

Arts & Culture

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STANDARD ON SATURDAY

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"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time." – Thomas Merton.

Highly driven: Scholar who walked out of a convent to study in the US, shares her thoughts on current state of literature

Prof Kabira: Let writers grow a spine on ethnic and other issues

By ABENEA NDAGO

When Prof Agnes Wanjiku Kabira looks at you, her face betrays no emotion. She fits the Luo saying: 'Jo-chame joyue dhogi joling' ka matuo' (literally: 'those who ate it wiped their mouth and became calm and innocent like patients'). And yet she did something drastic sometime in 1979.

She currently chairs the University of Nairobi's Department of Literature.

"Well, I found a different calling." That is the way she describes what inspired her to take the said decision, and how she today relates with Loreto Girls High School, Msongari, where she did her A-Levels from 1973-1974.

Her journey with literature began in 1965 when she wrote and recited a poem called *Virus*. She was then a Form One student at Loreto Girls, Limuru, a school then ran by Irish missionaries. She had just come from Githirioni Primary School in Lari.

"For the first time, I felt the magic of being a 'creator', and the experience of performance in the oral literature sense," she recalls. At the school, she would later read Shakespeare, James Joyce, and DH Lawrence.

Taught by Okot p'Bitek

Yet, her real contact with literature happened at the University of Nairobi's Department of Literature, which she joined in 1976, and left in 1978. She was taught by David Rubadiri, Taban Lo Liyong, Kimani Geau, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo, and Okot p'Bitek.

"I am in oral literature because Okot made the biggest mark on me," says the writer of *The Oral Artist*, and *A Time for Harvest*.

"Unlike today's academics, Okot taught us to question everything under the sun. He insisted on your opinion. He did not want to hear a student quoting from sources without holding a position as happens

today. He would say: "Well, that is what all those others say; but what do you say?"

She observes that Okot was intellectual to the point of being humorous, and yet he meant it. His knowledge cut across oral literature, sociology, and law. At one time, after Kabira and her fellow students finished their oral literature dissertations, Okot stressed the difference between written literature and oral literature by refusing to enter the students' marks on the mark sheet.

"He simply told the examination people: "Oral Literature cannot be written; it is oral. So I am telling you orally that I listened to all the students' oral dissertations, and they all passed. But their passing cannot be recorded on the mark sheet because it is oral. It is impossible for me to write it down. You can record whatever you want on that mark sheet, but know I have told you that all the students passed."

If Kabira wears a calm persona, then it belies the militant in her, which may be a carry-over from Okot. The strain is identifiable in her work as a champion for women's rights, and in her fight for all Kenyan literature – whether oral or written –

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LITERATURE

Ugly stepsister: Oral literature was denigrated in often racist fashion by colonial anthropologists

Orature is here and everywhere, healthy, equal and always alive

By STEPHEN DERWENT PARTINGTON

Recently, the self-serving British art establishment, as its own literature suggests, "shocked the art world" by nominating a spoken word artist, Tris Vonna-Michell, for the prestigious Turner Prize.

Shocked? I doubt it. True, the Turner works well to annually ask, "What is Art?" This necessary question has been posed since time immemorial, often being answered with an open-ended, "No-one can say". But the establishment Turner seems to exist merely to make art saleable, and it does this by predictably nominating a wider, gimmicky clutch of artists each year. Its annual debate increasingly seems affected and cynical, leading us to conclude: "Art is that which makes money for business-type investors, and its market is annually expanded by this very prize, which forcibly extends the definition of art as Nakumatt might extend its branches".

Art that truly pushes the boundaries of creativity happens elsewhere, despite the establishment, with no desire to be appropriated by this establishment.

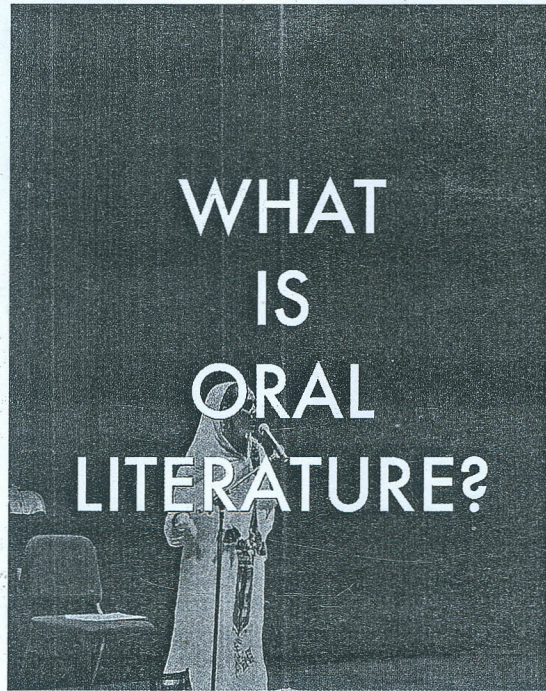
But, perhaps the Turner's inclusion of a spoken word artist does do something a little different. Even if it's just a stunt, perhaps we may nevertheless read it more interestingly than it deserves, to make a point about oral and written literature, those supposedly contrasting forms that have fea-

tured as antagonists in postcolonial African debates from at least the 1960s to today.

Colonised divide

Oral literature, or orature, is old and indigenous; written or scriptal literature is imported. Or so we are told. There is a major problem stemming from the manner in which colonial-era types falsely contrasted these 'two' forms: written literature as modern; orature as traditional. The perceived absence in East Africa of the former and the prevalence of the latter suggested to the early settler that colonised African lands were 'primitive'. More than any other perceived lack, the absence of written texts in colonised countries betrayed their inferiority to a country, Britain, that was performing imperialism during the height of national pride in its own literature. These invaders constructed a binary between the oral and the literate; then, they tipped it to form a bigoted hierarchy.

“It's only recently that Western scholarship has accepted that literate cultures in Africa.” – S. Partington.



Inevitably, the British didn't consider the highly literate cultures of coastal Kenya to be "indigenous", even though they'd been here for hundreds of years. Instead, such problematic cultures were identified as "alien" to the region and themselves imported, bringing a form of civilisation that tried but failed to penetrate the inland. The British would succeed in spreading their "superior" Word (in all its written incarnations, through the Bible and exploitative written laws) where the "Arabs" failed. Nothing, not even the Swahili epic *Al-Inkishafi* or other classics, would shake the fixed oral/literate hierarchy set up by the British, a hierarchy that reinforced the coloniser/colonised divide.

It's only recently that Western scholarship has accepted that literate cultures in Africa (say, the Tamazight, Nubian and Ge'ez) are as "indigenous" as oral cultures, not aberrations. Such studies conclude that there is no predictable temporal progress from oral to literate cultures, but

rather that both have existed contemporaneously for centuries, with, in addition, certain African societies having become literate prior to several Western cultures. A few African scholars had been arguing this for years, but the ears of the Western Academy were closed. The falseness of the Imperialist oral/scriptal hierarchy has therefore been revealed; it was established for 'reasons of political expediency', to help justify the exploitations of Imperialism.

Profoundly sexist

This recent scholarship demands a new respect for (African) orature from the West and a new self-reflection on the part of African commentators. When orature was denigrated in often racist fashion by colonial anthropologists, those early African liberationists who rightly played the anti-colonialism card could do so by strategically reversing the terms of the oppressor's argument, by calling orature 'good, authentic and pure', as opposed to written literature, which

was supposedly everything opposite. Things remained antagonistic and confrontational. But now, orature, due to this new acceptance of its equality and coequality with the written word, can no longer be set up by African scholars as 'only good'. Many African scholars are consequently studying our orature more critically; our own brightest, Evan Mwangi, has pointed out how oral literature can be profoundly sexist and otherwise prone to enforcing conformity from minorities, meaning it's as likely to oppress its own putative community members as any other form of textuality. Moreover, the Kenyan habit we still have of publishing works of orature as ethnically pure (as Kamba Oral Literature or Kikuyu Oral Literature, and so on) works not to liberate, but rather to erect ideological boundaries between peoples who are not as perfectly separate as certain leaders might have us believe. The dangers of this neocolonial publishing convention in an ethnically and politically divided region, are obvious.

Oral literature is no better or worse, and no more authentically 'African', than written literature. To believe otherwise would be to fall into the colonial trap of hierarchies and (racial) purities, which achieves nothing good.

There is resilient orality not only in new popular song forms from our region, but also in every written text, including the West's own literate poetry, the sound devices of which (from alliteration to vocalic rhyme) echo those of the ancient bards. Indeed, orature and scriptal literature are historically, linguistically entwined, like non-identical twins.

Perhaps the Turner's nomination of a spoken word artist is symbolic of this previously-suppressed fact of equality and kinship. Perhaps we can read it as Britain's late, dullard realisation that (our African) orature is, and always was, something as fine and admirable as literate poetry. We always knew this. Britain is catching up. Of course, those who nominate folk for the Turner have no idea this is what they are doing; chauvinistically, they probably have no awareness of African orature at all. It is we who can perceptively read this into their nominations. For the Turner judges, their move just makes it easier for the art world to make money. For us, their move proves we've always been right: orature is here and everywhere, healthy and equal. And it always will be.

'Contemporary Kenyan writers are afraid to criticise their tribes'

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to be relevant to the Kenyan society. In 1979, while teaching at Loreto Girls, in Kiambu, the Government banned her play *What a World, My People!*

Her work with women saw the founding of the African Women Studies Centre at the University of Nairobi in June, 2011, and in her tireless work with the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission. Her book, *A Time for Harvest*, traces the women's journey in the struggle for a new constitution in the past 20 years, beginning from 1992 to 2012. She reminds the 16

women MPs of 290 that their mere presence in Parliament will be fruitful if it is not properly utilised.

She says, "It disappoints me that, with a new constitution in 2014, it is still possible to read that 7.1 million Kenyans still often go to bed hungry, as if these people are mere statistics. With devolution, how can it be possible for the Government not to know these people, each by name, and give them food? It is unacceptable for people to be dying of hunger in Baringo and Turkana under a new constitution. Even worse than that is the fact that pioneer singers like Joseph Kamaru live in grinding poverty. If pira-

cy is the problem, then why is it impossible for the Government to subsidise their CDs so they can earn?"

Waste of time

At the University of Nairobi's Department of Literature, she says there is a new dimension to women in literature. It is now possible to do post-graduate studies in any of four areas: African Literature of the Global South; African Literature of the Global North; European Literature; and Theatre and Film Studies. The department has also liaised with the Ministry of Education to found the Teachers Film Association,

which sensitises teachers on how best to enrich the National Drama Festival.

"This is an attempt to make literature relevant to the Kenyan society," she stresses. "The people who tried to kill Kenyan literature by merging it with English were KIE and the Ministry of Education. You can never teach English through Oral Literature simply because you will never translate the two Dholuo words 'Thu Tinda' into English. Even though there is a lot of writing going on, the so-called writers waste time on extremely petty issues, mainly individualistic. It is as if there is nothing happening in the

wider Kenyan society. Ngugi, Okot, Taban and the rest were able to capture the national imagination by holding opinion on daily national issues; not private ones."

Nothing horrifies Prof Kabira more than the contemporary Kenyan writer's inability to criticise his/her own tribe.

It is what she calls 'ethnic self-censorship,' and she says it is an exceptional mark of spinelessness and cowardice. That is what she lacked in 1979, when she walked out of the convent, to pursue further studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA.

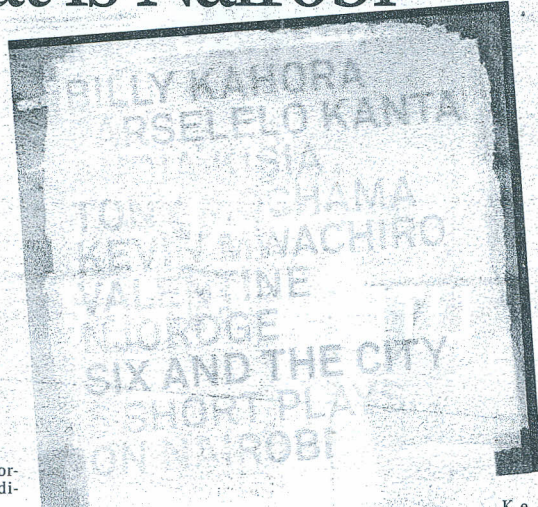
Killing dreams: Plays darkly and starkly remind you about precariousness of life in capital

Getting into belly of beast that is Nairobi

By JENNIFER MUCHIRI

Nairobi hosts people from all walks of life living in different parts of the city, engaged in different activities, harbouring various dreams and aspirations, each with different thoughts about all kinds of subjects. For the different residents of the city-in-the-sun, living in the capital city means different things, in different places at different times. For some the city is the land of opportunity; for others each day is a nightmare. For some Nairobi is home; for others it is exile. Some enjoy the Nairobi sun; others curse each day the sun rises in the east of the city.

Living in Nairobi today is the subject of a recently published book, *Six and the City* (Contact Zones and Goethe-Institut, 2014). *Six and the City* is a collection of six short plays: Billy Kahora's *The Committee*; Parselelo Kantai's *I Just Got Back*; Andia Kisia's *The 24th Floor*; Tony Mochama's *Percy's Killer Party*; Kevin Mwachiro's *Thrashed*; and Valentine Njorge's *Modern African Woman*. The plays offer different stories about living in Nairobi and have characters who represent the various traits of Nairobians in different circumstances, spaces and jobs – politicians, thugs, beggars, university students, NGO professionals, businessmen and women, lawyers, government officers. The writers show what it really means to live in present day Nairobi and the kind of situations one finds oneself in on an



ordi-

ordinary day in the city. *Six and the City* addresses the various issues that Nairobians grapple with each day and mocks city residents who pride themselves in living in the capital yet the so-called city-in-the-sun is actually a dark, rotten and soul-destroying place.

Horror of adulthood

Kahora's *The Committee* is about the activities of a sub-committee selected by the government to oversee the selection of heroes to be honoured during the 50th anniversary of the republic. Dubbed the committee of "Persons in Production of Heroes for Kenya Republic in the Jubilee Year Anniversary", the committee is a sub-committee of another one called the Intra-County Reflections Committee, Sub-Committee for the 50th Anniversary of

Kenya Republic. What a name! The committee reflects the greed and corruption that ail Kenya where public funds are spent on non-performing and self-serving committees and commissions whose members do not have the interest of the country at heart. The play, in some sense, satirises the much hyped Kenya@50 celebrations which had nothing to show for all the money allocated to the same.

Parselelo's *I Just Got Back* tells a story of a young woman who has just got back to Nairobi from Europe and hopes to settle in and possibly start a business. She discovers that Nairobi is not what she imagined it to be when she is conned of all her investments by a friend; her landlord threatens to evict her over rent arrears; the shopkeeper will not extend her credit anymore and she cannot get a reliable supply of water

or electricity. She had hoped to live the kind of life she had been used to in Europe but realises painfully that the life of Bluetooth, Whatsapp, wine, ipod, is not easy to maintain in the face of the deceit and pretensions of Nairobi. You can take it to the bank that this city can kill dreams; it can spit on your strategic plans and turn them into obituaries of what-would-have-been. Inhospitality is a modern disease afflicting cities the world over. It is just that it is an epidemic in Nairobi. For the returnees, better vaccinate yourself before getting the back-home visa.

Mochama's *Percy's Killer Party* tells the story of a young female university student who dies while attending a party hosted by wealthy politicians. The play reveals the dangers young women expose themselves to when they allow themselves to be lured by promises of fun and quick riches by unscrupulous old men. This is the city that will eat its young, feeding them ambition, dreams, drugs, alcohol, turning them into zombies before they can see the horror of adulthood. And then bury them, so young.

Mwachiro's *Thrashed* is the story of a female beggar who explains her woes trying to make a living in the city. She is raped, beaten, insulted, loses her children yet she still has to provide for her remaining child. Through her we get to see survival tactics of one section of the city residents including using dolls as babies to hoodwink pedestrians into giving them money. This is the capitalistic, morality-shredding Nairobi; one in which you are not sure if the fellow on the pavement asking you for kobole is a beggar, a cop in disguise or your Buruburu landlord!

Six and the City will show you the different variations to the theme of Nairobianness. The language, concerns, places, experiences and characters are Nairobi-like and the plays leave no doubt that different people indeed experience different smells, tastes and sounds of Nairobi. The plays will darkly and starkly remind you about the precariousness of life in Nairobi.

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“It is the risky nature of the city that some thrive

ON – Jennifer Muchiri.

Book stresses role of clergy in ethnic reconciliation

By ABENEBA NDAGO

When we begin to compare Kenya with Europe in regard to the place of the church during decisive historic upheavals, then what comes to mind is our agitation for multi-party democracy in the early 1990s, and Europe's Reformation in the 16th century. We invoke the names of Bishop Alexander Muge, Rev. Timothy Njoya, and Dr. Henry Okullu each time Europe mentions Martin Luther and Ignatius Loyola.

JR Alila's *The Milayi Curse* (2013) addresses a similar theme. The allegorical tone of the novel bears the seething, ethnic undertones which have dogged Kenya's politics since independence, and which the country has never really known how to expunge from her collective, national memory with a magic wand.

A Kenyan scientist-novelist who

lives and works in the US, Prof Alila weaves a gripping tale about two sub-clans with an unresolved curse running for three hundred years. The two rival sub-clans are represented by two families, Jamoko and Milayi.

Bloody history

During the years of Luo settlement on the shores of Lake Victoria, Raburu Milayi had been the chief warrior against the Konyango clan, and Jamoko had been his commander. But on the day Milayi was fatally wounded, his fellow warriors abandoned him in enemy territory, and Jamoko had unfairly benefited from these wars at the expense of war widows and Milayi himself.

It is this historical 'theft' that congeals into a curse against the Jamokos, and the potency of the curse transcends the two sub-clans' lives deep into post-independence Kenya. As



Prof JR Alila

has secretly been expressed with reference to the curse of ethnicity in Kenya, the author suggests that women are part of the reason why 'the curse of Milayi' is alive so longer after Raburu Milayi's murder those three centuries before.

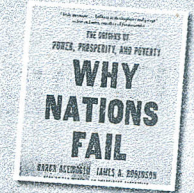
The church is an institution whose bloody rubber stamp is very well documented in the African con-

continent. In 2007/08, the ethnic pronouncements of a certain church made us think that even tribalism was ordained by God. That same church today works very hard to fight the mayhem in the Central African Republic (CAR), but most people would still need convincing that such loud work isn't inspired by that church's guilt about Rwanda twenty years ago.

That is the question any reader will ask *The Milayi Curse*. Bishop Muge, Dr. Okullu, and Rev. Njoya were rare souls and intellect. The Kenya we today live in is so ethnically dark that you hardly rule out the possibility of members of the clergy separately kneeling before God each morning, crying to Him to liquidate all other ethnicities except theirs. If you met a Bishop Muge somewhere today, that would be as rare as a white pot.

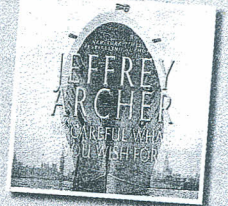
What Kenyans are reading this week

WITH KIUNDO WAWERU



Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson

This book popular at the Prestige Bookshop explores why some nations prosper in wealth and power while others lag behind using economic insights. A good example is South Korea and North Korea, where the former is prosperous while the latter is marred in poverty. The authors are both economists, Acemoglu from MIT and Robinson from Harvard University, and the book is a result of 15 years of research.



Be Careful What You Wish For by Jeffrey Archer

Published March this year, *Be Careful What You Wish For* is the fourth Jeffrey Archer novel in the Clifton Chronicles. It has been moving off the shelves at the Text Book Centre, Sarit this week. The book from the acclaimed fiction writer tells the story of the Barington Clifton family involved in a shipping business rigged with conspiracies and sabotage. Archer had intimated there will be five books in the series but now there is talk they will be seven. Number five comes out in 2015



The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho

Books First, Lifestyle, had a surprise book. Well, not so surprising as the *Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho has been a world bestseller since it was first translated to English. It was first written in Portuguese in 1988 and it now holds the Guinness World Record for the book translated into most languages, over 50.