



A historical perspective on the evolution and presentations of the ideal in children's television: A study of Kenyan television from 1989 to 2012

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at offering a brief history of children's television in Kenya since 1989 when Voice of Kenya (VoK) was rebranded Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). The year 1989 is unique in the sense that broadcasting hours were increased, giving room for more programmes for children. This paper tries to provide a historical progression of Kenyan children's television programmes, while analysing their portrayal of the world to the child. The paper will also look at notable opinions by Kenyan scholars on what children television ought to be vis-à-vis what it is. This paper concludes that although the Kenyan society (and to a great extent, television stations) still harbours the idea that children are innocent individuals being natured to join the society by controlling the content they watch, we may be misleading ourselves. It must be accepted that currently children have multiple venues in which they can access various media with varied content. The paper accepts that children have varied intellect, experiences, interests and come from different backgrounds with different expectations of what is entertaining and what is boring. Although the paper does accept that television is a useful tool for culture transmission, it challenges the idea that children are a homogeneous group that can do with a standard offering.



Children are a special category of television audiences with needs that differ from those of adults and as such the programmes they are interested in are unique to them. Kenyan television has been offering both foreign and local content targeting children since the founding of the first television station in Kenya, with the programs ranging from magazines to the more recent children's drama. This paper tries to provide a historical progression of Kenyan children's television programmes, while analysing their portrayal of the world to the child.

The year 1989 saw Voice of Kenya change its name through an act of parliament to revert to its original name Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), a move that also saw the modernisation of the national media house facilities. The improvement of infrastructure at KBC enabled the station to increase its broadcasting hours, meaning that the broadcaster also had to increase its offering in terms of programmes. This move also saw the number of children's (persons who are 18 years old and below) programmes at the station increased with more Kenyan produced children programmes being offered in addition to foreign produced cartoons.

KBC, which was the only broadcaster in Kenya at the time, moved to make children part and parcel in the stations programming by ensuring that children who got home at 5 pm from school always had a programme meant for them to watch. During weekends and public holidays, children had a few additional offerings for them from 2pm in the afternoon and later when the station further increased its broadcast hours children programmes started airing from 8am. Most of the programmes targeting children on KBC were magazines, a concept that the station never moved away from even with increasing competition from stations such as Citizen Television that revolutionized children programming in television by offering local dramas not only targeting children but also acted by children. However, the concern remains whether the Kenyan media is really in-touch with the evolving demand of children in terms of themes, content and style of presentation of their programmes.

Since the late 80s, KBC offered magazine programmes such as Children's Variety Show, Youth in Action, Happy Days and Mix Them Gather Them. Other programmes by KBC were quiz and debating shows such as School's Debate, Quiz and Sanaa ya Kiswahili. There was also an assortment of shows that differed in content but had the same style of presentation i.e: Budding Club and Kiini Macho. Indeed, programmes like Variety Show and Kiini Macho have patronized Kenyan television since the early 80s and had become household names when it came to television by the time KBC was restructuring in 1989.

Budding club was a religious (Bible study) show, while Kiini Macho was a magic show. Both shows had an adult presenting to a group of children in the studio, who were later invited to contribute to the presentation as participants on the stage where the magic trick will be done on them in Kiini Macho, or by reading a verse,

answering a question or singing a hymn in Budding Club.

A typical Kiini Macho show would start with the presenter introducing the show to the children in the studio who were his primary audience. He would then pose a few questions to them, such as: what school they were from, what class, whether they knew the magic words used in the show and such. After taking answers from the children, he would then instruct them on the magic words and proceed to perform a few tricks for them on stage. Later he would invite a few children to assist him perform the tricks or to have a trick performed on them.

The magazine programmes offered by KBC often presented the same events by different schools week after week. The structure was the same in the different programmes with minor variations in terms of presentation and format. While Variety Show approached schools (mainly primary schools) all over the country for content, Youth in Action and Happy Days were produced by KBC's Mombasa studios and featured Coastal schools. Youth in Action was tailored for high school going children as it featured different Coastal secondary schools, while Happy Days catered for primary school children. These programmes were educational in nature and exposed children to cultures from different communities in the country.

Variety Show usually started with the presenter on location introducing the school which he/she had visited and would brief the viewer on the different activities that had been prepared by the school. The presenter or a student leading a segment of the programme (be it a dance, play, choral verse etc) would inform the viewer on what the performance to be offered is about, and then proceed to lead the troupe through the performance. At times the programme contained a question and answer segment where a student will be responding to questions posed by the presenter on a traditional music instrument, work tools, craft, clothing and such.

Like Budding Club, Kiini Macho or Variety Show, the presentation of children's programmes on KBC was remarkably similar. Different episodes of the same programme shared the same structure, making them predictable. Although the similarity in plot in children's programmes may be to enhance familiarity, it may also become tedious as the child would always know what happens next. The tediousness of a standard plot has been demonstrated by Akoleit (1990), where she found out that the fourteen year olds sampled in her research desired more intricate plots in their reading material. Akoleit (1990), who studied Barbara Kimenye's Moses Series, found out that many of the fourteen year olds sampled were already reading adult novels.

However, Akoleit's findings suggest that programmes aired by KBC targeting children might have attracted children who are fourteen years or younger because of the nature of their content. According to Piaget's (1950) stages of cognitive development, the programmes aired at that time were more suitable to children in their pre-operational stage (age 2-7) and the concrete operational stage (age 7-

11/12). Hence, children in their formal operational stage (age 11/12 and beyond) did not have anything relevant to them being aired by the station.

Although a programme such as Youth in Action may have been formulated to cater for the formal operational stage, its presentation could have made it more relevant for the concrete operational stage. This can be supported by Akoleit's research in which the Moses series of books, written by Kimenye for lower secondary school students in Uganda, were found to be too simple for 14 year olds (class eight students) who were surveyed.

The liberalization of airwaves saw more television stations coming up and hours of broadcast increased as competition took hold in the media industry. Kenya Television Network (KTN) came up with the perennial Klub Kiboko, while Nation TV (NTV) has been offering Teen Republic. Kiss TV had Tinga Tinga Tales with Citizen TV having the widest variety of local shows targeting children, including: Tahidi High, Machachari, Great Debate Contest and Kubamba School Visits.

Tinga Tinga Tales aired on Kiss TV was a programme of mixed origin as the concept was from Tanzania, the producer British and the animation done in Kenya. The animation series was targeted at children in their pre-operational and concrete operational stages.

The animation identified and told various African myths of how various wild animals gained their appearance. Davis and Watkins (1960) note that children are fascinated by animal characters who behave like human beings. In the case of Tinga Tinga Tales, the animals are able to talk like human beings and even have emotions that are similar to human emotions. The narration in the animation was in Kiswahili, with a monkey being the primary narrator, or at least introduces the narration before it is picked up by the lead character (animal) in the episode.

A typical plot in Tinga Tinga Tales can be demonstrated in one of the episodes titled Kwa Nini Twiga ana Shingo Ndefu (Why a giraffe has a long neck). The episode begins with a monkey (narrator) jumping from the introductory title of the programme on to a giraffe that is passing underneath the title. The giraffe has a short neck and legs (looks more like a zebra than a giraffe). Monkey starts telling the giraffe's story of how she had short legs and neck and how she used to be picky when it came to food. Giraffe picks up the narration and tells how she gets constipated when she eats some types of food. Monkey and Giraffe get to a tree where other monkeys offer Giraffe a mango that sets off Giraffe's constipation and causes her great embarrassment. Elephant who happens to be passing by offers to help drown the noise coming from Giraffe's stomach by blowing its trump. Tortoise arrives at the scene and suggests that giraffe should be more selective on the types of food she takes. Lion and Rhino join the gathering of animals and also offer their advice. Lion suggests that giraffe should take honey, while Rhino believes fresh vegetation will stop giraffe's constipation. Giraffe goes out to seek honey and gets to

a tree with a honey comb guarded by bees and a chameleon patched up on one of the branches. Giraffe explains her problem to Chameleon who advises Giraffe that she may try convincing the bees to give her some honey but says it would not be easy. Giraffe approaches the bees to present her plea, and the bees in a melody and dance (making symbols) ask who wants honey and why. Giraffe explains her problem and is allowed to have honey. She presses her head into the crack on the tree where the hive is and starts licking the honey within. However, when she has had enough and Chameleon has confirmed that her stomach is no longer growling, Giraffe realises she's stranded as her head is stuck in the hive. Chameleon also realises Giraffe's dilemma and goes to get help. After a full night, Chameleon returns with Lion, Rhino, Elephant and Tortoise who try to pull Giraffe from the hive but only succeed in making Giraffe's feet longer. When this fails they withdraw and decide it is best to try to fell the tree by pulling it down, however, this only makes Giraffe's neck longer. Chameleon then encourages Giraffe to try pulling herself from the hive now that her body structure has changed, a move that is successful with Giraffe being able to pull herself out. Monkey takes over the narration by reciting a list of advantages that Giraffe has over other animals due to its long neck and legs. Giraffe invites Chameleon to join her in eating the fresh leaves on top of the tree, but Chameleon refuses by saying that it prefers flies instead. The episode is concluded by Monkey promising to narrate Chameleon's story next time.

The above extract has made use of a melody by bees, which is in effect music. The programme always incorporated music in its plot to add on to the entertainment value of the tale. Kabui (1997) notes that for children, following a monologue in a play would be tedious for it is passive, thus to keep the audience's concentration and to help them remember the scene, song accompanied by dance is employed.

The musical has also been traditionally associated with children films. Bordwell and Thompson (2001) note that apart from the backstage and romantic plot patterns, the musical has also often been associated with children's stories. The Wizard of Oz is an early example of this. Feature-length cartoons are often musicals, a convention that was established by Walt Disney in 1937 with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and has continued to the present day children films such as The Lion King and Tarzan. Indeed, by the 1980s and 1990s the live-action musical had become rare and animated films had largely taken over the function of providing tales interspersed with musical numbers.

Alembi (2003) points out that children enjoy singing and reciting poems. Use of poetic language and verse are therefore invaluable techniques in children's plays. He notes that creative use of repetition in terms of words, lines and ideas is an equally important feature of children's plays. This device creates rhythm, which in turn makes the piece musical, a feature that greatly excites children.

Repetition of words, lines and ideas can be noted in the above quoted excerpt from Tinga Tinga Tales as Giraffe's sensitivity to certain foods has been explained over and over again. The sensitivity to food provides the explanation and why Giraffe is advantaged at the end of the tale as it can get to eat the fresh sprouting leaves at the top of trees, hence avoiding constipation.

Apart from the use of music and repetition, the animals in the series are always moving and meeting other animals engaged in varied activities, hence action in the animation is kept constant thus holding the child's interest. Kabui (1997) stresses the importance of action in a play meant for children by noting that action is necessary because it keeps the audience, especially children whose concentration span is short, engrossed in the play.

Tahidi High and Machachari aired on Citizen TV made milestones in children's programming in the country as they were the first television programmes in which Kenyan children could watch other children involved in situations that are familiar to them. Although the Kenyan child can relate to and understand American and European children's productions, the setting, interactions between characters and some of the themes may be remarkably different from the Kenyan situation. Alstrom (1957), while discussing the educational value of theatre to children, contends that children's theatre should teach them about their environment, other people and themselves. In the Kenyan situation, the child's environment is the Kenyan neighbourhood in which he/she is living, the Kenyan school that he/she is attending, and the Kenyan culture that he/she abides by. Relating Alstrom's opinion on the function of theatre to children's television in the country, the child should be taught about what is expected of a Kenyan child in relation to his/her society.

Machachari is an episodic drama that revolves around four children: Baha, Govi, Almasi and Joy. The plot of the programme demonstrates why this television drama is suitable for children.

In one episode, the drama starts with Almasi being reprimanded by his mother for committing a number of misdemeanours. One of Almasi's offences is that of carrying his phone to school. The mother has also found out that Almasi has opened a facebook account and has photos of skimpily dressed women hidden in his room. Almasi's mother is disappointed that despite all the endeavours by her and her husband to give their children a good life, Almasi has the temerity to betray them and strikes him. Joy tries stopping the mother from hitting Almasi. Soon after, Almasi walks off to his room and starts crying. Joy goes after him but he sends her away. Joy resorts to calling one of her mother's sisters, Auntie Caro, to come and intervene. Auntie Caro visits and is able to mediate between mother and son by advising that while Almasi ought to apologize to his mother, the latter also needs to understand that her son has become a teenager and is tempted to try out various things and therefore needs a lot of direction. Almasi writes an apology letter to his mother and

also endeavours to apologize verbally where the two reconcile. Almasi's misdemeanours and subsequent apology is the main plot, but there is a sub-plot involving Baha and Govi. Their father is involved in some woodwork, with the two boys helping. At one point the father asks Baha to hold two pieces of wood together so that he (father) can join them using a nail. Unfortunately, the hammer hits Baha's finger. However, he is not seriously hurt such that in the father's absence, he thinks of himself as a knowledgeable carpenter, claiming to have the expertise to repair their neighbour's (Stella's) door whose hinges are loose. He removes all the hinges, planning to fix them properly. However, when he tries to fasten the hinges he realizes that it is more complicated than he imagined. Then the children get wind of their father approaching just when they are struggling to fasten the door. Hastily, they put up the door with unfastened hinges to give their father the impression that nothing was the matter. Indeed, when their father appears, they pretend that they were actually not doing anything wayward. Subsequently, in a humorous childlike way, they ask their father what kinds of nails are suitable for door hinges. However, their naughtiness comes to the fore when Stella's mother materializes and heads straight to her house without suspecting that the door is merely suspended. She pushes the door to open it but it collapses.

Mugubi (2012) notes that plots meant for child viewers ought to be generally simple. In the above extract from Machachari, there is only one main plot with an accompanying sub-plot. Tinga Tinga Tales has only one simple plot with the same set of characters interacting in two different settings. Mugubi (2012) further notes that whereas story forms meant for adult consumption may have innumerable plots and sub-plots, story forms for children usually has a single plot. He points at the telenovela *Shades of Sin*, saying that the programme's numerous sub-plots (overloaded plot) would be extremely taxing for a child's mind as he seeks to follow the story. He writes that it is very easy for a child to lose interest in such a program that has more than five stories going on all at the same time.

Mugubi (2012) observes that a story line that takes a couple of hours or more strains the minds of children. It is in this regard that children's programmes meant for 2-7 year olds, who belong to the preoperational stage, seldom exceed 30 minutes. This is because no matter how entertaining the programme is, the concentration span of such children is quite low. For 7-12 year olds who belong to the concrete operational stage, going beyond one hour may be strenuous unless it is utter entertainment with no story line.

However, sociological research in the United States of America has proved that the mass media, especially television has become an important means of socialization for children in the country; a trend that is being replicated all over the world with television sets becoming more affordable.

Calhoun (1995) says that overall, children in the United States of America

(and other Western nations) spend more time watching television than they spend in school, or, very likely, in direct communication with their parents. Slaby and Hollen-beck, et al (Cited in Fabes, et al, 1989) note that children as young as nine months of age already are watching the television set as much as 90 minutes a day in North America. By age four, children average 4 hours a day of viewing, and by the time they have graduated from high school, youth have spent more time watching television than any other activity except sleeping.

The changing demographics in terms of ownership of television sets and other entertainment media has modified children's understanding of television texts, such that children have now been equipped with the knowledge of comprehending plots that may be perceived to be beyond them. Akoleit (1990) wrote of 14 year olds reading novels meant for adults, while Huck (1979) argues that the child in his/her formal operational stage can hold several plots or sub-plots in his /her mind and see the interrelations among them, hence highlighting the complexities of the child's understanding.

However, Allan (1973) simplifies the argument by suggesting that plots in children's books (in this case television) should be those that children can easily identify with. Hence, a film like *The Gods Must be Crazy*, which has three parallel plots that intersect at the end, is easy for a child at its concrete operational stage to understand and appreciate because of the simplicity of the various plots in the film and their entertainment value.

Machachari uses humour as one of its main ingredients in order to attract and maintain the interest of its viewers who mainly comprise of children. Ray (1970) notes that apart from adventure, humour is perhaps the most essential ingredient in popular and successful children's fiction, since children generally expect to be amused in their recreational reading (and also television).

Machachari places its emphasis on situational humour as it is more understandable, funnier and more memorable to children. Kabui (1997) notes that humour derived from speech does not appeal to children mainly because they do not understand it. Although Machachari uses situational humour, it should be noted that the humour in the programme is not fanciful or clownish, but it is the simple endeavours by the children together with the adults that at times border on the outrageous that provide the comic relief.

While it is usually children in the different episodes of Machachari who provide the comic relief in their predicaments after being involved in mischief while playing adult or getting themselves in a situation somehow, the adult MaDVD (sales pirated Digital Versatile Disks while managing a public toilet in a slum) has also had the ability to provide comic relief in the different situations that affect him as part of his life. MaDVD who is a good friend to the children in Machachari usually does not go out looking for trouble, but somehow trouble always seems to find him. The

trouble typically originates from the business he is running, his need for money or attempts to impress his girlfriend who happens to be a house-help at Almasi's and Joy's home.

Mugubi (2012) notes that the simplicity of the theme in *Machachari* tallies with the child-like character. Some of the themes explored in the programme include: hope, compassion/charity, benevolence, friendship, solidarity, adventure/exploration, trickery, fantasy, forgiveness, flexibility, among others.

Hunt (1994) notes that children's writers are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values, rather than 'simply' telling a story. Hence, children television programmes concentrate on themes such as friendship, forgiveness, honesty and such. However, while encouraging the depiction of virtuous and altruistic behaviour in programmes targeting children, we should also question whether we are giving children the space to learn the real nature of human beings and the societies which celebrates competition, greed and selfishness.

Hunt (1994) quotes Edward Ardizzone, who was forced to change the plot of his second picture-book *Lucy and Mr. Grimes*;

"I think we are possibly inclined, in a child's reading, to shelter him (sic) too much from the facts of life, sorrow, failure, poverty, and possibly even death, if handled poetically can surely all be introduced without hurt... if no hint of the hard world comes into these books, then I am not sure we are playing fair" (16).

Ardizzone concerns on the presentation of children's books can be related to children's television. In a programme such as *Machachari*, although Baha and Govi reside in a slum, the effects of poverty on the children are barely seen. Instead, the children are presented to have much more freedom than their well off friends, even when Baha's father loses his job or their house burns down, the despair is not communicated in its bluntness to the audience.

In *Machachari*, poverty has been romanticized to the point a child will not question why one family is prosperous with the other living in a slum. The situation has been presented to be an acceptable norm in society that the child viewer stands the chance of growing up knowing that poverty is a condition in life and the only thing that can be done for the poor is to sympathise with them and maybe once in a while give them a donation when the situation is really desperate.

Lynskey (1974) is of the opinion that the society must ensure that children have the widest possible range of experience from which to gain insight, sympathy and understanding. According to him, unless children set out positively to gain these experiences, they will remain captives of their own immaturity and environment.

Another widely contentious issue in children's television is the depiction of violence, which has remained a highly controversial issue. In the quoted episode, Almasi's mother strikes Almasi in a fit of anger for his 'wrongdoing', and later Almasi is the one who apologizes for his behaviour. Although Almasi's mother does not

seem to have injured him physically, the fact that he cries after being hit shows that he had been hurt emotionally. This raises the question of how justified it is for an adult (in this case a parent) to hit a child simply because he/she is angry at the child's action, and where is the place for violence in television?

On the one hand, Mckenna and Ossuf (cited in Weche, 2000) conclude that children who watch violent models on television may imitate violent behaviour in their interactions with others. On the other hand, Calhoun (1995) concludes that though there is a connection between aggressive behaviour in children and their preference for violent shows, it is difficult to say which comes first, the aggressive behavior or the preference for violent shows.

The fact that Almasi is shown being hit by the mother on television, raises the question of the place for harsh themes in television targeting children. Giddens (1989) notes that television drama emerged as being highly violent in character in researches carried out by Garbner; on average 80 percent of such programmes contained violence. Children programmes showed even higher levels of violence, although killing was less commonly portrayed. Cartoons contained the highest number of violent acts. Violence in Gabner's research was defined as the threat or use of physical force, directly against the self or others, in which physical harm or death is involved.

Alembi (2003) criticises the use of harsh themes in children productions at the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama festival, saying;

“They (adult directors) have used adult lenses to look at and address these issues. It has been shocking to see girls (as women) battered by their husbands (boys) and militia men (boys) and militia women (girls) massacre whole villages. In general, there has been senseless cruelty and brutality in the play that children at their age cannot carry. This has overburdened the child with dark emotions that may have everlasting negative consequences on the young adults as they grow and adjust themselves to different facets of life” (p. 2).

It is unfortunate that Alembi did not cite any research done to substantiate his opinion as expressed in the paper. It would be invaluable if research was done to ascertain the extent that a child or young adult gets attached to his/her role, and how the role affects him/her in his/her daily life.

Most critics agree that television entertainment is too violent. However, Rodman (2001) holds that the context of the violence (how it is shown and why it is shown) is important. He notes that violence is especially dangerous when its depiction ignores the real-life consequences of violent action, as in professional wrestling and action dramas, people who are grievously injured one minute are shown soon afterward as unhurt, when in real life they would be permanently crippled. Rodman (2001) further notes that dramatic violence is also considered particularly dangerous when it goes unpunished.

When it comes to issues such as domestic violence, it is now taken to be a fact that the home is the most dangerous place in modern society. Giddens (1989) notes that in statistical terms, a person of any age or of either sex is far more likely to be subject to physical attack in the home than on the streets at night. He notes that in Britain, one in four murders is committed by one family member against another. Most of this violence happens in the presence of children and most of the time against children themselves.

In Kenya, there are no official statistics on the extent of violence at home, but with teachers 'allowed' to exert corporal punishment in school (officially the habit has been banned, but it is in effect being widely practiced), then it can only be assumed that the violence these children face at home is even greater and experienced more often. With this kind of background on violence in which children are subjected to or observe, it will not seem to be a new phenomenon in a television programme but a depiction of their everyday life.

Lynskey (1974) notes that although teachers may feel war (violence) to be an unsuitable topic for children, the fact is that children are exposed to constant scenes of war, fighting and suffering on television news and films.

Alembi (2003), while discussing themes in children's plays as a chairperson (as he was then) of the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival, agrees with Lynskey's observation that violence is an unsuitable topic for children but ignores children's experience with violence. He posits that children are fascinated by nature, they want to see the petals of flowers opening up, they want to listen to and sing with birds as they trill beautiful melodies, they want to hunt and get grasshoppers that they turn into cattle and flocks of sheep and goats and so on. To Alembi (2003), a child's world is a world of play and not the hard/physical world that have been presented by producers at festivals (Kenya Schools and Collages Drama Festival). He noted that creators of children's works must endeavour to step out of their adult world full of torture, blood bath, pain etc and willingly step into the world of children – a world full of fantasy and adventure, if they are to make the desired impact.

It is also important to note that the question of violence borders on the issue of imminent justice as described by Tsikhungu (2008). He notes that a plot should be universal in terms of what Piaget (1951) describes as 'imminent justice,' whereby everything is thought to work out according to sound moral law, with rewards for good and punishment for the bad. A view that is supported by Cass (cited in Tsikhungu, 2008, p. 19) when she says; "Just because children are at the stage when they are still acquiring standards and value and sorting out their ideas of right and wrong, their stories need to show fairly clearly that goodness, in fact, triumph over evil."

However, when looking at the plot summary of Machachari in which Almasi is wronged by being hit by his mother and later apologises for his 'transgressions', how

is imminent justice served and what effect does the episode have on the child? Indeed, one of the lessons is that power relations in the society are skewed to favour those in authority.

Tahidi High, a drama series also aired on Citizen TV, is aimed at teenagers (children in their formative years), specifically those in high school. The programme is in a school setting and features students, teachers, support staff and sometimes parents. Although the programme is set in a school, most of the action takes place outside the classroom as illustrated by a plot of one of the episodes below:

Allan and his friend are walking from class while discussing their just concluded chemistry lesson. They decide that they can experiment on their own by brewing their own home made beer. They storm the kitchen school and make away with pineapples, bread, water and utensils they may need for their 'experiment'. They go to a bush within the school compound and started mixing up a concoction comprising of pineapples, water and bread because they think the wheat in bread will have the alcohol ingredient in it. However they are spotted by another student who joins them in their endeavour. They leave the concoction for a few days to ferment. After three days they check on their concoction and decide the best place to drink the concoction is the student's toilets where they head and consume the brew. After consumption they go back to class where they find their principal, Mr. Tembo, announcing a random drug test to be conducted in the school. The test is to begin with the class and he expects urine samples from all students present. Allan and his group decide to skip school and think of ideas on how to avoid the test. While discussing, they spot a girl who appears to be psychologically unstable. They promise her money in exchange for her urine, but flee without paying her the agreed amount after she has given them a bottle full of urine. After the tests, Mr. Tembo announces that the class has been cleared of drug abuse, but, three students tested positive of pregnancy. He then calls out the names of three boys and instructs them to line up in front of the class. Meanwhile the girl who supplied the urine comes looking for the boys demanding the promised money. However, in class, Allan decided to confess to being pregnant (despite being male), a situation that Mr. Tembo finds unacceptable and sends them to his office where the girl spots and approaches them. She explains her dilemma to Mr. Tembo, who orders the boys to give her whatever money they had been carrying in their pockets.

Tahidi High digressed from what would have been a conventional children's television in Kenya by the inclusion of themes that challenged the traditional mode of thinking as what is expected to be offered to children. The programme's producers recognised that high school children are sexually active, with boys seeking to have liaisons with girls and girls being preoccupied with the idea of beauty. It can be noticed in the above extract that the boys approach a girl who is almost the same age as them and the issue of the urine testing positive for pregnancy highlights that

the girl, although still being a teenager, is sexually active.

Tsikhungu (2008), while analysing the portrayal of children in the selected theatrical pieces, notes that children are portrayed as being concerned so much with romantic relationships, especially boys. He says that this is a negative portrayal of children because it defines them as people who are not focused in life.

Tsikhungu (2008, p. 101) states that, “we would have expected the children to talk of school work or other things that children generally talk about yet they talk of discos and love.” To Tsikhungu, discos and romantic relationships should not exist in children’s world unless they are children whose guardians have brought them up in a morally corrupt way. Tsikhungu continues by attacking the children in one of the plays he was analyzing by saying that the girl’s apparent consent to the boy’s romantic involvement proposal is wrong and as such she is a bad role model to children especially girls because they are supposed to have no romantic relationship until such a time when they are ready for marriage.

These views by the Tsikhungu can best be described as being too conservative as Calhoun (1995) cites data collected in the United States of America in the early 90s saying that every year more than a million American teenagers become pregnant. In 1988 alone, 490,000 teenagers gave birth. About 190,000 of these mothers were aged seventeen or younger, and 10,500 were fourteen or younger. In 112,000 cases, the baby was a second, third, or even fourth child. Calhoun concludes by saying that though the United States has the highest teenage pregnancy rate of any industrialized democratic nation, the American teenagers are no more sexually active than those in Canada and Europe.

Data from Africa, and in particular Kenya, is hard to come by, but one only needs to observe teenage behaviour in the country to understand that love and romance are indeed matters that teenagers are interested in. Hence, instead of castigating television and theatre directors for highlighting this theme, we should be more concerned on how the theme has been depicted. The internet has made it easier for children to access Western programmes acted by teenagers with the target audience being fellow teenagers such as *Hard Times* of R. J. Burger and *Awkward*; just to mention two Western programmes that have shocking amounts of sexual references.

Wesonga (2011) challenge’s Tsikhungu’s perception that theatre (and in extension television and books) need to depict children concentrating in class work and not relationships by noting that in *Tahidi High* the search for affiliation comes out boldly as a quest for identity in teenagers. Wesonga (2011) quotes one of the episodes in which Jean-Joyce (one of the main characters at the time) spends most of her time tagging Ray’s (her boyfriend) shirt around school to prove her possession. He notes that *Tahidi High*, like many other mixed schools in Kenya, is not just an educational centre but also a rendezvous for the boy-girl relationships, which are

typical of the teenage years. It also dawns on the audience that the students treasure these relationships to an extent that the relationships appear more important than their studies.

Akoleit (1990) concurs that issues of teenage pregnancies, early marriages and school drop-outs need to be addressed by children's literature. She notes that these are common problems in schools in Kenya today and they definitely need to be addressed by the morally and socially conscious authors of children's literature. Her views also apply to children's television programmes like *Tahidi High* which have already captured the attention of teenagers.

However, *Tahidi High* may have placed too much concentration on relationships between the teenagers outside class that it has failed to tackle significant issues such as the congested curriculum that the Kenyan child is subjected to in the name of education and its effects on the child. With education in the country becoming a competition among schools than the acquisition of knowledge by students, the situation has seen schools adopt strategies such as extra tuition in the evenings and weekends to ensure a decent mean-grade for the school. Subjects such as the place for corporal punishment and its impact on the child's confidence, self-esteem and the sense of self-worth have also escaped the producer's attention.

Akoleit (1990) while analysing Kimenyi's *Moses* series where little learning seems to take place in Mukabi's Educational Institute for the Sons of African Gentlemen, notes the possibility that Kimenyi merely wanted to present a make-believe school situation to the overworked child to give him relief from the pressures of real life. She notes that that is the case with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* where a fantasy world is presented to the child to enable him to escape into a relaxed dream world for a few hours.

The school in *Tahidi High* may also merely present a setting for the performance without the reflection of the academic pressures and expectations that the child faces. Indeed, the child in *Tahidi High* is depicted as an individual with plenty of time to spend in out of class activities. In the plot above, Allan and company have ample time to go to a bush to prepare alcohol and sneak out of school in search for a solution when confronted with a drug test without seemingly being worried about their academic performance. However, this is not the case on the ground where students are being pushed to the limits to get good grades for a decent mean-score for the school.

Music has also been noted to be important to children and KBC magazine programmes of the early 90s recognised the attraction. The Magazine programmes such as *Variety Show*, were in a way a prelude to shows targeting children such as *Teen Republic* on NTV that has incorporated music as an essential package in its presentation to children. However, a number of music shows offering the latest foreign and local genre, hip-pop, gospel, and rhythm and blues target the general

public also have teenagers as their core audience. McQuail (1994) writes that since the rise of the youth-based industry in the 1960s, mass-mediated popular music has been linked to youthful idealism and political concern, to supposed degeneration and hedonism, to drug-taking, violence and antisocial attitudes. Such is the attachment in which the teenagers and the youth have towards music that identifies them and give them a group affiliation.

Currently, all television channels have music shows, with most of them targeting teenagers and the youth. The shows include: KTN's Straight Up, Citizen TV's Mseto East Africa, KBC's Club One, Kiss TV's Live on Blast and Urban Hits, K24 TV's The Loop, Q TV's Mahewa, and NTV's The Beat and Password. The popularity of the different shows is governed by the presentation of the show and the speed in which the producers get and play new videos.

Conversely, this music programmes that have a large fan base among teenagers may be the most controversial offering to children. The music videos aired are rarely educational, and the majority do not even attempt to present an implied moral lesson like a drama programme targeting children would. Rodman (2001) notes that to reach the greatest possible audience, most television programs are designed to make limited intellectual and aesthetic demand on their viewers. He observes that people spend a lot of time entertaining themselves watching television, which has made critics worried that the quality of lowest-common-denominator programming damages viewers intellectually and emotionally.

However, with new technology and innovations in the presentation of creative work, the media industry together with the needs of children has been evolving. Whatever the child in the 1980s enjoyed, where television was still a luxury only the affluent could afford, and in the current era differ as the child now has more entertainment options available.

Magazine programmes were okay in the 1980s where the child had no other option but KBC when it came to watching television, but with the current generation of children where a six year old can operate a basic program in a computer proficiently and is able to handle advanced computer games with ease, it is worthwhile to re-think the traditional children's programming. The question is, can the traditional format of children's programmes hold the attention of this child who has grown up exposed to a variety of media such as satellite TV, gaming consoles, computer games, DVD's and complicated cell phones that has tons of data including music, videos and the internet.

Conversely, it is also important to note that children are not a homogenous group that one set of rules will apply to all of them. This can be demonstrated in Weche's (2000) thesis where children who responded to Alembi's fantasy book High Adventure, gave differing responses with most of the children from standard four saying that it is possible for a magazine to save a person in danger. However,

respondents from standard five were skeptical. Most of them argued that Philip's (the lead character in *High Adventure*) experience is 'just' his imagination (most likely meaning that this group of pupils did not relate to the book). It is quite astonishing that children just one year apart in terms of age will have very different opinions and relations to one book. This experience can also be related to nine year old twins, where one may regard the children television show *Teletubbies* as being 'babyish' and prefer narrative serial cartoons such as *Avatar*, with the other being sentimentally attached to *Teletubbies* and attain much pleasure in watching it.

The growth and knowledge of a child with appreciation to the arts at different ages is governed by much more than just the child's intellect. It is a fact that different children grow at different rates and appreciate different modes of entertainment, but the child's exposure to the modes of entertainment and the cultural demands of his/her society regarding the forms of entertainment available govern how a child will perceive them.

Siks (1985) and Lewis (1976) while discussing children's theatre, note that content should differ depending on the age-group that the theatre targets. They argue that each age group has a different perception of life and therefore should be presented with content that appeals to them. Siks (1985) recommends fantasy for six year olds, with eight to eleven year olds being offered adventure, struggles and heroism. At about twelve years, children are idealists and theatre that appeals to them will have characters with power, courage and loyalty. These characters will be central in solving difficult problems. The classification of the content of theatre and the age-grouping it should be presented to can be extended to television targeting children.

Furthermore, the fascination that children had with TV in the 80s when it was the only option available for entertainment apart from socialising with other children is long gone with the majority of Kenyan households (including low income households) not only having a television set but also a DVD player.

However much we have local programming targeting children in television, the concern still remains on the place of the child in such programming. Jacqueline Rose (cited in Alvarado, 1987) observes that children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which rarely ventures to speak. She notes that children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space between.

Children are usually either audience spectators or participants in various games and competitions that will almost always have an adult taking a prominent role guiding, coaching, moderating or presenting. Hunt (1994) notes that despite the fact that what adults intend is not directly related to what children perceive, children's

books very often contain what adults think children can understand and what they should be allowed to understand; and this applies to the literariness as well as to vocabulary or content. This can also be said about children's films and television programs.

Hunt (1994) makes an important contribution on the place of children in the arts by noting;

“There are three principal human beings between a story and the child reader: the writer, the editor and the adult who makes the book available. If they go down like dominoes, if the adult can dictate to the editor and the editor commandeer the author, then where is the story? Where is the child?” (p. 163)

Hunt (1994) notes that this is inevitable in any literary system, and it is only because of a romantic sense of responsibility of childhood that it seems unusual or undesirable. And such an attitude (which is common) may carry a subtext which questions the expertise of those involved.

This paper has tried to trace the history of children's television in Kenya since the restructuring of KBC in 1989 where more programmes meant for children were offered. The programmes meant for children from 1989 to the 90s were mainly formatted as magazine programmes with the perception that the different programmes will attract children of all age groups. However, it has been observed that making television programmes for children is not as simple or a straightforward matter as there are many considerations and questions to be tackled before embarking on the actual production, chief among them is the question of age. Children are not a homogeneous group that can all be fed on a standardised product. Different age groups with different exposures to television and other visual arts have different demands in terms of programming that should always be taken into consideration when making a television show targeting them.

Television is one of the tools through which culture can be transmitted, but care should be exercised so that the didactic function of television does not become tedious to the child viewer. The presentation of any programme targeting children on television must always take into account the fact that its target audience is watching not for the sake of education or information, but for entertainment.

However much the society has maintained a conservative view when it comes to children in relation to themes in their television programmes, it is important to note that television is also a way in which children are exposed to the wider realities in the world outside their society. It is crucial that children are exposed to virtues such as kindness and love, but they should also know that the society is made up of a mass of greedy and self-centred people.

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