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Invoking the community: Orality and cultural diversity in biographical narratives for children in Kenya

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This study aimed to examine how orality was utilized in biographical narratives. The study argued that orality as a stylistic device not only helped in creating a narrative structure that tells the stories of specific personalities, but this device also helped in summoning literature from different Kenyan communities. The study examined three biographies from the Lion's series of biographies for young readers in Kenya through close textual reading. It maintained that the appropriation of oral features from different Kenyan communities, like the grandmother figure as a narrator, songs, oral poems, proverbs and other oral art forms evoked not only a specific society's collective identity, but was further read as an expression of cultural diversity in the Kenyan nation. These oral elements were viewed as certainly creating an illusion of fiction in personal narratives like biographies, and in addition, worked to shape the imagination of the young readers.

Key words: Biographies, children's literature, Kenya, cultural identity, cultural diversity, orality.

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars are engaged with the question of orality in African literature. Among these is Julien (1992) who has shown that in recent years, scholars of written literary texts have begun to consider the possible links of these texts with African oral traditions. Julien submits that the term orality is used to refer to several types of phenomena that may sometimes overlap in a text. She asserts that for some people, the oral refers to written narratives that retell narratives of oral tradition; while for others the oral nature of African novels refers to the representation of everyday conversation or the inclusion of proverbs, tales, riddles, praises and other oral genres. Yet to others, she argues, the oral nature of the novel is especially a question of narrative form, the adaptation of principles of oral narrative genres (Ibid). But Julien contends that as readers and critics, we should not aim to isolate orality, to see it as singular, or as inherently "first" or "other" in opposition to writing, and that neither of the medium is "the good guy" or "the bad guy". The two, she asserts, are modes of language and are ours when we have the means to produce them. Therefore, when critics examine the manifestations of the oral in the written it

should be in an effort to appreciate literature as a social and aesthetic act. Julien thus, argues that orality and writing are not two mutually exclusive realities but the two live together in a continuous interaction.

Ong (1982) posits that oral cultures used stories to organize and communicate much of what they knew. He adds that writing makes words appear similar to things because we think of writing as the visible marks signalling words to decoders because we can see and touch such inscribed "words" in texts and books. Ong therefore projects the written word as a residue for orality; a manifestation of oral art form through modern technology.

In line with Julien's and Ong's arguments earlier mentioned, this essay examines how orality interacts with the written form, not only to create a narrative structure, but also to project cultural identity and diversity. The appropriation of songs, poems and other oral art forms from various Kenyan communities that are visible in the texts under discussion represents each community's cultural identity. This representation of identity of different communities is further read as an expression of cultural diversity of the Kenyan nation.

According to Caplan (2004), the notion of identity can be taken to refer to perceived qualities of sameness, as a result of which people associate themselves, or are associated by others, with particular groups or categories on the basis of some common features. This means that the term identity encompasses the notions of differences and presupposes the existence of the other because identity is only understandable when pitted against difference. While this discussion examines various community/ethnic identities that ensue from the use of oral art forms from different communities, it is important to note that these ethnic identities do not in any way undermine National identity. Instead, they provide a template upon which National history and the broader nationalist identities are imagined and pursued because it is out of the varied ethnic identities that the nation comes into being. It is these differences that make up the whole, thus, challenging the notion of a nation as a homogenous entity, and consequently promoting a wide-ranging kind of national identity.

The Lion's series of biographies which this essay examines was introduced in Kenya by the Sasa Sema publications in the early years of the 21st century. The main aim of these biographies was to narrate the stories of Kenya's historical figures and heroes to children. The authors of these biographies claim the desire to reinvent Kenyan history, not through a historical project but through a literary intervention for the sake of young readers. The discussion in this essay is limited to three texts from the series: One of the texts is *Mwana Kupona: Poetess from Lamu* by Kitula King'ei (2000), which outlines the life of a famous Swahili female writer in the 19th century. The second biography is *Elijah Masinde: Rebel with a Cause* by Ezekiel Alembe (2000), where Alembe tells the story of a man from the Bukusu community in Kenya, who fought colonialism through a religious sect. The third text, *Dedan Kimathi: Leader of the Mau Mau* by David Njeng'ere (2003) is a narrative of a famous freedom fighter from the Kikuyu community who was condemned to hang by the British government in 1957.

This essay employs the methodology of close textual reading of the three texts under discussion in order to identify the use of orality, and subsequently relate this orality to cultural identity and diversity. Firstly the paper examines the use of storytelling and the figure of the oral narrator in the written text. Secondly it looks at the use of songs, dance and oral poetry, and thirdly, the discussion proceeds to interrogate the deployment of proverbs and sayings as avenues that signal cultural identity and diversity. Towards the end, the paper interrogates the importance of fantasy in narrating personal stories.

Storytelling and the oral narrator

One of the most important features of orality that is

manifested in the biographies discussed here is the introduction of the storyteller figure from whose mouth the narrative seemingly proceeds. Pereira (1986) argues that the introduction of a fictional narrator in written texts enables the author to distance himself from the narrative and at the same time acts as a means of recreating the situation and recapturing the ambience of the storyteller's direct contact with the audience. Through the fictional storyteller the author authoritatively manipulates the narrative and directs it towards his desired path while he poses as a spectator. The fictional narrator then becomes both a presenter and participant in his/her own story: it is she/he who now speaks to a specific audience. In the texts under discussion, the oral narrator is positioned as the repository of tribal history and cultural values, as well as, one who knows the character of the person whose story she/he tells. The storyteller therefore guides the reader into understanding the protagonist's story as one embedded in the society's life.

The authors of the three biographies under discussion utilize different narrative techniques. For example, King'ei employs the third person point of view to narrate the story of Mwana Kupona. This all-knowing narrator takes the reader through the Swahili cultural aspects mostly visible during the marriage of Mwana Kupona's daughter as it will be clear later in this discussion. In the other two texts, the authors introduce the oral narrator, a grandmother figure, who tells the story to either an active audience, for example in *Elijah Masinde* (2000), or a non-respondent audience evident in *Dedan Kimathi* (2003) by David Njeng'ere. Julien (1992) recognizes the strategic use of orality in the written texts by authors when she argues that the use of oral narrative elements by African writers is neither natural nor gratuitous, but it is done with a purpose. These elements, she asserts, solve or help to solve a formal or aesthetic problem that the writer faces and they suggest, at the same time, facets of a particular social situation. Writers can therefore transform narrative strategies to serve their aims and their immediate socio-cultural and political agenda. In addition, the manner in which the oral narrator tells the story is what lends orality to the text. In *Elijah Masinde's* biography for example, Alembe utilizes the grandmother figure, with an implied active audience. Alembe imbues grandmother with the qualities of a good storyteller evident in the way she uses songs in her narration and sometimes posing questions to ensure that her audience is alert. The setting of Masinde's narrative is also typical of the traditional oral storytelling sessions which evoke the fire-side ethos of the oral tale:

"The night was bright with stars.... A gentle breeze from Mt Masaba, Mt Elgon, rustled through the leaves and caressed the group of four boys and six girls who sat round the fire outside grandmother's hut.... When grandmother came outside, the first child to spot her was Barasa. "Grannie!" he yelled.... "Tell us more stories!"

cried Nelima.... "I will tell you more and more stories," Grandmother assured them.... (1 to 3).

Alembi here sets up an atmosphere that conjures the common sessions of traditional communal oral narration. Agatucci (1988)¹ argues that oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Such participation, Agatucci adds, is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education on their way to initiation to full humanness. In the above quotation, the reader is prepared for "a real" oral storytelling session at the very beginning of the text. Alembi therefore utilizes the Bukusu narrative technique/tradition as a shaping influence to the narrative form and structure. Grandmother's words, "I will tell you more and more stories", show us that storytelling is a cumulative/never ending activity. In other words, she suggests she has been telling stories to her audience in the past, which we read as a means of preserving cultural knowledge identified with specific communities in Kenya. Evidence of these stories is seen when the children start guessing what kind of story they are about to be told. Some say it is about "wanakhamuna, the hare", others think it is about "namunyu, the hyena", while others mention "kunanai the ogre" (Alembi, 200). There is also a conversational tone between grandmother and her audience, which lends orality to the text:

The children jumped. "Who was Elijah Masinde?" asked Nekesa.

That must be a big namunyu [the hyena]!" put in Simiyu.

....

Grandmother replied, "No, Elijah Masinde was a human being. He was born and grew up here in Bungoma."(6).

In this quotation, Simiyu draws from his repository knowledge of narratives and guesses that Masinde is a hyena. This as I have argued earlier signals a prior experience of different stories. In addition, the question and answer sections between grandmother and her audience advances Masinde's story. Through the grandmother figure, Alembi draws the readers' attention to the ritual and pattern of naming children in the Bukusu community.

The Bukusu name their children according to the season or activities happening during the birth of the baby. Masinde was born when they were digging new land. And at the time, a kind of grass called *Masinde* was growing there. That is how young Elijah got his name, Masinde (9 to 10).

The narrator further discloses that Elijah Masinde belonged to Bakananachi Machengo age group which means "construction", and that, the age group was given such a name because at the time when Masinde's age

group was circumcised, "the Kenya-Uganda Railway was being constructed in Bungoma" (15). Rituals and naming ceremonies are forms of historical retrieval and according to Qauyson (1997) they are forms of cultural codesthrough which people remember. These codes are exposed in the biography by the oral storyteller who is seen as the repository of tribal history and cultural values. Thus the storyteller acts as a mirror in which the community can reflect itself. Alembi also explores the idea of cultural diversity, seen in the way grandmother explains how communities differed in rituals that accompanied their rites of passage. Some removed teeth while others circumcised their men (14 to 15). The mediating role of the narrator becomes visible here through grandmother who is cast as possessing knowledge concerning not only her own community, but also other communities. As Scheub (1996) argues, the storyteller is a creator, teacher and a guide to the society, who most regularly and persuasively touches every member of the community. S/he is a creator who moves behind the facts of history, and clarifies, defines, and elucidates the experiences of people, thereby sustaining the society's traditions, those institutions that give context and meaning to daily life. Obiechina (1993) also argues that the story is a primary form of the oral tradition and a mode of conveying culture, experience and values. It is a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies. Alembi therefore gives the story a central position in *Elijah Masinde* as it helps in shaping literary works as well as, passing cultural knowledge to the new generation of Kenyan children. Grandmother is used in this narrative to point out the complex configuration of Kenya's peoples and nation-state by indicating the existence of other communities alongside her own.

Another link between orality and authority of grandmother as a narrator is seen in *Dedan Kimathi* (2003). From the start of this narrative, we are alerted that the story is narrated by a fictional narrator and not from an authorial voice. In the preface Njeng'ere writes "... I decided to use a fictitious character, a young girl called Wangu to tell the story of Kimathi" (viii). In the story, Wangu was supposed to take a letter to Kimathi in the forest when she was a young girl, but presently she is an old grandmother and she tells Kimathi's story to her grandchildren. Njeng'ere finds a voice that is immediately recognizable within the community, in this case a grandmother [Wangu], whom he entrusts with the narration of Dedan Kimathi's story. The grandmother figure lends authority to Njeng'ere's voice and consequently he narrates the events that happened in the lives of Mau Mau freedom fighters, with confidence, in the knowledge that he has bestowed authority upon himself by claiming kinship with storytellers of the old (Muriungi, 2002). Grandmother stands for the collective and narrates issues that relate to people's struggles through one person's story.

Julien (1992) argues that aspects of oral tradition, as of

¹ <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/afirstory.htm>

the prose tradition, are not simply given, they are chosen. Julien says these aspects are present in Ngugi's work (*Devil on the Cross*), not because they are essentially African but because they offer possibilities to achieve specific ends – in this instant, to appeal to a specific audience. In Kimathi's story, the author consciously borrows the oral storytelling technique from his community not only for the representation of the Kikuyu community identity, but also to construct a work that is directed at a modern audience. Therefore, the storyteller in this biography is positioned as a repository of community knowledge; she knows not only the story of the character she tells but also possesses the knowledge about the whole community.

One feature that surfaces in the utilization of the oral storytelling technique that I want to mention at this point is the ogre motif. In African folklore, stories about ogres and ogresses teach children that "their world was not full of angels only – there were other lesser human beings who could harm them (Mbure, 1997). Such stories therefore challenge children to be intelligent in order to survive in a world where endurance is paramount. The ogre motif is used in some of the biographies not just as evidence of storytelling practices in some communities, but it is used for certain other purposes. For example, Kitula King'ei utilizes the ogre motif in Mwana Kuponu's biography to question some Islamic traditions that are traceable to some Kenyan coastal communities. The author is especially uneasy with the idea of girls having to wait until their wedding day where they meet their prospective husbands. Mwana Hashima asks her friend Zuhura, who is about to get married: "well, if on your wedding day you find your husband is an ogre, what will you do?" Zuhura in turn answers that she would run away (25). The two girls do not admire the idea of arranged marriages but they somehow have to live up to the expectations of the society. Luckily for Zuhura, her husband turns out to be a handsome man. In the exchange between the two girls, we read some intertextuality between oral narratives and the story that the narrator tells. In some of the African narratives where the ogre appears, girls find themselves married to such beings who pretend to be human beings. The fate of such girls is either they rescue themselves through their own wits, or brave relatives rescue them. Sometimes the ogre eats them, though rarely. A reference to the ogre in the case of Zuhura's wedding shows the girls have been brought up in a cultural environment with the art of oral storytelling. However, in Mwana Kuponu's biography King'ei employs the motif of the ogre not to warn young girls and children, but he transforms the motif to critique arranged marriages that are evident in Mwana Kuponu's community. Representing Zuhura's marriage as an arranged one helps to teach children some of the cultural practices concerning marriage in African communities. We could also conclude that by using Mwana Hashima and Zuhura to critique arranged marriages, the author articulates his own position with regard to such practices.

Song, Dance and Oral Poetry

In the three biographies discussed here, the authors employ songs, dance and oral poetry drawn within the communities where the personalities come from. The use of songs or dance from specific communities in the art of narration of individual stories signals those communities' cultural identity. In Mwana Kuponu's biography, King'ei evokes the coastal/Swahili/Arab identity through the Swahili songs sung during Zuhura's wedding ceremony. These songs are accompanied by societal musical instruments and a vigorous dance.

A special *taarab* group played songs specifically composed for the occasion. There were seven musicians. One of them was blowing a *tarumbeta*, a trumpet, three of them were on *ngoma*, drums, and each of the others was strumming an *udi*, a guitar. They sang and played songs that expressed feelings of romance and excitement. One song said that love is like a wound in the heart of the lover, a secret that the singer had to express:

Mapenzi ni kama donda
Yaingiapo moyoni
Nimechoka vumilia
Leo nawapasulia

....

The dancers were busy on the floor trying to out-do each other with their styles and movement: "Again! Again!" thundered the crowd, raving more music" (39 to 41).

The word *taarab* used in the above quotation originally comes from the Arabic word *tariba*, which means to be agitated, to be moved (Musau, 2004). As a type of music *taarab* refers to both the performance by a group of persons, or the event, as well as the music (ibid). Musau observes that although *taarab* was initially sung in Arabic, in the 1920s the first African orchestras started singing in Kiswahili. *Taarab* was conventionally performed at weddings and social gatherings but over the years the singing of *taarab* has become open and versatile; it is sometimes performed in hotels, guest houses and tourist resorts. In addition, *Taarab* is played on radio and performed on TV in Kenya and Tanzania (Ntarangwi, 2003; Musau, 2004). This form of song and dance can therefore be said to be responding to modernity and the need for change, showing that cultural issues may not remain stagnant. *Taarab* has been transformed into a mode which hails audiences way beyond the coastal communities, as it intersects with other forms from other cultures. Certainly, these changes make the Swahili identity an identity "in motion". Being part of the larger Swahili community, a Swahili person could also be said to have multiple identities, because one time s/he could have the identity of the traditional Swahili area, and at another time s/he could have an identity belonging to

larger geopolitical entities (Musau, 2004).

However, King'ei uses *taarab* music in Mwana Kupona's biography in the context of its old age usage where it was restricted to social gatherings. One also notices that the singing and dancing is restricted to the traditional *taarab* musical instruments. The music, dance and instrumental collection signal societal artefacts, which are aspects of oral tradition which evoke the Swahili [coastal group] cultural identity. Although, *taarab* has adapted to constant change in the Kenyan society, the use of such songs in the biography allow a reading of a distinctive culture and identity associated with the Swahili.

In this text, King'ei shows that Mwana Kupona writes a poem for her daughter during her last days of life which was to act as her instruction manual when the mother is gone. The poem is therefore intended to teach Mwana Hashima how to behave and how to cope with various situations of life. King'ei invokes the society's oral practices further when he shows that although Mwana Kupona wrote her poem to be read by her daughter, she [Mwana Kupona] occasionally recited some verses to her (Mwana Hashima). For example, in her conversation with her daughter Mwana Kupona recites verses to warn her daughter against gossiping (14), that she should avoid jokes that annoy others (5) and also make sure she keeps her body smart by wearing decorative ornaments because "wearing ornaments increases one's outward beauty and is a mark of good culture" (12):

Pete sitoke zandani Always put rings on your fingers,
hina sikome nyaani henna on the palms of your hands
Wanda sitoe matoni Wanda on your eyelids
na nshini kuitia and on your eyebrows (13).

The verse aforementioned demonstrates the idea of beauty in Mwana Kupona's community. In addition, the oral nature of Mwana Kupona's community is demonstrated by the author's implied suggestion that instructions may be delivered more clearly through recitation of songs or poems rather than using simple grammatical sentences. This aspect of reciting rather than talking represents a unique culture of this community.

Songs are also used in Dedan Kimathi's biography. At the beginning of the biography Njeng'ere presents a situation where grandmother goes to show her grandchildren a *Mugumo* tree, fig tree, where Kimathi used to pray, which has recently been declared a monument by the government. But grandmother is carried away by memories of the past and she sings the following song about Kimathi:

Riria Kimathi witu ambatire kirima-ini kia Nyandarua
Nietiirie hinya na umiriru
Wakuhoota nyakeru

When our Kimathi ascended Nyandarua Mountains

He prayed for strength and courage
 To defeat the white man ... (2).

Introducing such a song in the narrative demonstrates Njeng'ere's reliance on Kikuyu oral traditions. In his anthropological study of the Kikuyu traditions in *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo (1938) posits that songs and dances were very significant in the Kikuyu traditions, for it was through the words, phrases and rhythmic movements of the songs and dances that news was passed across to people, including the laws of the society. These songs and dances, Kenyatta says, were part and parcel of the Kikuyu way of life. Through the song quoted above, grandmother evokes a communal memory – of the Mau Mau and the fight against the white man. This song, one could argue, calls upon a collective identity or group identity of those who were involved in the Mau Mau. Group identity forms part of community identity, which can also be called ethnic identity. This community or ethnic identity is further exemplified in the text by more Mau Mau songs, some of which were in form of prayer or chants:

Wee NgaiwaKirinyaga Oh God of Kirinyaga
We mugaiwamagai you are the giver of all blessings
Turathimageriunahindciothe because you are our creator
Na ugituhebururiwamGikuyunaMumbi and you gave us
 Gikuyu's and
 Mumbi's
 Land (65).

This song was a kind of prayer by the Mau Mau fighters. It calls upon the Kikuyu common ancestry to legitimize their belonging to the land that the community was given by God of *Kirinyaga* (Mount Kenya) through their first parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi. Land here invokes a common ancestry. This natural process of land acquisition, through a filial bond with the spiritual guardians of land as the ancestral spirits, is one form of creating collective identity (Ogude, 1999). Identifying with the ancestors links the character (Kimathi) to this past and to presumably an imagined ethnic identity. Mt. Kenya was therefore seen as God's resting place and as such the centre of the Gikuyu nation (Kenyatta 1938). This mountain was also very significant in all the Kikuyu prayers as it was their God's dwelling place. For example, the narrator in Kimathi's biography says that before she started off her journey into the forest where she had to take a letter to Kimathi, Waigua, an elderly man, together with her [the narrator's] mother prayed to Ngai to guide her through her journey. So they all turned towards Mount *Kirinyaga* and prayed:

May Wangu reach her destination without being seen by
 an enemy....
Thaai Thathaiya Ngai Thaai
 May her mission be completed successfully
Thaai Thathaiya Ngai Thaai

May she come back to us unharmed
Thaai Thathaiya ngai Thaai (13).

The words “*Thaai Thathaiya*” are beseeching words that are directed to *Ngai* (God). The idea of memory and common ancestry is invoked through the adoration of the God of the Kikuyu community. Such prayers/chants that were common in Kikuyu’s past history bring orality into the text and again invokes group identity. The past is in this case recreated to provide the ground for an act of reconstitution of identity (Barber 1997). Sometimes people feel the need to reconstitute identity especially in the face of external threats of power that threatens its being and authority. The Kikuyu African leadership and authority was at the time of Mau Mau being threatened by the intrusion of the colonialists’ power and therefore there was need to reconstitute their identity through such songs. Therefore, the Mau Mau songs and prayers that evoke Kikuyu community’s common ancestry are significant in the text, as they enhance not only spiritual unity amongst the fighters but also communal unity to fight a common enemy. We could certainly argue that it is for the same reason that popular songs tend to emerge during many liberation struggles. While Mau Mau songs were useful in ways discussed earlier, one shortcoming of these songs was that many of them were in the Kikuyu language, which exclusively limited their circulation, because without translation, other ethnic communities could not sing them with conviction as national freedom songs. It is for this reason that one could argue that such songs mostly evoked the Mau Mau group identity which was generally composed of Kikuyu community and parts of Embu and Meru. In fact, these songs rarely spread to other communities.

In the case of the Bukusu tradition in Elijah Masinde’s biography, Alembe shows that songs were important in praising the good or heroes in the society. In the course of her narration of Elijah Masinde’s story, grandmother announces that she and her audience should take a break by singing a song. Nanjala (one of the children in the audience) starts the following song and the rest take it up:

<i>Mwana mbeli beyaye!</i>	First born oh yee!
<i>Mwana mbeli....</i>	First born....
<i>Beyaye!</i>	Oh yee!
<i>Mwana mbeli nesiekhoelo!</i>	First born (is source of) pride!
<i>Mwana mbeli Elijah</i>	First born Elijah
<i>Mwana mbeli</i>	First born
<i>Elijah!</i>	Elijah!
<i>Mwana mbeli nesiekhoelo!</i>	First born (is source of) pride!

The song signals fecundity and the start of motherhood so it can be sung when a child of either sex is born. However, *Mwana mbeli* can also be sung to express pride in an act of valour or any other act by the child or any member of the family or the community which brings

pride to the family, saves the community/family from some tragedy, or does anything that improves the wellbeing of the family and of the community. Sometimes, it can also be sung for initiates who have shown courage during circumcision, amongst other uses. In the context of the text, *Elijah Masinde*, the song is used to praise Masinde who fought injustice. Nanjala quickly draws from her cultural praise songs and immediately applies the song to Masinde’s context because he is identified as a hero. This song is therefore incorporated in the structure of the narrative for the purpose of perpetuating the theme of heroism – to praise the achiever. The song evokes the cultural practices of the Bukusu community, whereby the do-gooders were praised. Songs introduced during the art of narration not only encourage participation in the narrative, and thus comprehension, but they also enrich children stories, making them more interesting. In many Africa societies, song and dance is generally used for purposes like thanksgiving, political awakening and as a means of recognizing heroes. In this discussion, songs are also viewed as evoking identity of different groups of people, thus signalling cultural diversity in the nation.

Sayings and proverbs

Proverbs and sayings contain condensed experience of a society’s past generations. They are a social phenomenon, and as such, they can be defined as messages coded by tradition and transmitted in order to evaluate and/or affect human behaviour. They can also reveal elements of culture such as morality or what is considered to be the appropriate behaviour. The use of proverbs and sayings in the texts under discussion therefore portrays the richness of African oral traditions. Specifically, proverbs may reflect and express different aspects of the same problem depending on the society, and this makes it difficult to understand certain proverbs without the ethnographical background of the societies from which they emanate. Therefore, it is only by placing a given proverb in its cultural background that we can understand its meaning, and thus, gain insight into different people’s ways of life.

In *Dedan Kimathi*, Njeng’ere shows that Kimathi learnt many societal matters from his grandmother. When she was about to die she called Kimathi and told him:

The time has come for me to go and plant cassavas. And when I am gone I want you to take good care of your mother and your siblings. And remember everything I have taught you (45).

Of interest here is the phrase “the time has come for me to go and plant cassava”. This can be read as an element of orality in the text, because it is a euphemism, that refers to death among the communities that live around

the Mount Kenya region. The restriction of the use of certain words within a specific locality intimates ethnic identity because like national and communal identity, ethnic identity is contingent and relational: it is defined by territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation; the other (Grint, 2000). Identity is therefore viewed as constructed and not discovered.

In Mwana Kupona's biography proverbs are also seen as a cultural resource of the Swahili culture, some of which are found in *Khangas*, colourful patterned cloths used as wrap-arounds by women. Some of these include: *Mapenzi ni kikohozi, haiwezi kufichika* (love is like a cough, you cannot hide it) and *Akipenda chongo huita kengeza* (King'ei, 2000), literally meaning, one who loves mono-eyed man does not notice the fault but calls it a squint – referring to the apparent “blindness” of love. Love is further referred to in one of the songs sung at Zuhura's wedding, as a wound (*donda*) in the heart, and once a person's heart is wounded, everybody is bound to know – you cannot hold/hide love. The use of symbolic language which is read here as a cultural resource becomes clearer during the marriage negotiations before Zuhura weds. She (Zuhura) is referred to as a seed which the possible in-laws needed for planting (King'ei, 2000). In this case Zuhura is a seed that will may be, not only bear children but also be productive in many other ways while at the in-laws' place. In this text, the importance of proverbs as a means of communication among the Swahili is emphasized through the symbolic language which demonstrates the rich culture of the Swahili that King'ei draws from. In this text, the importance of proverbs as a means of communication among the Swahili people is emphasized. It can therefore, be argued that proverbs are seen as important cultural reservoirs, which like songs and stories, are useful for societal education and other purposes. Their deployment in children's texts serves a useful purpose of educating young readers about the cultural wisdom of different communities. These oral elements also draw attention to the nature of these societies.

Fantasy

Fantasy is a narrative device that is often used in African folklore for the purpose of elevating certain characters to a heroic stature. Mathews (2002) argues that although, it is difficult to precisely define literary fantasy, most critics agree that it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live. Mathew reiterates that a literary genre fantasy is best thought as a fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or the impossible, consciously breaking free from mundane reality. Fantasy therefore accepts the magical, non-rational, and the

impossible world of imagination.

In *Elijah Masinde*, religion is used as basis of fantasy. Alembe elevates Elijah Masinde to a symbol of determination for his people and treats him as a being that possesses power beyond the ordinary. Masinde gets in touch with the ancestors, who ask him to bring back the Bukusu way of worship, *Dini ya Musambwa*, the religion of ancestors. Consequently, Masinde fights against colonial and foreign Christian influence in order to sustain his traditional religion. Religion is seen in this text as one of the ways through which people fought for independence which is invoked as a means of truth-claiming and asserting the rightfulness of African religions in the face of colonialists influence. What makes Masinde to occupy the realm of the fantastic is the power he apparently possesses, through his religion. The narrator says that Masinde:

... Could walk through walls.... When he was fighting against injustice he was locked up in prison.... The prison wardens would lock up all the prisoners at night. But before the guards opened the doors in the morning, Masinde would be outside frolicking in the early morning sun! And the doors would still be securely locked (28-29).... Masinde had magical powers. Not only could he go through stone walls but he could even transform bullets into water! (41).

Alembe employs fantasy in many instances in the novel, which continually blurs the line between the real and the surreal. Fantasy defies our sense of the ordinary and the accepted system of logic (Kunene, 1989) and allows us to enter into infinite possibilities. Kunene argues that fantasy is used a great deal in didactic writing in order to add to the persuasive power of the message or to enhance the dramatic impact of words, or both. Alembe employs various elements of the fantasy in various instances in Masinde's story. For instance, we are also told that Masinde played his guitar while seated in the river where the water was swiftest (26 to 27). In addition, he was a good footballer, and one day he kicked the ball upwards and it never came back (24). Actions like kicking a ball or playing a guitar are ordinary but they assume a fantastic significance when they depart from their common predictable patterns. These actions, as Kunene would say, are based on ordinary things, and ordinary things behaving in extraordinary ways (1989). Thus, playing a guitar is ordinary but playing while sitting in the middle of the river where the water is swiftest is strange. The fantasy Kunene argues is often regarded as being more persuasive in motivating a character to action than the ordinary logical events (Ibid). It tickles and captivates children because of the incongruence and unexpected situations in life and people's action. The presentation of Masinde as an extra-ordinary person therefore helps to keep the audience active/involved and triggers children's delight and imaginative faculties Alembe's use of fantasy

in this narrative, could argue and also help to create some kind of shock in the minds of the young readers. This approach defamiliarizes Masinde and places him in a realm where we can only look up to him as source of power, ability and triumph. As a result, in many instances in the text, all the children want to be called Elijah Masinde (Alembi, 2000).

Fantasy is however not Alembi's own creation. Instead, he draws on the folklore narratives about Masinde and presents this picture to children. *Dini ya Musambwa*, which allegedly bequeaths Elijah Masinde power/ability to perform fantastic deeds, is read as a source of unity for the Bukusu community in times of crisis. This religious sect serves the purpose of not just identifying Masinde with his society, but Masinde's deeds attract the people to him, thus unifying the whole community against a common enemy – the colonialist.

Conclusions

Acting as the focal point of this article, orality has been examined in order to show how the authors of the biographies discussion in this essay invoke specific community identities. These identities have in turn been read as demonstrating cultural diversity in Kenya as a nation. The use of oral art forms in the three texts is also important in summoning literature from different cultural backgrounds, and also an important part in the unfolding narrative structure. The stories of these personalities therefore form part of cultural history of the communities from which they come, and unless this history is recorded so that the coming generations can have access to it, it is doomed to remain an artefact of one society and may in the end disappear. These narratives therefore perpetuate the names of these people and their communities' history because as Chinua Achebe (2001) reminds us in *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior; the story outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighter. As Gunner (1999) asserts, the calling upon the former distinct national figures makes it possible to put into account the history and traditions of all communities that form the nation. In this case biographical writing for young readers introduces cultural diversity in children's books; a means for socialization through which children can understand themselves, their culture and others (Glazer, 1997).

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