

Morphology of the Embryonic Kenyan 'Spoken Word' Poetry: A Case Study

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Abstract

The launch of Tony Mochama's revolutionary anthology of poetry entitled *What If I AM a Literary Gangster* (2007), attracted a lot of attention in Kenya. His poetry divided literary critics in the country right in the middle with one school averring that Mochama's kind of writing should be encouraged and the other rubbishing it as pseudo-literary garbage. One critic described it as mutinous 'scribbling and musings' (qtd. in wordpress.com). According to this critic (Egara Kabaji), Mochama's are, 'Not the conventional neatly trimmed lines rich in meaning and social concern, as Okot p'Bitek's or Jared Angira's (qtd. in otienoamisi.wordpress.com). In his introduction to his anthology, *What If I AM a Literary Gangster* (2007), Mochama confesses to having derived his title from Kabaji's assertion that he (Mochama) is a 'literary gangster' whose godfather is Binyavanga Wainaina Kenyan writer renown for Avant garde Literature). So what are the manifestations of this rebellious poetry and does it contain any literary merits?

Introduction

The launch of **What if I Am a Literary Gangster (2007)** elicited heated debates in the literary 'blogospheres' like never before. At maishayetu.com critics tore into each other over Mochama's poetry. While Kabaji is categorical that such works should not be allowed into a classroom, other critics like Munene wa Mumbi and Otieno Otieno label Mochama a literary clown who revels in quasi-poetry that is essentially utter empty, quaint, droll' exhibitionist verse'. On the other hand, a new generation of critics and poetry lovers views Tony Mochama's works positively. Apart from fellow performance poets, critics like Otieno Amisi, Tom Odhiambo, Joseph Ngunjiri and John Mwazemba have hailed Mochama's experimentation with language with his type of approach being viewed as a new dawn in the poetry scene in Kenya. To Ngunjiri, Mochama's poetry is "refreshingly real... and could only come from someone who has been through much" (www.jngunjiri.wordpress.com). Just like any other work of art, poetry has undergone significant transformations and innovations. From performance-based oral poetry came written poetry where major poets from Shakespeare through Yeats concentrated on metrical structures that was by and large in closed form. Any poetry that did not adhere to the stringent lexical, syntactic and metrical expectations was regarded substandard or 'vulgar' in a literary sense of the word. It is from the 1960s that many poets, especially in America, started advocating for forms that stay open; asserting that the earlier closed form was a "straight-jacketing" model that limited free expression and creativity.

Development of 'Spoken Word' Poetry

Before the advent of print media, there only existed performance poetry that was specifically composed for or during a performance before an audience. With writing and printing in place, a new form of poetry that was composed in writing emerged. This drastically changed the poet's role from being a performer to a source of written texts for his/her audience's private reading. This latter-day arrival went on to gain prominence with its predecessor being relegated to oral literature where it is generally viewed, especially by young elites, as a lesser poetry compared to the written one.

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In the 20th Century, there emerged poets who renewed the earlier emphasis of poetry on sound. Robert Pinsky (39th Poet Laureate of the USA), for example, argued that a well written poem is that which is written with consideration of the voice (qtd. in Charters 1997). To him and others like Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky (qtd. in Makin 1999), there was a need to link poetry with drama and other performing arts. This would give back to poetry its earlier life and popularity. It is these campaigns that saw proliferation of such poetry and the term 'spoken word' poetry was therefore coined in the 1980s to describe the live and audio recordings of poems. The 21st Century with its technological advancement and new social realities has seen poetry spread from texts and anthologies to a wider audience through public performances, television, radio and online transmissions. Besides going to libraries and bookshops to access poetry, one may now visit a cyber cafe or even use his/her internet-enabled phone to not only download and upload favourite poems but also enjoy their performances. Also, over the years, there have been an increasing number of 'spoken word' poetry venues and festivals in Kenya. It is in such venues that a paying audience gathers to listen to various poets as they perform their poems. These usually mammoth gatherings of poetry enthusiasts sit for hours as they relish performance after performance from different poets and other 'open mic' artists such as rappers, hip-hoppers and comedians. Examples of such 'spoken word' poetry sessions and venues in Kenya are: 'Kwani? Open Mic' held every first Tuesday of the month at Club Soundd along Kaunda Street (Nairobi), Silver Bird Poets Club held every Tuesday at Silver Bird Movie Theatre situated near Nakumatt Junction (Nairobi), 'Poetry at Discovery' held every Saturday at Discovery Restaurant along Koinange Street (Nairobi), Bar Stool Poetry Night held every second and last Thursday of the month at Giggles Restaurant (Nairobi), and Wamathai 'Spoken Word' held every Thursday of the month at Secrets Lounge, opposite View-Park Towers (Nairobi). Apart from live performances in these and other joints in Nairobi, there are a lot of slam and 'spoken word' poetry audiovisuals online. 'Storymoja', for example, does poetry online in addition to its annual 'Hay Festival' in Nairobi. Leading poetry bloggers like Njeri Wangari, Wamathai, and Keguro Macharia have sites such as www.kenyanpoets.blogspot.com, www.wamathai.com and www.keguromacharia.wordpress.com respectively where they not only post their poems, reviews and poetry updates but also give space and room to upcoming poets who would otherwise not be heard. Other avenues where 'spoken word' poetry dominates are the annual '**Kwani?'s Litfest**' and '**Jukwaani**' Festival for Performance Literature. It is here that Kenyan 'spoken word' poets have met and interacted with the world of 'spoken word' poetry. As a result, many have received international recognition. An example is Ngwatilo Mawiyoo who presents her works at festivals across Africa and Europe. Although many 'spoken word' poets have not published their works, there is an increase in poetry book publications in Kenya. In 2010 alone, several poetry anthologies were published. These include: Blue Mother-tongue by Ngwatilo Mawiyoo, Mines and Mind Fields: My Spoken Words by Njeri Wangari, Lilac Uprising: Poems for the City and other Places by Phyllis Muthoni, Bittersweet: The Pain and Joy of Being by Elizabeth Orchardson, Nests of Stones by Wanjohi wa Makhoha and How to Euthanise a Cactus by Stephen Partington. Most of these poets are key figures in the development and popularization of 'spoken word' poetry in Kenya. The fact that the above new works are not readily available on the shelves of Kenyan bookshops and libraries is a clear pointer that there has been little or no constant evaluation of new poetry as it comes. The preoccupation with the poetry of 1970s and 80s has created a notion that this is the only poetry that exists in Kenya.

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Universal Elements of Poetry

Though creative writers have a license to manipulate their works the way they deem best, each genre of literature has its conventions within which it has to operate. In poetry, apart from lines and stanzas, there are a number of universally acknowledged means to it. Of these elements, the most commonly used can be broadly categorized into two, phonological and figures of speech features.

Phonological Features

These are aspects of orality that give a poem its rhythm. They are further divided into two. There are those that can be marked graph logically like alliteration and rhyme and those appreciated through hearing otherwise called supra-segmentals.

Figures of Speech

Although 'spoken word' poetry has predominance of sound, it does not in any way disregard other literary devices. Figures of speech, also known as imagery, are those features that create mental pictures in the minds of the poetry readers or listeners. They are similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia among others. It is the presence or absence of the above two categories of poetic features and their effectiveness that is considered when evaluating the general stylistic character of a poem.

Classification of Poetry

Poetry can be classified either thematically, stylistically or even by its mode of transmission. Pfeiler (2003) uses mode of transmission to classify poets as follows:

i. The 'Paggers'

These are poets who purely write for the page. Theirs is a written poetry that is solely transmitted to its audience through the print media.

ii. The 'Page-stagers'

These are poets who write for print but at times may read their published works aloud for an audience as a way of marketing those works or just for fun. Although they present their poems in a well-articulated way that brings much of the meaning to the fore or adds meaning to the overall perception of the poems, these printed poems also work well for the silent recipient whose auditory imagination is well trained. Dylan Thomas and T.S Eliot are examples of the 'page-stagers'.

iii. The 'Stagers'

These write poems to purely perform them. They include the contemporary 'spoken word' poets who have been credited with reclaiming poetry as a spoken art actualized through performance. The 'stagers' use the stage as the page, transforming poetry readings into theatrical events. While the recent resurgence of 'spoken word' poetry is seen as a reaction against mainstream, print-based poetry, the style takes us back to the classic role of the poet, who recited, chanted or sang notable happenings, emotions, and perceptions on occasion. While traditional poets utilized standard structures, in part to serve as mnemonic devices, contemporary 'spoken word' poets call upon experimental rhythms as a means to engage their audience in the listening experience. Gray (1986) attributes the origin and rise of this form of poetry in USA to poets that include James Russell, Henry Wadsworth, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their poetry gained popularity not just because it was performed but also for its handling of everyday subject-matter often using material that titillates the audience. Glazner (2000) calls this form of poetry, 'sound' or 'spoken word' poetry although he classifies it further to include 'slam poetry' that is a cross between poetry reading and competition where judges picked randomly from the audience rate the performances. The recent growth of 'spoken word' poetry can be attributed to the popularity of this slam, which has grown to a movement dedicated to creating real-time discourse between the performer and his or her audience coupled with other 'spoken word' efforts. While 'spoken word' poetry cannot be categorized, for example, as a sonnet or a haiku, it has its uniqueness that bears in mind the presence of a listening or (and) watching audience. It is an inclusive art form that invites all people to participate, whether as a poet, audience member, or a judge.

iv. The 'On-stagers'

'On-stagers' orally compose spontaneously during a performance and only later transcribe and publish. There are very few poets in this category. It is mostly free-style hip-hoppers who can fit in this classification. The 'page-stager', the 'stager' and the 'on-stager' are all 'spoken word' poets. It is only their levels of performance that differs. The 'page-stager' mainly emphasizes sound while the other two may flavour their renditions with physical body actions.

The Manifestations of Spoken Word Poetry in Kenya: A Case Study of Tony Mochama's Poetry

In an article appearing in the **Sunday Standard** of September 4, 2005 titled, "The Kwani? Generation's Dilution of Literature," Munene wa Mumbi accuses Mochama and his ilk of being journalistic in their literary attempts. According to Wa Mumbi, Mochama and other 'Kwanists' have deliberately taken journalistic methods to appeal to their audience; hence substituting literariness and subtlety with sensationalism and "unrefined rebellion while purporting to think outside the box." He takes issue with Mochama's poem on Kamlesh Patti that had appeared in '**kwani**'?'s third issue where he equates it to "any letter to the editors on the same in the local dailies."

He goes on to castigate this generation of writers for dwelling on trivial and “matatu inspired poetry” while there are great happenings and serious issues waiting to be highlighted in creative works. In making these assertions, Wa Mumbi fails to realize that good poetry can be created or composed on anything including what he refers to as trivial. It is the dexterity, creativity and the ingenuity involved in transforming the ordinary that matters. The term **poetry** has been defined in many ways. Classical critics like Plato and Aristotle used the term to refer to imaginative literature in general. Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined poetry as “the best words in the best order”. Poetry has also been defined as the art of using language figuratively to convey one’s feelings or emotions. To others, poetry is a genre that has words selectively and carefully chosen to communicate ideas. Olembo (1986) sees a close relationship between poetry and music. This view tallies with Babette Deutsch’s (1965) definition: The art which uses words as both speech and song to reveal the realities that the senses record, the feelings salute, the mind perceives, and the shaping imagination orders. (p.111) Whereas Deutsch combines the structural and sensual qualities of poetry, Wordsworth is more interested in the imaginative expression of strong feelings, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings inherent in poetry. Looking at the definitions given above, it will be noted that certain words, certain qualities, certain ideas stand out. These words are: creativity/imagination, thought, truth, orderly arrangement, sense impression, beauty and rhythm. These words point the way to three qualities common to all poetry: content (a particular idea), form (that poetry has a definable structure) and thirdly, poetry is intended at a specific effect.

Although the seriousness and the topicality of the issues expressed in one’s poetry are important, it is the poetry’s aesthetic quality and the craftsmanship involved in its creation that appeal to the audience. It ought to be appreciated that poetry is more of a source of pleasure than of information. Poems are simply ordered spontaneous outbursts of sentiments recollected in calmness. ‘Ordered’ implies that as much as poetry derives from some spontaneous emotion, the poet endeavours to present this emotion in a pleasurable manner by properly **arranging** the emotion through employment of linguistic decoration/ornamentation. ‘Tranquil’ because the poet tries to objectify his / her feelings so that his/her art does not become a mere sensual outburst lacking in both objectivity and creativity. We read or listen to poetry basically for the same reasons we listen to a song whose words we may not even understand. Enjoyment, delight and satisfaction are the main driving forces to poetry for it is not only a method of communication but also a unique experience where poets endeavour to create new and unique impressions and perspectives of the ordinary. The Oryx mystery (where a lioness in a Kenyan conservancy adopted an orphaned oryx) and the extra-ordinary case of the dog that rescued a baby that Wa Mumbi advises Mochama to highlight in his poetry may have constituted great breaking news but certainly not great poetry. According to Meyer 2001, in poetry, it is not so much about ‘what’ but ‘how’ it is expressed.

Mochama’s work falls under ‘spoken word’ poetry, an emerging form of poetry that has unique stylistic characteristic. Due to its intended oral transmission nature, this form of poetry is bound to cater for the interest of its audience especially considering the fact that they may be hearing it for the first time. Unlike in reading where one can always flip pages back and forth, when listening to a recitation one has to get everything while it is in progression. Aware of this, ‘spoken word’ poets are forced to be somehow ‘prosaic’ in their poems so that their listening audience can get the flow and subsequently, the message. It is this ‘prosaic-ness’ that a critic like Wa Mumbi cites when he argues that clipping the lines of a short story does not render it a poem. Though Wa Mumbi is right to an extent, a poet can still use enjambment, a stylistic technique that allows one to ‘cart’ the sense over to another line beyond the metrical unit. This is to allow the stream of meaning from one line to another or even from one stanza to the other. Though this tends to make a poem prose-like, it may be necessary for the poem’s intelligibility. To achieve this all important unequivocality in his poetry, Mochama too has not avoided prose-like structures. Most of the poems in the anthology would read like a story if the lines were to be joined. Sample the following extracts from two poems in the anthology:

Trading Places (for the Hong Kong WTO ‘Talks’)

The day Africa became the
solitary super-power
In the world
There was panic in the stock
markets of the earth

Nairobi sneezed, and New
 York caught pneumonia
 The Gold Standard in Zurich
 Was replaced by blood and
 Milk
 From pure-bred Maasai Zebu
 Cows
 Chirac came, via Iraq, to beg
 aid from the government of
 Kenya
 But Kibaki called him 'kum-
 Bafu', gave him stringent con-
 ditions he had to meet first
 including reducing the num-
 ber of French immigrants,
 trying to sneak across the
 Sahara into Kenya
 And doing the breaststroke
 Across Mediterranean to get
 Into morocco

When the lines are joined, the results are grammatical structures as follows:

- The day Africa became the/solitarysuper-power/in the world/there was panic in the stock/markets of the earth.
- Nairobi sneezed, and New/York caught pneumonia/the Gold Standard in Zurich/was replaced by blood and/milk/frompure-bred Maasai Zebu/ cows.
- Chirac came, via Iraq, to beg/aid from the government of/Kenya/but Kibaki called him 'kum/bafu,' gave him stringent con/ditions he had to meet first/including reducing the num/ber of French immigrants,/trying to sneak across the/Sahara into Kenya/and doing the breaststroke/across Mediterranean to get into/morocco.

It will therefore be noted that the lines defy the traditional sense of poetic lines as rhythmic and thematic units. The breaking of words like 'Kumbafu' and 'conditions' into two different lines adds no value to the poetic lines either in terms of syllabic embellishments or thematic communications. It can only be justified on the circumstances at hand – a listening audience. In this regard, the poem tries to imitate a hallmark of Kenyan-like impromptu speeches where sometimes a speaker utters half a word for the audience to complete the word. In such a situation, the word becomes an interactive signal in a poetic conversation. However, if imagery is the heart of poetry, the 'non-poetic' lines in Mochama's poetry do not deprive the text of poetic qualities. A figure of speech such as a metaphor gives style clearness, charm and distinction as nothing else can. Metaphoric language enlivens poetic style and metaphors employed in the above poem such as "Nairobi sneezed, and New York caught pneumonia" and "The Gold Standard in Zurich Was replaced by blood and Milk From pure-bred Maasai Zebu Cows" operate at two levels: the level of sense devices and the level of semantic absurdity – that what happens in a small economy like Kenya can affect what happens in an economy a hundred times its size. The absurdity of a first world begging for alms from a third world economy is palpable in "Chirac (former Prime minister of France) came, via Iraq, to beg/aid from the government of/Kenya/but Kibaki called him 'kum/bafu" To Aristotle, metaphors are necessary in as far as stylistic ornamentation is concerned. This view is true but limited in the sense that it does not touch on the thematic use of metaphors as seen above. Veritably, metaphors issue from more complex interactions of perceptions, feelings and thoughts than a mere eye for resemblances (the only aspect classical Greek philosophy emphasized). Metaphors may function as the controlling image of a whole poem thereby elevating the images to a pedestal higher than mere semblance. In that regard, the metaphors become the life, the very heart of that text without which the text would literally die and may be rendered meaningless.

Another illustration from Mochama's poetry is essential:

Black mischief
 Sisina's sin, it seems
 Is that he had no idea

Where Naivasha ends,
 And England begins
 So he crossed the invisible line
 Between here and there...
 Between monarchy and Kenya,
 Between peasantry and pleasantry
 Between being the heir to colonial history
 And being a black with the traditional zero
 sum legacy
 (we Africans can trace our ancestry right
 back to our parents).
 Sisina crossed the line
 That divides the territory
 Between being bound by the law
 And being a grazing god to whom
 The law is neither here nor there
 And penal codes are but hot air
 (As viewed from Derwent-ic attics,
 or balloon sundowners) just bally-hoo.

In the lands of white gods
 Those who cross the line
 Are apes, robbers or goats
 To be summarily shot.
 (They who cross the line',
 Says the invisible sign,
 'walk into the line of white fire-
 And become black ghosts')

Once again, the pseudo-poetic lines can be joined to come up with grammatical structure as follows:

- Sisina's sin, it seems/is that he had no idea/where Naivasha ends,/and England begins/
- So he crossed the invisible line./Between here and there.../ Between peasantry and pleasantry./Between being the heir to colonial history/and being the heir to colonial history/and being a black with the traditional zero/sum legacy/ (we Africans can trace our ancestry right/ back to our parents)./ Sisina crossed the line/ that divides the territory/ between being bound by the law/ and being a grazing god to whom/ the law is neither here nor there/ and penal codes are but hot air/ (as viewed from Derwent-ic attics,/ or balloon sundowners) just bally-hoo.
- In the lands of white gods/ those who cross the line/ are apes, robbers or goats/ to be summarily shot. / (They who cross the line,/ says the invisible sign,/ 'walk into the line of white fire/ and become black ghosts').

The above are also the first three stanzas of the poem found on page 17 of the anthology. Although the visual impressions of sentences broken up into lines seem to affect the reader's eyes in mysterious ways, a continuous reading of the joined sample would appear like a narration. For his recitations not to be narrations considering this prosaic nature of 'spoken word' poetry, Mochama dexterously manipulates sound features in interesting ways. For example, his utilization of repetition, alliteration assonance and consonance in the above **Black mischief** not only heightens the musical quality of the poem but also aids memorization and recall during recitations. Alliteration and consonance are palpable in "Sisina's sin, it seems", "peasantry and pleasantry" (in Use of 's' and 'p' respectively) while alliteration and assonance are unmistakable in the second line "Is that he had no idea" (use of 'h' and vowel sounds 'a' and 'i'). Note also the repetition of words like "between", "here", "there" and "sign". Note also pseudo rhymes in words used in close proximity "gods", "goats" and "ghosts". The cumulative effect of all these features is in the creation of rhythm. Indeed, since poems are composed to be recited or sung, a good poet, traditional or avant-garde, extensively exploits phonic (sound) potentials of language in his / her bid to communicate.

It is in this regard that a poem resembles music. There is a deliberate “musicianly resonance in both the sounds and associations of words chosen” (Deutsch, B: 1965). While the sound features simulate conventional poetry, Mochama’s poetry employs two other components that belong to prose: authorial intrusion and description. The poet ends the second ‘stanza’ with a parenthetical element ‘we Africans can trace our ancestry right back to our parents’; that is essentially an authorial intrusion in spite of its semantic ludicrousness. The intrusion is actually not the author’s but the perspective of the colonialist who regarded Africans as people without a history, without a heritage. Another parenthetical element “As viewed from Derwent-ic attics, or balloon sundowners” constitutes another intrusion. Another unique characteristic of ‘spoken word’ poetry that Mochama exploits in his anthology is in the diction. In a ‘Bretchian’ style of writing in his target audience’s idiom, Mochama employs language that would not only appeal to the young generation that he targets, but also language that many times would be inaccessible to not just an older generation but also a non Kenyan audience. Since he picks his language of writing from his audience’s mouths, he has used slang, sheng, colloquialism, short-hand writing, among others: hallmarks of a particularized audience. The underlined words and phrases in the following extracts from different poems illustrate this assertion;

- “Aswa,” says my friend, whose Swahili is all skewered
- “mama, didn’t I screw you, in Addis Ababa?”
- Unless you are a ‘broda’, then you’re just a drug peddler

The poem ends with the expression: “there’s a girl/Selling coke/on dis-count... agal, coke, A miss Amama”-‘(Or the Benign Ethiopia Nature of Bourbon) A miss A mama’

Other examples of lexical deviance are:

- What we don’t see are the chokoras who line off litter, and the parking meters counting the ‘Hamzas’ the way we once counted stars -‘Nairobi West’.
- I am the unsung poet

Because the musicians sing about hip-hop and Kapuka
Na badosija-vukasakafu
Lakiniwapi?-‘Immortal’

- With a green simuya jamii, manned by a jinii/ whose name was simply, mammie!/
• The jinni would be jimmy-jammed, and he’d call Jamii for free-‘The Dream of David Vera’
- We used to walk home coz mom-‘Trans-ported’.

When writers choose a medium of communication, it is expected that they will consistently use that mode of communication. Thus, when one chooses a language, the audience will have assumed or concluded at the beginning of the text that the writer has consciously selected the particular language as opposed to others as a result of various circumstances obtaining such as context, audience and purpose; in essence, the rhetorical situation, and will ‘harmoniously’ employ the same medium throughout. In this case, our writer is competent in more than one language but has chosen a particular one to communicate. Consequently, it is expected that the writer will conform to the vocabulary appertaining to that language. It is true that literary writers rampantly use words that belong to a language different from the main medium of communication especially when the writer has to reflect on a culture that has no equivalence in the tradition of the owners of the medium of delivery. This is why in his poem Song Of Lawino Song of Ocol, Okot P’Bitek employs Acholi words in expressions such as: the “**moko** dance”, “the **Ager** period”, “Chew the shoots of **Lapena** and **Olim**”, “Let the people drink **kwete** beer and **Waragi**”. The words in bold indeed signify components peculiar to the Acholi and can therefore not be translated. This is not the case with the use of non-English words in Mochama’s poem(s) illustrated above. Kiswahili words such as ‘Aswa’, ‘chokora’ ‘hamzas’ and ‘simu ya jamii’ can easily be translated as ‘exactly’, ‘street child’, ‘cash’ and ‘community wireless phone booth’ respectively. The words therefore have equivalents in the English language. Employment of the words can therefore only be rationalized on the **Orality** of the text and the influence of a live audience. For a reading audience, the use of such words can profitably give the reader a clue of the social or historical setting (or both) of the text.

For example, the use of Kiswahili words “simu ya jamii” places the poem in its historical context – the time in the late 1990s when there was a mobile phone revolution in Kenya but due to the prohibitive prices of the both the handsets and call charges, a huge population relied heavily on communal commercial wireless phone booths to make calls.

The use of Kiswahili especially in a pop song: “Na badosija-vukasakafu Lakiniwapi”, among others, places the cultural context (Kenyan) of the text easily. Kiswahili is used profitably in Kenya and Tanzania to give the populace a sense of cultural identity. It is a national language in both countries. In situating a literary text historically, socially, politically and culturally, the use of the Kenyan “Sheng” and non- English words in the poems also give the poems ‘flavour’ so that even though it is an African (read – Kenyan) situation reflected through the medium of the English language, the incorporation of words that belong to African/Kenyan languages gives the text a feeling of being truly ‘African/Kenyan’. In the poem, ‘Building Houses’ the poet uses words and phrases that can only be understood by a certain age group. The statement ‘chill at your digs’ in line 10 is slang for ‘relax at your house’ while ‘Thirte-fae’ in line 21 is a corruption of ‘thirty five’. The poem has other examples of such words like, ‘boondocks’ and ‘dacha’. Such words and colloquialisms not only help in easier and faster understanding of Mochama’s poetry, they bring his poetry down to the level that it can be enjoyed by any literate person. Throughout his anthology, Mochama has used words that are simple and in common usage. Although the use of regular language and clichés in ‘spoken word’ poetry has been accused of anaesthetizing the readers and listeners, Mochama, uses them fruitfully. Words and phrases may at times obscure a poem to the majority of the audience. The use of simple, ordinary words therefore helps erode the fast encroaching enigmatization of poetry. Unlike mainstream poetry, Mochama’s poems also extensively utilize allusion as a stylistic device. The many instances of allusion were meant to carry his listening audience with him since they are based on the current affairs of the time. Allusion is indeed a key characteristic of ‘spoken word’ poetry which is generally meant for a specific audience at the time of its composition and performance. This means that its predominant use by Mochama, though enhancing the topicality and immediacy of his poetry’s subject matter in its mentioning of the issues, occurrences and personalities of the day, may hinder communication to the less-informed members of his target audience or the future consumers of his poetry. This makes some of Mochama’s poems time and audience-specific; which is a negation of the universality of literature.

That notwithstanding, the beauty and the significance of the poem ‘**Blackmischief**’ for instance lies in the realization that the poem was composed and performed when the issue of Ole Sisina (an innocent Maasai Wild life ranger who was shot dead by white rancher who mistook him for a poacher) was hot and in the people’s mouths. Most of the members of the audience were able to understand and follow this poem because they were privy to the occurrence alluded to which may not be the case with today’s readers of the poem. In fact, a performance of this poem today will not arouse the emotions it aroused then. It would also be difficult to savor the poem ‘**Hummer**’ if one does not have a prior knowledge of the excitement and controversy that surrounded this make of a vehicle in Kenya in the year 2006. The poet juggles the words ‘Hummer’, ‘Hammar’ and ‘Humour’ to simply satirize that time’s much ado about nothing. The poem ‘**Equity; a commercial poem**’ will be totally obscure to listeners or readers who are not aware of this Kenyan bank and its friendly policies. One also ought to know the history of Kenya or have background knowledge of Dedan Kimathi’s legend to fully decipher the poem ‘**Dead Dreams of Dedan Kimathi**’. Since ‘spoken word’ poetry is originally created for a live and active audience, it is usually not fixed at the onset. What the poet writes down before the performance is just a skeleton to guide his/her rendition. During this eventual rendition, the audience’s reactions can force a pause, a repeat, a re-emphasis, additions or even a total diversion from the original script. It is this flexibility in rendition of ‘spoken word’ poetry that brings problems when it comes to a later transcription and publication of the poem since the poet may have several versions of that poem. If the poet decides to include the additions in the published version, for example, the added parts hang out, hence interfering with the flow of the poem. The parenthetical elements discussed earlier and in a poem like ‘**The Rest of Our Lives**’ where, for instance, the poet further explains the oxymoron describing life as living death by indicating in brackets that it is indecipherable, give further evidence that Mochama had first performed his poems before re-transcribing them later into their current forms in the anthology.

Conclusion

While the eventual proliferation of poetry venues in Nairobi that the journal ‘Kwani?’ has encouraged and its publication of non-conventional literature may have contributed in some way to undermine the traditional essence of poetry through subversion rules that define it, we also need to acknowledge the benefits of the new forms, new ways of expression as well as different viewpoints. Critics ought to be open-minded and allow the dynamism of art and the life it reflects. Our critical standards should accommodate new artistic creations and innovations.

Good art emphasizes individuality, diversity and innovation in creative writing since different times, individuals and places come with different aesthetic and critical concepts. It is this gradual breakdown of the old poetics that Warren and Welleck (1949) encourage. According to the duo, art being fundamentally irrational, should be left to individual appreciation. Critics ought to avoid the anarchy of norms and respect different perspectives in literary works. The continuous shift of interests and tastes in literary appreciation as espoused by the reader-response theory should guide any literary appraisal and assessment. This may increase the creative repertoire; hence becoming the panacea to the literary desertification of East Africa that Taban lo Liyong once alluded to. This view is underscored by Silas Nyanchwani in his article "Why There Are Few Ngugi, Achebe Successors". In this article, he blames the "rigid pedantic and didactic form" in which Literature is taught in our schools today for the dearth of natural successors to African great writers of the yore like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o among others. Flexibility in literary criticism does not mean condoning a laissez faire form of writing but a call to critics not to be slaves of conventions since it is the transgression of these norms that is the hallmark of creative writing. Mochama should not be condemned and attacked just because he liberated his poetry from abstractions and enigmatism of conventions for easier and clear communication with his target audience. The fact that he achieves ingenuity in his expression through an original and imaginative manipulation of language that runs away from the bandwagon tendencies does not, on its own, make him a lesser poet. There ought to be an independent analysis of his language and style before one can make an objective assessment of his poetry.

The casualness with which critics have approached Mochama's poetry and the strong subjectivity that underlies most of the lopsided criticism is betrayed by the mistaken assumption that 'spoken word' poetry should conform to the traditional poetry conventions. The critics fail to realize or acknowledge that the proponents of this form of poetry were looking for something fresher, newer, 'hippie-r' and more in touch with the times in which they are living. Their establishment of unconventional venues like cafes, bars and social media as avenues for staging this emerging poetry is a clear pointer to their unconventional thinking. It is actually a literary fact that a good writer is the one that travels past the conventional forms of thought instead of retreating to the way things have always been done. Mochama and other 'spoken word' poets bring freshness and creativity in their works.

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