

A CULTURAL AND SOCIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S PLAY SONGS IN NKARI

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Abstract

This study, 'A Cultural and Socio-pragmatic Analysis of Children's Play Songs in Nkari', focuses on how these songs function as cultural and communicative tools within the community. Drawing on Cultural Theory (Williams, 1961; Geertz, 1973) and Socio-pragmatic Theory (Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969; Brown & Levinson, 1987), the research analyzes the content, context, and functions of Nkari children's play songs. The study demonstrates that these songs are deeply embedded in Nkari culture, serving not only as entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting societal values such as respect, unity, and communal living. Moreover, through the lens of socio-pragmatics, the research reveals how the songs aid in socialization by teaching children communicative strategies and social norms. Through a qualitative research approach, this study examines how children's play songs serve as a means for cultural transmission, social and all-round development. By examining the cultural and pragmatic dimensions of these play songs, the study provides insights into how language and culture intertwine in early childhood socialization within the Nkari community.

Keywords: Nkari play songs, Cultural theory, Socio-pragmatic theory, Language socialization, Communicative competence.

Introduction

Children's play songs are an inherent part of cultural and social development among young children providing them with a unique venture for self-expression, creativity, social interaction, and communicative competence. These songs often serve as a medium for transmitting cultural values, traditions, and societal norms within specific communities. This research investigates the cultural and socio-pragmatic analysis of children's play songs in Nkari; a vibrant and diverse culture renowned for its rich musical heritage. Children playing songs in Nkari is a rich cultural and socio-pragmatic tradition. They reflect the values, beliefs, and experiences of the Nkari community and they play an important role in socializing children into Nkari culture.

Nkari, a settlement known for its deep-rooted traditions and cultural practices, places great importance on the role of children's play songs in shaping the social fabric of its speech community. These play songs serve as a means of socialization, aiding children in acquiring language skills, promoting cultural identity, and fostering a sense of belonging within the community. By examining the cultural and socio-pragmatic aspects of these children's play songs, worthy insights into Nkari culture and its intergenerational dynamics will be achieved.

One important aspect to explore is the cultural significance of these children's play songs. In Nkari, children play songs often derived from ancient folklore, oral traditions, and historical events. They embody the wisdom and collective experiences of previous generations ensuring their preservation and transmission to the younger ones. By analysing the themes, narratives, and contextual meanings in these songs, we can decipher the cultural values, beliefs, and ideas underpinning Nkari speech community.

Moreover, the socio-pragmatic dimensions of children's play songs in Nkari are worth exploring. These songs serve as a platform for teaching social skills, interpersonal communication, and community engagement. They often contain interactive elements, call and response patterns, and group participation, aiding collaboration and cohesion among children. By examining the linguistic structures, gestures, and non-verbal cues present in these songs, a deeper understanding of the socio-pragmatic functions they serve within the Nkari speech community can be gained.

The cultural and socio-pragmatic analysis of children's play songs in Nkari presents a unique avenue to explore the intersection of cultural values, social dynamics, and linguistic expressions.

Historical Background of Nkari

Nkari is a clan in the Ini local government area of Akwa Ibom State in the south-south geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. Urua (1996:16) classified Nkari as forming a cluster with Itu Mbonuso and Iwere, and together they make up the clan groups in Ini local government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

Ini is an acronym for the four clans that make up the local government Area, Viz; the first 'I' stands for 'Ikpe clan', the 'N' stands for 'Nkari clan' while the last 'I' represents the two clans namely Itu Mbunuso and Iwere clans. Ini local government Area was created in September 1988 from the former Ikono local government Area.

Nkari is also one of the communities that make up the 10 administrative wards in the present Ini local government Area. The total population of Ini local government is 99,196, male 52,644 while female is 46,552 according to the 2006 population census of Nigeria. It has a land mass of about 380 square kilometers. It is bounded on the south by the Ikono local government Area, on the north by Bende local government Area of Abia State, on the east by Ibiono Ibom local government Area, and on the west by Obot Akara local government Area. They are therefore in contact with other Ibibio groups, Anaan, Igbo, and Efik ethnic groups.

The Nkari people migrated from East Africa from the Bantu stock in pre-colonial times. The Nkari people claim that they are part and parcel of the Ibibio-Efik-Anaan groups. By land, the Nkari people first settled, due to the inter-tribal war with their neighbors, they were forced to migrate initially to Arochukwu, but a small group stayed back in Itu Mbunuso and this group formed the Itu Mbunuso clan, made up of (10) villages in present-day Ini Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

As these movements progressed, small groups moved across the Nkari River known as (Inyang Nkari) which separates the area from her Igbo-speaking neighbors to form the Nkari clan, the indigenous people of Nkari are called Uboho Nkari. Their major occupation is farming and they observe eight market days. Nkari celebrates about 4 festivals in a year; the Uwa Isong festival (celebration of the land) every August, the Akwa Ibi festival, the Idio mkpo festival, and the new yam festival occurring every second week of September.

Nkari community forbids stealing of any kind, adultery, and eating of snakes and lions. They also believe that whoever is chased by a lion (Ekpe) should shout 'Uwed Ekpe' and the Ekpe will disappear. Their naming system is according to the farming year, circumstances, or incidents surrounding the birth of a person in the Nkari clan, an elder man is called 'Aya and a young male is called' Nkaka Ayo.'

The Nkari language spoken by the Nkari people has not been described linguistically though it has dialectal differences from Ibibio and other Lower Cross languages. There is also a unidirectional intelligibility between Nkari and Ibibio. This is because Nkari people understand and speak Ibibio fluently without learning, whereas the Ibibio speakers struggle to understand Nkari, let alone speak it.

Statement of the Problem

In many cultures, children's play songs serve as a reflection of societal values and customs, yet there is a lack of research specifically examining their socio-pragmatic and cultural roles in Nkari. Previous studies, such as those by Olatunji (2017), Uche (2019), and Obasi (2021), have explored children's songs in Nigerian communities, focusing on language acquisition, socialization, and cultural transmission. However, these studies often overlook specific cultural contexts like Nkari. This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing the content, social functions, and themes of Nkari children's play songs, contributing to an understanding of their unique cultural and pragmatic significance.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to;

- 1) to analyze the content and context of these children's play songs in Nkari.
- 2) discuss the social, and cultural functions of the children's play songs in Nkari
- 3) analyze the different themes that are in existence in these children's play songs

Theoretical Framework

In conducting a study on "A Cultural and Socio-pragmatic Analysis of Children's Play Songs in Nkari," two theoretical frameworks stand out as highly suitable: Cultural Theory and Socio-pragmatic Theory. These theories provide the analytical tools to explore the cultural and social meanings embedded in the play songs and how these songs function as communicative acts within the Nkari community.

Cultural Theory delves into the processes by which culture is produced, reproduced, and transmitted within a community. It examines how cultural practices, such as rituals, language, and music, reflect and reinforce societal values, norms, and beliefs. Play songs, as a form of folklore, are deeply embedded in Nkari's culture and serve as a vehicle for cultural transmission. They are more than just entertainment; they embody the community's identity, belief systems, and worldviews. For example, themes of respect, unity, and care, commonly found in Nkari children's songs, are reflections of broader cultural expectations. Cultural Theory helps in identifying how these songs preserve Nkari's traditions and social structures, reinforcing cultural norms like respect for elders and the importance of education. This theoretical lens is suitable because it allows the study to link the content of these songs with the larger cultural context, showing how they function as tools for socialization.

On the other hand, **Socio-pragmatic Theory** focuses on language use within specific social contexts. It is concerned with how speakers use language to perform social actions and how meaning is negotiated in communication. In this study, children's play songs are not just passive reflections of culture but active social tools used by Nkari children to communicate, learn, and interact. Through Socio-pragmatic Theory, the analysis can explore how these songs function in everyday life—how they teach moral lessons, foster social bonds, and facilitate cultural learning among children. The theory allows an investigation into how the songs contribute to shaping children's pragmatic competence, enabling them to navigate social hierarchies, display politeness, and develop a sense of community.

By combining Cultural Theory and Socio-pragmatic Theory, this study can comprehensively analyze Nkari children's play songs. The former situates the songs within the broader cultural context, while the latter explores their function in social interactions. Together, they offer a rich framework for analyzing both the content and the communicative purposes of the songs, making them ideal for this research.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative form of research approach. Qualitative research design is a type of research that focuses on the exploration and understanding of human experiences and perspectives. It is often used to explore topics that are difficult to measure using quantitative methods, such as people's feelings, beliefs, and motivations. Qualitative research design typically involves in-depth interviews, observations, or the analysis of written texts. The goal of qualitative research is to generate rich, descriptive data that can be used to gain insight into a particular topic. Using the purposeful sampling technique, seven (7) children were selected, observing ethical considerations. Convenience sampling was employed for the elders and women. Six (6) respective native speakers were also selected and interviewed about the children's play songs from the Nkari community. These songs were later transcribed, translated, and analyzed by the researchers. The researchers used an audio recorder, structured interview, and non-participant observation to collect the data for this study. In collecting the data, the researchers first booked an appointment with the sampled individuals. The data obtained were authentic and reliable having been subjected to rigorous scrutiny and subjective questions to test the information gathered. These instruments were found reliable through a test-retest method. The data are analysed descriptively based on the objectives of the study. Since the research is an interdisciplinary study, the analysis is carried out using culture; understanding the beliefs, norms, values, etc. of the people.

Presentation of Data and Discussion of Results

This session deals with the presentation of data (play songs) acquired in the field during the research. The data will be analysed and properly discussed to answer the questions that followed the research objectives.

Presentation of Data

Nkari play song

Baba baba awara ooo
 baba baba awara ooo
 mama mama awara ooo
 aya Aya awara ooo
 mkpan – mkpan awara ooo

English Translation

father! I greet ooo
 father! I greet ooo
 mother! I greet ooo
 older sister! I greet ooo
 older brother: I greet ooo

The song above is about “greeting” (awara) this song is random, sung by the children in Nkari. The theme generated in this song is respect, hence it shows the importance of respect in the Nkari culture.

Nkari Play song

Ikwod oo
 yakuru yakuru ya

English Translation

a frog sings – yakuru ya

This song educates the Nkari children on animal sounds. Here, the child randomly sings at a frog in sight. The children believe that the frog makes the sound ‘yakuru yakuru ya’, hence they sing the song.

Nkari Play song

Nkam ooo
 eyeyen ooo
 Ikwod ese atama
 ntekpere.

English translation

(here the grandmother is
 singing for the crying child)
 saying to the child that I cannot
 leave you far just as how the
 mother toad does not leave her
 baby toad.

This play educates on the importance of care. Here, the grandmum reassures the crying child that she won't leave just as how the mother toad does not leave its baby. This song re-emphasizes the importance of care amongst the Nkari natives which is also seen as a good character trait.

Nkari Play song

Amaka ka nwed ta ikporo
 Mukaha nwed ta atatak

English translation

if you go to school, eat stock
 fish and if you do not go to school, eat insects.

This play song is mostly sung in the school environment. The context of this song emphasizes the importance of education, where the children are made to understand that if they go to school, they will eat "stockfish". "Stockfish" here implies that you will become someone valuable and if you do not go to school, they will eat insect. (That means not becoming valuable). The socio-cultural learning theory can be employed, as it emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Overall, education is highly valued in Nkari culture.

Nkari Play song

Tina mbe ambedebede
 Tina mbe amedebede
 Titi tina mbe ambedebede

English translation

here, the children
 divided into two as
 they are made to sing,
 While touching each other
 As they familiarize and unite
 While singing.

This song is mostly sung at the playground, here the children in Nkari are made to sing this song while playing at the playground, this song helps in fostering unity as its themes are built around the importance of unity amongst themselves. The setting and participants in this song formed the basis for contextualization.

Nkari Play song

Ibuod ma afara
 edon ye isin
 edon ye isin
 edon ye isin

English translation

my head, my shoulder
 my knee, my toe

This song has a simple melody and also the lyrics of the songs can be analysed properly. The context of this song provides an avenue to educate and introduce Nkari children to their body parts, as they sing along in harmony. In the context of Nkari culture, the theme of body parts identification can be explored by using the socio-cultural learning theory where the children can learn by observing and participating in identifying their body parts as they sing along with their peers.

Nkari Play song

Aban otono ken so ABC
 A – Aban
 Eto otono ken so ABC
 C – eto
 idem otono ke nso ABC
 I – dem
 Ofone otono ken so ABC
 O – ofon
 Ufok otono ke nso ABC

English translation

what letter of the alphabet
 A stand starts from
 A – Abang
 what letter of the alphabet
 does E starts from?
 E – eto
 what letter of the alphabet
 does I start from
 I – idem
 what letter of the alphabet does O start for?
 O – ofon
 What letter of the alphabet does U start for?

U – ufok

This song is usually sung in the school environment. The theme of this song is Alphabet identification this song helps in the easy identification of the five English vowels amongst the Nkari children. The socio-cultural learning theory is employed here to examine how the Nkari children learn their English vowel sounds by watching their teacher sing and identify these sounds on the board, while they in turn practice by reciting and identifying these sounds.

Nkari Play song

Udo ke yud fufu
 Ke baad ika
 Sop nam nkpo
 Ke obon adon owo
 Obion uyong nwed anwot

English Translation

if you join udo to cook in the
 kitchen, food will be ready in
 no due time.

Hard work can be read to the meaning of this song, as the singer encourages the children that when they are back from school, they should join udo (udo is seen as the imaginary cook in the house) in the kitchen, so food will be ready in no due time. The song here encourages participation and hard work as an important virtue in the Nkari culture

Nkari Play song

Kwa udua, kwa udua
 Ukanaada, kwa udua
 Kwa udua, kwa udua
 Ukanaada, kwa
 Udua.
 Kwaudia, kwa udua
 Ukanaada, kwa udua

English Translation

In every market day, there is an
 African oil seed.

The theme extracted in this song is that of importance. This song is sung in school by the teacher, here the teacher is singing to the children to make themselves important or valuable, hence “importance” is likened to ukanaada, meaning “African oil seed” in Nkari, during their market days, the African oil seed is usually available for sale, no matter the market season

Nkari Play song

Akpara inuen ekedu ke edem
 Esa ufok nwed, enye, akwo
 Ikow a-e-i-o-u.

English Translation

there is a little bird at the
 back of the school, every day
 the bird is singing a-e-i-o-u

In this song, the children believe that there is a bird that sings to them, teaching them the English five vowels. The theme extracted here is that of knowledge. This is shown as the children in Nkari are usually eager to seek to know their five English Vowels through the singing bird.

Nkari Play song

Ufan mme afo akai
 Ya min ntie mafo x3
 Ufan mme afo akai
 Nsanga mafo x3
 Yarmin ndung ma fo

English Translation

my friend will you allow
 me to stay with you
 my friend will you allow
 to walk with you
 my friend will you allow me
 Live with you.

This is a common play song among the Nkari children, here, the children are heard singing it to each other, beckoning on their friends to allow them to stay, walk, and live with them. The theme extracted is that of friendship as the children sing in harmony, they create bonds and also encourage unity amongst themselves.

Nkari Play song

Ufok nwed akarika oson
 Ndipep, ono nyin afoan ekorn
 Mme ndinam didie mkpebe
 Nte mbon efekpebidi,
 Ka idim keyene mmon kwabe
 Kam man idem okposong ukwe
 Nte idem mi oson de ukwak,
 Ukwak ukwuak.

English Translation

the teacher is singing, go
 to stream and bath,
 do not bask in fire. Do
 you not see how my body
 is strong.

The song above portrays an imaginary teacher trying to encourage her students on the need to go to school. The theme extracted here is that of encouragement. The context of the song portrayed by the teacher shows the importance of going to a school and being educated. The teacher further encourages the children by using herself as an example, saying that she is strong despite any season [dry, rainy, harmattan].

Nkari Play song

Nyin imeyene ediwak
 Mbom utom, nyin imeyene
 Ediwak mbom utom,
 Utom, ke obio
 Nyin imeyene ediwak
 Mbom utom, ke obio
 Ami ndi oto inwang
 Ami ndi ono usobo
 Ami ndi kpe ibet
 Ami ndi odom utom

English Translation

we have many professions
 in Nkari community, we have
 many professions in Nkari
 community, we have many
 professions in Nkari community

 I am a farmer
 I am a doctor
 I am a lawyer
 I am an artisan

This song is usually sung in the classroom and it is an interactional song with the aid of a teacher, the children sing the above song as they try to identify the different professions they know. The theme employed here is a profession. The students are made to personalize the different professions that they know.

Nkari Play song

Mama oyong di oyoyo
 Mama oyong di oyoyo
 Mama oyong di oyoyo

English Translation

Mama is back, oyoyo
 Mama is back, oyoyo
 Mama is back, oyoyo

This song is a welcome song. It shows the theme of embrace. The children usually sing this song to welcome their mother who has just returned.

Nkari Play songs

Mama ebei ke window o
 window she did not greet
 Iya eh
 Mama ebei ke window o
 Ikomke owom

English Translation

Mama is passing through the

The context of this song shows that greeting is important in Nkari culture. Here, an imaginary child named “mama” passes through a window or the balcony of a house and does not greet, another child who has keenly observed goes ahead to sing the song to admonish the child that does not greet. The theme extracted here is that of greeting habits amongst the children.

Discussion of Findings

The data collected from Nkari children's play songs offers a vivid representation of the cultural and social values deeply rooted in the community. Through the lens of Cultural Theory and Socio-pragmatic Theory, these songs reveal more than just entertainment—they serve as pedagogical tools for transmitting cultural norms and social practices. These theories, particularly those put forward by Williams (1961) and Geertz (1973) in Cultural Theory, along with Grice (1975), Searle (1969), and Brown & Levinson (1987) in Socio-pragmatic Theory, form the basis for analyzing the content, context, and thematic significance of these play songs.

One of the central objectives of this research is to analyze the content and context of Nkari children's play songs. The play songs presented reflect key cultural practices, including respect, as seen in songs like “Baba baba awara ooo”. The song emphasizes greetings, a fundamental aspect of Nkari culture, where respect for elders and peers is paramount. This aligns with Williams’ (1961) notion in Cultural Theory that culture is a way of life, incorporating learned behaviors such as showing respect through greetings. In the context of Nkari, these play songs become vehicles for teaching the younger generation to uphold these social norms from an early age. Socio-pragmatic Theory, particularly Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle and politeness strategies from Brown and Levinson (1987), is also reflected in these play songs. The song about greeting, for example, underscores the pragmatics of communication in Nkari culture, where politeness is conveyed through the act of greeting. Grice’s maxim of manner—being clear and respectful—plays out as the children sing greetings to their elders, thus learning effective communication strategies through play.

The second objective is to explore the social and cultural functions of Nkari children's play songs. Play songs like “Ikwod oo” (about frog sounds) and “Nkam ooo” (a grandmother’s reassurance) reflect the cultural significance of animals and care within Nkari society. These songs function as educational tools, teaching children to recognize animal sounds and instilling the value of care through familial bonds. As Geertz (1973) suggests in his symbolic

anthropology, culture is transmitted through shared symbols and meanings. Here, animals and family relationships are symbolic tools used in the songs to foster knowledge and emotional security among children.

The socio-pragmatic function of these songs is particularly evident in songs like “Amaka ka nwed ta ikporo”, where the importance of education is highlighted. The song juxtaposes the value of going to school with the metaphor of eating stockfish, a prized delicacy in the region. This aligns with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies, where indirectness and metaphorical language are used to convey deeper meanings about social expectations. The socio-cultural learning embedded in the song also reinforces Vygotsky’s view of social interaction being fundamental to learning. Here, children learn the value of education through repeated engagement with their peers and elders.

Finally, the research aims to analyze the themes present in Nkari children’s play songs. Themes such as unity, friendship, and body part identification are prominent across the songs. For example, the song “Tina mbe ambedebede” emphasizes unity, as children hold hands and sing together while playing. This song reflects Nkari’s communal values and the cultural importance of collective identity, which aligns with Williams’ idea that culture involves shared practices that reinforce group identity. Similarly, the song “Ibuod ma afara” helps children identify their body parts, demonstrating the pedagogical function of these songs. This educational aspect further supports the use of Cultural Theory as a framework for understanding how culture is transmitted through everyday practices like play.

The songs that deal with knowledge and alphabet identification, such as “Aban otono ken so ABC” and “Akpara inuen ekedu ke edem”, reflect socio-pragmatic elements of learning through repetition and interaction. These songs are sung in the classroom setting, where children actively participate in learning vowel sounds and the alphabet through play. The Socio-pragmatic Theory of language use is evident here, as children learn by practicing linguistic forms in social contexts. Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle can be observed in how children collaborate to sing and identify letters, with the teacher facilitating this interaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nkari children’s play songs serve as important cultural artifacts that transmit societal values such as respect, care, unity, and education. The application of Cultural Theory and Socio-pragmatic Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how these songs function as both cultural and communicative tools. The cultural aspects of these songs, as highlighted by Williams (1961) and Geertz (1973), show how deeply embedded values are passed down through generations. Simultaneously, the socio-pragmatic dimension, supported by Grice (1975), Searle (1969), and Brown & Levinson (1987), demonstrates how children in Nkari learn effective communication strategies and social norms through their participation in these play songs. Therefore, the play songs are not only a reflection of Nkari’s cultural heritage but also a dynamic space for social learning and interaction, fulfilling the study’s research objectives.

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