

**Ngas Children's Oral Poetry: A Veritable Cultural and Political Commentary****Name: Nenpan Monday Zakka (Ph.D)****Phone Number: 08065390005****Institution: Plateau State College of Health Technology Pankshin****Email: [ladynenpan@yahoo.com](mailto:ladynenpan@yahoo.com)****Abstract**

Ngas children's oral poetry serves more than the purpose of entertaining the children at play or just for whiling away time for caregivers. A sociological approach to selected Ngas children's play songs reveals how the art mirrors society and runs vibrant social commentary on the cultural, economic, spiritual and political life of the people, of the community of the songs' creation. This paper reveals that, the children as members of the Ngas community are more conscious of the society they live in than many may imagine. The children's play songs reflect various aspects of the society of their creation, showing that the children's play culture is not realized in a vacuum. While the opinion and outlook of children may not seem to count in determining things in society, their play songs play a vital role in revealing the makeup of the society and invariably shaping it in various ways. Looking at the play songs under review, some historical, cultural, political, economic and spiritual dimensions of the Ngas community are revealed, thereby affirming the submissions of sociological critics that, literature depicts life, and life is a social reality. The critical analysis of some Ngas children's oral poetry validates the positions of sociological theorists that, great literary works contain social, political, environmental, religious, economic and domestic values of the day. This lends credence to the Eco-foetal discourse model treaties of Iwokedok that, children's oral poetry has the same import, dimensions and merit as adult lore.

**Keywords:** Playsongs, social-reality, culture.

## Introduction

Children's oral poetry is a performance art that is either composed and performed by adults for children, or composed and performed by children for their own pleasure. Children's oral poetry is a tradition found in most, if not all societies. Children's oral poetry is mainly oral and casual in nature. It covers games songs, lullabies, work songs, birth songs, and others. Lar writes about the pre-vocational training of Tarok children which is accompanied by multi-thematic children's game songs that, invariably highlight the various nature and aspects of pre-vocational training (6). Iwokedok in her Eco-foetal Discourse Model gives a classification of Children's Oral Poetry: Children's Playsongs/play Verses; Children's Induction Songs; Children's Folktale Songs; Children's School Songs; Children's Work Songs; Children's Mantic Poetry; and Cradle Songs (11). What Lar above refers to as game songs for pre-vocational training, rightly falls under Children's Work Songs, as given by Iwokedok.

The influence of children's oral poetry is wide. Children's oral poetry can be a lullaby, which is performed to lull a child to sleep or to calm an agitated child to stop crying. It can be a play song that children sing at play, in school, or during religious ceremonies, or any of the ways categorized above. Children's oral poetry, in its multidisciplinary approach, is used to enhance children's language learning and speech development. Lullabies are said to enhance a child's linguistic development. They are also used to teach some aspects of physical geography and other sciences, as observed by Nakata & Trehub; Trehub, Plantinga and Russo; Cifi.

Children's oral poetry is versatile, in that many details and themes can be accommodated in it. From language learning to enhancing of speech, to teaching certain aspects of physical geography, Children's oral poetry can be used as a tool, for achieving different purposes. Uthtera Aseni Nandakumara holds the view that, "It appears that lullabies have their own special

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features that provide highly essential fundamental environment to an infant's requirement of language learning. ...thus, lullabies improve their ability of linguistic behaviour" (1). Lullabies, thus, stimulate language learning in children.

In discussing the significance of African Children's Oral Literature, with particular reference to lullabies, Magaji upholds the view that, "Lullabies, like all other forms of literature, carry their own identity which is linked to the culture's identity, especially, because they are rendered in the language of the people. They are therefore, replete with allusions to traditional values, and the songs are judged by the singer's ability to create and manipulate images, and also weave them into familiar forms in the manner that will pass on messages subtly and gradually to the child" (301). Children's oral poetry also helps in preserving the language of the people as the children use their mother tongue to compose and render their playsongs. This makes the study of children's oral poetry in their indigenous languages very crucial.

This paper focuses on selected Ngas children's poetry, observed and collected within Pankshin and Kanke Local Government Areas of Plateau state, where the Ngas tribe is largely settled.

Children do not live in a vacuum. They observe and assimilate things going on in their community, whether they are political, economic, spiritual, cultural or spiritual issues. They in turn while at play form their play songs to capture what they observe. Children are conscious members of society, who actively take note of things going on in the adult world, whether they are values, norms, traditions, or crises points and so on. Trevor Noble in his article titled "Sociology and Literature" observes that, "Literature presents the different sociological perspectives from which it has been considered with rather different problem" (211). Some of the culture, traditions and values that leap across from the adult Ngas world to the Ngas

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children's world are not all together positive. Some of the things that children learn from adults reflect conflicts, cultural, social and political tensions. Below is a play song that captures some age-long tension between two groups of Ngas people - the hill Ngas (Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State) and the plain Ngas (Kanke Local Government Area of Plateau State):

### TEXT 1

<i>Khe muna? khe muna ?</i>	Have you come up to us? Have you come up to us?
<i>Woh dyi-yi-yi?</i>	Oh no oh no no?
<i>Ku se pak bimwa di kya</i>	So that you can eat some things, right?
<i>Sit tomatitis khe mur pet</i>	Buy tomatoes with African olive oil
<i>Zhak zhak zhaak.....</i>	Zhak zhak zhak (dripping sound of oil)
<i>Shinkafa ba manja</i>	Rice without red oil (palm oil)

The above oral poetry is a Ngas children's play song that the hill Ngas children sing when they want to make mockery of plain Ngas folk, when they visit the hill Ngas land, for one event or the other. The Ngas people have a cultural attitude towards food. It is considered very cultured and dignified to show restraint before food, no matter how famished an individual is. Therefore, people find it very offensive when food is used to deride them, no matter what the hunger in the land. So, when you sing that someone has come over to your place, so he can eat something, as we have in the Ngas children's oral poetry in Text 1, it is deriding and scoffing. It is like you are trying to mock the person as being famished, so dependent on you. This folk song got adopted into the children's play culture from the conversations of adults and is sung as Ngas children's oral poetry.

There is the use of environmental signifiers, in children's oral poetry. As noted in Iwaketok's Ecofoetal Discourse Model treaties, "children draw from the flora and fauna in their socio-cultural environment to comment on life" (6). Ngas children use the flora and fauna of their environment in their compositions, as seen in the play song above, revealing how the song

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mirrors the makeup of the community. African olive oil that is found in Pankshin in large quantity is mentioned. So also, some socio-economic and political crises and history of the relationship between the plain Ngas and the hill Ngas can be deduced from text 1. Another treatise of Ecofoetal Discourse Model says, “children discuss prevailing issues in their communities. In other words, children mirror their societies and their lives” (6). There is the long rivalry between the two groups of Ngas that is captured in the play song.

Historically, plain Ngas had contact with missionaries earlier than the hill Ngas, which put them at advantage in terms of early access to western education. The hill Ngas believe that the plain Ngas look down at them. The orthography of the Ngas language dialect used initially for the Bible translation is that of plain Ngas area, as the missionaries first settled there, in Tuwan. Subsequently, the plain Ngas assumed that their own dialect of the Ngas language is superior and so more socially accepted. It is, therefore, not surprising to find some plain Ngas people laughing at some pronunciations and choice of lexical items of the hill Ngas. Take these examples:

Hill Ngas: Sur (hand)

Plain Ngas: Sar (hand)

Hill Ngas: Mur (farm)

Plain Ngas: Mar (farm)

The discrepancy in the use of some vowels resulted to superiority complex, as the plain Ngas think their own Ngas dialect is superior. The hill Ngas, however, believe that the plain Ngas dialect is not pure, as proximity with the Hausa speaking people of Bauchi and so on, has corrupted it. There are words that have completely disappeared in the plain Ngas dialect and are replaced with Hausa words. Meanwhile, the hill Ngas dialect has those words.

In the Ngas children’s poetry above, some flora of the people’s habitat are mentioned. The Ngas of Pankshin farm tomatoes a lot, which the Ngas from Kanke used to lack. It is only

lately that the plain Ngas started irrigation farming of tomatoes, pepper, onions and other vegetables, in some villages of Ampang East District. But for decades, the hill Ngas have been undertaking irrigation farming, which begun in Tazuk village, Wokkos District, of Pankshin Local Government Area. The people of Pankshin therefore, deride the plain Ngas, using food items produced by the hill Ngas: tomatoes and African olive oil (*mwir pet*). From the Ngas children's oral poetry above, the socio-economic dilemma of the two groups of Ngas can be observed. Sociological theorists such as Austen Harrington and Kenneth Burke are of the opinion that literature is as the expression of society, and that the relationship between literature and society is a two way. Consequently, literature is said to influence society and gets influenced by society. For instance, society provides the raw material to writers, but the same type of raw material does not produce the same type of literary works. The nature of literary form and style is given as dependent upon the worldview and creativity of the writer (Morrison). In this case, the literary form and style of the Ngas children's oral poetry, and the thematic concerns it raises are the product of the children and their play culture. This presents the children as creative and with ability to use their minds ingeniously.

During Ngas traditional festivals of Art and Culture like the Pusedung, Morgi and so on, the plain Ngas brothers come over to Pankshin, to collectively celebrate the festivals. Ngas people in the diaspora come home to Pankshin too for the festivals. Children take note of adults' use of some songs to deride the people who come from the plain Ngas area, by making references to what is available in Pankshin in abundance: tomatoes, and African olive oil.

The sociological analysis also reveals salient features in Ngas children's oral poetry that, divulges the socio-political and cultural disposition of the society of its creation. The

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Ngas children's oral poetry above also supports the hypotheses on Eco-foetal poetics of Childlore in Africa, as given by Iwokedok:

- a. Oral poetry by children is not significantly different from adults' forms. (Some of the lines in the Ngas children's oral poetry in Text 1 echo just as found in some Ngas folksongs).
- b. Children's Oral Poetry is representative of the society that produces it. (The Ngas children's oral poetry with the mocking play song represents some historical, social and political sentiments of the plain Ngas areas and hill Ngas, thus qualifying the hypothesis propounded by Iwokedok).
- c. Oral poetry by children exhibits literary qualities as much as folksong in a given society where oral literature exists.
- d. No subject escapes the interest of children's oral poetry.

The children pick the nuances from people's conversations and some folk songs sung during festivals and form their play songs with them. While the Kanke folk mock the Pankshin people for their dialect, the Pankshin people mock the Kanke people, because of some of the advantages they have over them, in terms of varieties of food items. This reveals how much literature reveals society. Michael J. Carter and Steven Carter, in their paper titled, "How Themes in Literature Can Inform Sociological Theory, Research, and Teaching" refer to the observation of Coser, that, "the trained sensibilities of a novelist or poet may provide a richer source of social insight than, say, the impressions of untrained informants on which so much sociological research currently rests. Why then should not sociology harness to its use, for the understanding of man and his society, those untapped sources in the rich accumulation of

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literature?” (390). The children’s play song alludes to some cultural, social, political, economic and historical realities of the people.

## TEXT 2

<i>Ngolong nu se pet ka</i>	Our king does not eat African olive
<i>Khi se bi rap rap uhoh mwaka</i>	He does not eat these dark dark things
<i>Ngolong nu mwak mes ka</i>	Our king does not eat locust beans fruit
<i>Khi se bi rap rap ka</i>	He does not eat this dark dark thing

The play song in text 2 talks about the economic capital of the Ngas king. The name, *Ngolong*, in Ngas means the owner of wealth. “Long,” the second syllable of the word “Ngolong,” refers to livestock. The person who has livestock in large number is wealthy. The king has rights over some pieces of land that are considered as royal properties. He has livestock in great numbers, as people bring them to him for various reasons. Therefore, certain food items known to sustain ordinary people during food shortages, like African olive fruit, should not be associated with the king.

In Ngas tradition, the king owns a traditional barn that he keeps reserves of food items for rainy season, for orphans, widows and the needy of the community. And so, how can he also depend on food items like locust beans fruit and African olive fruit, on which the indigent mainly depend on for survival during difficult seasons? That will appear degrading and contradictory to his exalted position; and so the children capture it in their play song.

African olive fruit is very nutritious, so also locust beans fruit. However, during famine in Ngas land, the two items are said to be the last resort of the poor, and so the people have the belief that they represent lack, when a man depends on them. Therefore, the children in their play song dissociate the king from the fruits in question. One of the hypotheses of Iwokedok says: no subject escapes the interest of children’s oral poetry. The poetry above shows children touching a matter concerning the economic status of the king. Sociological critics submit that art

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is a manifestation of society, one that contains metaphors and references directly applicable to the existing society of its creation. Kenneth Burke holds the opinion that, “works of art, including literature are strategic naming of situations” (“Literature as Equipment for Living”). In this case, the children’s oral poetry of text 2 using certain metaphors of food items, names the situation of the king which is at variance to that of the destitute members of the community.

### TEXT 3

<i>Fori mer mer woh</i>	Hibiscus leaves is so sour this year
<i>Jam jam jam</i>	Jam jam jam
<i>Ku chirang tanmi who?</i>	What will you do this year?
<i>Jam jam jam</i>	Ham jam jam
<i>Fori mer mer woh</i>	Hibiscus leaves is so sour this year
<i>Jam jam jam</i>	Jam jam jam
<i>Mu chirang tanmi woh</i>	What will we do this year?
<i>Jam jam jam</i>	Jam jam jam

This is a famine play song, sung during the month of July and August, when the barns are becoming empty, and crops are not yet ripe for harvest. These are the hunger months in Ngas land. Because of the rocky topography and lack of advanced technology to cultivate the small arable land, there is often shortage of food within the mentioned months in some families, especially in the past when modern farming techniques were not used. Songs, as Finnegan states, help people to cope with whatever situation they are facing as a people. As people find words for their challenges and form songs with the wordings, they find vent for their difficult emotions (17). As Ngas children sing the above play song, they will hold hands and swing from side to side, stamping their feet on the ground as they sing, creating a rhythm. This song runs commentary on the economic plight of the people during the season of distress. Harrington argues that pieces of art can serve as "normative sources of social understanding in their own right," (Harrington, 207). The social and economic situation of the people in difficult food shortage season is revealed in the song.

Varieties of hibiscus plants come handy for meals during the season of the shortage of food. Since the leaves have sour taste, women cook it and drain the water till the sour taste is mild and bearable for eating. Locust beans' seasoning is added, with some salt, and other available condiments, and the soup is ready. A small portion of *mun* (fufu) is dropped in a bowl of prepared hibiscus soup. The soup is the main meal as the *mun* is too small to fill the stomach. And so, the children weary of eating the meal of hibiscus all the time, will sing that song, lamenting, about its sourness. When hibiscus soup is too sour, it causes sensitivity on the teeth and makes consuming it near difficult; this becomes a theme of concern in the play song.

A breastfeeding mother married to a poor man can be heard singing the song as a lullaby to her crying child, as well as a message to her husband to do something to salvage the situation at hand. Iwaketok in her paper titled, "Analysis of Lullabic Songs of Traditional African Communities: Some Nigerian Examples" opines that: Beyond the portrayal of the social values, norms and material culture of the people; Nigerian lullabic songs reveal convincingly how the people apprehend their universe against the background of their daily experience. Embedded in these songs are ecological features of the people's environment, which the artist has employed imagery to describe their various situations in life (156) And so, in the Ngas children's oral poetry above, the issue of food shortage, as an economic situation some families deal with, during the months of July and August, makes an underlining theme. For this is what inspires the song of lamentation about sourness of the hibiscus. Michael J. Carter and Steven Carter posit that, literary themes could illuminate sociologists in their journey toward understanding the dynamics of human behavior. Desire, fulfillment, vanity, fealty, duty, greed, hope, innocence, loyalty, manipulation, perseverance, pride, and temptation- all are said to be often addressed in literature and all are of potential interest in sociology (408).

Ngas children's oral poetry therefore affects the complete narration of the Ngas ethno-national social experience of the people. If Ngas children's play songs are not studied, some of the socio-economic situation of the people may not be fully appreciated.

#### TEXT 4

*Bi khei yi mwa ne?*

*Ndadut(2x)*

*Kogak shidah wei nine?*

*Ndadut (2x)*

*Oh dit da wene nine?*

*Ndadut (2x)*

Where are your mates?

Ndadut (2x)

That one where are you from?

Ndadut(2x)

This small one where are you from?

Ndadut (2x)

Although this song is sung like a call for children to find their age groups during play, it is also a social commentary on small people and how they are viewed in Ngas land. The Ngas tradition abhors anything that suggests handicap. Culturally, dwarfs are rare. This is not because the Ngas race has always escaped the syndrome; rather, it points fingers to some cultural practices of the past. Children born with features seen as abnormal were considered bad omen, evil, and not nursed to survive the period of childhood. In discussing sociological theory of folklore Abrahams observes that, it relates "...with social collectivities, at play and at work. Folklore, among other things, is an expression of the means by which membership in a community of understanding, judgment is established, maintained, and celebrated" (163). In the play song we see how children make reference to the size of an individual in trying to understand where to place the person. Abrahams further submits that, there are studies of lore which are explicitly concerned with the making of social boundaries between groups and the exploration of the quality space existing at these boundaries (163). The play song suggests that the children place themselves in groups based on their age for functionality. Age difference thus, is a marker for boundaries.

The Ngas Traditional Religion sees handicapped individuals as unwelcomed in the society. The lame and cripples were rare in the traditional Ngas society, so also dwarfs. The play song above makes reference to a small person, whose physical features bury his age. The poet personae wonders where to place the small person, as Ngas children, (and other African children) usually play in their age group. They also do community work according to their age group.

The confusion in the age placement of the character being addressed in the play song, has to do with the small size of the character. “*Ndut*”, in Ngas language, means “short”. The repetitive pattern in the song, “*Ndadut*”, is a reference to the character’s petit frame. And that may not have to do with age, but nature. The character might be a dwarf but considered a child below the age of his mate. And so, the poet personae asks:

*Oh dit da wene nine?*

This small one where are you from?

It is interesting to note that, the Ngas have a generally tall physical feature. It is very normal to see men towering above six feet, and females who are six feet or close to that, in large number in a community. A very short person will easily stand out in a typical Ngas community. From Ngas children’s play songs, so much can be gleaned about the social, spiritual as well as cultural orientation of the people. In his paper titled, “Essentials of Some Ngas Traditional Names and Proverbs,” Rotgak Languk holds that, the name, *Godit*, for the male gender and, *Nadit*, for the female gender, are given to children born short (6). This suggests that, at birth, traditional Ngas people would examine the physical features of the child, to know if the child will grow tall or not. And so the naming of a child can be informed by physical features or the circumstances of the birth of the child. Langkuk opines that, “Name and naming are a veritable tool to Ngas man, which he uses for the expression of his thoughts, periods, and

situations” (7). The play song above justifies one of the Eco-foetal model discourse hypothesis: “Children’s Oral Poetry is representative of the society that produces it”.

Amy Troolin submits that, sociological approach to literature examines the relationship between a literary work and the society in which it was created and/or read and received. Consequently, literature is seen as never produced in a vacuum. Artists live in a particular society, and that society influences them and their works. (What is the Sociological Approach to Literature). In this case, the children are influenced by the social and cultural construct of their Ngas society to produce the play song in text 4. Michael J. Carter and Steven Carter opine that, the characters in each story may be idiosyncratic and unique, but they also reveal much about greater society- they resonate beyond their specific context and setting” (389). The discourse on Ndadut, the character in text 4, therefore, reveals some cultural idiosyncracies of the society of the song’s creation.

In some play songs, the children will imitate people having one disability or the other. Find an example below:

### TEXT 5

<i>Govum govum,</i>	Blind man, blind man,
<i>Po nyi pi par-ah?</i>	Does he see in the night?
<i>Agh bai dan</i>	You give way now.

For the song above which is a games song, a child will have a blindfold. The child will then go about with a walking stick, striking the ground, around the play area with the stick. If he or she traces a child with the stick, the child will receive a stroke. If he or she is not careful he can hit a stone and hurt himself. Usually, after tying the blindfold, the children who are ready for the game will take strategic positions within the play area. The blindfolded child will then

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start looking for them with his stick, as he sings, going about. The child who does not get a strategic place to hide as far as possible, receives some beating. Children use this game to sharpen their skills for alertness and smartness, thus making them prepared to compete with others favourably.

The play song also reveals the difficulty that being visually impaired entails for a person. Lack of sight is presented as putting a person at a great disadvantage before others. One can be tricked by others; also, one can deal with certain accidents easily. As mentioned earlier, the traditional Ngas people have little tolerance for anything that makes people handicapped. Perhaps, this intolerance for handicaps could be because survival in the Ngas difficult terrain has always been a herculean task. Being handicapped is seen as further militating against the people's chances of survival in their tough terrain.

## TEXT 6

<i>Mel nbit khe</i>	As the day breaks
<i>Ba le mun kunwei dhi (2x)</i>	Then tell us so that we can go home
<i>Mel nbit khe keh yah?</i>	Is it day break?
<i>Hai-yoi</i>	No no

The above Ngas children's oral poetry is a commentary on time, and when to do certain functions. Ngas children try to emulate adults when they play. In this song, the children supposedly spend the night toiling, probably, as hunters. Hunters hunt for games in the night. They return home often, as the daybreak approaches. In the song above, the children are asking, in a call and answer song, when to go home.

The song also is a pointer to the fact that, culturally, when the Ngas people go to work, they stretch their limit in time before they leave. It is normal to see Ngas people talk about going to farm from "six to six". That is, working on the farm from 6.00am to 6.00pm when dusk is settling. Usually, people take gruel only for energy in order to work from morning to dusk. When

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they return home, they will eat the dinner of a proper meal. Children take note of the time adults spend working, whether hunting, fishing or farming, and form their play songs with that. Taner Cifi observes that, “the concept used in lullabies (and play songs) generally involve the kind of knowledge accumulated and filtered repeated through observation for years” (891). And so, the knowledge filtered from the community to the children, through casual discussions or folk songs, becomes ready material for their play songs. Abrahams states that, the collection of occupational lore begins, with groups who embody their work concerns in their leisure creations (171).

### TEXT 7

<i>Tan tan sim na rang nye la chirye?</i>	Calling calling my name, why?
<i>Tan tan sim na Gowan dok wan npi</i>	Calling calling my name, Gowan went by the side
<i>Put lu gurrum</i>	Come out from someone’s room
<i>Pan ngan lu fu puna Zhibang</i>	Take me to your home my Zhibang
<i>Zhere lu shin sha uwan-a kwan</i>	Zhere in the mortar room fall by the side
<i>Pan ngan lu-o puna Zhibang</i>	Take me to the home of my father Zhibang
<i>Zhere lu shin sha wang kwan</i>	Zhere in the mortar room fall by the side
<i>Wang kwan – zikkuk</i>	Falls by the side – <i>zikkuk</i>

TEXT 7 is a children’s play song that children sing when around a grandfather figure. In Ngas community, children have a cherished relationship with their grandparents. Teasing and petting come to play when children hang around grandparent figures. There are play songs, riddles and jokes, and even proverbs that reveal so much about the relationship between children and their grandparents. Grandparents are generally tender with their grandchildren than they were with their own children in their younger days. The excesses that grandparents allow for their grandchildren they would never have allowed for their own children. The personae of the Ngas children’s poetry above expresses the longing to go to the home of Zhibang. Zhibang is the grandfather that children delight to visit.

This play song is a commentary on the amiable relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. Children always long to spend more time with their grandparents, where they are often pampered and can get away with some mischief. According to Davidson Morrison, “All works of literature are, to some extent, the products of the society in which they were written. A specific poem, play, novel, or short story is always written within a social context, and this inevitably influences the content of the work in question” (“Sociological Literary Criticism).”

This paper examines selected Ngas children’s oral poetry that validates the position of sociological theorists, that literature is not produced in a vacuum but it mirrors the society of its creation. As James F. English puts it, “There are so many intersections and openings, so many parallel projects of research, so many forms of literary study that rely on sociological thought, and so many forms of sociology that deals with the literariness of their own objects and procedure” (xx). The critical analysis of the Ngas play songs show that the children are very conscious members of their society. Consequently, their play culture actively reveals and reflects the social, economic, political, spiritual and cultural constructs of their society.

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