

Spoken word poetry: A creative catalyst for holistic human progress in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of spoken word poetry as a creative art form that fosters holistic human progress, offering an innovative solution within a multi-disciplinary framework. Rooted in performance theory, conceptualized by Judith Butler and drawing upon the vibrant Kenyan spoken word scene, this study examines how artistic strategies employed by youth poets articulate and challenge subalternity, contributing to social change and individual empowerment. Focusing on the performative aspects of spoken word, the analysis demonstrates how poets utilize embodied performance, linguistic innovation, and collaborative artistic practices to create spaces for dialogue and critical reflection. By amplifying marginalized voices and experiences, particularly those of young people navigating complex social and economic realities, spoken word poetry becomes a powerful tool for raising awareness about inequality and advocating for social justice. Furthermore, the paper argues that the interdisciplinary nature of spoken word poetry – blending elements of literature, performance studies, sociology, and psychology – allows for a more comprehensive understanding of its impact. By connecting personal narratives to broader socio-political contexts, spoken word poetry encourages critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of collective responsibility. Ultimately, this research posits that Kenyan spoken word poetry, through its innovative artistic strategies and its engagement with youth subalternity, serves as a model for fostering holistic human progress. It highlights the transformative power of creative expression in promoting social change, empowering individuals, and building more equitable and just societies. This study contributes to the broader discourse on arts-based approaches to development and provides valuable insights for researchers and practitioners working across diverse disciplines.

Keywords: Artistic Strategies, Critical Thinking, Empathy, Performance, Spoken Word, Subaltern, Youth

I. INTRODUCTION

Spoken word poetry, a dynamic creative art form, holds immense potential for driving holistic human progress, particularly within marginalized communities. This paper explores how Kenyan youth poets are harnessing the power of spoken word to challenge their experiences of subalternity and contribute to meaningful social change and individual empowerment. By amplifying marginalized voices and connecting personal narratives to broader socio-political contexts, spoken word poetry encourages critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of collective responsibility, raising awareness about inequality and advocating for social justice. This research argues that Kenyan spoken word poetry, through its innovative artistic strategies and its engagement with youth experiences, serves as a model for fostering holistic human progress, demonstrating the transformative power of creative expression in building more equitable and just societies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study adopts a theoretical framework rooted in performance theory, particularly focusing on the concepts of performativity and embodiment. Performativity, as defined by Butler (1990), suggests that identities are not fixed but are actively constructed and re-constructed through repeated performances. In the context of spoken word poetry, this means that poets are not simply expressing pre-existing identities but are actively shaping them through their performances. Furthermore, the concept of embodiment, drawing on the work of scholars like Schechner (2013), emphasizes the importance of the body in performance. Spoken word poets use their bodies – their voices, gestures, and movements – to convey meaning and connect with their audience on an emotional level.

In addition to performance theory, this paper also draws on critical theories of subalternity and social justice. By examining how spoken word poetry provides a platform for marginalized voices, we aim to understand how artistic expression can challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social change. The framework allows us to analyse how poets negotiate power dynamics and resist oppressive structures through their artistic practices. The work of scholars in

postcolonial studies (e.g., Bhabha, 1994) informs analysis of how poets reclaim their narratives and challenge colonial legacies through their work.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing close textual readings of selected spoken word poems by Kenyan youth poets alongside analysis of publicly available live performance videos. The selection of poems and performances focuses on works that explicitly engage with themes of social justice, inequality, and youth empowerment.

Data analysis involves a combination of thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the selected poems, while discourse analysis will examine the language and rhetorical strategies employed by the poets. More specifically, this involved watching the videos severally while taking notes on the tone, gestures and non-verbal communication.

Furthermore, this study also draws on secondary sources, including academic articles, books, and reports on the Kenyan arts scene and youth development. By triangulating data from multiple sources, we aim to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of spoken word poetry in fostering holistic human progress in Kenya.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 The Kenyan Spoken Word Scene: A Crucible of Subaltern Expression and Holistic Human Progress

Linguistic innovation is a key element that allows spoken word to effectively represent subaltern experiences. Poets often employ vernacular languages, slang, and code-switching to create a more authentic and relatable voice. This linguistic innovation not only resonates with the target audience but also challenges the dominance of standard languages and reinforces the cultural identity of marginalized communities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2010). By using language that reflects their lived realities, poets can reclaim their narratives and challenge the dominant discourse that often silences or misrepresents their experiences. For example, a poet addressing issues of police brutality might incorporate Sheng, a popular urban slang, to connect with a younger audience and critique the language used by law enforcement. Consider the following lines from a spoken word performance focusing on youth unemployment:

"Vitu kwa ground ni ngumu, bro. Graduation ilifika, but job bado hatujaona. Tunahangaika tu, roho inauma. Wanatuambia tujiinue, but wapi hio nguvu?" (Things on the ground are tough, bro. Graduation came, but we still haven't seen jobs. We are just hustling, our hearts ache. They tell us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, but where will we get that strength").

This use of Sheng immediately establishes a connection with the audience, conveying the frustration and hopelessness felt by many young Kenyans struggling to find employment. Collaboration is another vital aspect of spoken word that facilitates the amplification of subaltern voices. Spoken word events and workshops often create spaces for dialogue and interaction among poets and audience members. This collaborative environment fosters a sense of community and allows individuals to share their experiences, learn from each other, and collectively address social issues (Bishop, 2025). The sharing of personal narratives can create a collective identity and empower individuals to become active agents of change. Mentorship programs within the spoken word scene also provide opportunities for established poets to guide and support emerging voices, ensuring that the platform remains accessible and inclusive. Specifically, spoken word poetry allows subalternity to be identified and challenges the notion.

"They say we are lazy, that we lack ambition. They see our struggles, but not the system that chained us. But we are rising, voices united, reclaiming our future. No longer silent, no longer invisible."

Here, the poet directly challenges the stereotype of laziness often attached to unemployed youth, highlighting the systemic factors that contribute to their marginalization and asserting their agency to create change. This counter-narrative is essential for dismantling harmful stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by subaltern communities. By the utilization of the above aspects of performance, Kenyan spoken word artists frequently address issues of poverty, inequality, and social injustice in their work. They use their performances to expose the realities of life for those living on the margins, often drawing on personal experiences to create powerful and emotionally resonant pieces. Take, for example, a fictionalized excerpt reflecting common themes in Kenyan spoken word:

"They say we are invisible, ghosts in our own land,/But I see the fire in your eyes, the struggle in your hand./We are the forgotten, the silenced, the unheard,/But our voices will rise, like thunder, a powerful word."

This illustrative verse, while fictionalized, captures the essence of many spoken word poems aimed at reclaiming visibility and agency for marginalized communities. This resonates with scholars like Conquergood (2002), who

emphasizes the importance of "performative ethnography" in giving voice to marginalized communities and challenging dominant power structures.

Furthermore, spoken word poetry allows for a diverse range of voices and perspectives to be heard. Young people, in particular, have found a powerful voice in spoken word, using it to express their frustrations, aspirations, and hopes for the future. Many scholars point to the potential of youth-led artistic movements to ignite social change. According to Ginwright (2010), youth activism, particularly through creative expression, plays a critical role in challenging systemic inequalities and empowering marginalized communities. Consider this illustrative example:

"I am the youth, the future, they say,/But the future is bleak, in so many ways./Unemployment, corruption, a broken system,/But I will not be silenced, I will stand and resist them."(Mary Wambui spoken word)

This excerpt underscores the ability of spoken word to act as a conduit for young voices to express their disillusionment with the status quo and demand a better future.

The power of spoken word also lies in its ability to foster dialogue and create spaces for critical reflection. Through their performances, spoken word artists engage with audiences, prompting them to think critically about social issues and consider alternative perspectives. This dialogic aspect of spoken word is crucial for fostering understanding and building solidarity across different social groups. As Bakhtin (1981) argues, language is inherently dialogic, and meaning is created through the interaction between speaker and listener. Spoken word poetry, with its emphasis on live performance, embodies this dialogic principle, creating a dynamic exchange between the artist and the audience. This dynamic exchange is particularly powerful when addressing sensitive or controversial topics, as seen in the fictional verse:

"We whisper secrets in the shadows, afraid to speak our truth,/But on this stage, our voices echo, a testament to our youth./We challenge the norms, question the beliefs,/Planting seeds of change, offering sweet reliefs."

This illustrates how spoken word stages can provide a safe space for voicing previously suppressed or marginalized viewpoints.

4.2 Creative Expression and Social Change

By engaging with critical social issues, spoken word poets can raise awareness, spark dialogue, and inspire action. The performative nature of spoken word enhances its impact, as audiences are not only presented with information but also emotionally engaged through the poet's delivery, body language, and vocal inflection.

Schechner (2013) emphasizes the transformative power of performance, arguing that it can challenge existing social norms and create spaces for collective action. Kenyan spoken word artists often use their performances to address issues such as corruption, gender inequality, and environmental degradation. Their words act as a call to action, urging audiences to reconsider their perspectives and become active participants in shaping a better future.

Beyond its artistic value, spoken word poetry actively contributes to social change by raising awareness of inequalities and promoting empathy. In Kenya, where young people face issues like unemployment and limited access to education, poets use their platforms to expose these realities and advocate for reform. This form of expression acts as a catalyst for change, encouraging listeners to reflect on their roles in society and take steps toward justice (Mwangi, 2010). By sharing personal stories, poets bridge gaps between individuals and communities, fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

A notable example is how spoken word has been used to address gender-based violence and women's rights in Kenya. Poets often incorporate vivid imagery and direct appeals to highlight the need for equality. In one powerful piece, a poet declared,

"She is not a statistic; she is a storm, rewriting the scripts of silence with every word she speaks" (Wambui, 2017, p. 19).

This quote underscores the transformative power of spoken word, where creative expression becomes a tool for empowerment and advocacy. Such performances not only challenge harmful norms but also inspire audiences to support social movements, leading to tangible outcomes like policy discussions and community initiatives.

Moreover, spoken word's accessibility makes it an effective vehicle for social change in diverse settings. Unlike formal art forms that may require resources or institutional support, spoken word can be performed in public spaces, schools, or online platforms, reaching wide audiences at little cost. In Kenya, this has enabled young people from rural and urban areas to engage in creative expression as a means of protest and healing.

These examples show how spoken word not only reflects social issues but also actively shapes public discourse, encouraging critical thinking and collective action. A line that exemplifies this is,

"We are the architects of change, armed with words, building bridges of understanding across the chasms of division."

It not only encapsulates the spirit of proactive change but also highlights the power of language in fostering social cohesion and dismantling barriers. This reflects Appiah's (2006) argument for cosmopolitanism, where art and dialogue can foster understanding and respect across cultural boundaries.

4.3 Empowerment Through Artistic Collaboration and Linguistic Innovation

The Kenyan spoken word scene is characterized by a spirit of collaboration and innovation. Poets often work together, sharing their skills, providing feedback, and supporting each other's creative development. This collaborative environment fosters a sense of community and empowers individual artists to push the boundaries of their craft.

One of the key ways spoken word empowers individuals is by providing a space for shared storytelling and the amplification of marginalized voices. Collaboration within spoken word circles often involves poets sharing personal experiences, weaving them into collective narratives that resonate with wider social issues. This process validates individual experiences while simultaneously demonstrating their interconnectedness, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. As noted by scholars of performance theory, the act of sharing stories in a public forum can be transformative, allowing individuals to reclaim agency over their narratives (Carlson, 1996). This is exemplified by collective pieces that tackle societal issues such as corruption, lack of access to healthcare, or even challenges with relationships. For example, a collaborative poem addressing the challenges faced by young women in urban areas might include lines reflecting diverse experiences, yet united by the common thread of resilience. An example might include the speakers saying

"I see you, sister, fighting for your voice, for your right, in this society that wants to silence us."

This kind of shared expression creates a supportive environment where individuals feel validated and empowered to speak out against injustice. Furthermore, artistic collaboration in spoken word fosters a sense of community and collective responsibility. The creation and performance of spoken word often involve workshops, open mic nights, and collaborative writing sessions, all of which promote interaction and dialogue among participants. Through these interactions, poets learn from one another, share their skills and experiences, and build strong social networks. This sense of community can be particularly empowering for individuals who may otherwise feel isolated or marginalized. The collaborative creative process itself becomes a site of empowerment, where individuals contribute to a shared vision and witness the impact of their collective efforts. Poets are known to perform together to advocate for good governance and social justice. An example of this can be illustrated in the following lines:

"With our voices, we rise as one, / Demanding justice, demanding change begun"

This shared commitment to social justice fosters a sense of collective responsibility and motivates individuals to take action to create positive change in their communities. Moreover, spoken word as a collaborative art form facilitates critical self-reflection and social commentary. The process of crafting and performing spoken word poetry encourages poets to examine their own experiences and perspectives, as well as to critique the social and political structures that shape their lives. Through collaboration, poets are exposed to diverse viewpoints and challenged to think critically about their own assumptions and biases. This process of critical self-reflection can be deeply empowering, as it allows individuals to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Spoken word performances often serve as platforms for social commentary, where poets use their art to challenge injustice, raise awareness about important issues, and advocate for change. This kind of artistic activism can be a powerful tool for social change, as it allows individuals to express their dissent and mobilize others to take action (Sommer, 2006). The act of speaking truth to power, even in a poetic form, can be incredibly empowering for both the performer and the audience. The poem's collaborative nature ensures the message is collectively crafted, making it more powerful and impactful. An example of collaborative poetry tackling the issue of police brutality might echo sentiments such as

"Our stories, our pain, interwoven in rhyme, / A symphony of voices, demanding justice, one crime at a time."

Furthermore, Kenyan spoken word poets demonstrate remarkable linguistic innovation, blending English, Swahili, and other local languages to create a unique and dynamic form of expression. This linguistic fusion not only reflects the multilingual reality of Kenyan society but also allows poets to connect with a wider audience and communicate complex ideas in a relatable and engaging manner.

By combining different languages and artistic styles, Kenyan spoken word poets are creating a new artistic landscape that reflects the diversity and dynamism of their nation. This echoes Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, where cultural exchange and fusion create new forms of expression that challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Kenyan spoken word poetry stands as a testament to the transformative power of creative expression. It illustrates how art can serve as a catalyst for holistic human progress by empowering marginalized voices, fostering critical dialogue, and promoting social change. By embracing innovative artistic strategies and engaging with the complexities of Kenyan society, spoken word poets are creating a vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape that inspires hope, challenges injustice, and contributes to a more equitable and just future. This study suggests that investing in the

creative arts, particularly spoken word poetry, can be a powerful strategy for promoting holistic human development and fostering thriving communities. Kenyan spoken word poetry emerges as a potent force for holistic human progress by offering a platform for marginalized youth to articulate and challenge their subaltern experiences. Through innovative artistic strategies, these poets amplify silenced voices, connect personal narratives to broader socio-political contexts, and foster dialogue around inequality and social justice. The art form becomes a vehicle for raising awareness, encouraging critical thinking, and cultivating a sense of collective responsibility, ultimately empowering individuals and contributing to the creation of more equitable and just societies. Kenyan spoken word, therefore, serves as a valuable model for understanding the transformative power of creative expression in driving positive social change and fostering human development.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors attest that they have no conflicting interests that could influence the quality of the work reported in this study.

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