

Form and Content of Spoken Word Poetry in Digital Spaces: A Case Study of Performances by Thony Voks

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Abstract

Contemporary spoken word poetry is an emerging oral genre in Literature which encompasses orality, literacy and technology. In Kenya, this genre is mainly performed by the youth such as Thony Voks who portray an understanding of the urban culture. They also use languages such as Sheng in their performances which mirror the multilingual state of society. These performances are technologically mediated, and are in many cases transmitted through digital spaces. This paper, through a case study of performances by Thony Voks, investigates the form and content of contemporary spoken word poetry in digital spaces. Through the theory of intertextuality, this paper shows that spoken word poetry is a form that is made up of other literary in Literature. The theory of hyperreality on the other hand shows that as a result of virtual co-presence, the selected performances attain the status of hyperreality. The paper also elaborates on hyperreal images and the effects they have on people.

Key Words: *Spoken Word Poetry, Youth, Digital Technology, Digital Spaces*

INTRODUCTION

Oral poetry is one of the genres through which African communities in the past handed their traditions orally from one generation to another. Literacy was later on introduced with the coming of colonization. As a result, literature was broadly categorized as written and oral. This fuelled the orality-literacy debate as it was argued that literacy was eroding orality. Finnegan (1970) argues that in written Literature, not all aspects of the performance are captured such as tone and gestures and as a result, some of the meanings may be lost (3). In the 1980s, digital technology began to gain prominence as the world was shifting from modernity to post-modernity. There were thus more advanced ways of documenting and preserving oral genres. It is against this backdrop that Kaschula (2016) coined the term 'technauriture' which is an interplay between literature, literacy, and technology (p. 353). This term thus seems to have ended the orality-literacy debate as orality and literacy are connected through technology. Oral genres that embrace technauriture can be considered to belong to the category of technological literature as they neither belong to written or oral literatures, but are rather made up of literacy, orality and technology. An example of a genre that falls under this category is contemporary spoken word poetry. Ricarda De Haas (2018) observes that "contemporary spoken word performances are seen as artistic practices that merge old media such as live performances or printed texts with new media such as video recordings or social media tools."

Spoken word poetry has its roots in oral traditions and performance. It began in theatrical spaces, moved to print media and is now in the virtual spaces as a result of technological advancement

(Ekesa, p.172). As such, cultural and geographical boundaries have been collapsed such that the performances can be easily accessed by anyone who has internet access. Further, spoken word poetry is made up of other literary forms such as proverbs, narratives or songs which are not only used for aesthetic purposes but also to extend the meaning of the composition. This genre is fast taking root in Kenya in virtual spaces, with the youth coming in as the performers. This is because the youth, especially those in urban centres in Kenya identify with Sheng, a language made up of Swahili, English and local dialects, as their language which mirrors their multicultural state. Spoken word poetry within the Kenyan context is mostly performed in this language which explains why it is mainly urban youths who are the performers. Wabende and Were (2021) also note that “the youth performers are contemporary custodians of the urban culture and values who surrogate the elderly as custodians of culture and moral knowledge” (p. 53). This suggests that one of the reasons why the youth in urban centres are the ‘new’ performers is because they are knowledgeable about the urban culture which they experience and identify with. Also, the young people are technologically advanced such that they are able to use various mediations to enhance their performances.

The paper limits itself to four spoken word performances on YouTube by Timothy Barasa who goes by the stage name Thony Voks. These are: *The 2nd Conversation-Hatari* translated as “*The 2nd Conversation-Its Dangerous*, *The 4th Conversation- Industry*, *The 5th Conversation- Am Broken but so is Everyone* and “*The Final Conversation- “Watoto Wako”* translated as *The Final Conversation-Your Children*. All these performances have the name ‘conversation’ in their titles which seems to suggest that Thony Voks seeks to establish an understanding with his audience. He does not speak at the audience but rather speaks with his audience. In *The 4th Conversation* he gives a list of some of the previous performances he has been doing and then says that these days he does conversations as he believes that it is through conversations that he might change the world.

BIOGRAPHY OF THONY VOKS

Thony voks (Timothy Barasa) is a youth (24 years old) who recently graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from Embu University. He is a rapper, poet, and writer. Initially his stage name was ‘Voks’ which was coined from the term ‘vocals’. The other part of his stage name was heavily influenced by the feedback he got from his audience (Thony Voks, personal communication, Oct 13, 2023). ‘Thony’ was coined as a result of his audience constantly telling him “*umetu dunga mafakiti*” (“You have pricked us with facts”) after he staged various performances. They kept on saying his lines were ‘thorny’ and as a result, he added the name ‘Thony’ to his stage name. Therefore, it can be said that Thony Voks is a spoken word artist who through his art voices some of the issues which many may not be in a comfortable position to talk about or listen to. Thony Voks in his performances uses code-switching between English and Kiswahili and Sheng. This he says not only helps to create rhythm in his poems but also these are languages that many Kenyans understand and as such his content can be consumed by large audiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper guided by the theories of hyperreality and intertextuality. Baudrillard (1994) asserts that the postmodern world is simulacra which he defines as a fake reality that is stimulated or induced by media or other ideological apparatus. Seldon et al. (2016) argue that simulations are recycled fragments of the past and as such there is no innovation (p. 217). Hyperreality is thus the inability

of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality in a technologically advanced society. An image goes through four stages before acquiring the state of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994) as cited in Ekesa et al. 2023, p.11). It is first a pure representation of reality, then a distorted version of the reality after which it becomes an image that does not correlate with any form of reality which finally results in a hyper-real image. This theory is used to discuss how as a result of technological advancement, the selected performances ascend to the realm of hyperreality.

Intertextuality on the other hand refers to the connection of one text to another through elements such as allusion, parody, quotations, or pastiche (Kristeva, 1986). Therefore, a text can be said to be made up of fragmented pieces as the artist depends on other literary forms to come up with its structure. The theory on intertextuality is used to demonstrate how in the selected spoken word performances, Thony Voks relies on various literary forms such as historical allusions and proverbs to create meaning in his performances, and also ensure that the performances have rhythm.

THE FORM OF CONTEMPORARY SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Spoken word poetry is a form that makes use of other literary genres such as narratives, short forms, or songs. Ekesa (2016) observes that “Oral tradition is a major source of intertextuality in spoken word in Kenya. Artists make use of other oral genres to create their poems in terms of form and content” (32). Thony Voks in the selected performances relies mostly on other literary forms and wordplay in creating his content, while background music helps in delivering his message.

In *The 4th conversation- Industry*, he manipulates, through wordplay, the Swahili proverb *Subira huvuta heri* which in English is “Patience pays” to narrate how in the art industry, one may resort to using cunning ways to get to the top as it is not always that patience will pay. He also uses the TV series *Prison Break* (2005) to achieve this meaning by mentioning Scofield who is a character in the series. Scofield devises a cunning plan to help his brother escape prison as his brother had been sentenced to death for a crime Scofield believes he did not commit. This is captured through the lines:

*Na hiyo subira
Sio kila time itavuta heri
Hii industry ni prison
Na ndo upate breakthrough
Lazima uwe mjanja kama Scofield*

Translation

And that patience
It's not every time that it will pay
This industry is a prison
And to get a breakthrough
You must be cunning like Scofield

In the same poem, he advises his audience to be cautious of the company they keep as it has a great impact on one's character formation. He achieves this through the use of the English proverb “Birds of the same feather flock together.” This is captured in the lines:

*Alafu birds of a feather
Zihuflock together
So the company you keep
Ina impact who you be*

Translation

Birds of the same feather
Flock together
So the company you keep
Has impact on who you become

Thony Voks also uses historical allusion in the same poem by alluding to historical figures such as Martin Luther King Jr to extend the meaning of his poem. King is known worldwide for his

contribution to the civil rights movement in The United States of America, and for fighting for justice through peaceful protests. Just as he made a huge impact in the world through his vibrant campaigns, Thony Voks hopes that through the conversations he has in the form of poems, he will be able to change society and make it better though he admits that this is no easy task as some people do not watch his performances. This is seen through the lines:

*Am trying to change the world
Kama Martin Luther King
But bado nikituma
Fans wanaruka link*

Translation

I'm trying to change the world
Like Martin Luther King
However when I send
The link to watch my performances, fans
ignore it

From the lines above, it can also be concluded that spoken word poetry can be a window of learning about key historical figures in world history.

Thony Voks also makes use of biblical allusion. In *The 2nd conversation-Hatari*, he alludes to the Martyr Stephen who was stoned to death because some members of the synagogue were uncomfortable with the wisdom from the Holy Spirit he portrayed when he spoke (*Holy Bible*, Acts 6-7, 2011). He uses this biblical allusion in an ironic way to question the youths who are wasting their lives as a result of drug abuse. This is captured through the following lines:

*We ni youth na una abuse mihadarati
Kuchana kila day juu walimake miraa halali
You're getting stoned kushinda
Stephen the Martyr*

Translation

You are a youth and you are abusing
drugs
Chewing khat every day because they
legalized it
You are getting 'stoned' more than
Stephen the Martyr

In the illustration above, the word 'stoned' is used to mean being high on drugs.

Spoken word poetry is also set against a musical background. This helps to set the tone and mood of the performance, and also place more emphasis on the message. In *The 5th Conversation*, as the poem begins, soft music is played in the background. This music continues to play as the poet narrates how he is heartbroken as a result of being betrayed by the people he loves, which has resulted in him having suicidal thoughts and anxiety. However, as the poem is coming to an end, there's a dramatic pause after the poet says *skiza* (Listen) and as he begins to speak again with an increased paced in speech, the tempo of the music rises as he expresses in anger the pain he is in. In the final lines of the poem as he says that the only consolation he has is that everyone is as broken as he is, the soft music comes up again. This performance therefore demonstrates how different tempos of background music helps to bring out the message in a poem.

Wordplay also shapes the form of spoken word poetry. Through wordplay, Thony Voks not only ensures that his poems have rhythm but also that the intended meaning is achieved. This he does by manipulating words such as the names of the people he alludes to. Also by displaying the lyrics of these performances, the audience can see how this manipulation is done and this strategy ensures that the right message is passed across. In *The 4th Conversation-Industry*, he manipulates the word 'advice' to be 'add vice' in narrating that some of the content produced in the art industry makes society more vicious instead of making it better. In the same poem, he manipulates the word

‘procedure’ to be ‘*pro-si-Jah*’ to show that people take credit for their success without acknowledging God’s help. This is shown in the lines:

	Translation
<i>After God kutuhelp kwa procedure</i>	After God helps us in the process of making our art
<i>Tukisucceed tunadai si ndo ma pro si Jah</i>	When we succeed, we don’t acknowledge Him and instead take full credit

From the illustration above, wordplay helps in achieving meaning and rhythm in poetry.

The traditional view of liveness was that immediacy and intimacy could only be achieved through bodily co-presence. However, this changed with the development of film and later on advanced forms of digital technology. Auslander (2008) notes the performer and audience no longer have to be physically present to each other as “liveness involves technologically mediated co-presence and the feeling of always being connected to each other” (p.111). Therefore, the digital space such as YouTube provides the space in which the audience and performer get to interact, such as through the comment section, and to get timely feedback. As a result of immediacy and intimacy being achieved through virtual co-presence, performances such as the one under study transcend to the realm of hyperreality (Ekesa et al. 2023, p.11).

Through mediations, performances in the virtual space are enhanced. Thony Voks uses external mediations such as digital images to communicate his message. For example, in the *The 2nd Conversation-Hatari*, an image of the poet is portrayed with fire burning in the background. In this performance, the poet talks of how dangerous it is to engage in things such as portraying oneself as someone who is well off and yet the person is secretly experiencing depression, or one looking down on others once they succeed. Fire is sometimes associated with destruction, hence the image of fire burning in the background as the poet speaks enhances his message of destruction that arises as a result of people engaging in the things that he considers to be dangerous.

The digital space also provides a safe platform for young artists to nurture their talent. In the selected performances, Thony Voks only provides the lyrics of his poems as he voices them. Other than the lyrics, background pictures and the poet’s voice, other aspects of dramatization such as gestures are not portrayed. Through the personal communication on October 13, 2023, Thony Voks said that he delivers his performances in this manner because he is still working on his stage character. However, his voice can be considered as a great performance tool as the comments by the virtual audience demonstrate that they have understood the message in his poems.

The content of a performance is greatly related to its context. Muleka (2014) defines context as “circumstances for which and under which the performance takes place, or, within which it is to be considered and interpreted” (p. 89). The context thus answers the questions: Why? When? What? Thony Voks says that one of the reasons why he does Spoken Word Poetry is because he aims to educate the youth (Thony Voks, personal communication, October 13, 2023). This explains why he talks about issues that affect the youth such as mental health, religion and relationships. Barber (1997) notes that the performance determines the kind of audience that is assigned to them and whether the audience will choose to participate in that performance. From some of the comments given in Thony Voks performances, it is evident that part of the audience he attracts are youths. In *The 5th Conversation* in which he talks of brokenness that has resulted from things such as failed relationships, one of the members of the virtual audience comments:

@elizabethmwongeli3130

Thank you for speaking about what many of us youths have been through. It's an inspiration to anyone that is broken that they ain't alone.

In *The Final Conversation*, a poem which is delivered in the form of an address to God about how his children have lost their way as a result of not having guidance, a member of the virtual audience comments:

@komeriagrey

Everytime I listen to pieces from this guy lazima nirewind ...Ju words zihutoka kwa mouth ya huyu msee iko full of impact more so to us mayouth we need more of this. Unasema ukweli na lazima tusikize

Translation

Every time I listen to pieces from this guy, I must rewind...because the words that come from his mouth are impactful, especially to us the youth. We need more of this. You are saying the truth and we must listen.

From the comments above, a part of the audience seems to belong to the collectivity of the youth. They identify themselves as youths just as the poet identifies himself as one. Therefore, Thony Voks performances can be described as popular art which Bisschoff and Overbergh (2012) describe as “art that is made and produced by the people, targeted at the people, by addressing topics that are of interest to the people, easily accessible to the people, and is enjoyed and consumed and discussed by them” (p.114). As the selected performances are only available through the virtual space, they may be easily accessible to the young people, especially those in urban centres. Context can also be defined in terms of society as argued by Slembrouck (2010). The societal context is defined by the changes and advancements that are being experienced. As a result of an increased usage of digital technology that is mirrored in some of the selected performances, the societal context can be described as one which is high-tech. Thony Voks talks about the virtual culture and how some of the hyperreal images portrayed in various art forms have an impact on the people who consume them.

In *The final conversation* the poet narrates how social media is used to promote moral decadence. He says that some of the people post nude pictures and then use bible verses as the caption. However, the persona says that this is so because they do not have a person to guide them and therefore may not see any harm in what they are doing. This is captured in the following lines:

*Watoto wako wanapost nude
na wanazicaption na verses
Zile organs uliwapa kuprocreate ndo*

*Sikuizi wanauza
Yani in short
Watoto wako wamepotea na ni because
Hakuna mtu wa kuwaguide*

Translation

Your children post nude pictures
And use biblical verses as their captions
The organs you gave them for procreation
are what
They sell these days
In short
Your children have lost direction because
There is no one to guide them

Thony Voks also criticizes the art industry in *The 4th Conversation- Industry*. He openly states that some of the content being produced by artists is mainly for entertainment purposes and does not

instil sound values in people. He says it promotes moral decadence which may result from people imitating some of the hyperreal images portrayed in some music videos. He also says that artists produce this kind of music because some are only after making money. Some of the lines of this poem read;

*Mpaka muziki tunaimba
Inapromote rape and murder
Ni wapi tuna go?
Dnnccehall wanaimba uchafu*

*Naked girls wakitwerk
Tulishapoteza conscience
For the sake of cents
Tunafanya vitu hazimake sense*

Translation

The songs we sing
Promote rape and murder
Where are we heading?
The content of dancehall music is full of
immorality
With naked girls twerking
We already lost our conscience
For the sake of money
We do things that do not make sense

In another section of this poem, he questions why people still produce content that promotes teenage pregnancy and violence. He further goes on to criticize the reality shows because some of them are scripted. He also narrates that on social media people pretend to be happy but in the real sense, they are going through depression behind the cameras. He concludes by saying that Literature is the mirror of the society. However, the images which are being reflected in art show how broken the society is. This is captured through the following lines;

*Usanii ni kioo cha jamii
But our mirror is broken
Images tunareflect ziko distorted*

Translation

Art is the mirror of the society
But our mirror is broken
The images we reflect are distorted

Thony Voks thus addresses the question of morality in his poems, and blames the moral decadence in society on the virtual culture and the things people consume that are mediated by technology.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary spoken word poetry employs intertextuality, wordplay and music in its form as demonstrated through Thony Voks poetry. Thony Voks employs code-switching in his performances as he takes into consideration the multilingual and multicultural state of his audience. In addition, YouTube as a digital platform enables him to reach a wide audience which is high-tech in the postmodern society. As a result of the virtual co-presence that is experienced in these digital platforms, performances such as Thony Voks's enter the realm of hyperreality. His performances also demonstrate that there is a strong link between content and context as his message is influenced by why he does his poems and the kind of society he lives in. Thony Voks targets the youth as his audience by speaking about topics that are of interest to them. Further, he demonstrates how various hyperreal images impact people. He therefore comes out as a young artist who uses the digital platform to advise people and to call for change.

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