

In a World of Gatekeepers, Binyavanga Held the Door Open

I remember the patriotic pride that swelled in me, as a teenager when I saw Binyavanga Wainaina on the cover of a *Daily Nation* pullout, when he won the Caine Prize in 2002.

The beaming beady eyes. The dreadlocks. The chunky body frame. With a kitenge top, to complete what we typically call the 'African look'. And then, there was the name. Who names their kid Binyavanga? But in that little hardware shop run by my aunt and guardian, I knew a Kenyan had won some international award for a short story, and it was a moment of inspiration for a young man who loved books.

As an excitable teenager, I never thought in a few years I would shake his hand, that he would agree to my request to interview him for a piece that would appear in a third-rate, Indian, Delhi-based newspaper, and through him, I will meet some of my childhood and adolescent literary heroes such as Micere Mugo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yvonne Owuor.

In my community, when someone dies at a relatively young age, with so much yet to give, women cry in a very specific way.

They touch and knock the coffin, screaming, all the while quarrelling with the body of the deceased, as if the body cares. They always ask the deceased: "Why have you shamed us?"

They ask in a manner that even the most macho man break down in tears. It is the palpable pain in their cries. Because, not all deaths are equal; some leave us more devastated than others. And I am sure, for the Kenyan literary community, Binya's death, despite the premonitory strokes that he suffered in recent years, feels the same. He has shamed us, really mocked us. He pulled a fast one, choosing rest over work, and at only 48, when the life of a writer starts to peak.

Personally, I have been waiting for his novel, and newer works, as he promised during my last interview with him back in 2013. Because there has never been a better prose writer than Binyavanga, who with surgical eyes, pointed out at the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies of modern life in Kenya and the world, and

whose prose brimmed with vivacious sentences, peppered with wit, irony, humour and brevity that only an intelligent mind can conjure. And oh! His candour.

You just need to re-read his cinematic short story, *Discovering Home*, and how little has changed since he wrote the story about 18 years ago.

Discovering Kwani?

After high school, when it dawned on me that I would not earn a place in medical school, and my cash strapped background meant I could not privately sponsor myself for a degree in medicine, I wanted to be a novelist.

The mid-2000s were a beautiful time to be a creative. When I joined the University of Nairobi for my degree in Literature, among my earliest memories are the *Kwani?* Open Mic poetry sessions then held at Club Soundd along Wabera Street in downtown Nairobi.

We were young, new in town, smelling like freshly cut arrowroot. Our lecturer took us to Club Soundd, and we would meet journalists whose bylines we worshipped, poets so good but so understated and underrated, and the entire *Kwani?* brigade. The Open Mics were the best of the carefree freedom Kenyans were reclaiming since KANU was chased out of State House in that euphoric 2002 election. Annoyingly though, the drunkards always got in the way of some of the pithiest presentations. Still, to us, it was eye-opening, and my classmates of poetic disposition always had a chance to read their poems.

Local creatives in this city rarely have a place, much less a consistent platform where they can express themselves, even today. Places like the British Institute, Goethe Institute and Alliance Francaise often provide the physical avenues, but rarely do we have a truly local space where we can be Kenyan without trying too hard to fit into the sensibilities and artistic expectations of the benefactors. And that is what the *Kwani?* Open Mic was all about. Through it all, we were able to look at ourselves in the mirror, as the youth expressed their angst, capturing the zeitgeist of the 2000s, with tribalism, extra-judicial killings, corruption, the ever-widening class gap, and the soon to erupt post-election violence.

The Open Mics were made possible because of Binyavanga's bohemian incorporation of all forms of art – poetry, music, prose, performance, painting and everything with artistic spirit in it. Literary scholars have a way of frowning upon

other literary media not in their stable. Like the way poets often assume theirs is the best medium. Those who study prose think it is the only serious discipline in the department.

But Binyavanga was keen not to bring the scholarly cherry picking and the endemic genre in-fighting. He allowed *Kwani?* to incorporate everything artistic. And the results were amazing.

As a first-year student in 2008, I remember when *Kwani?* brought the future Nigerian superstar, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to my university. At that time, her second book, *Half of a Yellow Sun* was fresh off the press, and anyone with a literary brain knew that she was on course to be a super star. She was in conversation with Sierra Leonean author Aminata Forna and Angolan author Sousa Jamba.



Read series: Binyavanga Wainaina

In a discussion moderated by the great late Prof. Okoth Okombo they talked about the role of conflict as a crucible of creativity. And these writers came in the aftermath of the 2007/8 post-election violence that crushed the myth of Kenyan exceptionalism in Africa. All the authors came from countries that had endured civil wars. Chimamanda Adichie's novel was about the Biafra war that has refused to wash away from the conscience of the Igbo people. Forna's mother country, Sierra Leone, had endured a protracted civil war and was just recovering. I remember Prof. Okoth Okombo saying that countries that have gone through traumatising events produced better music (DRC, he said), better novels (Nigeria), because conflict forges the best of writers and artists. I think this was an attempt to make the horrors of the post-election violence somehow redeemable for Kenyan creatives. I'm not so sure how well it worked.

In successive literary festivals, 2010, 2012, and additional events we would meet

young and old, globally acclaimed authors such as Okey Ndibe, Teju Cole, NoViolet Bulawayo, Taiye Selasi, as well Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mukoma wa Ngugi and Micere Mugo. In all the festivals, Binya always hovered at the periphery, not addicted to hogging every space. He also wrote worthy praises of Yvonne Owuor's *Dust*, a book that explored our collective silence towards the old wounds that hurt our country the most.

And for these fond memories, we can all be grateful to Binya, because it was the seed he planted a decade earlier in *Kwani?* that made it possible.

A Kenyan Literary Gem

In many ways, Binyavanga to me was like Bakayoko, the main character in Sembene Ousmane great novel '*God's Bits of Wood*'. He is the absent leader of a revolution, only spoken in scattered references for nearly two-thirds of the books and only appears towards the end. But whose spirit is felt throughout the revolution. He was multifaceted, idealistic and practical, unrestrained, loquacious, arrogant where necessary, but always with good intentions.

Usually, in the literary sphere, older writers and seniors always look down upon young upstarts. Rather than accommodate new voices and new approaches to doing things, they sit prim in their quaint offices pining for the good old days, rhapsodizing about canonical writers of their time. Binyavanga did things differently, giving young creatives a chance, because with no one to hold the door open for you, you can die with your talent. And the door Binyavanga opened paved the way for many award-winning writers to launch their careers.

It is this generosity in a world of selfish gatekeepers that helped create the *Kwani?* fortress from whose well we would all drink the wisdom of our time. For this, I take a bow at the man we just lost.

Earlier in May, I complained to a friend that my biggest beef with Binyavanga was that he was less prodigious than he should have been. But I was thoroughly impressed by Isaac Otidi Amuke who made an [online archive](#) of all of Binyavanga's writing, and what an oeuvre is he leaving behind! Someone should anthologise everything in a one-volume reader.

Still, I would have appreciated some more fiction from him. But maybe fiction was not his forte, as he was more a memoirist in the mould of James Baldwin, as

Mukoma wa Ngugi mourned him in his tribute in Africaisacountry.com. Baldwin, indeed, is better when writing essays than in fiction. As a travel and food writer, few writers in Africa did a better job than Binyavanga. In the multiple magazines he wrote for, locally and internationally, his prose and cunning eye for irony leaves one breathless.

The best trait of writing is longevity. When he came home, from South Africa in the aughts, he caught the spirit of the time, by his photographic prose of Nairobi in the early 2000s, and re-reading it now, I noticed little has changed since then. It is even worse, under the Jubilee regime with its similarities to the worst of the KANU regime.

At Nyamakima in downtown Nairobi, where he goes to board a matatu and travel to his hometown of Nakuru, here is how describes what he observes;

A man wearing a Yale University sweatshirt and tattered trousers staggers behind his enormous mkokoteni, moving so slowly it seems he will never get to his destination. He is transporting bags of potatoes. No vehicle gives him room to move. The barrow is so full that it seems that some bags will fall off onto the road. Already, he is sweating. From some reservoir I cannot understand, he smiles and waves at a friend on the side of the road, they chat briefly, laughing as if they had no care in the world. Then the mkokoteni man proceeds to move the impossible.

An ordinary writer may not have observed the irony of poor soul in Africa pushing a cart donning a Yale University sweatshirt. These images still recur in Nyamakima today. Despite the transition of two regimes in power, what he captured in the short story is still evident, a perfect demonstration of our stagnation as a country, even with its perceived growth.

Or his piece of satire for Granta, *How to Write About Africa*, still regarded the SI Unit of Satire; so illuminating, so piercing, that most white people who come to Africa, have to pay homage to the piece, and keep it in the conscience as they write about the African content.

In the interview I had with him for the Delhi based newspaper, he sounded more optimistic about a renaissance of the African arts, and at the time, he was contributing to *Chimurenga*, the irreverent South African publication that cherishes African languages, something Binya told me would grow in the days to

come. And as you may notice, most Africans are now conscious of their image to the world. And when American and British media outlets that have tried to write nasty things about the continent, they have found themselves on the wrong end of the ire of the African Twitterati. I know Binya will stir from the grave every time a foreign journalist will attempt to misrepresent Africa.

In his memoir, 'One I will Write About this Place' the outstanding feature is his candour. He talks about masturbating to Pam Ewing with teenage exuberance. This is the same openness that makes him to tell off some Europeans who ask him to travel to Sudan and write about his experience. When they spurn the work he wrote for having unseemly language and not meeting the sensibility of the donor, he told them to 'fuck off'.

"I start to understand why so little good literature is produced in Kenya. The talent is wasted writing donor-funded edutainment and awareness-raising brochures for seven dollars job. Do not complicate things, and you will be paid well..."

He would write more about what it meant to be a Kikuyu in Kenya in the disastrous years of the Kibaki administration, leading to the post-election violence. Some have accused him of falling to the trap of ethnic supremacism claiming that the undertones in his works tend to cultivate the myth of Kikuyu superiority.

Coming Out

Binyavanga was bold enough to come out in a country where most gay men lead double lives, because coming out will ruin their careers and family.

Most people hold strong reservations on what being gay means. Rather than try to understand, many choose to hide under the cover of religion or culture when they want to trounce on the rights of others.

To me, Binyavanga understood that you only live once, and rather than lead life as a hypocrite, you can still live a richer, far fulfilling life, if you are honest with yourself.

While his death has robbed us a literary genius, we can always remember his great writing, his fervor fighting for the African image, and most importantly, for

defining the Kenyan and literary scene in the first two decades of this millennium.