new culture nationally by introducing a development discourse nationally. Ethnographic research design was applied, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods constituting a wide array of observations over a period of time. Interviews and questionnaires were used to ascertain how music festivals create a culture of constitutionalism, raising children rights awareness, and advocacy. In addition to the searched literature, the researcher's personal experiences as participant observer and his interaction with stake holders offer insight and understanding of how music festivals allow children to use the performance stage as space to evaluate inconsistencies associated with claiming their rights.*

**Keywords:** Music, Music Festivals, Children, Children's Rights, Advocacy, Constitutionalism

### Introduction

When the National Resistance Movement government took over Uganda, they fostered international relations with the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, in addition to getting involved in a wave of non-governmental development activity in the 1990s. Uganda then became a signatory to the UN convention with specific reference to the Rights of a Child. The government subsequently adopted a Western-based children's rights approach overseen by UNICEF and the Department of Social Welfare. Children all over the country continued to be victims of crime even as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and local schools embarked on sensitization campaigns on children's rights. Currently, a number of children suffer from a lack of basic resources in addition to security. Because of this, a multitude of children do not go to school and several of them are separated from their parents due to increased divorce cases, alcoholism, and armed conflict. About 4,000 children in Nakasongola District alone suffer abuse each year (New Vision, September 11, 2012, p. 13).

### The Perceived Problem

The perceived problem in this study is that a cross-section of Ugandans do not know what is embedded within the country's constitution with regard to children's rights. The main question for this survey therefore is: *to what extent has the government used school*

*music festivals to create and promote a culture of constitutionalism in order to raise children's rights awareness and advocacy?'*

### **Aims**

The aims of this study therefore are to **undertake** a literature search on documents that are of interest to this research as well as **investigate** whether and why school music festivals changed focus from UN millennium goals of alleviating poverty, stopping the HIV/AIDS spread and providing universal primary education. It is of paramount importance to also **evaluate** the effectiveness of children's music festivals format of play in enforcing children's negotiation of identity and rights awareness and **ascertain** the extent to which the government uses music festivals to create a culture of constitutionalism raising children rights awareness, and advocacy.

### **Materials and Methods**

"Reliable account of any society or community necessitates first hand familiarity with the environment acquired through the temporary assumption of an inhabitant's point of view" (Radway, 1988, p.366). As I worked with school choirs during training for music festivals, I interacted with performers, organizers, trainers, and administrators. I got an insight and understanding of how music festivals allow children to use performance stage as public space in which to evaluate and communicate contradictions associated with claiming their full rights. As a participant observer, I gathered information from within the various music festival rehearsal venues and at the actual festival. The survey attracted 198 participants ( $n=198$ ), including music teachers ( $n=60$ , 30.3%), students ( $n=80$ , 40.4%), parents ( $n=40$ , 20.2%), and administrators ( $n=18$ , 9.09%). Ethnographic research design was applied to this survey. It combined both qualitative and quantitative research methods constituting a wide array of observations over a period of time, survey amongst the festival organizers, interviews with the audience, parents, teachers and students. Structured questionnaires were sent out to music teachers, students, parents and administrators. Literature was searched including using the internet, archives, newspaper, and research documents and policies guidelines. In addition, face to face and telephone interviews were conducted.

### **Literature Survey**

Ericsson and Vaagland (2002), in Sidsel (2005) recount that while festivals have no significant economic gain, they mean a lot to the local community and their cultural life as they serve as arenas for social companionship and joint activity. Various studies focus on how learners interpret and react to nationalist discourses in constructive but active approaches. In music festivals, learners are usually under the supervision and direction of adults and adult-controlled social forces and are not considered, 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live' (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 4).

According to the MoES, festivals are assigned themes. The themes are aimed at raising awareness of the community on the developments in the political as well as socio-economic arenas (Uganda, 1998, p. 2). Music festivals as artistic and cultural

experiences are crucial for the creation of self-narratives as they bear possibilities of opening up for stronger emotional experiences. These types of experiences define change and develop the self (Giddens, 1991 in Sidsel, 2005). It is clear that the government is concerned about the reconciliation of traditional and modernity as reflected in the festival criteria. Children are supposed to utilize local, traditional and cultural elements to deliver modern, national development messages artistically. In addition, children engage in cultural identities to negotiate their place in society and the country at large.

Nielson (1997) affirms that music festivals are seen as educational music projects planned and performed by the festival boards [government], experienced by audiences [students and parents], with the festival program as the educational content. Our music festivals are, therefore, an interactive project; a joint investment between the government and school children in creating new notions on constitutionalism, children rights, tradition and their ultimate role in modern governance. Festival performers have turned into crucial discursive objects with regard to the reconstruction of the country. Holland *et al.* (1998) argue that;

....the improvisations that are characteristic of all social behavior make a difference to the habitus of the next generation. That is, the forms of novel activity created by a senior generation provide the experimental context in which their children develop the habitus of the group (p. 45).

Children taking part in music festivals often remind the adults of important social issues. Because of their high aptitude for cultural education, children are appropriate targets for festivals tasks and have been more effective than adults because ‘the child brings to bear specialized cognitive skills and domain-specific programs that make development possible (Hirschfeld, 1994).

## Findings

### **From UN Millennium Goals to National Development, Constitutionalism, Children Rights**

In a bid to sensitize Ugandans about nationalism, human rights, and constitutionalism, the government opted to use school music festivals as annual event organised at both district and national levels. With the kinds of creativity space and freedom festivals accord children in processing and interpreting musical arts involving music, dance, costume, drama, and dance during the process of preparation and execution, children have successfully applied the musical arts in sensitizing the communities on matters concerning poverty alleviation, education, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. On whether the festivals have shifted focus, 96% [n=190] of the respondents feel that the concept of these festivals gradually changed focus from UN millennium goals of alleviating poverty, stopping the HIV/AIDS spread and providing universal primary education, to promoting national development, creating a culture of constitutionalism, raising human rights awareness, and children’s advocacy. With the current festivals format, performers are expected to compose songs, dances, and dramas within the government designated themes using traditional instruments and traditional dances. Children are trained to sing

and act symbolizing stewards of the country's political future as well as their own traditional culture.

### **The Effectiveness of 'Play' in Negotiation of Children's Identity and Rights Awareness**

Children are incredibly talented and they always enjoy music festivals as depicted in their performances which are highly-energized. They are exceptional performers with high energy levels for the sustenance of the vigorous Ugandan traditional dances. Through personal interviews, formal and informal interactions, I ascertained that a number of trainers and performers alike, 67% [ $n=133$ ], likened children's performances to play. They considered the whole exercise to be enjoyable for performers because of the aspect of pretending to be what they are not. Pretention in this case refers to an educational element with a crucial social role within the music festival, a place for children to negotiate 'a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status-maintenance which constitutes communication in the quotidian social process' (Turner, 1986, p. 76). There are always interesting and common jokes in festival performances which denote serious habits that children witness from adults in their communities. Most times these jokes were based on children's experiences but in a rather playful format. The word 'play', has crucial meanings, rather than a lack of seriousness, in reference to the negotiation of identity. 86% [ $n=170$ ] of the participants agreed that children accomplish crucial socialization tasks through play in music festivals affirming that social change opportunities dwell in playful situations. Waliggo (1994) posits that:

If we compare adults to children we find that children are tender, quite innocent and neutral with regard to political or educational bias. The ideals carried through the lyrics of festival songs and dramas usually reflect sentiments of the general population because of the highly participatory nature of the Constitutional Assembly that enacted it.

In music festivals, performers took up constitutional children rights issues and it is important to note that 85% [ $n=168$ ] of the respondents felt that issues about children's rights were always more popular than others which were not about children's rights. Through musical performances, children emphasized their childlike identities, portraying a sense of oneness regarding children's rights.

### **Creating a Culture of Constitutionalism, Children Rights Awareness and Advocacy**

A cross-section of respondents feels that in addition to developing their musical skills and performance skills as school going children, they use the festival platform to freely express their dissatisfaction of adult behaviors towards children, which do not resonate with constitutional guidelines. Therefore, children capitalized on their school knowledge of the constitution to strengthen their rights appeal through performance. 75% [ $n=149$ ] of the respondents affirmed that the government through the MoES uses learners through music festivals as agents for the preservation of nationalism and the creation of the culture of constitutionalism. Through music festivals, school going children are presented with the opportunity to add their voices to the reformulation process of children's rights as well as understand how their rights are reformulated in the constitution.

### ***Namuli***

In one of the plays in the music, dance and drama festival, a mother preferred her daughter *Namuli* to get married after completing primary 7, rather than continue with secondary school while her father preferred otherwise. The mum insisted that she had done her bit and now it was time to reap 'wealth' in return of what she had invested in *Namuli*; when at the same time she 'wouldn't have to worry about taking care of her anymore in an economically challenging world. *Namuli's* father insisted '...the constitution has given children a right to education; *Namuli* has a right to education'. The mother asked furiously whether the constitution owned her children. 83% [ $n=162$ ] of the respondents agree that the mother's question is evidence that a cross-section of the people do not know what is embedded within the country's constitution. However, if they were educated, they would probably not ask questions on whether the constitution owned their children. Neither would they use government authority challenging statements with regard to members of their family and under their care when the constitution, overturns traditional values, and assumes jurisdiction over them.

### ***Tamale, the 'Resident District Commissioner' (RDC)***

At the same festival, *Tamale* a ten year-old boy dressed formally got on stage role playing an adult and started singing a song. Pausing as a Resident District Commissioner (RDC), he ably acted as a mid-level local government official, an office occupied by adults.

Addressing the audience, the 'RDC' acted confidently on stage using dramatic speech pauses and gestures aimed at adopting the behavior local government leader through dress, singing technique, posture, and the general confidence, as he authoritatively addressed issues about rights of children. *Tamale* mimicked local government representatives, subverting ultimate State authority through mime and satire. He was effective ironically in his strategy of unsettling generational authoritative hierarchy when his role playing was cheerfully met with audience approval as mocked state personnel through music performance.

With regard to constitutional protection, musical arts festival performances create educational and judgment scenarios in which various community members welcome new constitutional changes. Messages delivered by children through musical arts festival communicate ideas that everyone should embrace the constitution as well as utilize constitutional protection and entitlements to uplift themselves. When *Tamale* sings a different song from as a child, he receives normal attention from the audience much less than when he performs as an 'RDC'. This is the sort of response symbolic of dilemmas children encounter in an attempt to claim control over rights and self-representation. *Tamale* therefore illustrates how to claim rights as a child, indicating how children should usurp their power, identifying as an adult to be heard.

### ***Abasomesa n' abazadde (Teachers and Parents)***

While children's performances are effective channels of popularizing the national constitution, children are ironically conned into conforming to idealized conditions of

happy, free and fair childhood situations when in the actual sense they are under oppressive adult authority. In response, children use performances to unleash bold criticisms of contradictions that lie between constitutionalism and traditional values. *Omusomesa* (teacher) after caning each of the students that came late for music practice mentioned to me as a way of justifying his actions that '...caning is an effective means of disciplining children'. The irony lies in the fact that children are regularly caned by their *abasomesa n'abazadde*, who are the very adults that tell them of their rights. These kinds of scenarios leave children with anxiety and hopelessness about their security. In addition, one wonders how *abasomesa n'abazadde* should expect 'stress-free and jovial children with happy facial expressions when they are subjected to heavy schedules involving school work, music and dance practices and sports training. It is hard for children that are not treated cordially, to respond as expected. More ironical is the fact that the authority to enact, formulate and defend children's rights remains in the adult hands outside children barriers. In the actual sense, adults must be the stewards of these rights by acting in the best interest of children (Ennew & Milne, 1990).

**Table 1**

***Quantitative Data from all Participants N=198***

<b>Festivals helping children to</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>	<b>Abstain</b>
Advocate for social change	00	122	57	11	08
Negotiate national identity	20	84	67	08	12
Address child abuse	00	119	67	07	12
Educate adults on constitutionalism	00	121	68	00	09
Harness children rights discourse	10	99	60	11	08

**Summary**

Children in schools are taught to sing and dance about their roles as the pillars of Uganda's future in national development, and about the country's constitution. Children's roles are articulated in the Uganda national youth anthem which is sung at during school assemblies and other events in addition to music festivals. Smaller performance opportunities such as school assemblies serve as alternative platforms where children take liberties within performance thickets to collectively and publically complain to teachers and parents regarding child abuse. These are issues that none of children would most likely be able to talk to their parents about in such a manner. Occurrences such as these accord children the opportunity to participate in social change and the development of national culture. This is ably achieved by interpellating a national development discourse with which children are fast becoming familiar.

While children's rights discourses promote children's participation in social change, adult authority prevents them from claiming those rights in daily life. Through music festival space, children are able to highlight hiccups between the daily realities of life

they face as less powerful society members and nationalist aspirations that co-opt them as symbols of the future. They are able to connect important links between constitutionally guaranteed freedom from oppression by adults, and their own child development processes into fully productive citizens. They view themselves as pillars of tomorrow and are aware of the metaphorical connection of their status as children to the country's development. On the surface, it may look as if children have nothing to do about their being abused and 'oppressed', but when they engage in performative devices including satire in dramas and identity negotiation done through speech, they utilize musical arts festivals to launch critiques of the very ideals it is intended to communicate.

Music festival performance contexts allow space to harness important rights discourse by children to hold *abasomesa n'abazadde* accountable for their obligations to defend as well as preserve the rights of children. They are successful in using musical arts festivals as a conduit for collective empowerment through which they express conscientious social and political views, communicating their powerless age-based identity posing as government officials, and emulating the model citizens they are expected to become.

Musical arts festival performances help children bring various elements and concepts together to be regularly re-negotiated through cultural-past performances and current national identity interpretations. In essence, the expert who is supposed to be the novice in this case, is the child "... an expert at learning culture cannot be understood except in terms of the cognitive architecture of children and the specialized learning mechanisms that the architecture affords" (Hirschfeld, 2002, p. 616). Through play of form and meaning, children are able to creatively employ this mechanism in festivals, reaffirming their own authority over cultural meaning, and shaping the ideologies of the community around them.

Musical arts festivals are therefore crucial events through which children advocate for social change as well as foster alternative discourses, interpreting from their own viewpoints, citizenship and nationalism. In addition, festivals allow children to educate adults about constitutionalism and the rights of children, serving as space for improvisation, negotiation and interpretation of national identity as children situate themselves within communities in which their voices are regularly silenced. Through improvisational play and performative critical engagement, children contribute towards the development of a culture of constitutionalism. However, throughout this process adults remain the decision makers. And because of this, the effectiveness for negotiations and interpretation will ultimately depend on the engaged and positive participation by all stakeholders.

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