



Poetry Is Dying and Poets Are an Endangered Species

By Oby Obyerodhyambo



A friend, Evelyne Ongogo, a budding poet who had an anthology of her poems titled, *'Dichol and Other Poems'* and *'Breaking the Burdens'* published by non-mainstream publishers a few years back, sent me two of her latest anthologies titled, *'The eye of the smiling sun'* and *'Beautiful shards of the maiden pot'*. Both these collections are published by what we would call fringe publishers - this could be a euphemism for self-publishing. I read the three collections and was struck by the quality of the writing. However, a nagging thought refused to melt away; the fringe publishing company. I wondered about poetry; the creation, writing, publishing and marketing. I stopped to reflect on the last time a major publishing house operating in Kenya had released an anthology of poetry.

A few weeks later, I attended a function where two poets, Adipo Sidang' the author of *Parliament of Owls* an eclectic collection of poems shared the stage with the most amazing Ugandan writer, Mugabi Byenkya, author of *Dear Philomena*, a novel compiled from a series of social media messages, phone conversations and thoughts. It is as radical as they come. Both these artists read from their works and performed from the corpus of their work. Adipo's declamatory performance contrasted Mugabi's sombre reflections, yet both were powerful rendition of poems. This awakened nagging thoughts on poetry; the creation, writing, publishing and marketing.

Speaking to Adipo after the conclusion of the event, he referenced his own experience and let out a

tirade about the difficulty of publishing poetry in Kenya. His frustration was obvious as he described the encounter with the mainstream publishers who flatly refused to even consider his work. Having faced so much rejection, he had virtually given up on the idea of publishing, yet when his work found a sympathetic eye to read even he was surprised that the verdict was that it was extraordinary. His collection was published through an initiative supported by the Goethe Institute - not a mainstream publisher. These tribulations reminded me of Okot p'Bitek's frustrations when he first tried to get *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ochol* published. After many rejections, he eventually published the collection in 1966. The collection of 'songs' was a resounding artistic and commercial success and it has been said that many publishers who rejected the manuscripts regretted their poor judgement. Okot's encounter with the publishers was over fifty years ago, but it seemed that the script remains. The poetry publishing terrain has not changed? "Poetry and Drama" Adipo Sidang' declared, "occupy the bottom of the priority pile of the overly commercial minded Kenyan publishers. Unless a book is likely to end up among the set-books recommended by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development that will result in huge sales, they will not publish it".

Death of Language

Publishers, have over the years been accused of focusing on profit and sacrificing the artistic and cultural importance of creative expression. Poetry seems to have suffered more than all the other literary genres. In the foreword of *Dichol*, the late Professor Christopher Lukorito Wanjala, the renown literary critic who taught in Kenyan Universities for over forty years, wrote his reflection on poetry: *'We wondered whether poetry was still read, enjoyed and appreciated, by secondary school students. We concluded that poetry is too important a literary genre to be oversimplified in the social media by the young generation.'*

Why would the late literature don doubt the position occupied by poetry in the secondary school language and literature syllabus? This is especially intriguing, because he reiterates the essential position poetry occupies among the corpus of literature genres in the learning of language. Professor Wanjala must have been alluding to a past era when secondary students read and enjoyed poetry as an integral part of learning of English language. Literature, is creative expression of a language, and as such, is a product of mastery and competence in that language. Literature is to language what algebra is to numbers. Whereas one can speak a language enough to get away with it, consuming, appreciating and enjoying (and creating) the literature created in a language is akin to the numeric ability and competence used in solving algebraic equations. It goes beyond simple addition, subtraction and multiplication. It follows, that if secondary school students are not reading, enjoying and appreciating literature and poetry, their mastery of the language, any language, is stunted at its most will remain at the rudimentary level.

If there was recognition of the primacy of literature in the teaching of language, and poetry being among the genres of literature, why would it be that the production of material for the learning and enjoyment of poetry be considered a non-commercially viable enterprise? Could it be that the importance attached to linguistic dexterity that the good professor alluded to, is lost on us?

Recently, a letter purportedly written by a University student leader went viral on social media. Though the subject of the memo was tragic, a student at that university had been shot dead by thugs during a robbery, what caused consternation was the poor language and paucity of grammar sense in the memo. Many commentators were left wondering how a university-level student could write such an incomprehensible memo. To be fair to the student, there were some who did not understand what the fuss was all about!!

The tragic inability of this student to express himself raised questions surrounding standards of English in our education system. The fact that English is the only language of instruction in our

education system elevated this concern to crisis level. Was this student able to understand what was being taught and how would he respond to his examiners. Returning to poetry one could ask, with this kind of limited language could this student actually read, enjoy and appreciate poetry?

The crafting of a memo might not be considered a literary exercise, but it calls for one to utilise language creatively in order to communicate a message. In that process of communication, an individual uses a distinct style and voice, they chose their words carefully to create the desired impact. The tone of the memo, in this case announcing the demise of a fellow student, should have conveyed the solemnity of the message. The gravity of the student leader's appeal to the institution's administration to do something to ensure the security of the student body should have been contained in the choice of words. Stylistics, is the study of distinctive styles found in literary expression and even a memo such as the one referenced here, was roundly criticised because it was subjected to a stylistic analysis. Herein lies the reason for Professor Wanjala's lament. The skill to read, enjoy and appreciate writing is taught through literature and more so in poetry. Neglect of poetry in particular, and literature in general, is likely to result in the production of a generation that is 'word deaf' or those who cannot understand nuance and word-play. They will not 'get it' and what happens to one who goes through life totally at sea regarding things around them?

Poetry taught one to understand meaning that is stated and implied, it taught one to be a 'wordsmith' to know when irony, satire, hyperbole and sarcasm are in use. Figurative and colourful language, including proverbs are used in poetry and, as Chinua Achebe taught us, proverbs (and indeed other figurative language) are the palm-oil with which words are eaten! Will this generation not suffer from communication indigestion?

The Hollywood movie titled, *Green Book* bagged several awards at this year's Oscar awards. The anti-racism storyline carries a powerful message about intrinsic human nature, and the power of friendship. It tells the story of an unemployed working class Italian-American bouncer who, out of desperation, takes up a job as a driver/bodyguard to a brilliant African American classical pianist traversing the American South in the 60s. This is at the height of the American Civil rights campaigns and racial segregation and lynching was rife. The reversed race roles of Black master and White subordinate ignite the initial spark in a movie that is loaded with nuances. The race stereotype-based assumptions in the movie abound, as expected, but the most fascinating interaction between Merhashala Ali and Viggo Mortensen, playing Don Shirley and Tony Lip respectively, happens when Shirley, the African American, coaches the barely literate clueless white driver how to compose a love letter. Tony's vocabulary bank is totally overdrawn, he being a man accustomed to using his fist. His distressed attempts at communicating his feelings and emotions to his wife are salvaged by Shirley who injects linguistic flair and poetry into the letters. After much coaching, Tony eventually, catches on and is able to express his feelings and emotions to his wife in poetic language. His letters cause a sensation back at home among the womenfolk unused to such elevated highfalutin expression. When Tony returns from his work-trip, he is welcomed by an extremely elated and charmed spouse, totally enamoured by his communication. Without the benefit of a formal poetry lesson, Tony is walked through a stylistic course at the end of which he is able to read, enjoy, appreciate and create poetry and when he does he is the better for it. Tony's poetry results in a revolution within and without.

Complexity

Poetry has had the reputation of being 'hard' and in his allusion to the threat of 'oversimplification' Professor Wanjala acknowledges that poetry has by nature to be complex. At the same time, he applauds the late poet Okot p'Bitek for simplifying poetry and making it more accessible. Wanjala, must have been making a distinction between simplification in terms of form, but not the complexity of the thoughts and feelings expressed via poetry. Many who went through poetry lessons were

scarred to the bone, especially by the likes of poets like the late Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka who took pride in writing esoteric poetry that was supposedly for the initiated and select few and not the masses. Deciphering their works was like solving algebraic problem. One could argue that complicated language used just for its own sake, does not support the need for communication. However, there are critics like Horace Goddard in a review of *Interpreters*, considered to be among the most obscure of Soyinka's work in prose, who assert that the complexity in Soyinka's language was reflective of the complicated issues bedeviling Nigeria. In order to express these issues, he had to coin a language that could capture the complexity. He also argues that when a non-native speaker is using an adopted language there is the challenge of appropriating a language enough to give it a distinct identity other than the original. In this case Soyinka's English must be distinct from that of any other native English speaker. Could the 'difficultness' of poetry be the reason that it has repelled secondary school readers and hence it's a case of the enemy within?

Many who studied language and literature in the days that Prof Wanjala nostalgically refers to, will recall that the literary genres were handled separately: prose – usually represented by the novels or short stories, drama and poetry. Poetry stood out and retained a certain alien quality, even though there were African and Kenyan poets writing. Whereas the novel was domesticated early, and publishers embraced African novelists and provided them a publishing platform, the same opportunity was not accorded poetry and drama. Poetry actually fared less favourably among the neglected siblings. A casual look at the published works under the African Writers Series set up by Heinemann Educational Books Limited the leading publishers of literary work by Africans at that time, demonstrates the bias. For every poetry collection published, there are twenty extended prose works. Drama does not fare any better. Could this bias have originated from the colonial hangover that concluded that the extended prose form was easily identifiable as an African art and literary form more akin to African storytelling – with a higher chance of commercial success – as compared to poetry and drama? Would it be plausible to speculate that this racist notion actually informed the commercial decision that saw publishing opening up for novelist and not poets? Could the bias against poetry that Adipo Sidang' recounted a few weeks ago actually have begun well in the sixties? When we reflect on the ground-breaking work by Okot p'Bitek this speculation gains some traction.

Quality versus Quantity

Okot's attempts to get published by the mainstream publishers faced headwinds. It was difficult to convince publishing houses that *Song of Lawino* fitted the narrow definition a poem, especially because Okot had called it '*Wer pa Lawino*' and '*song*' was not considered a literary genre. This was even though there were western '*songs*' like *Odyssey* and *Iliad* by Homer. *Wer*, was maybe considered too simple in form. What Wanjala considered its strength, was probably seen as the one feature that excluded it from consideration. Okot's poem has been hailed as among the most lucid discourses on the process of deculturalisation of the African by western education and religion. Professor Andrew Gurr, who served as head of the Department of English at the University of Nairobi and Okot p'Bitek's colleague in an inaugural lecture, analysed *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ochol* and explained how they articulated the theme of cultural conflict with deep insight. He went on to compare Okot's poem to other post-colonial writing and accorded it plaudits as high as other celebrated works. Wanjala recognises Okot for having launched an African poetry tradition in print with his *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. He recognises Evelyne Ongogo, among others, for keeping aflame the song tradition, and he celebrates her for demystifying poetry as an art form and rekindling the interest in African poetry. Professor Wanjala draws a line between oversimplification and demystification and identifies the former as a threat. He says, '*We concluded that poetry was too important a literary genre to be oversimplified in the social media by the young generation*'.

My discussion with Adipo Sidang' explored the role played by social media in the 'publication' of

poetry. He acknowledged that because publishers had shunned poetry, poets retreated to the blogosphere. This alternative platform is wonderful for poets to share their work, but Sidang', like Professor Wanjala, acknowledged that this free forum poses a serious challenge of quality. While the great thing is that there is an outlet for free expression, there are many blogs where what passes as poetry would not pass the test of quality. There is a notion that poetry can exist devoid of any standards of quality. Austin Bukunya, among the foremost poets and teachers avers that, '*a good poem is made up of a competent fusion of strong feelings and well-structured expression*'. The latter part of this definition is most important, 'well-structured expression' especially in the face of the proliferation of 'free verse' on the social media platforms. Experimentation is fine, but anything done for its own sake defeats the purpose. Free verse is not formless verse; it endeavours to creatively establish its own patterns that best suits what the poet is trying to communicate. When words are thrown together helter-skelter simply to achieve a rhyming or rhythmical effect it results in the oversimplification that Professor Wanjala lamented. Poems, are not simply about rhyme and rhythm, though these elements are crucial for performance poetry.

Performance and Poetic Roots

Performance poetry has a long tradition in Africa, and indeed Okot's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ochol* actually are, or are crafted on the template of traditional Acoli song performance. The Spoken word has emerged as a unique genre within poetry and its growth has been fuelled by the 'open mic' tradition that allowed poets to present their poems to a live audience. In the 80s the universities popularised 'Poetry Nite' where any poet was free to present their poems to the student body. This is the period of state paranoia and being found with 'subversive literature' was the easiest way of ending up as a state guest. Oral performance of political protest poetry caught on as an unintended consequence. Thankfully, it was before the days of mobile phones with video recording capability with which evidence of subversion' could have been captured. Bold original poems were recited, enjoyed and appreciated.

The 'open mic' sessions were highly influenced by the African American and Jamaican spoken word artist like Mutaburuka, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Gill Scott Heron and others. These spoken word traditions were heavily influenced by the musical tradition - mainly reggae, soul, blues and jazz and used word play, intonation and voice inflection to communicate. The soul of performance poetry, and spoken word, lies in the musical and lyrical poetic tradition. In our case it seems like many of the artists performing poetry and spoken word have tried to borrow these 'foreign' traditions hence are unable to adequately manipulate them. The result is the free verse that Bukunya describes as a travesty.

The Swahili language 'Ngonjera' poetic tradition provides a model upon which Kenyan performance poetry can be authentically modelled. [Ngonjera](#) is a call-response poetic performance with two opposing sides of a group, or single performers engaging in a battle of wits and rhyme tackling any emerging issue. One performer poses a question or challenge and the other answers as much wit as possible. However, to date the tradition has not evolved, remaining relatively monotonous, but offers great potential for evolving into a rich form of poetry presentation. A more complicated oral poetic form is the [Gichaandi](#) - a traditional Gikuyu oral poetry recitation that uses proverbs and riddles and can be performed by one or by two contesting Gichaandi performers in 'burn out' format. The loser among the duo is the one who faces a challenge that they are unable to respond to, or respond in manner that is deemed to be inarticulate. The *Gichaandi* art form is among those that can be described as dying and so is [Khuswala Kumuse](#) performed among the Bukusu.

[Khuswala](#) is recited as part of the funeral rites of a great departed individual. The recitation details the lineage and history of the departed individual and his history with time, the experts in oral history are dying off and the art form is becoming rarer even as western tradition slowly edge out

the traditional Bukusu culture. Among the Luo funeral dirges, *sigiyya* are among the most resilient. These are usually individual performances unaccompanied by instruments and poetically express the relationship between the mourner and the deceased and also encapsulates the loss experienced by their departure.

This sample of oral poetry traditions is by no means exhaustive. The young generation of poets that Professor Wanjala is afraid might end up oversimplifying poetry could do well to research into these forms and use them as a model. Building a critical mass of consumers of poetry, will convince publishers that a market could be cultivated for poetry. The responsibility of convincing publishers, who are investors like any other and would like to put their investment where there is return, lies with the current crop of poets. The challenge that social media poses is that of ensuring that quality prevails. There are those who would argue that the market forces will determine high quality because it will rise to the top. However, the challenge remains, that if literature is not being taught, and especially stylistics, then the consumer will be unable to read, enjoy and appreciate poetry and that way the vicious cycle that has condemned poetry to the bottom of the literary pile will prevail and so will the quality of language.

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