

The Didactic Role of Spoken Word Poetry on Kenyan Youth: A Study of The Wajinga Nyinyi Series

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Abstract- *This study explored the didactic values embedded in the Wajinga Nyinyi spoken word poetry series and how these performances influence youth in Kenya. The study focused on how spoken word acts as a tool for civic education, moral instruction, and consciousness-raising among young people. Grounded in Performance Theory and Semiotic Theory, the research employs a qualitative design that includes focus group discussions, interviews, and performance analysis from four selected universities in Kenya. The findings reveal that the Wajinga Nyinyi series uses performance elements—costume, setting, gestures, and tone—alongside linguistic techniques like satire, metaphor, and multilingualism to deliver compelling moral and political lessons. The study concludes that spoken word poetry serves not only as a creative outlet but also as a transformative tool for socio-political awareness and collective action. The research recommends institutional support for spoken word platforms and integration of performance poetry in youth development and educational curricula.*

Indexed Terms- Civic Education, Didacticism, Kenyan Youth, Performance Theory, Spoken Word Poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

Spoken word poetry has existed for many years as an ancient oral artistic tradition before writing was introduced. It has its roots in oral tradition. Eleveld (2016) considers spoken word as a genre of oral literature that is read and performed before an audience. Spoken poetry is recognized as a movement that encourages empowerment of the youths and also targets to address issues that affect the society. As a genre of oral literature, it plays a didactic role like any other genre. Through oral

literature people can express their feelings of anger, condemn bad leaders and mobilise people for a good cause, (Konate, 2021). Even the works of classical poets like William Shakespeare and Maya Angelou had some political and reflective undertones. In the contemporary society spoken poetry has emerged as an engaging, powerful, anti-oppressive tool that has demonstrated a currency among the youths. It has been labelled as ‘performance poetry’, ‘slam poetry’, ‘oral poetry’ and even ‘live literature’. Spoken word explores literary or oratory aesthetics that could be accompanied with body movements, musical instruments, song or even drama. The performance targets the audience by the poet or poets who compete and show their ability to communicate through words. The contemporary spoken word poetry events are described as a platform for ‘authentic’ expression: emotionally charged space at which poets viscerally, honestly share their personal experience directly with the audience (Ailes, 2019)

The majority of the users and audience of spoken word poetry are the youths globally. Adichie (2018) reveals that spoken word creates space for the youths to reflect on their own vulnerability, positionality and identity. Authors further note that youths have worked to confront misogyny and racism in their community, they have used spoken word in telling their stories as weapons of resistance as well as for entertainment. In the mid- 1990s organizations such as “Youth Speaks” in San Francisco came to the realization that this form of genre could be an excellent tool to use with contemporary youth. The entry point of the youth has been the hip-hop music rhythm. This has encouraged them to start writing and performing spoken word. Through spoken word poetry youths have been encouraged to view their daily lives as an inspiration (Atieno, 2021).

In America, spoken word poetry begun as slam poetry in 1980 by Marc Kelly Smith. He begun the

slam poetry because he felt poetry had lost its passion. Slam poetry combined the elements of writing, performance, competition and audience participation. It was based on free verse style of the Beat Poets and on the poems of the Negritude movement which focused on the experiences of discrimination and oppression by the black French speaking poets. The foundation of this movement built most of its radical ideologies that challenged prominent ideologies, supported self-determination and also decolonization (Waliaula, 2018).

Slam poetry movement inspired hundreds of slam poets across the United States, Canada, parts of Europe and even Japan. It influenced many aspects of modern culture such as political movement, art, media, literature and entertainment. In America the college students adopted it bringing in place the Postmodern Art Movement. “The Nuyorican Poets Café,” in New York is an avenue that gave spoken word artists a voice as it raised the very first platform for slam poetry documentation in 1989. Spoken word poetry entered the main stream media through a television show called Russell Simons Presents Def Poetry where popular spoken word artists converged in America. The Nuyorican Poets Café and Da Poetry Lounge linked to slam poetry movements.

They were often marked by unconventionality and social protest which makes them popular with people representing the marginalized (Ekesa, 2016) Africa’s roots of modern poetry in spoken word are traceable to the apartheid era in South Africa. It is during this era is South Africa that Afrikaner National Party seizes power and gain majority, from the power split between the English and Dutch. Apartheid aimed at maintaining white domination while extending racial separation before the grand Apartheid laws came into place in 1948 to enhance territorial separation and police repression under an institutionalized racial discrimination. The enactment of race laws was put in place and these laws affected all aspects of social life, including sanctions of white-only jobs, interracial marriage, and mistreatment. In 1950, all South Africans fell into the racial class of white, black (African) or colored (mixed race). The categorization of individuals focused on appearance, decency in looks, and social acceptance. It was then that spoken word poetry became a medium through

which people rebelled and conveyed their message; a form of protest. People expressed their rebellion against the government through protest poetry. Poets like Professor Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, Mzwakhe Mbuli, Don Mattered and Dennis Brutus used spoken poetry as the weapon against apartheid. This dark period ushered in a rich form of art that is highly respected and has continued to be the country artistry legacy. Currently spoken poetry events are common in Johannesburg through events like House of Hunger, Word and Sound among others (Ekesa, 2016).

The massive growth of spoken word led to formation of poetry events in Kenya like Fatuma’s Voice, Rhythm and Rhyme among others. These events brought together adults and youths who loved poetry. These events gave birth to artist like King Kaka, Tear Drop, Juliani and Mufasa the Poet, Gufy Dox among others. The artist used the genre to give voice to unspoken thought. They used the genre to speak about human dignity, social justice and personal life, (Waliaula, 2018) The massive growth in the spoken word trend later led to more poetry events mushrooming in the outskirts of the capital city, in towns like Nakuru and Eldoret.

Ekesa (2016) comments that the performers in spoken word poetry in Kenya are the young elites from diverse social backgrounds, that perform pieces with focus on different themes, like tribalism, love, gender-based violence, ethnicity and corruption. Its audience is both adults and young people who love poetry. Wajinga Nyinyi spoken word becomes appropriate in this study because after its first debut by King Kaka it ruffled some feathers of a few government officials he called out in the poem. Because of this it gained a huge following with many Kenyans feeling that it gave voice to unspoken thoughts. Other poets came up and built on the same subject that were deemed sensitive such as politics and social-economic issues.

The researcher hopes that spoken word poetry is apt to be taken up as a literary art and this trend has been there for quite long. Kariuki (2019) writes that “Art questions our actions and motives and their moral context. It is the function of art to disturb, in the productive sense, to provide a counter story to the

dominant story.” The author further observes that spoken word poetry has become an art through which the oppressed voice their struggle. Many people identify it as a mere form of entertainment, a keen insight on the presentations of spoken words, divulges more than sheer pleasure with specific issues raised on corruption, racism, ethnicity, child abuse, gender-based violence, climate change and terrorism. As a result of the importance of this genre, the researcher seeks to explore the youths understanding of its form, content, role and importance in Kenyan society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ali (2021) defines spoken word poetry as a form of poetry that consists of home language, oral tradition and storytelling. The spoken word poetry is usually performed in front of the audience (Johnson, 2019). This form of performance is considered ideal in creating a bond between the audience and the poet and it enables the poet to get an insight about a given society.

The study by Ndege (2020) established that the spoken word is the best form of poetry that can be used to address the issues affecting the youths. Deepa & Ilakumaran (2018) argue that the purpose of spoken word poetry is to help the youths to understand themselves and the world around them, this is considered important because it enables them to identify the best means of conveying the message regarding their wellbeing by using their story telling as a tool to engage in poetry and interact with the audience. In this case, *Wajinga Nyinyi*, poetry can be used to help the youths understand their challenges that they might be experiencing and how best they can address them through poetry.

Chepp (2016) notes that the purpose of spoken word poetry is to bear witness and testimony. Similarly, *Wajinga Nyinyi* can be said to be a testimony about the status of life among the youths and the society at large because it shows the level of the problem. The position of the spoken word in the society remains fundamental in building network and friendship among the poets and the community at large. This friendship allows the poets to share out their stories concerning life in the society. It also enables them to

champion for a certain course of action by advocating for adoption of change or disregard a certain belief. Additionally, spoken word poetry can be used to reduce levels of stress among the poets and the audience (Waliaula, 2018). In the case of the *Wajinga Nyinyi* poetry, the poets used spoken word poetry to address the pressing issues in the society and he offered a solution on what should be done to address those issues.

The study by (Ntarangwi 2022) found out that spoken word poetry can be used to address the unemployment situation among the youths in Kenya. In his view, unemployment among the youths in Kenya results from poor political leadership which excludes the youths from decision making. As a result youths turn towards social media to air out their voices regarding their position in the society and what they think needs to be done to better their lives. The *Wajinga Nyinyi* poetry is one of the examples that depicts what they youths do when they are discontented with a certain course of action within the society.

In summary, the reviewed literature has shown that there exist a strong correlation between performance and the spoken word poetry. It has been established that spoken word poetry has a direct effect on performance and vice versa. For instance, the study reviewed the literature related to spoken word poetry and performance. The reviewed literature revealed that performance remains one of the important means through which artists can convey their message to the audience. On the use of language and meaning of words used in spoken word poetry, the reviewed literature showed that stylistic qualities make oral performance unique compared to written literature since they provide both aesthetic and functional values which makes the performance more interesting. Similarly, an artist in spoken word poetry can make choices of words, syntactic structures, sound effects and so on from the linguistic repertoire. Finally, the literature reviewed showed that the position of the spoken word poetry in the society remains influential. For instance, the spoken word is the best form of poetry that can be used to address the issues affecting the youths. The spoken word poetry can be used to address the unemployment situation among the youths in Kenya.

In conclusion, most of the existing literature on spoken word poetry was conducted in other countries with different cultural practices which make it difficult to be applicable to the local context such as Kenya. On the other hand, none of these studies have focused on didacticism of spoken word poetry performance to the youths. Subsequently, none of the existing literature has examined the “*Wajinga Nyinyi*” spoken poetry to understand the language and meaning of words used, the position of spoken word poetry in the society, and performance of the spoken word poetry. This current study seeks to fill this gap by assessing the didacticism of spoken word poetry performance to the youths in Kenya.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative descriptive design. Data collection involved eight focus group discussions (FGDs) and structured interviews with a total of eighty participants drawn from four universities in Kenya: University of Nairobi, Mount Kenya University, Alupe University, and Kabarak University. Participants were purposively selected based on their familiarity with and exposure to the *Wajinga Nyinyi* spoken word series.

The study also conducted textual and visual analysis of eight spoken word performances drawn from the series. These performances were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes, symbols, and didactic content. Data from interviews and FGDs were coded and analyzed thematically, allowing patterns to emerge around how youth interpreted and responded to the performances.

IV. RESULTS

The findings from the study revealed five major themes that emerged from the *Wajinga Nyinyi* spoken word performances and focus group discussions with youth respondents: dangers of apathy, cultivation of reflective awareness, leadership and civic education, the social cost of addiction, and moral education.

The first theme, dangers of apathy, was powerfully conveyed in the poets’ indictment of the public’s silence and indifference toward poor governance. In

Wajinga Nyinyi Pt1, King Kaka laments, “*Mnajua nyinyi voters ndio washenzi*” (“You voters are the fools”), a line that deeply resonated with participants, who described it as a jarring wake-up call. The poets used rhetorical techniques such as repetition, direct address, and Sheng to expose the self-destructive consequences of political passivity. The youth respondents admitted that while they had witnessed corruption, they often avoided engagement, allowing bad leadership to thrive. This aligns with Waliaula’s (2018) assertion that spoken word poetry in Kenya acts as a cultural mirror, confronting collective silence and urging civic consciousness.

The second theme, cultivating reflective awareness, was developed through poetic content that prompted self-examination and moral introspection. Respondents reported that the poetry helped them confront uncomfortable truths about their roles in societal problems. Through rhetorical questions and ironic tone, the poets questioned not only leadership but also citizen complicity. In *Pt1*, King Kaka’s recurring line, “*Wajinga Nyinyi*”, became a refrain of introspection. Participants noted that they began to “see themselves” in the poetry, leading to moments of clarity about their own behavior. Bauman’s (1992) theory of performance supports this finding, stating that performance invites co-creation of meaning through audience reflection. The poets served as provocateurs, shifting the audience from passive observers to active thinkers.

The third theme, leadership, accountability and civic education, was developed through the poets’ interrogation of both elected officials and voters. Poets like Tear Drop, Oeba, and King Kaka criticized the lack of role models in Kenyan politics. In *Pt4*, Willy Oeba says, “*Mnalalamika vijana wanatumia mihadarati na mweshimiwa mwenyewe projects zake zina drugs*”, directly blaming political leaders for enabling vice. The poetry advocated for a new leadership ethic—one based on transparency, responsibility, and mentorship. Youth were urged to become leaders who embody integrity, rather than reproducing the failures of previous generations. The poems thus served as educational texts, teaching principles of governance and civic responsibility in a style that was relatable and emotionally impactful. Ekesa (2016) confirms that such art forms inherit the

didactic role traditionally held by elders and griots in African societies.

The fourth theme, the social cost of addiction, emerged from vivid portrayals of gambling, alcoholism, and drug abuse among the youth. In Pt3, Zack Newt's line, "Baze ya jaba na tei imekuwa our settlement" ("Hangout spots of weed and alcohol have become our settlement"), reflected a growing dependency culture among unemployed young people. Youth respondents described these lines as accurate reflections of their lived reality, where substance use is normalized as an escape from frustration. The metaphor of "betting with death" in Pt1 and the imagery of "wasted youth" in Pt4 pointed to a generation at risk of mental health issues, exploitation, and violence. Finnegan (2012) observed that African oral traditions often personify social ills to dramatize their urgency. Here, addiction was not merely a personal vice but a symptom of deeper systemic neglect—unemployment, lack of mentorship, and limited opportunities.

The final theme, moral education, was emphasized through poetic critiques of infidelity, sexual exploitation, and family neglect. Tear Drop's line in Pt2, "Mnakula nyama na makahaba na familia nyumbani wanakula nyama na jaba", illustrates the ethical failures of men who forsake familial duty for pleasure. Similarly, Oeba in Pt4 highlights predatory behavior against school girls, stating, "Mtoi anakuwa mzazi for no apparent reason." These lines provoked strong emotional responses from respondents, who described them as "raw" and "painful." They emphasized the importance of moral leadership, sexual responsibility, and community protection of the vulnerable. Ekesa (2016) and Waliaula (2018) both support the notion that contemporary spoken word poets serve as moral instructors, continuing the African tradition of embedding ethics into performance.

Overall, the findings affirmed that the Wajinga Nyinyi series is more than just art—it is a layered public discourse that merges performance, pedagogy, and protest. Through language, symbol, and gesture, the poets catalyzed youth reflection and stimulated urgent conversations about Kenya's moral and political future.

CONCLUSION

The Wajinga Nyinyi series embodies the potential of spoken word poetry as a vehicle for youth empowerment, civic education, and moral instruction. By combining emotionally charged performance, culturally resonant symbols, and direct language, the poets deliver layered messages that engage the intellect and emotions. The study concludes that spoken word poetry should be recognized as a legitimate form of pedagogy, capable of shaping attitudes, fostering political literacy, and encouraging social transformation among Kenyan youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, several recommendations are made.

1. Youth should be encouraged to embrace spoken word poetry not just as entertainment but as a source of civic and moral education. The poetry provides a platform through which they can understand complex social issues and critically reflect on their own responsibilities.
2. Parents and guardians should create open communication spaces within families where young people can express themselves, share concerns, and be guided without fear of judgment. Participants in the study expressed the need for mentorship and guidance, especially in dealing with issues such as substance abuse, peer pressure, and unemployment.
3. The government and policy actors should ensure that education, employment, and mentorship opportunities are expanded for young people. The study highlighted that idleness and lack of direction contribute significantly to social problems such as addiction, early pregnancies, and reckless behavior.
4. Artists and educators should be supported to produce more socially conscious content, and institutions should create spaces for spoken word performances to reach a wider audience especially in schools, universities, and community forums.

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