

(re)Reading Mochama: Some thoughts on spoken word poetry in Kenya

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The launch of Tony Mochama's *What if I Am a Literary Gangster* (2007) attracted surprisingly polarising critical attention in Kenya, dividing readers, academics, artists and literary critics in the country. The crux of debates hinged on whether or not Mochama's writing should be encouraged, especially in classrooms and intellectual spaces, and celebrated as part of a relatively new literary aesthetics.¹ Acknowledging this dichotomous critical reception, we suggest a pause to (re)consider the terrain and (re)assess analytical tools and evaluative rubric.

With increasing freedom of expression in Kenya after successive totalitarian governments, spoken word platforms, hospitable spaces for artists to vent creatively, have gained significant popularity in Nairobi. In addition to events and festivals, such as Kwani? LitFest, Storymoja's Hay Festival and Jukwaani, artists and audiences enjoy a range of venues across the city that consistently host performances — from Tuesdays at Silver Bird Poets Club Poetry (Dagoretti Corner) and Saturdays with Poetry at Discovery (Koinange Street) to the monthly Kwani? Open Mic (Kaunda Street) and Wamathai 'Spoken Word' (Utalii Lane). In these spaces, a paying audience gathers to experience poetry performances. Enthusiastic audiences sit for hours, relishing performance after performance from different poets and 'open mic' artists, such as rappers, hip-hoppers and comedians. In addition to live shows, Nairobi-based artists, bloggers² and organisations host slam and spoken word audiovisuals online. Moreover, although publications are still limited, there has been a significant upsurge in anthologies. The release of Ngwatilo Mawiyoo's *Blue Mothertongue*, Njeri Wangari's *Mines and Mind Fields*, Phyllis Muthoni's *Lilac Uprising* and Wanjohi wa Makhoa's *How to Euthanise a Cactus* marked 2010 as a particularly productive year for Kenyan spoken word. Nonetheless, local publishers remain rigid, loath to touch anything 'unorthodox.' And while events, festivals, online platforms and blogs that feature and engage with these artists have been largely successful in terms of participation and increasing visibility, the fact that these collections are not readily available at Kenyan bookshops and libraries speaks to a dearth of critical engagement with the genre. In fact, many critics in Kenya have yet to accept such emerging genres as Literature.

The casualness with which critics have approached Mochama's poetry in particular, as well as the strong subjectiveness that underlies the most lopsided criticism, are betrayed by the mistaken assumption that spoken word conforms to traditional poetry conceptions. As a spoken word artist, Mochama privileges the unique stylistic characteristics of his genre — a highly localised

¹ See, for instance, Otieno Amisi, 'Otieno Amisi on Tony Mochama's Poetry,' *Creative Ventures: Journalism meets creativity*, 14 December 2007, <https://otienoamisi.wordpress.com/2007/12/14/otieno-amisi-on-tony-mochamas-poetry/>. Accessed 01 October 2015; 'Literary Gangster: Smitta's poetry book,' *Maisha Yetu: Putting Kenyan art on the world map*, 12 November 2007, <http://maishayetu.com/2007/11/12/literary-gangster-smittas-poetry-book/>. Accessed 01 Oct 2015; Chris Mwiti, 'Seven Years On, "Literary Gangster" Shoots Down Critics,' 29 November 2014, <http://www.sde.co.ke/thenairobian/article/2000142918/seven-years-on-literary-gangster-shoots-down-critics>. Accessed 01 Oct 2015.

² Njeri Wangari, Wamathai and Keguro Macharia

performance-driven poetry. Therefore, his Nairobi-based praxis reflects the concerns, discussions, techniques and methods relevant to the city's spoken word community. Literary criticism that overlooks or ignores these genre-specific priorities is ultimately unproductive, if not entirely counterproductive. A copy and paste application of rubrics that have proven useful in analysing Kenyan poetry of the 1970s and 1980s is ultimately a refusal to engage with spoken word. Critics fail to realise or acknowledge that the proponents of spoken word are looking for something fresher, newer, 'hipper' 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 indicator of their unconventional thinking. Indeed, a good writer is one who travels beyond established forms of thought instead of retreating towards the way things have always been done. Mochama and other spoken word artists bring freshness and creativity in their works.

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 emphasises individuality, diversity and innovation in creative writing since different times, individuals and places come with different aesthetic and critical concepts. Flexibility in literary criticism does not mean condoning a *laissez faire* form of writing but a call to critics not to be slaves to conventions. After all, it is the transgression of these norms that is the hallmark of creative writing.