

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 mostly performed by the youth such as Thony Voks who portray an understanding of the urban culture. Spoken word artists in Kenya use languages such as Sheng in their performances which mirror the multilingual state of the urban Kenyan 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, examines the form and content of contemporary spoken word poetry in digital spaces. Through the theory of intertextuality, this paper demonstrates that spoken word poetry is a literary form made up of other literary forms. The theory of hyperreality on the other hand demonstrates that because of virtual co-presence, the selected performances attain the status of hyperreality. This paper also elaborates on hyperreal images and their effects on people.

Key Words: Digital Technology, Hyperreality, Intertextuality Urban Culture, Youth

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 developed with the coming of colonization in Africa. 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 (p. 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 seems to have ended the orality-literacy debate as orality and literacy are connected through technology. Oral genres that embrace technauriture can be considered as technological literature as they neither belong to written or oral literatures, but rather are 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 (p.1)."

Spoken word poetry has its roots in oral traditions and performance (Ekesa, 2016, p.59). It began in theatrical spaces, moved to print media and is now in the virtual spaces because of technological advancement. As a result, cultural and geographical boundaries have been collapsed hence 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. This language mirrors the multicultural urban state. Spoken word poetry within the Kenyan context is mostly performed in Sheng 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 can use various mediations to enhance their performances.

The paper limits itself to four spoken word performances uploaded on *THONY VOKS* channel on YouTube by Timothy Barasa who goes by the stage name Thony Voks. These are: *The 2nd conversation-Hatari* translated as *The 2nd conversation-It’s 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 suggests that Thony Voks seeks to establish an understanding with his audience. He does not speak at his 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 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 because of his audience constantly telling him “*Umetudunga 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 reach large audiences since these are languages that many Kenyans understand.

The digital space provides a safe platform for Thony Voks to nurture his 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 a great performance tool as some of the comments by the virtual audience demonstrate that they have understood the message in his poems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper is guided by the theories of hyperreality and intertextuality. Baudrillard (1981) asserts that the postmodern world is simulacra which he defines as “substituting the signs of the real for the real” (p.2) such that simulation is not considered an imitation or duplication but rather is hyperreal. Seldon et al. (2016) further argue that simulations are recycled fragments of the past meaning there is no innovation in the present (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 (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 hyperreal image. The theory of hyperreality is used to discuss how the selected performances ascend to the realm of hyperreality because of technological advancement.

Hyperreality is also used to challenge the traditional view of liveness where it was perceived that immediacy and intimacy could only be achieved through bodily co-presence. This view changed with the development of film and later advanced forms of digital technology. Auslander (2008) notes that the performer and audience no longer must 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 a platform in which the audience and performer are virtually co-present. The performer and audience interact in the comment section which enables the performer to get timely feedback. As a result of immediacy and intimacy being achieved through virtual co-presence, performances such as the ones under study transcend to the realm of hyperreality (Ekesa et al. 2023, p.11).

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 artists depends on other literary forms to come up with its structure. The theory of 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 ensure that his 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 as artists make use of other oral genres to create their poems in terms of form and content” (p. 32). Thony Voks in the selected performances relies mostly on other literary forms to create his content, while background music aids 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:

Translation

<i>Na hiyo subira</i>	And that patience
<i>Sio kila time itavuta heri</i>	It's not every time that it will pay
<i>Hii industry ni prison</i>	This industry is a prison
<i>Na ndo upate breakthrough</i>	And to get a breakthrough
<i>Lazima uwe mjanja kama Scofield</i>	You must be as cunning as 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 through the lines:

Translation

<i>Alafu birds of a feather</i>	Also, birds of the same feather
<i>Zihuflock together</i>	Flock together
<i>So the company you keep</i>	So the company you keep
<i>Ina impact who you be</i>	Has an impact on who you become

Thony Voks further uses historical allusion in the same poem by alluding to historical figures such as Martin Luther King Jr to create meaning in his poetry. 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 spoken word poetry, he too will be able to change society and make it better. However, he admits that this is no easy task as some people do not watch his performances. This is seen through the lines:

Translation

<i>Am trying to change the world</i>	I'm trying to change the world
<i>Kama Martin Luther King</i>	Like Martin Luther King
<i>But bado nikituma</i>	However when I send
<i>Fans wanaruka link</i>	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 further makes use of biblical allusion. In *The 2nd conversation-Hatari*, he alludes to the Martyr Stephen in the Biblical narrative 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 manner to question the youths who are wasting their lives because of drug abuse. This is captured through the following lines:

Translation

<i>We ni youth na una abuse mihadarati drugs</i>	You are a youth who is abusing drugs
<i>Kuchana kila day juu walimake miraa halali</i>	Chewing khat every day because they legalized it
<i>You're getting stoned kushinda Stephen the Martyr than</i>	You are getting 'stoned' more than

Stephen the Martyr

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

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. 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 demonstrated in the lines:

Translation

After God kutuhelp kwa procedure

After God helps us in the process
of making our art

Tukisucceed tunadai si ndo ma pro si Jah

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.

Spoken word poetry is set against a musical background. This helps to set the tone and mood of the performance and place more emphasis on the message. As *The 5th conversation- Am broken but so is everyone* begins, soft music is played in the background. This music continues to play as the poet narrates how he is heartbroken because of being betrayed by the people he loves. This 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 experiencing. 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 enhances the message in a poem.

THE CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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 (p. 353-354). 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- Am broken but so is everyone* 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 be youths. 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. 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*- “*Watoto wako*” the poet narrates how social media is used to promote moral decadence. He says that some people post nude pictures and then use bible verses as the caption. However, he 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:

Translation

<i>Watoto wako wanapost nude</i>	Your children post nude pictures
<i>na wanazicaption na verses</i>	And use Biblical verses as their captions
<i>Zile organs uliwapa kuprocreate ndo</i>	The organs you gave them for procreation are
<i>what</i>	
<i>Sikuizi wanauza</i>	They sell these days
<i>Yani in short</i>	In short
<i>Watoto wako wamepotea na ni because</i>	Your children have lost their way because
<i>Hakuna mtu wa kuwaguide</i>	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 performance read;

Translation

<i>Mpaka muziki tunaimba</i>	The songs we sing
<i>Inapromote rape and murder</i>	Promote rape and murder
<i>Ni wapi tuna go?</i>	Where are we heading?
<i>Dnncehall wanaimba uchafu</i>	The content of dancehall music is full of
immorality	
<i>Naked girls wakitwerk</i>	With naked girls twerking
<i>Tulishapoteza conscience</i>	We already lost our conscience
<i>For the sake of cents</i>	For the sake of money
<i>Tunafanya vitu hazimake sense</i>	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. Thony Voks 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. Thony Voks thus addresses the question of morality in this poem and blames the moral decadence in society on the virtual culture and the things people consume which are mediated by technology.

Mediations are used to enhance the meaning of the performances. Thony Voks uses external mediations such as digital images to communicate his message. For example, in *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 from people engaging in the things that he considers to be dangerous.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary spoken word poetry employs intertextuality in its form as demonstrated through Thony Voks poetry. YouTube as a digital platform enables Thony Voks to reach a wide audience which is high-tech in the postmodern society. He employs code-switching in his performances as he takes into consideration the multilingual and multicultural state of his audience. 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 may interest them. Further, he demonstrates how various hyperreal images impact people. He therefore comes out as a young artist who uses the digital platform to call for change.

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