



Voicing Familial Struggles: A Critical Analysis of Child Images in Selected Kenneth Khaemba's Popular Songs

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Abstract

Familial struggles, though often glossed over and rarely voiced, form the very cartography of a community's history. Considering this, scholarship accords so little attention to the multifaceted meanings embedded in child images, particularly as these images can themselves be powerful expressions of those same familial struggles, especially within popular songs. The neglect seems to emanate from the relegation of Indigenous knowledge and foregrounding the adult in an adult/child dyad. Nevertheless, popular songs, as one of the popular cultural forms, provide a platform for reading about the familial struggles in the contemporary society. In this paper, using Luhya community, and Kenneth Khaemba's popular songs the paper seeks to investigate the child images as a (re)presentation of the family as a site of struggles. The paper is anchored on the premise that popular songs, vide child images, is a vital avenue in understanding contemporary community. In achieving this end, the paper uses the ideas of Globlectics theory as propounded by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in particular, the perception of a community's verbal arts, specifically folklore, as being at the center of comprehending the lives of members of any community. Individual community, globlectically, is equidistant to any community in the globe. Before subjecting the songs to discourse analysis, Khaemba's popular songs were listened to and transcribed, and translated the two purposely sampled songs, namely *Mayi Mutiti* 'Little Mother' and *Mayi Muro* 'Step Mother'. The study used the presence of a child narrator in the songs as the parameter for the selection. The findings of the study demonstrated that the child image in Khaemba's songs is literary and, therefore, is a canvas for the insights into the struggles of Luhya community.

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Introduction

Familial struggles, though often obscured beneath societal facades, form the very bedrock upon which a nation's history is etched (Hooks, 1994). Despite their profound impact, these struggles are frequently unvoiced, relegated to the periphery of public discourse and scholarly attention (Foucault, 1977). Similarly, the nuanced meanings conveyed by child images within popular songs have often been overlooked by researchers. This neglect, arguably, stems from a broader undervaluation of Indigenous knowledge systems and a persistent tendency to prioritise the adult



perspective in the child/adult dynamic (Said, 1979). However, popular songs, as a vibrant form of popular culture, offer a powerful platform for articulating and examining the familial struggles that permeate contemporary society (Storey, 2018). This paper aims to investigate child images as representations of the family as a site of struggle, focusing on the Luhya community in Kenya and specifically selected popular songs by Kenneth Khaemba. Kenneth Khaemba is a popular song artist who sings in LuNyala, one of the languages under the Luhya community umbrella in Western Kenya. This does not mean that Khaemba sings only in the LuNyala language; he also sings in Swahili.

Drawing upon the premise that popular music, specifically through the lens of a child narrator, provides a crucial window into understanding contemporary community dynamics, this study utilises Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (2012) concept of *globalectics*. Ngugi posits that a community's verbal arts, and particularly its folklore, are central to understanding the lived experiences of its members, and that each community occupies a position of equal importance on the global stage. Therefore, by analysing Kenneth Khaemba's songs, the paper reads the songs as portraying the specific struggles of the Luhya community, while acknowledging their relevance within a broader global context, a view argued by Appiah (2006).

Scholarship has increasingly recognised the power of popular songs as a mirror reflecting social, political, and economic realities. Mwaura (2007), for instance, highlights the dynamism of popular music, arguing that its ability to mediate reality stems from astute observations and interpretations of the world around us. His work explores gender issues in Gikuyu popular songs, revealing how these songs unpack complex societal norms of patriarchy. Similarly, Wanjala and Kebaya (2016) utilise popular songs to explore the intricate construction of youth identities.

These studies provide context for this paper's investigation: examining familial struggles as portrayed in popular songs. While often overlooked, the voices of children, interwoven within the lyrics and melodies, offer a unique perspective on the dynamics and challenges within the family unit.

The study aims to explore how popular songs serve as a platform for these often-silenced voices. By analysing the lyrical content, musical arrangements, and cultural context of these songs, the paper provides valuable insights into the experiences of children navigating complex family relationships, economic hardships, and societal pressures.

The paper posits that popular songs of Khaemba illuminate the often-hidden realities of familial struggles from a uniquely vulnerable perspective. By listening closely to the child voices, the songs portray a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by children and the social fabric that shapes their lives. Understanding these narratives is crucial for fostering empathy and promoting policies that support the well-being of both families and children. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role that popular music plays in society.

Theoretical Framework: Globalectics and Indigenous Knowledge

This paper adopts Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Globalectics Theory* as its primary theoretical framework. *Globalectics* posits that all cultures and languages are interconnected and equally valuable, rejecting the hierarchical positioning of Western knowledge as superior (wa Thiong'o, 2012). This perspective is crucial for understanding the significance of Indigenous knowledge, particularly in the context of popular music. wa Thiong'o (2012) argues for the centrality of a community's verbal arts, including folklore and music, in comprehending the lives and experiences of its members. Popular songs, as a



form of contemporary folklore, become a potent tool for articulating and preserving cultural memory and social realities. Further, Ngugi posits that a community's verbal arts, and particularly its folklore, are central to understanding the lived experiences of its members, and that each community occupies a position of equal importance on the global stage. Further, Ngugi posits that a community's verbal arts, and particularly its folklore, are central to understanding the lived experiences of its members, and that each community occupies a position of equal importance on the global stage. Kabaji (2025) observes that for Ngugi wa Thiong'o, oral traditions, folktales, and performance forms constitute valid repositories of knowledge (p. 6). Therefore, by analysing Kenneth Khaemba's songs, insights into the specific struggles of the Luhya community can be gained, while acknowledging their relevance within a broader global context (Appiah, 2006). Applying this framework, Khaemba's songs are read not only as entertainment output but also cultural texts that encapsulate the anxieties, hopes, and struggles of the Luhya community.

The pursuit of knowledge has historically been dominated by Western epistemologies, often marginalising and dismissing alternative knowledge systems originating from the Global South. Globalectics, a framework that emphasises the interconnectedness and mutual constitution of local and global processes, offers a lens through which to reposition Luhya knowledge, a rich and nuanced body of understanding from the Luhya community in Western Kenya, as equal to other forms of knowledge.

Globalectics, as defined by scholars like Boatcă (2015), moves beyond a binary understanding of global and local, instead highlighting their dynamic interplay and mutual influence. It acknowledges that global forces shape local realities, but equally, local responses and adaptations contribute to reshaping the international landscape. Applying this framework to Luhya knowledge allows us to move beyond portraying it as a static, isolated set of traditions and instead recognise it as a dynamic, evolving system shaped by and actively shaping its engagement with global forces.

One crucial aspect of Globalectics is its emphasis on the decolonisation of knowledge production. This involves challenging the assumption that Western knowledge is inherently superior and recognising the inherent value and validity of indigenous knowledge systems.

Moreover, Globalectics helps us understand how global forces, such as economic globalisation, impact the Luhya family dynamics and child welfare. It acknowledges the challenges faced by Luhya families in navigating these complex dynamics, such as the impact of polygamous family structures and the influence of ideals of parenting on traditional practices. However, it also recognises the agency of Luhya communities in adapting and drawing on their cultural resources and values to negotiate these challenges.

In conclusion, Globalectics provides a crucial framework for repositioning Luhya knowledge as equal to other forms of knowledge in understanding child welfare and family dynamics. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of local and global forces, emphasising the decolonisation of knowledge production, and promoting culturally sensitive research and intervention, popular songs offer unique contributions that can be appreciated and integrated into broader global discourses through Globalectics. This ultimately leads to a more equitable and practical approach to promoting the well-being of children and families in Luhya communities and beyond.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on discourse analysis of two purposely selected songs by Kenneth Khaemba, '*Mayi Mutiti*' (Little Mother) and '*Mayi Muro*' (Step Mother), chosen



specifically for the prominence of the child narrator. Through this analysis, it will be demonstrated that the child image in Khaemba's songs functions as a powerful literary device, offering a profound canvas onto which the familial struggles are portrayed.

The selection criteria for the songs are based on the presence of a prominent child narrator. The initial phase involved listening to and transcribing a range of Khaemba's songs, identifying those that explicitly or implicitly feature children. These songs were then subjected to close readings, analysing the lyrics and contextual background to understand the intended meanings and potential interpretations. The analysis focuses on how these images represent the family as a site of struggle, exploring themes of economic and emotional struggles as portrayed in the songs to depict the experiences of children in two separate familial contexts, highlighting the challenges they face and the role they play in the family.

Results and Discussion

Economic struggles

According to Opondo (2005), to understand the significance of child images in Khaemba's songs, it is essential to acknowledge the role of music within Luhya culture. Music, dance, and oral traditions are integral to the community's identity, serving as vehicles for transmitting history, values, and social commentary (Opondo, 2005). Khaemba taps into these cultural roots, using his music to reflect the everyday realities of his listeners.

The child images in Kenneth Khaemba's popular songs serve as a (re)presentation of the family as a site of struggles. The songs depict the family as a complex and dynamic system, characterised by power dynamics. The struggles represented in the songs range from economic hardship to emotional neglect, highlighting the multifaceted nature of familial struggles.

The economic struggles within the family are best exemplified by '*Mayi Mutiti*' (Little Mother). The song problematises the challenges within polygamous families. Polygamous family structures, while diverse in their manifestations, often present unique challenges, particularly for children navigating complex dynamics of power and privilege. The song relays the story of a child whose mother is the first wife (first family) in a seemingly polygamous family of two wives. This child's story reveals the subtle yet profound ways in which the mother's position impacts his reality within the family structure.

The core of this narrative revolves around the child's observation of his mother's perceived disadvantage. Three primary power centres frequently dictate the dynamics within the household: the two mothers and the patriarchal figure of the father. The first wife (the narrator's mother), in this scenario, occupies a less privileged position, influencing the child's access to resources, attention, and even emotional validation.

The child, caught in the middle, grapples with conflicting loyalties and a deep-seated need to protect his mother's interests, and by extension, the entire first family. The song begins with the child posing the rhetorical question, "*What is it that little mother has?*" The narrator's seemingly innocent inquiry into the perceived elevated status of the second (wife) family in a polygamous household unveils a deeper, more troubling dynamic. While the child seems to defend the "little mother ostensibly", the narrative reveals the unjust distribution of resources, leaving children of the first family economically vulnerable and emotionally neglected.



The irony lies in the fact that the “little mother” and, by extension, her offspring benefit disproportionately. At the same time, the children from the first family are deprived of both paternal care and financial security, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of parental favouritism. As listeners, one witnesses the child’s collateral damage, a loss of a nurturing father figure and equitable access to family wealth.

Furthermore, the child image can also represent the dashed hopes and unrealised potential within a family. In the song ‘*Mayi Mutiti*’, part of the lyrics describes a child whose dreams are jeopardised by poverty and parental neglect. In lines that resonate with both childish innocence and profound understanding, the child narrator embodies a potent symbol of resistance against familial inequalities. As a keen observer of the subtle yet pervasive biases within the domestic sphere, the child articulates a stance that transcends individual experience, becoming a voice for countless children who yearn for fairness and recognition. The declaration, “*All mothers are equal, I have said this*” stands as a testament to the child’s unwavering commitment to equity. Furthermore, the challenge to the adult world is revealed in the direct address, which seems to be intended for the entire Luhya community. The child vents:

You (adults) can accuse me if you so wish, but I have said it, and I am tired.

The line underscores the deep-seated frustration and weariness that arise from witnessing and internalising injustice. This assertion, delivered with defiance, positions the child as an advocate for a more equitable distribution of affection, resources, and respect within the family unit.

It can be construed that favouritism in the polygamous family set-up results in economic hardship for the less favoured family, the first family. In the song, the lyrics depict a desolate picture of a child burdened by the weight of poverty,

...a cent that you get, commercial bank, my little mother, a coin that you earn, commercial bank, my little mother...my mother goes to the cassava plantation to relieve herself

This imagery resonates deeply with the lived experiences of families within the Luhya community, where poverty rates remain a significant challenge. The child becomes a symbol of economic vulnerability, a poignant reminder of the societal inequalities that impact family life. This aligns with research by UNICEF, which highlights the disproportionate impact of poverty on children, leading to malnutrition, limited access to education, and increased vulnerability to exploitation (UNICEF, 2023).

Similarly, Bourdieu (1984) asserts that the family unit, often romanticised as a haven of love and support, is a complex social arena characterised by power dynamics and economic pressures. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu emphasises how the family serves as a site of “symbolic capital” transmission, where inequalities are reproduced and perpetuated (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). These inequalities are frequently expressed through the experiences of children, who are often most vulnerable to the effects of familial dysfunction. As Ardener (1993) avers, understanding the experiences of marginalised groups, including children, is crucial to gaining a holistic picture of societal power structures (1993, p.96). Popular songs, serving as a readily accessible and widely consumed form of cultural expression, provide a platform for voicing these often-silenced struggles.

Besides the economic constraints of the first family, the allocation and sharing of the family land heighten the economic burden. The mother figure in the second family wrestles for the power to allocate land from the father figure. She asserts,



That one allocated him the land of stones and the less fertile land.

This scenario places the woman in the second family as a central figure in determining access to the crucial resource of land, suggesting preferential treatment for her sons, who are granted the privilege of choosing where they wish to be allocated. In contrast, the sons from the first family are denied this privilege. Consequently, the sons of the first family are allocated less desirable and less fertile portions. This dynamic highlights the struggles over land, a theme echoed in Verma's (2001) analysis of land as a contested material resource, vital for sustaining livelihoods, where access, control, and negotiations are shaped by inequitable local power relations (p. 79).

The song lays bare the uneven power dynamics at play between families, where the second family and her sons wield significant influence over land distribution, effectively disadvantaging the first family. The allocation of land, often the primary economic resource for families, presents a complex challenge intertwined with patriarchal structures, feminist ideals, and inequity. Traditionally, the power to allocate land resides with the male figure within the family, a practice deeply rooted in patriarchal systems. While challenges to this power dynamic, often framed within a feminist lens, seek to dismantle these unequal power structures, the ramifications of these challenges can inadvertently create new forms of economic hardship.

Feminist perspectives advocate for a more equitable distribution of resources that empowers women and recognises their contributions to the family's economic well-being. Contesting this power, therefore, appears to be a positive step towards gender equality.

However, the reality is often more nuanced. While challenging the patriarchal control over land allocation may be a necessary step towards gender equality, unintended consequences arise, particularly for children from the first family. These children face significant economic constraints through skewed land distribution patterns, or even outright exclusion from decisions pertaining to the family's primary resource.

Moreover, the song illustrates how economic deprivation exacerbates familial instability. The lines describing the allocation of infertile land to the narrator's mother (first family) and the child's assertion of future agency in choosing his land unveil the child as a symbol of vulnerability. This is not merely a literal depiction of economic hardship but a metaphorical representation of the emotional voids within the family. The child, thus, becomes a barometer of societal inequities, as Finnegan (2012) suggests, which is often the case within African oral traditions, embodying the profound impact of adult decisions on the most vulnerable members of society. The song "*Mayi Mutiti*," therefore, presents the child's perspective as a powerful indictment of social and economic realities, compelling a critical examination of the forces that erode the stability and well-being of the African family. Khaemba's "*Mayi Mutiti*" utilises potent child imagery, not merely as a sentimental device, but as a critical lens through which to examine the fracturing forces of marital strife and economic hardship on the family unit. The song portrays the child as a vulnerable observer, bearing witness to the corrosive effects of parental conflict and the fragmentation of familial structures in the face of poverty. This resonates with Barber's (1987) argument that popular music often lays bare the "underbelly of social relations" (p. 67).

Emotional Neglect

In this section, the paper closely examines Khaemba's song *Mayi Muro* as a lens through which to understand the emotional complexities experienced by children navigating challenging family dynamics. In the song, the child narrates his experience with both the stepfather and the stepmother.



The song, narrated directly from the perspective of a child, delves into a childhood lived within the confines of a step-parent family. It is essential to note that the recurring use of the child narrator serves not only as a stylistic choice but also as a deliberate mechanism to amplify the emotional impact of the narrative, allowing listeners to engage directly with the child's perspective and internal struggles. This analysis illuminates the emotional neglect of the child narrator and, by extension, the emotional realities of childhood. The song begins with a chilling litany:

Namusia went to the land of the dead

She is in the land of the dead

Kabiiri went to the land of the dead

I don't know what ate my father

I would have narrated the whole day

These lines are a stark reminder of the circumstances the child narrator finds himself in: a total orphan. The repetition of death – Namusia (the narrator's mother), Kabiiri (the narrator's father), gone to the "land of the dead" – creates a haunting atmosphere, emphasising the pervasive nature of loss. But it's the fourth line that is significant: *I don't know what ate my father*.

This innocent admission speaks volumes about the emotional trauma the child is enduring. The mystery surrounding his father's death adds another layer of pain – the inability to understand, to find closure, to even properly grieve. He yearns to understand, confessing he "*would have narrated it the whole day*" had he known the cause of the father's death. Perhaps through narration, the narrator would have found healing and come to a closure on the loss. This desire to tell the story, to recount the events endlessly, underscores the child's desperate need to process the immense loss and find some semblance of peace.

The emotional devastation stemming from the death of both parents is immense. The narrator does not just mourn the loss of the biological parents, but also the loss of security, of belonging, and of a future that now looks uncertain. The song concludes its lament for the father's death here, but this ending suggests the complex emotional journey yet to come. Potential secondary traumatisation may arise from displacement and familial restructuring. Specifically, the absence of primary caregivers raises concerns regarding the well-being of affected children.

The anxieties that haunt the dreams of every orphaned child soon materialise in stark reality. Having sought a new home, a stepfamily becomes a breeding ground for a different kind of loneliness – a more profound sense of abandonment. This is the reality for the narrator, a child cast adrift and forced to navigate a world that feels increasingly hostile. The stark truth is affirmed in repetition of the line: "(Your) *stepfather is not (your) father*." This line becomes a constant echo in the child's mind, reinforced by the actions that follow. The child narrator is relegated to the periphery.

A simple act like sharing a meal of beef becomes an instrument of cruelty. The delicacy of a meal of meat, a rare treat, fills the air with anticipation. But for the narrator, the promise is quickly extinguished. While his step-siblings are presented with the succulent, meaty portions, the narrator is left with the bones, amidst the jeers and laughter of those who should have offered comfort. The tears stream from the narrator's face in this encounter. To be treated like a dog, cast aside with the bones, is traumatic. The message is clear: he is not valued, not worthy of the same care and consideration afforded to the others. The bones and the tears become symbols of a childhood stolen, a future



threatened by the absence of genuine love and the enduring scars of being treated as less than the others.

And the pain is not limited to the male figures (of the stepfather) in the household. The stepmother, too, participates in this subtle, yet devastating, form of neglect.

My stepmother keeps the dried ugali for me and covers it

when I come; her insults pierce my heart, which makes me not eat

While the physical demands are undoubtedly challenging, the child narrator's primary struggle stems from the relentless insults hurled by the stepmother. These verbal assaults are not mere fleeting moments of anger; they are described as piercing the child's heart, suggesting a deep and pervasive emotional wounding.

The child's inability to eat, a direct consequence of the emotional distress, further emphasises the severity of the trauma. The failure to eat might have resulted from the loss of appetite. This loss of appetite is a physical manifestation of the psychological burden the child carries, a testament to the power of words to inflict real pain. The desolation experienced within the supposed sanctuary of their own home underscores the betrayal and lack of support that exacerbate the child's suffering.

The foregoing conversation has demonstrated that this unequal treatment within the step-parent family not only deprives the child materially but also fosters feelings of rejection and abandonment, ultimately contributing to emotional and psychological distress.

In conclusion, *Mayi Muro* transcends its musical form to become a powerful social commentary on the complexities of blended families and the often-overlooked emotional landscape of the children within them. By adopting the authentic voice of a child, *Mayi Muro* offers valuable insights into the potential traumas and anxieties experienced by children navigating the intricacies of step-parent relationships, promoting a greater understanding and empathy towards their unique needs.

These examples demonstrate how Khaemba's songs challenge the adult/child dyad by elevating child images to central narrative roles, thereby voicing familial struggles that are often glossed over in mainstream discourse. As Finnegan (2012) notes, popular songs in African societies act as "vehicles for social commentary," allowing marginalised voices to disrupt dominant narratives (p. 112). Through this lens, the child becomes a symbol of resistance, embodying the community's resilience in the face of struggles. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that categorisation of the two songs along the economic struggles and emotional neglect is flexible, not restrictive.

The foregoing demonstrates the family as a site of unresolved struggles, with the child's watchful eyes symbolising hope amid despair. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) would interpret this as a reclaiming of narrative agency, where child images in popular songs challenge adult-centric hegemony. Thus, Khaemba's songs collectively demonstrate that child images are not mere embellishments but critical tools for voicing familial tensions, supported by empirical evidence from indigenous knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The analysis of these songs reveals the power of the child image as one of the lenses through which to understand familial struggles in the Luhya community. Khaemba's songs offer a poignant commentary on the social and economic challenges facing families, the impact of marital conflict on children, and the loss of one's parents that often accompanies poverty and hardship. By giving voice



to the child, Khaemba challenges dominant narratives and invites listeners to empathise with the experiences of those frequently marginalised.

The findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of the role of popular culture in shaping perceptions of childhood and family. Khaemba's songs, as a form of Indigenous knowledge, provide valuable insights into the lived realities of the Luhya community. By analysing these songs through a Globalectics lens, the paper appreciates the unique perspectives and experiences that contribute to a global understanding of human suffering and resilience.

Kenneth Khaemba's songs, through their potent use of child narrator, serve as a powerful testament to the struggles faced by families in the Luhya community. These songs are not merely forms of entertainment; they are a form of social commentary, a valve into familial struggles, and a call for empathy and understanding. By continuing to analyse and interpret these songs, the paper has demonstrated that the complexities of familial life and the voice of those who are often silenced can be appreciated through a close reading of popular songs. Further research could explore the reception of these songs within the Luhya community and the extent to which they contribute to social change. The study of child images in popular music offers a rich and promising avenue for understanding the dynamics of family and society.

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