

**SPOKEN WORD POETRY IN KENYA:  
AN EMERGING GENRE OF ORAL LITERATURE  
IN SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES**

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***Abstract***

*Spoken word poetry is an emerging genre of oral poetry in Kenya. This genre is a demonstration of the transition that has taken place in the field of performance poetry. Spoken word poetry began from the theatrical spaces, moved to print media, and now we are experiencing it in the virtual spaces due to its adaptation to the technological advancement in society today. Social media networks like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, have been instrumental in popularizing spoken word poetry. This genre started with real theatrical performances in various platforms in Kenya but has since occupied the social media as an alternative space for their performances. These new spaces have seen the rise of many poets in this genre due to the availability of a ready audience, as well as the ease in which poets have when sharing their poems with the virtual audience. The social media saves these poets the financial burden that comes with publishing a book, or the complexity of getting a media house to air their performances. This paper seeks to draw connections between theatrical performances of the traditional oral poetry and the virtual performances of the contemporary oral poetry, particularly spoken word poetry. The study evaluates ways in which the social media is transforming the performance of oral poetry by offering an alternative space for the performance of spoken word poetry in Kenya.*

**Key Words:** *spoken word, performance poetry, social media, virtual space, oral poetry, orality, auriture, technauriture*

**Introduction**

Spoken word poetry is a contemporary genre of oral poetry that has similar characteristics with hip-hop, dub poetry and jazz. They all have their roots in the African oral tradition (Ekesa 2016, p. 59). Before the invention of the print media, narratives, poems, and other forms of oral literature were handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. These literary

forms were heard and told “without the intervention of writing” (Centre for Hellenistic Studies, Harvard University). The introduction of the print media brought about changes in the way in which oral literature was passed down from generation to generation. Amin Sweeney, in his study of the relationship between the oral and written Malay traditions states that the print media was viewed as a “displacement” of orality to a great extent, even though traces of the oral tradition prevailed in “written compositions.” He observes that the written versions were meant for “aural consumption” and had to be tailored for the sake of a “reading audience.” He concludes that the print media robbed these classical works their traditional touch (Sweeney, 1991).

Ruth Finnegan lays emphasis on the key characteristics of oral literature that distinguishes it from written literature. These characteristics include performance, audience and occasion. She argues that the aesthetic experience of the performer and the audience can only be fulfilled through actual performances, which cannot be realized fully through the print media. She classifies oral literature as a type of literature that is characterized by “particular features to do with performance, transmission, and social context” (Finnegan, 2012).

As the society embraces technology as an alternative media for oral literature content, it is important to examine this new mode of transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next. The print media attempted to retain some features of orality in oral literature content, but the digital media technology is overtaking the print media in the preservation of orality for future generations. Angelus Mnenuka asserts that a “broader categorization of literary genres” should be adopted to cater for emerging genres of literature, such as “online literature,” which transcend the traditional forms. She argues that the continued classification of literature as either oral or written “alienates” online literature which contains a combination of both (Mnenuka, 2019). This paper is particularly interested in the social media as an alternative space for the transmission of spoken word poetry in Kenya. In the paper we examine how spoken word poetry transmitted through the social media exhibits the key characteristics of orality, which include performance, audience and occasion as advanced by Finnegan. John Miles Foley argues that there is a similarity between the old and new technologies of communication. He compares the internet technology to the oral tradition in relation to how information travels fast within and between communities “mimicking the practice of collective rituals” (Foley, 2018). He observes that both the oral and digital platforms promote co-creation and participation during transmission of information. Through the social media technology both the oral and aural features of oral

literature are retained for a listening audience as well as a reading audience for generations to come. The social media technology will ensure that contemporary oral literature content like spoken word poetry reaches the future generations without losing any of the oral or aural features.

### **From Auriture to “Technauriture”: The Development of Spoken Word Poetry in Kenya**

As stories are retold from one generation to the next it is possible for them to lose their original meaning. “Technology and technauriture” ensure that such stories are recorded more accurately for future generations. “Orality and technology are now integrally intertwined” (Kaschula, 2017). Coplan coined the term “auriture” to include the oral, the written and the aural aspects of literature (Coplan, 1994). The term “technauriture” was coined to reflect the intersection between orality and technology. According to Kaschula “techn” stands for technology, “auri” for ‘auriture’, and “ture” for literature. Thus, technauriture is defined as “an attempt to capture the modalities associated with the three-way dialectic between primary orality, literacy and technology” (Kaschula, 2017). The term technauriture encompasses all forms of literature transmitted through the word of mouth or print media using technology. Therefore, spoken word poetry transmitted through the social media spaces can be classified as technauriture. The social media is a simulacrum of the oral tradition. Information spreads out fast from one person to the next using the share button, making the social media an ideal space for the dissemination of oral literature material to the audience.

Spoken word is a contemporary oral poetry genre in Kenya that emerged at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the Kwani? Movement at Club Sounds. The “Rhythm and Spoken Word” event at the Daas Restaurant in Nairobi led to the popularity of this genre among residents of the city. After that other physical spaces for the performance of spoken word poetry emerged in various places in Nairobi. This included platforms such as the Fatuma’s Voice, Kwani? Open Mic, and Poetry After Lunch, hosted by Kennet B. at the Kenya Cultural Centre (Ekesa, 2016). As the genre continued to gain popularity, the mainstream media began to invite these poets to entertain their audience. The Kenya Television Network (KTN), NTV Kenya and K24 TV, were among the television channels that gave these poets space to perform their poetry. Meanwhile the spoken word poets themselves started posting their performances on YouTube and sharing on other social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The television channels too started streaming these performances on YouTube as the genre became more and more popular. What started as a genre that was mostly performed to the residents of Nairobi in designated

physical spaces, started to spread to other parts of the country and the world at large through the mainstream media and the social media. Today, spoken word poetry in Kenya is still performed in physical spaces such as Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institute, Michael Joseph Centre, Kenya Cultural Centre and the Kenya National Theatre, but such performances receive a lot of viewership when shared on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This is evident in the number of views, likes, comments and shares witnessed.

The advent of the social media technology has brought about transformations in the performance of spoken word poetry in Kenya. This has given rise to the virtual space as an alternative to the physical spaces in such performances. These virtual spaces are a simulation of the physical spaces. They allow the interaction between the poet and the audience as well as interaction amongst members of the audience. Spoken word poetry in social media spaces is presented in the form of written texts, video poems, recorded live performances and virtual live performances. All these forms of spoken word poetry contain some elements of orality. The virtual live performances will be examined to establish the extent to which they exhibit the three key characteristics of oral literature: performance, audience and occasion.

### **Spoken Word Poetry as a Virtual “Live” Performance through Facebook Watch Party**

The Facebook Watch Party feature allows oral literature content to be recorded live in its original form. This feature was invented to promote a “shared viewing experience” on social media. The content creators may choose to upload a video or do a live performance for their audience to watch and react in real time (D’Cruze, 2018). The reactions of the audience are also recorded, and it can be viewed in the comment section and/or the likes section. Spoken word poets in Kenya are increasingly making use of this Facebook watch party feature to present their poetry to the audience. Most of them upload their prerecorded videos while others choose to perform live to their audience in real time. These poets include Brigeddia General formerly Brigeddia Poet, Dorphan, Kennet B., Mufasa Poet, Namatsi Lukoye, Raya Wambui and Teardrops. Spoken word poetry presented live to the audience using the Facebook Watch party feature is what is referred to as a virtual live performance. This kind of a performance brings back the visual aspect of oral literature that was lost when the print media was the only source of recording such content. When oral literature is written out the visual aspect of a performance is lost, and the readers are only left with 1.the printed word alone to analyze the work of art. Sweeney observes that the visual aspects of a performance cannot be captured in a written composition (Sweeney,

1991). It is “misleading” to concentrate on “words” and exclude the most important features of a performance (Finnegan, 2012). Spoken word poetry on social media not only contains the oral and aural features, but also the visual aspects of a performance. Live television performances give a similar experience, but they lack in the interaction between audience to poet and audience to audience while the performance is going on.

### **Performance**

The actual performance is essential in oral literature. It is the “first and most basic characteristic of oral literature” that is often neglected by scholars (Finnegan, 2012). The aesthetic experience of the performer and the audience can only be fulfilled through the actual performances. The Facebook Watch Party live is an attempt at keeping an accurate record of an actual performance to the audience in real time for future generations. The effectiveness of a performance depends on how well an artist makes use of aspects such as the “expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity or humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience.” (Finnegan, 2012). All these aspects can be recorded in a Facebook Watch Party since the actions of the poet and the audience are captured in real time.

Mufasa Poet, a spoken word poet from Kenya, held a Facebook Watch Party live event on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020. The event was called “Mufasa Live In Concert,” and it was a virtual performance in which only the poet and his crew were physically present to each other, but the audience participated live through the internet. The whole event was recorded live and is available on his Facebook page. Watching the recording of the event gives one the feeling that it is live because the comments keep popping up the way they did during the time of the actual performance where they appeared in real time. Mufasa, performs several poems in this concert. He starts off with a self-reflective piece in which he voices out the challenges facing artists in the contemporary society where the number of followers and likes on social media is equated to success without considering the content of a work of art. He believes he has more to tell the world and the number of likes is not a measure of his worth as a spoken word poet.

See I always wanted my art to be about what I know,  
But people keep making it about how many people know me,  
How many directions I have to take,  
Before I am as famous as one direction

I know my name every alphabet,  
But you ask me to prove myself numerically?  
Anyway, numbers won't count me out.

During the performance he says these lines with increased tempo. He also brings both his hands to his chest when he says *See I always wanted my art to be about what I know*, before releasing them when he says the next line. He moves each of his hands in a different direction when saying *How many directions I have to take*, before lifting up his left index finger when saying *But you ask me to prove myself numerically?* Afterwards Mufasa looks straight into the camera as he nods his head when saying *Anyway, numbers won't count me out*. All these add to the meaning and aesthetic appeal of the poem. The look on his face when he says the last line is an affirmation to his audience that he will not allow himself to be defined by the number of likes he gets for his performances because he knows his real worth. He then drops his eye contact with the audience when he picks up the next line.

The “musical setting” of this poem also contributes to the general mood and atmosphere. As Mufasa begins to recite the lines quoted above, the musical instruments become louder than before as if to draw the attention of the audience to the importance of those lines. However, the voice of the poet remains above that of the musical instruments allowing the audience to get what is being recited. The element of musical accompaniment is common in the performance of spoken word poetry in Kenya. Dorphan has made use of it in some of his poems like “Najua”, “Mashujaa” and “Nyota Yangu”, while Kennet B. in his poems like “Silent River”, “Amani” and “Green Talk.” Namatsi Lukoye has also made use of musical accompaniment in her poems like “Queen”, “Tomorrow” and “Words”, while Brigeddia General in his poems “Mheshimiwa” and “Lizzi Mammu.” All these poems are available on their YouTube channels and some have even been shared on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This is in line with Finnegan’s observation that “Much of what is normally classed as poetry in African oral literature is designed to be performed in a musical setting, and the musical and the verbal elements are thus interdependent” (Finnegan, 2012). Such forms may have a soloist who may be accompanied by a chorus and musical instruments which is common with most of Dorphan’s spoken word poems. The feature of musical accompaniment is experienced throughout Mufasa’s Live In Concert. There is a vocalist for every poem recited by Mufasa as well as instrumentalists. The songs are used to heighten the mood of the poem as well as complement the message.

The other visual elements of a performance like the costumes and accoutrements are also important in creating the general atmosphere in African oral literature (Finnegan, 2012). During the entire performance, Mufasa is adorned in a yellow, black and grey African print regalia over a pair of black trousers and a black round neck shirt with two long beaded necklaces hanging on his chest. The yellow in the regalia represents the title in Mufasa's spoken word poetry anthology, *Raising a Sun*. He uses the concert to advertise his newly released poetry anthology. "The title looks at a new dawn of Africa, a hopeful Africa with her youthful population steering the way, but in retrospect, things are not that easy as it were." (Okach, 2020). He also has his signature black beret on his head and black and white sports shoes. The black colour is dominant in his costume which may be taken to represent the race of the people whose plight he explores in his poetry. The décor has an image of a person's face with tears rolling down one eye. This is in line with the objective of the concert which is aimed at sensitizing the public about police brutality and violation of human rights in Kenya.

### **Audience**

In African oral literature the audience is usually actively involved in the creation of a work of art. "An audience of some kind is normally an essential part of the whole literary situation" (Finnegan, 2012). Spoken word poetry performed virtually through the Facebook Watch Party feature allows the interaction between the poet and the audience in real time. Members of the audience show their reaction to the performance by leaving a comment in the comments, liking or sharing the post with their social media friends. The like button allows members of the audience to use emojis, GIFS, or Avatars to show their reaction to the performance. During the "Mufasa Live In Concert" held on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020 there were at least 13,000 Facebook users who watched the performance as indicated in the number of views recorded. Their reaction to the performance was recorded and can still be accessed to date. One of Mufasa's top fan writes "One day, one day a poet will get a million live viewers." This is in response to Mufasa's lament that sometimes people rate his poetry based on the number of likes/views on social media. Another member of the audience says "We can't forget the band the music at the background *iko freshi kabisa* 🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵🎵". This can be loosely translated as "We cannot forget the band. The music in the background is awesome." This member of the audience uses emojis to show how much she appreciates the musical accompaniment used in Mufasa's spoken word poetry. Therefore, it is important to take the entire performance into consideration during analysis rather than just concentrating on what the poet says. All the aspects of the performance contribute to

the aesthetic appeal and how the message is understood by members of the audience. Below are some of the comments that can help us gain insights into how the spoken word poem was experienced by members of the audience who were mostly virtual. These comments together with the entire performance will be handed down from one generation to the next and will affect to a great extent how other viewers will react to the poem in future.

“Mufasa Kibet yours isn't just poetry but an outpouring of your soul... It's transcendent & beautiful ☐”

“We must change it for our children, women, men for everyone.”

“Oyess n I love how they express themselves n the message that they are sharing to us ...n big up to them n will support continuously”

“Snap snap snap cheers ☐ great work buddy”

“The saxophonist is on ☐ and all the band guys are ☐☐”

“Are we the generation that could not generate the power to be unslaved? Eeeish! ☐☐☐”

“huyo jamaa wa saxa apewe delmonte kwa bill yangu” – Translation: The guy playing the saxophone should be given Delmonte (juice from Delmonte company) on my bill.

“The melody is speaking. Have we failed as a generation?”

“That piece my boys are dying has hit home very differently☐☐Thank you Mufasa Kibet. Also the dress code iko tu sawaaa. I like it.” – Translation: Also the dress code is just okay. I like it.

As witnessed in the comments the members of the audience are not only responding to the words in the poem, but to all aspects of the performance including the musical accompaniment. Throughout the performance Mufasa is heard encouraging his virtual audience to keep writing the comments and tagging their friends. Members of the audience also react to the performance by sharing it with others or tagging their friends along. You can tag someone to watch/read a Facebook post by simply writing their Facebook name in the comment section and the person will be alerted that their attention is required. All these comments are part of the performance and should not be left out in analysis. Mufasa takes his interaction with the virtual audience a notch higher when performing the love poem. He asks how lovers are handling kissing with masks on due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This acts as a comic relief. The previous poem about the plight of young artists was emotionally charged and Mufasa skillfully debriefs the audience from that mood to prepare them for a love poem which he delivers effectively. At the end of the performance Mufasa joins the band in dancing and celebrating the success of the event.



### **Occasion**

The actual occasion is important in the analysis of African oral literature. The occasion can “directly affect the detailed content and form of the piece being performed” (Finnegan, 2012). Some oral pieces are designed for and arise from specific occasions. Mufasa Live In Concert was specifically designed for a virtual audience because it came at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic was at its peak globally. Due to social distancing rules artists were not allowed to perform in physical spaces that would require many people to converge in one place as this would increase the risk of infection. The concert was organized with the aim of addressing some of the social injustices experienced in Kenya in time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Before Mufasa begins his performances, Lizzie Kiama, the managing trustee of “This Ability Trust” talks about the challenges faced by persons with disability in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The next speaker on stage is Michael Hjelmaker, the acting ambassador and deputy head of mission, Embassy of Sweden – Kenya. He says human rights is the foundation of any civilized society. He talks of how the core democratic values are being “scaled back” and “infringed upon” during the Covid-19 pandemic. He emphasizes the importance of engaging in conversations about “human rights, democracy, rule of law,” which he says the concert is aimed at addressing. These two speakers set the stage for what should be expected in the performance. Mufasa recites a total of five poems in this concert. Four of the poems are packed with tension as the poet addresses challenges facing the marginalized in the society including young artists, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before Mufasa performs his second poem he makes a short speech which helps us understand the context of the performance.

Now it is a weird time. No one saw this time coming. Like I said it is a challenging time. I mean I was thinking to myself like no one downloaded skype thinking that he would use it to bury their loved ones in the future. And so much is coming out like there is this person, Maina, the guy who was beaten up by police for being late. It was like seven and he was beaten up and I realized one thing that most of us are desensitized from issues that do not affect us. Like I remember one of the questions someone was asking on Twitter was “What was he doing at that time?” And you know that question comes from a point of privilege like you were in the house you were safe, so you don’t really care much about someone. You question the situation. And there are other people as well that won’t feel as long as we are not them. As long as we cannot see those people who are in slums and where people are struggling, people who don’t have savings and stuff, we have distanced ourselves from them.

This speech and any other in that event is part of the performance. In the speech Mufasa talks about the isolation that has been brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Gatherings even at

funerals are prohibited forcing people to bury their loved ones virtually. He addresses the challenges facing the poor people living in informal settlements where they are forced to go out and do manual jobs to afford a day's meal. During the pandemic, such individuals found themselves in trouble with the police when they could not beat the curfew leading them to be clobbered to death in some cases. It is such injustices that form most of Mufasa's poetry in this concert. The speeches provide the context for his poetry. Before Mufasa begins the recitation of his second poem he ushers in a singer whom he refers to as Ashley. The song by Ashley is very emotional and is characterized by repetition and tonal variation. The lines below are repeated several times but each time the singer uses a different kind of stress and intonation to create a pensive mood.

*We need to find a way to change tomorrow today*

*We need to find a way to change tomorrow today*

*Change it for the children*

*Change it for the women*

*Change it for the men*

Mufasa then comes in with his poem. In the poem he addresses the Covid-19 situation and how the poor have been affected by it. Anyone reading the poem years after the pandemic might never understand why Mufasa uses the metaphor of the mask as a silencing tool. During the pandemic it was a requirement for people to wear masks in public places and defying this order would land one in a serious problem. The mask is supposed to cover a person's nose and mouth to prevent the rapid spread of Covid-19. This interferes with communication among people. The persona in Mufasa's poem feels that the police should not silence people from voicing out their concerns just because there is a pandemic in their midst. He observes that the poor are struggling to make ends meet while the police unleash all their wrath on them in the name of enforcing curfews. He states that whenever a country is going through a crisis the poor people living in informal settlements are usually the casualties. They experience the crisis firsthand by suffering in the hands of those who are charged with the responsibility of protecting them. The song is like a response to the poem, and the two must be analyzed side by side. Working towards change for a better tomorrow is what will ensure the wellbeing of children, women, men and the society at large. This message is emphasized throughout the concert. In fact, at the end of the concert one of the speakers sums up the main message of the day, "We need to find a way to change today for a better tomorrow for everyone." Her name is Catherine Khamali, Programme Manager,

Forum SYD. She explains that her organization is geared towards supporting artists like Mufasa and that that is one way of changing the future of the people. She talks about the role of artists in fighting social injustices and promoting democracy in our society.

Just because they cover their mouth  
Doesn't mean the masks are supposed to silence us  
This Covid situation is unreal  
But police brutality and people's struggles are real  
I have realized  
Every time the country is burning  
People in slums get third degree burns  
They walk around with scars and scars are not like plastics  
They can't be burnt  
They are free to land on any part of your body

As stated before, spoken word poetry in social media spaces is a simulacrum of the oral tradition. The poems are spread widely from one person to the next through sharing and tagging friends. In non-literate societies stories and songs/poems were shared from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Today, the social media is creating a transition into how oral literature is transmitted. The like, comment and share buttons on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter are replacing the real physical movement of people from one place to another to transmit oral literature content. The introduction of the print media as an alternative way of preserving oral literature for future generations, has been a subject of debate for decades as some scholars believe that some features of orality are lost in the written versions of oral literature. The Facebook Watch Party feature allows oral literature performances to be streamed live to the audience in real time. This creates a virtual performance that meets the key characteristics of African oral literature where performance, audience and the actual occasion are all witnessed. Therefore, spoken word poetry in social media spaces is one way in which oral literature can be transmitted from one generation to the next and still retain the original content.

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