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Rhythm in Oral Poetry as Interface and Interphase of Culture and Development

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Abstract:

This paper draws from an Ethnopoetic research carried out on the cultural aesthetics of oral poetry of the Makindi rituals performed by the Mbeere community of Kenya. The aim is to extend the discourse of that study by delving into rhythm beyond its significance as a central aspect of style in the poetry texts that are performed during the Makindi rituals and into focusing on it as a strategic innovation in cultural aesthetics that links the dynamic collective development of policies to their implementation in the quest of the society to transform life experience positively. The paper introduces rhythm as a term, explores its definitions in a variety of contexts including that of the African oral poetry. The aesthetic significance of rhythm in various spectacles of the Makindi ritual is illustrated after which the paper explains how rhythm is a unique cultural thread that weaves through society's state of being into its state of becoming with efficiency and effectiveness worthy of attention because of its contribution to development and its sustainability across generations. The paper concludes that culture is rhythm and socio-economic development is a function of rhythm. In that regard, rhythm in Makindi phenomenon is realized through the rhythm of Makindi oral poetry in an aesthetic relationship which plays a critical role in the dynamics of development of the society. This creative fact is representative of the importance of African oral literatures in collectively (re)negotiating, (re)generating and disseminating cultural wisdom and presiding over its actualization for positive transformation. This Mbeere aesthetic milieu constitutes what Wasamba (2010) calls invaluable, intangible heritage for the present and the future generations across ethnic nations. In the end, the paper makes an appeal for institutions to rethink their relationship with oral literatures as a source of credible knowledge for use in matters that address people and their development.

Keywords: Rhythm, cultural aesthetics, Makindi oral poetry, development

1. Introduction

This paper draws from an ethno-poetic research carried out on the cultural aesthetics of oral poetry performed during the Makindi rituals of the Mbeere community of Kenya. The paper is an extension of the discourse of the said research which found rhythm to be a central aesthetic pillar of the poetry and the rituals. The paper delves into the significance of rhythm beyond its centrality in such language aspects as phonology and semantics as well as the realization of rituals during the Makindi cultural ceremonies. Instead, the paper broadens focus on rhythm to illuminate how it is also (probably more importantly) a strategic innovation in cultural aesthetics that links people's collective dynamics of conscious development of transformative policies to the implementation of these policies in people's endless quest to address challenges of experience effectively and sustainably. This quest is guided by sensitive and seasoned cultural artists who are produced, nurtured and commissioned to duty by the community. As Taban lo Liyong (1990) observes,

East or West, artists cry best. Because they have a heightened consciousness, they feel heat or cold before everybody else...the true artist needs not be told of his duties to himself and the society...does not wait till after a tragedy in order to regret and say: 'Had I but known that those things I refused to consider seriously would turn out thus, I would have worked hard to stamp them out' (6).

In other words, through oral poetry, the artist ensures that the society is safe and developing. This paper begins with a general exploration of the term rhythm with reference to propositions by scholars. It then introduces oral poetry within the Makindi ritual context in order to make it easy for the reader to follow the succeeding presentation. The paper uses oral poetry to help us appreciate the uniqueness of Mbeere people, their experience and culture. Indeed, this is in concurrence with the views of Oyekan Owomoyela (1979) that "a study of oral poetry will give insight into how this art explains the interrelationships of all things that exist, and provides for the group and its members a necessary sense of their place in relation to their environment and the forces that order events on earth" (2).

1.1. Definition of Rhythm

Rhythm is an important aspect of art and it can be correctly argued as indispensable in the production, performance and appreciation of oral literature in general and ethnic oral poetry in this particular case. It is also arguable that rhythm is an aspect of style that is as old as the earliest human literary expressions. The centrality of rhythm can explain the volumes of critical discourse that have emerged especially among scholars from the classical period and which continue to the present. Within these discourses, rhythm has been defined and explained in many ways, all of which converge in the appreciation of its aesthetic significance. Plato, one of the most reputable classical philosophers, viewed rhythm as what he called '*Kineseos taxis*' which means "an order in movement, or an order in articulation" (qtd. in Rassner 1990: 229). According to Plato, rhythm is the product of purposeful literary creativity in the sense that the order in the movement is designed with unique capacity to deliver A (what is being moved) to point B (intended destination). In the same way, the order in the articulation is a communicative design enhanced to enable delivery of M (message) by P (poet/poetry) to AUD (audience) in a preconceived way that impacts AUD in a premeditated way.

Leech (1969: 105) agrees with the detailed broadness of Plato's subtle definition of rhythm and adds that, "rhythm of language is not isochoric in terms of crude physical measurement [alone]. Rather, [it] is psychological and lies in the way in which the ear interprets the recurrence of stress in connected speech". On his part, Rassner (1990: 243) defines rhythm as, 'the repetition and variation of images, or patterns of images, which induce an effective response from an audience and enhances the communicative 'message'. The element of unique repetition as a defining characteristic feature of rhythm is also seen in the definition by Kiura (2014). According to him, rhythm is "the regular recurrence of similar or related artistic elements including sounds, words, lines, silences, actions as creatively aligned by the artist in order to realise artistic balance and achieve aesthetic effect" (15).

From the definitions sampled above, it emerges from by the scholars that rhythm is a very broad aesthetic strategy whose application is open to versatile creativity by artists. However, aesthetic recurrence seems to be a common denominator for all applications. What recurs, how it recurs, what aesthetic objective is targeted and the level of aesthetic significance and impact of rhythm depend on the creativity of the artist and the interpretive instinct of the audiences. The research on the cultural aesthetics of the oral poetry of Makindi rituals of the Mbeere community of Kenya found that rhythm is uniquely used to link cultural theory to cultural practice with the aim of fostering and sustaining positive socio-economic transformation. The study concluded that Makindi is the single most all-inclusive and most dynamically stable cultural phenomenon that all members of Mbeere community are supposed to participate in and to refer to for authentic and credible guidance on all matters of life. According to Kiura (2017):

Whereas all rituals are important in the societies where they are performed, Makindi can be argued to be one of the most important ceremonies of rituals in Mbeere culture. Clearly, Makindi rituals are not only inevitable, but their occasion also occupies the status of large-scale, and is the single most popular, all-inclusive, multi-purpose Mbeere cultural phenomenon. (261)

With this kind of conclusion, we will venture into an analysis of the various ways in which rhythm has been employed in the said cultural phenomenon and attempt to illustrate how it is an important link between what people collectively decide and agree to do for socio-economic development and how they do it to realize the envisaged development.

2. Makindi Cultural Rituals and Oral Poetry in Context

The contemporary Makindi culture involves an organized festival which is arguably the totality of ritual ceremonies performed for children of the Mbeere community across their national regions commonly during seasons culturally agreed upon and set aside for the purpose. The festival is a recent cultural innovation to the traditional Makindi culture in which Makindi culture involved a visit by women related to a mother in a homestead where a Mbeere new-born had been reported. Its traditional name is 'Ugwati wa mwana' which directly translates to 'holding of a baby'. Commonly, the maternal grandmother of the new-born would mobilize a few women hurriedly upon receipt of the good news and they would prepare gruel and other domestic necessities of the circumstances of a new mother. They would then go to 'hold' the baby. Their journey to the homestead, their stay at the homestead and their departure from the homestead were accompanied by elaborate dramatic performances presided over by oral poetry. This is the practice that has kept evolving to respond to the changing worlds of the Mbeere community and to be what it is today.

The findings from the study indicate that through collective regeneration of culture, Mbeere people have broadened the concept of baby/child beyond the traditional infant. Today, any member of Mbeere community is considered a child in the context of the Makindi culture. In addition, the trigger of the ritual arose exclusively from the good tidings and the related needs associated with the birth of a baby. A multiplicity of other triggers has been included to warrant performance of Makindi rituals for persons of all ages in whom something worthwhile is noted and to which a need by the person or by the society is attached. Such contemporary triggers include a teenager who has passed in exams and, perhaps, needs material support to proceed with higher level of education. A ritual ceremony is organized in which the community recognizes the achievement and rewards in material gifts and in kind. Similarly, a ritual is performed after a young initiate is re-united with the family and community after spending a number of weeks in seclusion. The event is marked by prayer, a lot of singing and dance and exchange of gifts. Oral poetry in Mbeere society is performed in dramatic ritual spectacles in praise of the 'baby' as profuse encouragement given to motivate further achievement. Collectively generated wisdom and cultural philosophy related to hard work/smart work, focus, determination and prudent teenage lifestyle is re-enacted in the specific context of the teenage. In the case of academic excellence, this translates to academic

success which ultimately empowers the individual economically with positive socio-economic impact to the immediate family and the larger Mbeere community and eventually the general humanity.

Findings further indicate that the intensity of ritual ceremonies varies from one sub unit of the community to another depending on the uniqueness of each. The sub unit could be a geographical region, a clan or even a family. Commonly, the dry seasons of August and the festive season of December experience most ritual ceremonies. According to Kiura (2017), members of the community argue that the two seasons are determined with the social and economic circumstances of the Mbeere region in mind. The seasons provide adequate time for majority of the people because there is less demand for farm work on the largely small scale farming community. Also, people have plenty of disposable harvest of foodstuffs as well as proceeds from sales. These are necessary for material gifts which are employed as costumes and props in the dramatic performances of oral poetry during the rituals. Considering the contemporary value for education in Mbeere culture, the season is appropriate because schools are also closed and thus the young children who constitute majority of the subjects of rituals are available at home. Another advantage of this scenario is that parents are not under pressure to pay fees and provide pocket money since children are home.

The month of April, the only other school holiday, is normally the long rains season and the sky is thus too unpredictable for the outdoor public ritual ceremonies. In addition, the fortunes of the rare rains demand uncompromised commitment to agriculture making it inappropriate for intensive ritual ceremonies. Another factor that makes the month of April inappropriate is that this month is far off after the month of December when harvests and food stocks are fast depleting in this low income semi-arid region. Whereas Makindi ritual ceremonies take place in specific homesteads of each of the subject children of the rituals during season, all the ritual ceremonies are realized from the same basic cultural template and, thus, the aesthetics involved are largely similar leading to a unique realization of the collective spirit of the people and the essence of the festival across the land. This rhythmic system of alternating economic activities and ritual seasons is the deliberate result of collective wisdom which is part of the cultural policy on positive transformation of socio-economic development.

Further, Ademola Dasylyva, made a Pre-conference remark in 2018, that 'in Africa, probably more than in other regions, the festival is the premier cultural institution.' He continued to state that, 'it is most enduring element of cultural heritage through which societies undergo a periodic rebirth, and renewal of body, soul and spirit.' Dasylyva's words help to define Makindi cultural ritual festival. He sees the African festival, as a creative and regenerative process occasioned by the visiting ancestors or genies and their blessings for individual and communal cleansing of accumulated sins and diseases to usher in peace, fruitfulness and progress. To put it in other words, Dasylyva observes that the African festivals are seasons of celebrations, marking important events and phases in the life of a community (2018: 1). Paul Kithumbu Njiru is a cultural enthusiast of the Mbeere community whose assertions during a personal interview with Moses Kariuki Kiura concur with Dasylyva's view of African cultural festival. Njiru describes Makindi as "a grand festival made up of several rituals, ritualistic spectacles and performativity sets of ritualized actions". He foregrounds the grand nature of the festival by adding that "some spectacles and sets of ritualized actions of this major festival are performed on several different days ahead of the day of the main rituals [ceremony] of the festival" (qtd. in Kiura 2017: 68).

Makindi festival culture acquires the status of a grand phenomenon not only from its deep and rich history as well as its social saturation (prevalence in all regions occupied by Mbeere people) and contemporary cultural significance particularly of the ritual components, but also from the oral poetry which gives life and voice to all its aspects. The multidimensional essence of ritual is central to the status of Makindi because, as Denis Rook (1984) observes, one domain of ritual, such as those of Makindi, constitutes "public, elaborate, and often large-scale religious, aesthetic or civic ceremony" (1).

Kiura (2017: xiii) presents the term Makindi as representative of a cultural phenomenon whose appreciation can be better realised through multipronged approaches. It ought to be viewed from the traditional foundational perspective and the contemporary dynamism in the context of globalization. As such, he defines Makindi ceremony from the traditional perspective as the corpus of cultural rituals performed in Mbeere community for children and presided over by oral poetry. From the contemporary view, he argues that, courtesy of its responsiveness, adaptability and dynamism, the term Makindi ceremony has also been adopted to refer to any ritual or symbolic cultural celebration involving a positive aspect of the life of a member of Mbeere community. In this definition, the traditional conceptions are aesthetically and strategically reviewed to enable the community to address challenges of the present including socio-economic development as has been highlighted above.

It is important to note that whereas Dasylyva posits that the African festivals are occasioned by visitation by ancestors or genies, a close look at Makindi festival from the findings of the reference research reveals that elements which can be viewed as regenerative genies of globalization constitute additional visitors who contribute to occasioning specific rituals and ritualized activities of the contemporary festival. Such genies visit Mbeere community in their socio-economic, natural, cultural, technological realities. Makindi festival offers the space for the community to come to grips with, and to address the needs occasioned by globalization. The community has developed a dynamic and sustainable cultural strategy for this purpose using literary creativity in dramatic performances of ritual spectacles that are presided over by oral poetry. In the entire process, rhythm plays a significant role as will be demonstrated in the sections of this paper that follow.

2.1. Origin of Makindi: Cultural Aesthetics of the Name and the Festivals

It appears that in spite of the evolutionary dynamics, the name Makindi has endured as the most creative epitome of the festival from as far back into history as available memory has taken us. The ordinary translation of the metaphorical

name/word 'Makindi' is the uncooked or undercooked flour lumps in one of the most popular health meal in Mbeere -the traditional gruel. These lumps would obviously make the consumption of the gruel unpleasant in addition to rendering the signature delicacy unfit for human consumption. Yet, in an interesting literary irony, the name signifying the worst state of a basic meal continues to embody the best and one of the greatest and most strategic products of the Mbeere cultural aesthetics; i.e., the Makindi ritual culture. In the same way the flour lumps are conspicuously felt and stand out in the gruel, the Makindi aesthetics stand out and are felt during the ritual performance. A close attention to the common speech of the community reveals that its effectiveness is based on how continuously its competent speakers infuse literary elements for strategic aesthetic effect. In fact, it is a common expectation by people interacting on certain matters to expect, even demand, that certain specific literary expressions are used to indicate deliberate elevation and foregrounding of message. Use of other non-literary options would either imply that the message lacks weight or betray the cultural incompetence on the part of the speaker.

According to respondents, the traditional Makindi rituals were presided over by song and dramatic performances in symbolic ceremonies which served as practical mitigation of the challenges arising from the birth process and its immediate aftermath. These challenges included lack of adequate supply of material resources for the new experience in the new-born's family. The performances also constituted funfair, entertainment and leisure that enhanced the social bond, socially legitimized the identity of the child and initiated a socialization process for the new-born. In addition, the rituals celebrated the parents; mother in particular, father and the extended family of the child and promoted the parents along the existing cultural ranks of parenthood and age-sets.

The origin of Makindi cultural rituals ceremonies is perhaps understood better from a perspective presented by Alvaro Vargas in his article "Ritual as a cultural lens" in which he argues that "As humanity searches for meaning and purpose in its actions, it creates a series of perceptual frameworks upon which to make sense of the world around it" (workisplay.com). Viewed from this argument, Makindi appears to be one of these frameworks created by the Mbeere people in their antiquity for the purpose of facilitating understanding of their world and negotiating appropriate interaction with it. The formation of the Makindi cultural ritual framework is tied to specific situational contexts that the Mbeere community found itself in and continues to encounter within the contemporary context of globalization. This can largely explain the uniqueness of the practice by the Mbeere community, especially when compared to related practices by other communities. A participant interviewee in this study confirmed that although there are ceremonies for the baby in the culture of her native Tharaka community (neighbours of the Mbeere community), there are significant differences particularly with regard to the high aesthetic level of elaborateness and intensity of Makindi ritual ceremony. The elaborate and intensive structures noted by the respondent are the unique cultural frameworks designed and redesigned from time to time to enhance practical realization of cultural policies. Such realization signifies success of society in responding to the ever-changing socio-economic needs of the community.

Regarding such structures, Vargas observes that "The creation of these frameworks is intricately tied to all the elements present that contribute to the perceptual experiences at the time that the frameworks were created" (workisplay.com). Vegas contention informs our view that once the Makindi framework was created in the traditional context, it became not only useful but also efficient, to be able to pass on wisdom to others that may not have been a direct part of the experiences at the time that it was being created. Makindi cultural ritual, therefore, becomes an important vehicle for the purpose of cultural regeneration, sustainability and proliferation, and through it, Mbeere people regularly present the worldviews and meanings that they ascribe to the world around them for (re)negotiation. This is one point where rhythm is credited for the enduring and dynamic existence of Makindi and its strategic role in the development of society.

On the surface of it, the traditional framework may be misconstrued to have been designed only for immediate help to the new mother to manage her life and sustain that of the child before she regained her strength and full health after childbirth. However, the key symbolic cultural underpinnings of the traditional ritual were broad and were as important as they are in the contemporary ritual. A very candid observation is drawn from the assertion by one respondent who strongly emphasized that the changes that occurred to the original framework of Makindi rituals were "because we [Mbeere community] later became very wise" and revised the frameworks to expand the types and realm of community needs that Makindi rituals could address (Kiura 2017: 80). The continued (re)adjustment and (re)alignment to changes in the society are transformative outcomes of cultural aesthetics through rhythm and not haphazard or spontaneous changes. In fact, dynamism in Makindi culture is so rhythmic that people expect certain strategic structural reviews concomitant to changes in life experience.

Participant observation revealed commonalities in major characteristics of Makindi rituals across the ceremonies and festivals in Mbeere community. In a good description by Rook (1984: 1), rituals commonalities are in a formal behaviour comprising four elements, i.e., actor participants, audience, scripted episodic behaviour, and ritual artefacts. These elements were evident in traditional Makindi and continue to pervade the contemporary festivals in their dynamic adaptations to globalization. For example, the visiting women and members of the host family took turns as participant performers and audience during the ceremonies, the ritual spectacles in the activities of the participants and the audience observed predesigned episodic actualization while the gifts and provisions delivered during the ceremony as well as those that the visitors were given to return to their homes with constitute the ritual artefacts. The symbolic nature of Makindi ritual rhymes evidently in common lifestyle and mannerism of members of Mbeere community even outside of the actual ceremony. This is the transformative power of the strategic cultural phenomenon. The creative human relations exhibited during the performance of the ritual and ritualized activities permeate the general relations of the people as the acceptable

standard and as marks of collective identity. Also, their practical economic activities are founded upon the ritual instructions and counsel

The name Makindi is so far the traditional identity of the festival and, as has been indicated, its ironical element was subtle literary creativity serving as a cultural alarm that presided over the preparation of ritual artefacts. Other names that have emerged in the dynamic nature of the tradition, according to respondents, include: *Mambura ma mwana* (Festival of the baby) *Ugwati wa mwana* (Holding of the baby) and *Cai ya mwana* (Tea of the baby). These have been occasioned by emerging issues including those related to modernity and they reflect the recurring or continuing expansion which is the rhythmic nature of such significant African festivals.

3. Aesthetic Significance of Rhythm in Culture and Development

From the introductory information provided above on the Makindi ritual culture with the presiding oral poetry among the Mbeere community, it is arguable that to a large extent, Makindi phenomenon encapsulates the totality of the fundamental structures responsible for the dynamic (re)production and sustenance of the theoretical, philosophical and practical essence of the community. The theoretical and philosophical aspects constitute what we are referring to as the cultural policies on the various matters of development, while the practical essence refers to the implementation or realization of the spirit and letter of the policies through guided interaction with their environment. In other words, from the performances of Makindi ritual emerges the cultural compass for sustainable development and from the same aesthetics compliance with the cultural guidelines is enforced and performance by individuals and groups monitored and evaluated. In addition, within Makindi, rewards and sanctions are adequately provided for those who conform and for the non-conformists respectively.

This important Makindi culture largely depends on rhythm as its core ingredient. It is in order to say that Makindi is rhythm. Since socio-economic development of the Mbeere community is managed within the rhythmic Makindi phenomenon, it is arguable that rhythm is responsible for initiation and sustenance of such development. We will now attempt to illustrate the aesthetic significance of rhythm in culture and development.

3.1. Rhythm and Ritual Calendar

Makindi ritual ceremonies are not enshrined in national law and neither are they provided for in Acts of Parliament other than being part of the basic rights to assembly and association. However, the zeal with which members of the Mbeere community display commitment to faithfully participating in them is evidence of the effectiveness of rhythm not only in development of strategic cultural policy but also in successful enforcement for compliance. Consideration of the rhythm of natural seasons in relation to the economic dynamics unique to Mbeere people when determining the general seasons for the Makindi ritual ceremonies was brilliant cultural creativity (also called cultural aesthetics). The seasons were never gazetted, but in their responsiveness and sensitivity to people's economic development as well as through rhythmic introduction, it was possible to successfully condition the collective psyche to regularity and continuity of ritual festival seasons. It is even easier to enforce compliance with a friendly rhythm of strategic policy on ritual seasons.

Through rhythm comes a guarantee of sustainable continuity of the seasonal rhythm for rituals. In the end, the cultural objectives will continuously be realized. It is gratifying to note from the findings of the reference research that government administration respects the cultural policy on ritual seasons and takes advantage of the rhythmic order to address its own agenda among the people during these seasons in a non-obstructive way. Government agencies train local people who are known for their centrality in the ritual ceremonies in various development matters. This is done because the trainees are better placed to cascade the development ideas to the populace through the Makindi forum. The agencies send representatives to the ceremonies to monitor the dissemination of the knowledge gained to the participants in the ritual ceremonies. Government agenda is also infused in the oral poetry performed during the ceremonies.

3.2. Rhythm and Ritual Economy

Socio-economic inequality is a reality in many countries and the gap between the rich and the poor in society has gone beyond material to other forms of exclusion and alienation. Nations have been spending resources and formulating academic and political laws struggling to address this problem but the challenge persists. However, Mbeere community has employed the strategy of rhythm, particularly in their Makindi rituals, to develop a successful policy of not only social inclusivity but also of rhythmic (re)distribution of resources across the populace with deliberate suppression aesthetics that help to counter negative effects of man-made differences. Performances of Makindi ritual illustrate consistency in treatment of all people with dignity and as equal, even where the inevitable reality first among equal is in no doubt. For example, rhythm in poetry is used in many ways to accord equitable praise and encouragement to all participants in rituals in line with what is clearly a desired outcome of cultural aesthetic policy.

Families that are less endowed economically are boosted to new levels of economic empowerment through ritual artefacts which are material and monetary gifts from across the economic demography of the rich and the poor. Further empowerment for economic development is realized through performances that disseminate wisdom on development through oral poetry. The rhythm involved works to ensure that the aesthetically generated knowledge is implemented by all members without discrimination.

It is evident that the difficult task of conditioning the collective psyche on inclusivity in economic empowerment for development has been made easy through the rhythm of Makindi ritual. The said distribution and sharing of material and knowledge wealth is not only rhythmic but it is also realised in a friendly cultural policy. These qualities render the role of rhythm in development almost auto dynamic and, as a result, sustainable. The guarantee that each family has

equal chance of hosting a ritual ceremony and equal access to knowledge on economic development motivates commitment to compliance with the policy for its sustainability.

3.3. Rhythm and Ritual Spectacles

Cultural ritual is built on rhythm; without rhythm we can only talk of an isolated event. In other words a set of events and activities elevate to the status of ritual through the aesthetic facilitation of rhythm. The systematic, orderly repetition of certain sets of activities is necessary for conditioning of the collective psyche of the community to identify with the events, own and dignify them above their ordinary counterparts. The community deploys the aesthetic strategy of rhythm for deployment in the process of inculcating in people a commitment to cultural ritual and its rhythm as part of their life. Thus committed, members lead a life of cultural rhythm going forward and that guarantees regularity and sustainable dynamic continuity of the ritual. In the end, rhythm is seen to create a suitable environment for all the strategic cultural objectives of ritual to be realized.

Whereas the Makindi ritual is rhythmic in its nature, the function of ritual this ritual is through rhythm. Kiura (2017: 84-98) elaborates the rhythm of the dramatic spectacles observed in the field and which constituted Makindi rituals expected as a matter of the rhythm guiding each ceremony.

3.3.1. Gutua Kiathi (Setting Date for Ceremony)

Jacinta Mumbi informs us that setting the date for a Makindi ceremony involves rituals performed by members of the community through visits and consultations. Any member who feels compelled to perform a Makindi ritual for any child is allowed and encouraged by the culture to initiate the process. Initiating a Makindi ceremony is a ritual which involves a process of ritualised activities. For example, and this is the case revealed in the interview with Kithumbu about Mwalimu Njuki who wanted to perform rituals for Kithumbu's daughter. Since he is male, and males are not culturally mandated to preside over the actual ceremonies directly, he involves his wife to be the matriarch.

3.3.2. Kuuna Mucii¹ (Breaking Into the Homestead)

The study records dramatic spectacles of visitors' entry into a homestead hosting Makindi ceremonies. These constitute the first ritual of the main ceremony while it can also be regarded as the second ritual considering that preparations constituted a ritual. This ritual involves a cultural spectacle and dramatic in the entry into the homestead of the Makindi occasion. Visitors who have been preparing through the first ritual gather a distance from the entrance into the homestead as they arrive. As stated earlier, once they are satisfied with their composition status and quorum, they break into song as an invocation to declare their commencement of the process of cultural break-in ritual.

3.3.3. Gutunga (Meeting to Receive)

Meeting incoming visitors to receive them at a homestead hosting Makindi ceremony is a ritual. This research observed elaborate performances of this ritual in Makindi A and C. This is the third ritual which involves cultural activities in a counter-break-in spectacle performed by the hosting party. This is the party that is resident in the homestead or members invited to perform the ritual on behalf of or together with the hosting family. Immediately upon hearing the break-in song, which they have been keenly waiting for, they hurriedly assemble at one point inside the homestead near the entrance and respond by breaking into a cultural counter-break-in poetic performance to declare a "bring-it-on" and welcome readiness for the break-in spectacle.

They dance the counter-break-in songs in dramatic step towards the entrance. The creative cacophony of the two parties creates a simulation of a battleground frontline and amid this spectacle of dramatic 'chaos' the two parties meet at the entrance creating a mock face-off stand-off stalemate. The hosting party opens the gate by singing welcome songs to usher the visitors into the homestead. However, as responses indicate, the dramatic spectacle is extended when this welcome is initially rejected by the visiting party who demand better treatment by the hosts.

In response, the hosting party presents a better reception gift in line with certain cultural factors that partly underpin the aesthetics of the mock stand-off. The additional gift can also be rejected and more demands placed. At the point when the gift is accepted members of the two parties mingle amid animated hugs and greetings blending the aesthetic discord into and a new symbolic cultural harmony out of which emerges common song performed in one common rhythm as the hosts lead the visitors into the main homestead and to the section set aside for them.

3.3.4. Kwaura Nthoki (Relieving of Gifts)

Observation reveals that relieving visitors of their gifts and gift packs is a ritual and it is also the longest of all. This involves an elaborate and symbolic performance which begins at the end of the counter-break-in spectacle. It involves two cultural processes of symbolic activities and spectacles through which all ritual items brought for the ceremony are presented. One is by members of the hosting party and the second is where participants perform part of the ritual by relieving themselves of the gifts in their possession. Observation reveals that this ritual is realised in a number of steps.

3.3.4.1. Step 1: Special Storage Gifts

As the counter break-in ritual closes, some members of the hosting party go round the arriving visitors identifying those with gift packs and luggage that need host's immediate special attention. Upon performance of a dramatic quick and humble cultural request, the visitors surrender the luggage to the hosts with special instructions, if any. Commonly, close relatives perform this symbolic part of the ritual because the owners of the luggage will need to be identified at a later stage especially for the performance of *gukuurirwa* (reciprocal gifting). Also, certain gifts may need to be handed back to the visitor for use during the performance of the rituals.

During Makindi B, goats are handed over to young men by the visiting party as song goes on and the animals are tethered safely away from the people and brought to the respective visitor later when their turn to perform the gifting ritual is due. It is equally in a symbolic performance that other luggage is taken by hosting women and girls and delivered for provisional storage at culturally designated locations such as kitchen, living room or store. Smaller animals such as birds were observed being handled within this category. This step is carried out in efficient, quick, dramatic coordination presided over by song before guests settle down in the section set aside for them.

3.3.4.2. Step 2: Settling Down

This is a symbolic activity to facilitate the visitors to perform their part of the rituals of relieving of gifts – we call it hereafter gifting ritual. Through song and dance, the visitors are shown where to *kuuna karu*² (break the knee); i.e., to sit. One of the songs observed commonly employed to preside over this ritual under normal ceremony circumstances is 'Werokamu Kanyanya' (Welcome *Kanyanya*). However, if members of the visiting party feel that a certain aspect of reception has not been conducted satisfactorily by the hosting party, they use song to register this dissatisfaction before the subsequent steps can follow. Respondents performed samples of such performances as will be discussed later. Under normal circumstances, guests take their seats with their handbags and other light luggage.

3.3.4.3. Step 3: Call for Central Stage Set-up

This is a session in which the visiting party uses poetic performances to preside over the setting up of a central stage at which the gifts can be relieved and the individual participants given opportunity to perform their rituals or parts of the rituals. The song begins by calling out for the parents of the central baby as well as the symbolic parents. In response to the poetic demand by the visitors to see the central arena set, the hosting party places a table and seats in the middle of a free space with a level and cleared ground of sufficient size depending on the available space. All homesteads had adequate space for the central stage.

The hosting parties in all the ceremonies are seen presenting the occupants of the central stage; the child, the mother, and the father. Then, a culturally symbolic container is placed at the centre of the table by the hosts. In Makindi A it is a basket, in Makindi B a paper bag, in Makindi C it is a tray and it is a basket in Makindi D. This is additional space for placing gifts of smaller sizes such as currency notes and coins. The surface of the table presented provides adequate space for larger gifts and the immediate area around the table is also space for positioning gifts. The whole of the central table area becomes a symbolic cultural space for the ritual around which oral poetry is performed to preside over the activities.

3.3.4.4. Step 4: Ritual of Gifts

3.3.4.4.1. Kuingura Kiondo³(Opening the Basket)

This is a symbolic performance by the hosting party that sets pace and standards for the rest of the performance of the gifting ritual. Through that performance, as Nancy Kanini emphasises, members of the visiting parties interpret the symbolism involved and, from it; they determine how to perform their gifting rituals. As the spectacle of opening the basket begins, song leads in calling out for hosts to launch the first session of the ritual involving what is called rearing of the central baby. In all ceremonies, observe is made that a ring formed by dancers led by members of the host family along the outer end of the radius of the ritual stage around the central table. Each member of the host family takes turn to move to the table to perform the ritual of rearing the central baby, by placing food stuffs and/or other items inside the container or the area round it on the table or on the ground space where the table stands.

A soloist leads the performance of oral poetry and is observed keenly monitoring the progress of the family in performing the gifting ritual. On noticing that the hosting party is almost through with its performance, the soloist calls a different tune inviting the visiting parties to perform the ongoing rearing session of the gifting ritual. Song continues presiding over the entire performance as the parties dance around the central table ushering in the next session of the gifting ritual.

3.3.4.4.2. Kurera Mwana (Rearing the Child) and Manyanga⁴ (Adornment)

The study observes that the opening of the basket is done to launch the gifting rituals in general but also as part of types of gifting ritual called rearing the child and adornment respectively. Once the host party has led in launching the basket, the central stage is open for the longest phase of the Makindi ceremony. This phase begins with a symbolic presentation of gifts of food stuffs, with a thematic focus on appropriate rearing of the children as important members of the community who are embodied in the symbolic central baby. Respondents explain that this is the ritual context which informs the name of the part of the ritual. The ritual is spectacular and is entirely presided over by songs and dances. The lead soloist, with constant backup from volunteer soloists and general participating public, presides over the entire process of the ritual inviting people and making appropriate cultural commentary on the proceedings while giving direction to the progression of the spectacles of the ceremony.

It is noted that the lead soloist is the over-all in-charge of the entire ceremony. Where there is an announcement to be made, that is presented to the soloist who delivers it through the ongoing song blending it to become part of the ritual. After the presentation of foodstuffs, the lead soloist guides the ceremony to transit to symbolic presentation of *Manyanga*, i.e., symbolic special clothes and cloth items to adorn the central baby. Song continues to preside over this part of the gifting ritual which is popularly known as *Manyanga*.

3.3.4.4.3. Buying Ritual – Cash gifts

The study observes that whereas cash gifts can be presented at sessions of the gifting ritual or other rituals because it is culturally acceptable for its flexibility and capacity for equivalence to all types of gifts, this section largely involves cash gifts. The participants are required to make symbolic acquisition of what has not been physically brought. They do this by presenting cash symbolising missing items and which is to be used to acquire such actual items for the child at a later time. The soloist leads participants in performance of song and dance presiding over the gifting ritual as participants place the money in the container or on the table.

3.3.4.4.4. Kuamukira (Acceptance)

This study argues that the process of accepting gifts and the activities observed in the ceremonies constitute a cultural ritual. Responses of participants clarify that this is a ritual of substantive acceptance of ceremony and the gift items. In all ceremonies, the father of the central baby, still culturally acknowledged by the entire party as the head of the home, is required, through song, to perform substantive acceptance of the ceremony and the gifts presented. He is required to perform in a symbolic cultural test involving poetry, and to pass in order to convince the party that he genuinely accepts the rituals, entire offerings, and gifts and that he is grateful, happy and satisfied. This test involves several aspects.

3.3.4.4.4.1. Humility Test

The study draws illustrations from observation particularly during Makindi B and D where the central babies are young enough to be carried. The soloist leads the entire party - including the wife and mother of the central baby - to sing, requiring the father of the central baby to perform a symbolic humility act of carrying the baby strapped on his back like a Mbeere woman. The father is also required to walk with the baby on his back all the way to the main family house surrounded by a singing and dancing crowd, among whom is his wife: the mother of the central baby.

3.3.4.4.4.2. Love Contest

It is observed that another test which is performed in a very elaborate manner especially in Makindi 4. The father of the central baby is expected to continue carrying the central baby strapped to his back as the poetic and dramatic spectacle of a contest that is staged at this point between the hosting party and the visiting matriarch's party unfolds. In this contest, members of the hosting party block the door to the main house demanding proof from the matriarch of ceremonies, that she loves the mother of central baby, before the door can be opened for the father of this central baby to enter with the baby on his back and for the gifts presented to be taken into the house. The matriarch is required to give additional gifts, especially in monetary terms to the satisfaction of the hosting party before the door is opened. This love contest merges with the humility test in this part of the ritual.

3.3.4.4.4.3. Homing of Gifts

This is a spectacle in which the male age mates of the father of central baby, especially as demonstrated in Makindi B, assisted by close female relatives ferry gifts into the main house. All the while, the father has the baby strapped to back undertaking the humility test and songs and dances continue presiding over the other activities. Once all the requisite gifts are in the house, the father of the central baby is required (through song) to enter the house with the wife – the baby still strapped to back. Through song, he is instructed to close the door with him and wife and child inside. Once the door is closed the song changes and another demand is made requiring the father of the central baby to reopen the door. At this point the humility test is over and, normally, the baby is seen with the mother when the door reopens.

3.3.4.4.4.4. Appreciation Jig

When the father of the central baby obeys the ritual requirement to reopen the door, he is again required, through song, to perform a symbolic spectacular jig. Once he has complied with the requirement to the satisfaction of the participants, the soloist leads people in dancing their transition to the ritual that follows: the ritual of symbolic feasting. Upon accomplishment of these rituals, the spectacular rituals of the main ceremony come to a close.

3.3.4.4.4.5. *Kugagurwa (To be Fed)*

Feeding the participants is a ritual. In this ritual, the hosting party organises a symbolic program for providing all participants with foods and drinks. The matriarch and members of the host party preside over the feeding. The matriarch is commonly the last person to take her share of the meal after everyone present has been served. In all Makindi ceremonies recorded, poetic prayer is offered as a chant to transit and preside over the performance of the next ritual of feasting. The ritual symbolises acknowledgement and cultural recognition of the participants for their patriotism and commitment to culture and is a way of perpetuating the phenomenon.

From the description of the rituals, the ritualised activities and their relevance to the ceremony as well as their symbolic significance beyond, it is clear that rhythm remains a key element in their creative production, orderly performance and strategic functioning at all cultural level. Rhythm facilitates enforcement of compliance with the strategic cultural policies of rituals by ingraining necessary commitment to ritual among people for sustained recurrence and continuity.

3.3.4.4.4.6. *Rhythm and Texts of Oral Poetry*

Interpretation of rhythm in a text of oral poetry is first and foremost interpretation of language in which there are what Joseph Muleka in his article entitled "On the Paradoxes of Form and Style" refers to as 'dubiousities', inconsistencies, and absurdities in form and style (60) which make analysis of language of literature complicated. The language and language use; the form of language and style of its employment in Makindi oral poetry with all the 'dubiousities', inconsistencies, and absurdities viewed within specific ritual contexts are significant to those cultural rituals. They guide in the search for meaning because apprehending meaning in oral poetry texts involves deconstruction of the ever present absurdities and 'dubiousities' in the language employed.

This complexity in search for meaning and interpretations of language is further emphasised by Geoffrey Leech. He quotes Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923, 186-7) in which they argue that meaning is complex and could be an intrinsic property, the connotation of a word, the place of a thing in a system, the practical consequence of a thing in our future experience, that to which the user of a symbol actually refers, ought to be referring to, believes himself to be referring to, that to which the interpreter of a symbol refers to, believes himself to be referring to, or believes the user to be referring to (1).

Our argument here is that textual efficacy of Makindi oral poetry is largely based on uniqueness of rhythm at the level of spontaneous production in ritual performance, in presiding over the rituals and in encapsulating ritual symbolism into the wider society. Trudgill argues that "language, in addition to being a means of communicating information, is an important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people" (108). The kind of rhythm employed and how it is aesthetically used, communicates information and meaning. It establishes and maintains relationships within the variegated immediate contexts of the cultural ritual, while presenting referential cultural trajectories into human experience spaces beyond the immediate space and time of the specific ritual through symbolism.

3.3.4.4.4.7. Unique Cultural Rhyme in Makindi Oral Poetry Texts

From the findings of Kiura (2017), it is apparent that rhythm in Makindi oral poetry is better analysed from a broader text-to-culture perspective and not merely text in ritual view. He feels that mere analysis of the phonological aspects and verse structures internal to the texts only is inadequate for the grand corpus of cultural ritual context. He introduces what he calls "a higher level of rhythm culturally structured integral to the totality of Makindi phenomenon". He adds that the unique rhyme is a strategy of rhythm that operates in a variety of "ways that contribute to strengthening the aesthetics of rhythm in the performances of poetry texts within Makindi rituals".

One of these ways is in what this study calls inter-ceremony texts rhyme. This kind of rhyme is construed here as the recurrence of similar texts and text templates in different Makindi ritual ceremonies. Texts constitute the language with which the culture is aesthetically negotiated by her subjects. That is why similar texts are performed where the perspectives under negotiation are similar and different texts from same templates are employed where varieties of ideas occur in different ceremonies.

For example, it was found that a song titled "Gakenge" (The Baby) and its templates are performed after the break-in and counter break-in rituals and specifically when the ceremony is setting the central table where the central baby of the ceremony and any other accompanying person are meant to sit. Since the negotiation in all ceremonies at this point are similar as performers indicate their readiness to start performing the gifting ritual, template as well as texts drawn from it are relatively rhyming. However, the rest of the textual content varies from ceremony to ceremony depending on the contextual peculiarities.

It is important to note that texts addressing matters directly or indirectly related to the socio-economic development are performed in each Makindi ceremony.

3.3.4.4.4.8. Rhythm and Individual Participation

In the source research, (Kiura 2017: 151), this rhythm was expressed as "Inter-ceremony face rhyme" which he described as "the symbolic recurrence of certain participants ... in several Makindi ceremonies ... as well as appearance of new participants in each occasion". Like in the previous examples, rhythm is the strategy used in conditioning the collective psyche to commitment to regularity and continuity of active and constructive participation in ritual ceremonies. Rhythm enforces compliance through reinforcement in cultural sensitization which creates a sustainable rhythm of continuous, repeated individual participation.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to enhance the discourse on rhythm in oral literature by arguing that it is a cultural aesthetic strategy that is deployed in Makindi rituals which are presided over by oral poetry. In the discourse, the paper held a unique view that rhythm is a crucial interphase of culture and development. It is this view that the paper has attempted to demonstrate in many ways. The paper opened by exploring the definitions and descriptions of the term rhythm with regard to various scholars. From the definitions sampled, it emerged that rhythm is a very broad aesthetic strategy whose application is open to versatile creativity by artists. However, aesthetic recurrence seems to be a common denominator for all applications. The paper has put Makindi ritual culture and its oral poetry into perspective with a focus on its historical roots, its contemporary nature and its enduring dynamic existence as one of the most important cultural innovations among Mbeere people. The paper has made it clear that it addresses every aspect of human experience through collective processes of generating, disseminating and enforcing cultural policies including those that hope to transform the socio-economic sectors of the Mbeere community positively and sustainably.

The key point of the paper has been that rhythm in its variegated forms is a key facilitator of the Makindi phenomenon, which the paper argues is the embodiment of the totality of Mbeere culture, in the process of developing cultural policies. The paper has also demonstrated how rhythm is credited for appropriate dissemination and enforcement for compliance with cultural policies as dramatized in the symbolic rhythmic Makindi rituals. In all this discourse, the paper has been reminding us that the language of the Makindi ceremony is poetry in dramatic spectacles. The paper has related the significance of rhythm to specific aspects of Makindi ritual ceremony and to the realization of human dignity; equality and sustainable peace and development with examples of unique resource (re)distribution policy enacted within the ritual culture. The paper has shed light to the uniqueness of cultural aesthetics of the Mbeere community helping the world to appreciate the community and find aspects with which to cross-pollinate their cultures. The exemplary success of the dynamism of Makindi phenomenon should be given more attention and be used as a case study. Indeed, rhythm is a broad concept and a useful cultural strategy with the aesthetic capacity to link and to harmonize various sectors and subsectors of our society for improvement of quality of life.

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¹ The term Kuuna is used in Mbeere to refer to a forceful passage while Mucii refers to an enclosed homestead. The aesthetics of the dramatized poetry in the forceful entry encapsulate the ritual symbolism of this spectacle.

²Kuuna is to break, but could also mean to bend severely, while karu is the diminutive form of Iru (knee). Kuuna karu is a Mbeere phrasal verb based on the motor process through which a person who has been walking for long stops briefly to rest without a seat before proceeding with the journey. He squats in a shade of a tree with knees severely bent for a short while to regain energy. The phrasal verb means to take a necessary brief uncomfortable rest and is used as an irony of modesty for inviting visitors to sit even if on posh couches.

³Kuvingura is a term that ordinarily refers to opening. In Makindi context, opening the kiondo (basket), is used to mean launching of the gifting ritual signalled by participants forming a ring around the central table, beginning to sing gifting songs and by presenting the first set of gifts at the central table or in the basket. The term basket refers to any container placed for use on the central table.

⁴Manyanga is a term adopted from a Kenyan urban sociolect called "Sheng" where, while it was in use in the 1980s and 90s, it was in reference to the beautiful, sexy, trendy, and fashionable with a feminine bias. Its entry into the Makindi culture is not documented but its presence has spanned decades. Within Makindi it refers to both the session of the gifting ritual when clothing items are presented and the items themselves.