

# Cultural Creative Dances and Environmental Consciousness in Kenya

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## Abstract

*Traditional African performances in their production and theatrical rendition can be themed to address issues regarding environmental conservation, climate change and digital space. This study demonstrates how cultural creative dances can be used to promote environmental consciousness, examines how the African environment defines the song, movement, sound and colour of the cultural creative dance, and discusses the role of cultural creative dance participants in an environmental conservation in a theatrical setup. It draws data from a close examination of cultural creative dances performed in Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Film Festivals. It deploys the Performance and Theatre Semiotics theories to examine how cultural creative dances attempt to sensitize the community on various environmental conservation and climate change issues. It samples five cultural creative dances performed in different years with different themes for the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Film Festivals. These were: **Omulumindi**, **Valumindi**, **Siwuyiso**, **Iloto** and **Unyanyapaa**. From the analysis, it is revealed that cultural creative dances arise and are performed within a given environment, therefore, they reflect the issues that touch on that particular environment. The same environment also defines the structural scope of the performance by shaping the song, movement, sound and colour of the cultural creative dance. Lastly, the performance brings together various groups that represent different segments of the setting within the environment. As such, a cultural creative dance is a coalescing of different perspectives on environmental issues. It also serves to provide a common ground on which environmental conservation interventions can be advanced. The study concludes that the Kenyan Cultural Creative Dance is never static; rather it changes with regard to the changes that environment presents, and demonstrates that these performances in fact have both entertainment and educative value, including sensitising the masses on important matters of community concern.*

**Key Words:** Cultural Creative Dance, Environmental Consciousness, Performance, Theatrical Production

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural creative dance is a genre in Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Film Festivals, whose guiding principle is that it should have a cultural source from any of the ethnic groups within the republic. This rule suggests that a cultural dance is a product of a given socio-cultural and even physical environment. This genre is part of a wide umbrella of traditional theatre performances that usually combine acting, singing, dance and music, dialogue, narration or recitation but may also include puppetry or pantomime. However, these artistic expressions are more than simply

‘performances’ for an audience. They also play crucial roles in culture and society, as they can be sung while carrying out agricultural work or be music that is part of a societal ritual.

The study uses the term ‘environment’ to incorporate the physical, social, cultural, economic and political world from which a dance is composed and in which it is performed. Human beings also constitute the environment in which they live. As such, environmental conservation is also an agenda for the promotion of human life. The interplay of art and the environment is supported in the work of Widdowson (2008) who examines the interplay of text, context and pretext. In his view, context infers both the situation (physical environment or event) and culture which encompasses the human socio-economic and political world. As such, in this study, environmental consciousness is used to infer both the physical environment and the socio-cultural spaces in which humans exist and operate.

Cultural creative dances carry contextual meanings that can be interpreted based on the environment. Their storyline is told through song, dance, instrumentation, drama and colour. The drama is always infused in the dance, and as a genre it is divided into key areas of adjudication. First is scripting and choice of the dance: this area basically recasts the cultural creative dance as having a cultural source, as being educative, entertaining and relevant thematically. Second is choreography: which seeks to bring out the aesthetics implied in the pantomime of the dance in telling a complete story, and captures aspects of music, which entails the use of songs, of musical instruments, the harmony of the song, soloist, chorus, instrumentation and audibility. Third is the dance: which encompasses quality of dance steps, uniformity and variety of formations and patterns, involvement and originality. Fourth is drama: which advocates for the infusion of drama into the dance so that it tells a complete story with credible characters, with costume and décor, which bring out the appropriateness of settings/backdrops, functional ornaments, body decoration and make up. Fifth is achievements: which evaluates the cultural creative dance in terms of the impression, impact, flow of music, dance and drama in telling the story of the dance (*Adjudication Guidelines*, 2023).

Traditional African performances do not exist in a vacuum (Finnegan, 2012). The oral artist is a product of time and space, and his/her work supports the values of a particular class. As such, cultural creative dances do reflect the environment in which they are set, shaping the form, content and target audience. The instruments, objects, artefacts and spaces associated with cultural expressions and practices are all included in the convention’s definition of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). In the performing arts this includes musical instruments, masks, costumes and other body decorations used in dance, and the scenery and props of theatre. Performing arts are often performed in specific places; when these spaces are closely linked to the performance, they are considered cultural spaces by the convention.

Just like many forms of performing arts, the cultural creative dance is a victim of post-modernistic factors that the environment presents today. It differs from traditional group dances (the Folk Dance) for Music Festivals in the sense that the latter is in the idiom of a particular community (MOE, 2023). The performance of traditional group dances is meant to preserve the authentic idiom hence revealing the originality of the source of the dance, but the cultural creative dance is meant to tell a literary story in a creative manner. All the movements in this genre must be danced creatively. It allows incorporation of both secular and religious musical tunes, instrumentation and dance patterns with credible characters. As a genre, it calls for all creative and artistic skills that are literary in nature and that make the dance to unfold.

## PROBLEM OF THE STATEMENT

Cultural creative dance is a traditional performance that has featured in Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Film Festivals in Kenya for many years. It is among the oldest forms of theatrical and dramatic performances in Kenya (Mumma & Levert, 1997). Past research into this genre has examined it with regard to theatrical elements (Kimani, 2019; Adair, 2014), the musicality and cultural identity in the dances (Wanyama, 2008), and through the origin of traditional drama in relation to the performances (Were, 2014). Such studies have treated cultural creative dances in Kenya as existing due to educational influence. The environmental consciousness that go into the production of these cultural creative dance has hardly been considered during research. There is also a need to establish standards for critiquing the cultural creative dance in relation to environmental consciousness. Therefore, this study underpins the cultural creative dance as an artistic work that is a product of time and space and whose motives and renditions reflect the environment in which it is set. It traces the environmental set-up as a component in traditional Kenyan cultural performances in order to provide a framework for examining its relevance with regard to the question of environmental conservation and the promotion of human life. It specifically describes the aesthetic choices, values and literary motives that are implied in its performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many studies that link cultural dances with environmental consciousness. For instance, Eno (2010) discusses environmental dance as an educational practice for ecological sustainability. Drawing from personal experiences as dance art educator, Eno argues that there is hope for attaining the much-needed shift in epistemic consciousness if educators (and society as a whole) begin to focus on the way in which we come to understand the world, distinguishing distinct differences and cultural influences that help to shape that understanding. He regards dance as a form of appreciation of the link between the human body and the environment, where the latter shapes the former. He advocates for the use of dance as a form of expression of our appreciation of the environment as well as a means for spreading ecological consciousness.

In another study, Eno (2018) explores how the mountain dance represents a transdisciplinary exploration of environmental dance as an auto-poetic expression of ecological connectivity and synthesis. He argues that the mountain dance underscores an underlying prerequisite shift in perspective, mindfulness and embodied awareness that restructures the way humans have previously chosen to engage the natural world, while celebrating the unifying concepts of diversity and connectivity in a self-organizing universe. As such, in his view, arts can become a viable, complementary balance to science offering an equilibrium in the ways we can choose to more holistically know and be in the world.

Newton (2022) observes that dance art can be used to embody the *ecological condition*. In his study, he imbibes his personal experience as a contemporary dance artist to unpack how the methodical processes of contemporary dance exemplify a practice-based approach to embodied knowledge that engenders greater understanding of the ecological condition of the body's interconnection with the more-than-human world. To this end, he proposes that dance practices develop a form of knowledge that is imminently relevant to recuperating human-environment relations in the face of climate crisis.

Vissicaro (2023) explores how dance can be a means for embodying the interplay of culture, ecology and the human wellbeing. In his view, the primacy of motion to unite the human body

with its terrestrial home is key to coexistence. In his analyses of pedagogical, performative, and creative dance processes, Vissicaro deduces the capacity of dance movement to open possibilities for encountering different points of view in which non-hierarchical alliances could form, potentially disrupting anthropocentric discourse. The findings further demonstrate the function of dance culture as a relational strategy to practice navigating precariousness.

Other studies have explored the interplay of environment and cultural creative dances. Akunna (2015) provides an Igbo perspective on mourning dances and their application to dance/movement therapy. Although the study does not address the influence of the dances on ecological consciousness, Akunna demonstrates the power of cultural dances in shaping the human experiences in response to the social environment. Kimani (2022) explores how cultural creative dances can be used to articulate contemporary issues, including environmental conservation. He specifically examines the techniques of dramatization in the dances, contextualised in their cultural and creative contexts. From the findings of the study, Kimani notes that cultural creative dances performed in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival tackle various themes that are derived from various issues the Kenyan society is grappling with. He observes further that the artist has a central role in bringing issues to the fore and affirms the cultural creative dance as a powerful and enduring platform for ruminating on societal concerns. He concludes that the cultural creative dance is a potent, lively and well-grounded mode of communicating and discussing the issues in the hearts of individual citizens and the nation at large.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is anchored on the Performance theory as derived from the works of Schechner (2003) and Austin (1962) and the Semiotics theory as propounded by Keir Elam (1980). Performance theory involves the total framework of the interaction between the oral piece, the artists, the occasion and the audience that work out a total achievement of the aesthetic realization. The proponents of this theory are Schechner (2003) and Austin (1975). Schechner's key argument is that drama is not barely a segment of the stage, but of daily living, and it cuts across societies. As he puts it:

It is important to develop and articulate theories concerning how performances are regenerated, transmitted, received and evaluated in pursuit of these goals, performance studies are insistently intercultural, inter-generic and inter-disciplinary (Schechner, 2003).

Performance theory in this study implies the total framework as well as the environment in the delivery of the cultural creative dance as a theatrical performance. The performer's dramatization of the various moods and actions give life to the dance as a festival genre. The cultural creative dance is thus fully contextualized within a given environment in regard to the story or plot, the participants, and the features of language use.

The study further anchors on the theory of theatre semiotics, which offers a framework for examining the drama festival as an activity involving performance entrenched in systems of signs and significations that relay meanings (Odutsa, 2023). It adopts semiotics theory as advanced by Elam (2002, 2003), and Minishi (2019) who regard semiotics as a science devoted to the examination of the generation of meaning in a given social context using the different sign systems and codes that operate at the level of the actual messages and texts generated in that context. These postulations echo those of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argues that theatre and performing arts in general have simply taken up what the linguists developed to explain the processes of generation of meaning in linguistic communication. Elam (2003) also notes that the interplay between the

audience and the performer creates what can be considered as ‘theatrical communication’. This theatrical communication is entrenched in theatrical systems, which are similar to de Saussure’s linguistic systems, which is useful in relation to selection of the songs used in these dances and their linguistic meanings in relaying messages of ecological consciousness.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative study; whose target is all CCD performed within a span of 5 years at the KSCDFF. It purposively samples 5 CCDs performed by 5 institutions at different times and spaces. These are *Valumindi* by Mother of Apostles Seminary (2023), *Omulumindi* by Eldoret National Polytechnic (2023), *Siwuyisyo* by Bungoma High School (2018), *Unyanyapaa* by Matuga Girls (2018) and *Iloto* by St Paul’s Shikunga (2017). The study relies on participant observation and thematic analysis for data collection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural creative dance is a genre that tell a story through song, dance, instrument and drama. Drama is infused in the dance. The plot of cultural creative dances is thematically pegged to what happens in the environment where the dance is culturally sourced. Their motives thus mirror a particular audience residing within a specific socio-cultural and physical environment. As such, cultural creative dances lend themselves as potential tools for articulating issues, including climate change and environmental conservation. The performer in a cultural creative dance is its first target audience. Moreover, as a genre, the cultural creative dance is never static; it is dynamic and is adapted to the new environment or space of theatrical performance.

As an art form, the script of a cultural creative dance lends itself for encoding content on environmental conservation. One can directly develop a cultural creative dance script addressing specific environmental issues. Therefore, the main subject matter or theme is the environment. Nevertheless, one can also subtly infuse these environmental issues within the text. For instance, certain features of plot, setting, character and characterization, themes, language use, song, movement and staging can reflect aspects of the environment. The role of the choreographer, as the author of the cultural creative dance performance, is to ensure that certain key environmental conservation messages are foregrounded both in the script and in the performance.

For example, the cultural creative dance, *Omulumindi* by the Eldoret National Polytechnic (2023) is concerned with banditry activities and destruction of forests and water catchment areas. The destruction of nature, especially the water catchment areas, has led to loss of lives, displacement of families and resource-based conflicts. Similarly, *Valumindi* by Mother of Apostles Seminary (2023) addresses the subject of cattle rustling, property destruction and death. In its rendition, the performance clearly demonstrates how banditry activities have adverse effects on the environment. In the dance, the bandits are seen invading the villages, stealing cattle, destroying crops, burning houses and even killing humans and other animals. These acts are destructive to both the physical and socio-cultural environment: a clear reflection of a human nature that is adversarial to the physical world.

In the above examples, the performances also provide a critique of solutions used to address environmental conservation issues. For example, in both cultural creative dances, the choreographers challenge the government’s approach in handling banditry. The government often arrests, detains, fines and releases culprits. This process enrages the culprits more making them to exact greater vengeance at the earliest opportunity. As a panacea, the cultural creative dances point

at a more effective solution: The fencing off of the water catchment areas to demarcate or distinguish the reserved from the public spaces. Further, officers to be placed to man the reserved areas, and the general public to be properly educated on environmental conservation.

*Valumindi* also emphasizes how the detainees can be empowered with life skills such as carpentry, civil construction, creative and performing arts, tailoring, among others. These skills will equip them with alternative ways of earning income rather than engaging in banditry. Therefore, the cultural creative dance underlines that military operations are not a solution to cattle rustling. In fact, military operations are a major contributor to environmental destruction – instead the media, community networking and the digital space provide better avenues for identifying and netting cattle rustlers.

The environment within which a cultural creative dance is composed and performed shapes the structure of the dance. In Kenya, the state provides specific themes on which performances should focus. These themes are informed by the social, economic, political and cultural priorities of the Kenyan environment. When it happens that the theme of a given year is environmental conservation, performances more overtly address this subject matter. However, even when themes are not directly linked to environmental conservation, there are nuances that can be gleaned from the text and the performance that reflect the agenda of environmental conservation. These nuances can be seen in how aspects of composition and performance of a cultural creative dance relate with the environment.

*Siwuyiso* by Bungoma High School (2018) focuses on the impact of delocalisation of head teachers and school principals by the Teachers Service Commission on the family unit and the performance of learners. It specifically highlights how some aspects of social and cultural background of individuals in Kenya influence their ability to work or fit in within certain environments. For example, some of the consequences of delocalisation included student unrests, poor performance and lack of unity in communities surrounding affected institutions. Student unrests are often accompanied by destruction of property and the environment. Although the Kenya government used delocalisation strategy to foster national integration and unity, which worked in some cases and institutions, the strategy also registered more negative outcomes, and the dance urges the government to adopt stakeholders' participation to be more effective in carrying out its policies.

*Iloto* by St Paul's Shikunga (2017), brings out how unregulated sports betting has affected family and marriage life. Betting is portrayed as an obsessive behaviour that destroys one's ability to provide for his family, creating a strained relationship between husband and the wife leading to ultimate break-up of families and thereby greatly affecting the social environment. It urges the government to step in and regulate betting companies and make them have a human face instead of pursuing profit at the expense of societal cohesion. Thus these cultural creative dances underline the features of the social, economic, political and physical environments in which they are composed and performed. For instance the plot in *Siwuyiso* is structured along the popular subject of delocalisation that was vogue in the Kenyan environment in 2018 when the dance was choreographed. Similarly, *Iloto* is a product of the popular problem of sports betting in Kenya in recent times. *Valumindi* also borrows a popular Kenyan tune, *Wimbo wa Historia* by Enock Ondego, associated with the sombre mood of independence struggle, which helps to highlight the seriousness of the message being relayed. It also adopts Daudi Kabaka's tune in the song *Helule Lule*, to underscore how the absence of banditry enhances happiness and harmony in the environment.

In these dances, the colour of costumes, backdrops, rostrums and body decorations reveal the setting. Colour is a parameter that defines African performance. For theatrical purposes, they reveal the symbols and the community where the dances are sources. In *Siwuyiso*, the nature of the colour of costumes reveals Bukusu's *Kamabega* dance while in *Valumindi*, the choreographer's choice of colour of costumes reveals a blend of Bukusu's *Kamabega* and Isukha's *Isukuti* dance. The accompanying songs in these dances depict the mood in the environment. They provide a means of social commentary by the choreographer. *Iloto* imbibes current secular tunes and infuses vernacular lyrics to make the song more receptive to the audience. Sound is also used in the cultural creative dance to reflect the environment of composition and performance. Instrumentation sets the beat and dancing style, and the pace of the dance. During performance, the dancing styles and patterns reflect contemporary dance movements in the Kenyan environment. By integrating the popular dances, the choreographers are able to capture the attention of the majority of the audience and therefore relay their messages far and wide.

The cultural creative dance infuses drama in the dance for it to tell a complete story. Therefore, participants greatly shape its communicative effectiveness – here participants include the script writer(s), choreographer(s), cast, the audience(s) and the adjudicator(s). The script writer provides the blueprint (storyline) for articulating the subject of the dance, hence encodes in the story aspects of various subject matter such as environmental conservation. The choreographer is key in creatively transforming the script into performance, and shapes the degree to which it reflects the subject matter. The cast are the mouthpieces of the performance: Under the guidance of the choreographer, they bring to life the script, but can also be limited by the socio-cultural environment. The choreographer's auditioning and casting skills are therefore key in identifying credible and creative performers.

The audience are the recipients of the message of a cultural creative dance. They encompass the adjudicators who assess the communicative and creative value of the dance, and the spectators who are the target audience within the environment. They respond to the dance emotionally and psychologically. The audience shape the general social, cultural and physical space of performance. Their knowledge, attitudes and response influence the composition and performance of the dance. Although *Unyanyapaa* by Matuga Girls (2018) depicts a head teacher moved to a new school who meets rejection and resistance from both the school and neighbouring community, the emphasised aspect is that they eventually reach an understanding on how to work together. Because of this the dance was lauded for its thematic relevance, creative choreography and the nature of the musical accompaniment and relevance of dance styles and patterns (Orido, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Cultural creative dances reflect the social, cultural and physical environment of their composition. Secondly, they are constrained by the rubrics of the environment of performance. Thirdly, they address specific issues within the environment of both creation and performance. As an art form, the script of a cultural creative dance lends itself for encoding content on environmental conservation. This may be achieved through various features of form and content. For instance, certain features of plot, setting, character and characterization, themes, language use, song, movement and staging can reflect aspects of the environment. The environment within which a cultural creative dance is composed and performed in essence shapes the structure of the dance, and underlines the features of the social, economic, political and physical environment in which it is performed. Moreover, participants greatly shape the communicative effectiveness of a cultural creative dance.

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