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 Arenea Ndagó

When Prof Agnes Wanjiku Kabira looks at you, her face betrays no emotion. She fits the Luo saying: 'Io-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, Lirouru, 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, Shibon Lo Liyeng, Kimathi Geza, 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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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" 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 open-ended, "No-one can say". But the establishment Turner seems exist merely to make art saleable, and it does this by potentially nomi

nating 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 busi-

ness-type investors, and its market is increasing. Foreign- tic, 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 boundar-

ies of creativity happens elsewhere, despite the establishment, with no desire to be appropriated by this estab-

ishment. 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 never-

theless read it more interestingly than something a little different. Even if it deserves, to make a point about oral scholarship has received 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 invades con-

structed a binary between the oral and the literate; then, they tipped it up to form a bifurcated hierarchy.

"It's only recently that Western scholarship has accepted that literate cultures in Africa." - S. Partington.

Inevitably, the British didn't con-

sider the highly literate cultures of coastal Kenya to be 'indigenous', even though they've been here for hundreds of years. Instead, such problematic cultures were identified as 'alien' to the region and them-

selves imported, bringing a form of civilisation that tried but failed to penetrate the island. The British would succeed in spreading their 'super-

ior' Word (in all its written incarnations, through the Bible and expl-

orative written laws) where the 'Arabs' failed. Nothing, even not the Swahili epic Al-Iklaash or other clas-

sics, would shake the fixed oral/liter-

ate hierarchy set up by the British, a hierarchy that reinforced the colonis-

er/colonised divide.

It's only recently that Western scholarship has accepted that literate cultures in Africa (say, the Tama/ngiz, Nubian and Ge'ez) are as 'indige-

nous' as oral cultures, not aber-

tions. Such studies conclude that there is no predictable temporal prog-

ress from oral to literate cultures, but rather that both have existed contem-

poraneously for centuries, with, in addition, certain African societies having become literate prior to sev-

eral 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 hierar-

chy has therefore been revealed. It was established for 'reasons of politi-

cal expediency', to help justify the exploits of Imperialism.

Profoundly sexist

This recent scholarship demands a new respect for (African) orature from the West and a new self-reflec-

tion on the part of African commen-

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gically 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 coevality with the writ-

ten word, can no longer be set up by African scholarship as 'only good'. Many African scholars are consequently studying our orature more critically; one of whom is a Kamba novelist Mwangi, who has pointed out how oral literature can be profoundly sexist and otherwise perceptively read this into their nom-

ination that (our African) orature is, and always was, something as fine and admirable as written orature. 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, chaotically, perhaps, but have an awareness of African orature at all. It is we who can perceive this into our nom-

inations. For the Turner judges, their move just makes it easier for the art world to make money. For us, the 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"'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

to be relevant to the Kenyan society. In 1975, 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 from at least the 1960s to today.

Colonised divide

Oral literature, or orature, is old and indigenous; written or scriptal literature, imported. Or so we are told. There is a major problem stemming from the manner in which co-

lonial-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 per-

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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 circumstances.

It is the risky nature of the city that some thrive

On 1 - Jennifer Muchiri.

Book stresses role of clergy in ethnic reconciliation

By ABEREKA 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 Muge, Rev. Timothy Njoroge, and Dr. Henry Okullu each time Europe mentions Kenya’s church’s guilt about Rwanda twenty years before.

That is the question any reader will ask The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. Books First, Lifestyle, a surprise book. Well, not so surprising as the Alchemist by Paulo Coelho has been a world bestsell-

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Books First, Lifestyle, 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.