



Spoken-word poetry and the framing of fluid identities amongst Kenyan youth

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how spoken-word poetry in Kenya serves as a crucial medium for framing and articulating the fluid identities of Kenyan youth. Drawing upon a formalist theoretical framework, the paper examines the aesthetic and structural elements of spoken-word performances to understand how they construct meaning and voice various identity expressions. Specifically, the analysis delves into four key dimensions: cultural hybridity, social norms, political issues, and social nationalism, demonstrating how youth navigate and represent their multifarious selves through poetic form and delivery. By giving voice to subaltern experiences and confronting stereotypes, spoken-word poetry emerges as a potent artistic and socio-political tool, reflecting the dynamic interplay of cultural, social, and political influences that shape young people's experiences in contemporary Kenya. The findings reveal that Kenyan spoken-word poetry functions as both a creative and political platform through which youth assert agency, negotiate belonging, and challenge dominant discourses surrounding identity and power. The study concludes that spoken-word poetry not only redefines the contours of Kenyan youth identity but also fosters critical dialogue and social transformation by bridging art, activism, and everyday lived realities.

Keywords: Cultural Hybridity, Fluid Identities, Kenyan Youth, Spoken-Word Poetry, Social Norms

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper interrogates the way spoken word poetry in Kenya frames fluidity of subaltern identities amongst Kenyan youth. It examines how selected Kenyan spoken word poetry gives voice to the voiceless youth. It also explores how the youth use spoken word poetry to confront the stereotypes of young people by trying to reach the broader young listening public through politically and socially relevant poems. The youth tend to raise issues such as unemployment, identity crisis, gender discriminations, poverty and corruption (Muiya, 2014).

In particular, the paper looks at spoken word poetry as a performance-based literary genre which has emerged as a potent form of expression among Kenyan youth, reflecting the complexities of their identities. This art form captures the dynamic interplay of cultural, social, and political influences that shape young people's experiences in Kenya (Dina, 2015). As a multifaceted medium that engages with various themes, spoken word poetry allows Kenyan youth to articulate their realities, aspirations, and struggles, thus revealing the fluid nature of their identities. The study further discusses how spoken word poetry serves as a lens through which the evolving identities of Kenyan youth can be understood, focusing on themes such as cultural hybridity, social issues, and political engagement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Formalism and the Poetics of Identity

To rigorously analyse how spoken-word poetry frames fluid identities, this study adopts Formalism as its guiding theoretical framework. Formalism, originating from Russian Formalism and later evolving into New Criticism, posits that the true meaning and aesthetic value of a literary work reside primarily in its intrinsic features: its form, structure, language, and literary devices rather than external factors such as authorial intent or historical context (Shklovsky, 1965; Jakobson, 1960). While traditional Formalism focused largely on written texts, its principles are uniquely adaptable to performance-based genres like spoken-word poetry, where the *how* of delivery is as crucial as the *what* of the message (Kariuki, 2018).

In the context of spoken-word poetry, a formalist approach directs attention to elements such as rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, metaphor, simile, narrative structure, vocal intonation, cadence, pauses, repetition, and even the



performer's body language and interaction with the audience. These are not mere embellishments but constitute the very mechanisms through which meaning is generated and, crucially, through which identities are articulated and framed. For instance, the deliberate choice of code-switching between Swahili, English, and Sheng (a Kenyan urban slang) is a formal choice that signifies cultural hybridity. The rhythmic crescendo in a political poem formally signals outrage or urgency. The narrative arc of a personal story, performed with fluctuating vocal tones, formally maps the journey of an evolving identity (Odinga, 2020)

III. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology, examining chosen spoken-word poetry performances by Kenyan youth through formalist literary analysis. Poems were intentionally selected from notable platforms and digital repositories to encompass a variety of voices and themes. The analysis concentrated on the structural, linguistic, and performative aspects of the poems, investigating how these elements shape and express fluid identities. The interpretation of data was directed by formalist principles, highlighting intrinsic poetic devices and performance techniques to reveal the intricate methods through which identity is constructed and articulated within the genre.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1.1 Spoken-Word Poetry in Kenya: A Contextual Landscape

Spoken-word poetry in Kenya has experienced a vibrant resurgence, particularly within the last two decades, evolving from informal open-mic nights in Nairobi's cultural hubs to become a significant force in public discourse and artistic expression (Ndung'u, 2017). This art form resonates deeply with Kenyan youth, offering an accessible and unmediated platform for self-expression in a society often characterized by generational divides and limited avenues for youth engagement. The emergence of groups like Poetry Slam Africa, Kwani? Open Mic, and individual artists gaining significant online traction underscores its growing influence (Chepkwony, 2016).

This growth is not accidental. Kenyan youth, particularly those in urban and peri-urban centers, face a myriad of challenges including high unemployment rates, limited economic opportunities, pervasive corruption, and social pressures to conform to traditional norms (Gakii, 2015). Concurrently, they are increasingly exposed to global cultural currents through digital media, leading to a complex negotiation of local traditions and global influences. Spoken-word poetry provides a cathartic and empowering space where these complex realities can be articulated, challenged, and collectively processed. It acts as a counter-narrative, allowing young voices to challenge prevailing stereotypes that often paint them as apathetic, unruly, or simply a demographic burden (Moi, 2017).

4.1.2 Cultural Hybridity and Identity

One of the most prominent ways spoken-word poetry frames fluid identities among Kenyan youth is through the articulation of cultural hybridity. Kenyan youth inhabit a liminal space, often straddling the perceived divide between traditional African values, inherited colonial legacies, and burgeoning global digital cultures (Wanjiku, 2019). Spoken-word poetry, through its formal choices, masterfully reflects and celebrates this intricate interweaving of influences, thereby framing an identity that is not homogenous but a vibrant mosaic.

From a formalist perspective, the most striking manifestation of cultural hybridity is the linguistic eclecticism evident in many performances. Poets frequently engage in code-switching and code-mixing between English, Swahili, and Sheng. This is not merely a practical communication choice but a deliberate artistic act that formally signals the multidimensionality of the youth's identity. The rapid shifts in language, often within a single stanza or even a line, reflect a mind that seamlessly navigates different cultural registers. Consider the following lines from Mufasa's poem

"They tell me to remember my roots, but my roots are Nairobi concrete, my soul whispers in Swahili proverbs, while my dreams speak in English headlines. Si niko hapo, between tradition na tech? A child of two worlds, neither fully broken, nor quite yet whole".

Here, the formal elements of linguistic juxtaposition are key. The use of "Nairobi concrete" immediately grounds the identity in an urban, modern Kenyan reality. The contrast between "Swahili proverbs" and "English headlines" formally encapsulates the dichotomy of traditional wisdom versus globalized information. The interrogative "Si niko hapo?" (Am I not there?) in Sheng, followed by the reflective English phrase, formally blurs linguistic boundaries, asserting an identity comfortable in its hybridity. This linguistic fluidity, as Nyamu (2021) suggests, is a performative act of identity construction, showcasing the versatility and adaptability of the contemporary Kenyan self.



4.1.3 Social Norms and Identity

Spoken-word poetry also serves as a critical platform for Kenyan youth to frame their identities in relation to, and often in defiance of, prevailing social norms. Traditional Kenyan society often upholds conservative values regarding gender roles, age hierarchies, sexuality, and community expectations. Youth, navigating modern influences and global perspectives, frequently find themselves at odds with these established norms. Formalism helps us analyse *how* spoken-word poetry challenges, redefines, or sometimes reinforces these social structures through its aesthetic choices.

The direct address and confrontational tone often employed in spoken word are key to challenging social norms. Poets frequently adopt a confessional or argumentative stance, directly addressing societal expectations or specific restrictive beliefs. The use of rhetorical questions, irony, and satire formally dissects and exposes the inconsistencies or hypocrisies within traditional social structures. Consider a poem, by Mufasa addressing gender stereotypes:

They said a girl's place is hushed and low, beneath the shadows, where her whispers go. But my voice is a thunder, a defiant roar, shaking the foundations, demanding more. Are these traditions chains, or merely old stories told?

From a formalist perspective, the deliberate use of rhyming couplets in the opening lines (low/go, roar/more) initially mimics a traditional, almost ballad-like structure, setting up the norm. However, the immediate shift in imagery to "thunder" and "defiant roar" formally breaks this quietude, asserting a powerful counter-narrative. The formal shift from description to rhetorical questions "*Are these traditions chains, or merely old stories told?*" directly engages the audience, forcing a re-evaluation of established norms. This formal disruption is not accidental; it is a calculated poetic strategy to destabilize rigid social expectations and assert a new, bolder identity (Gitau, 2022). The contrast between the "whispers" and the "thunder" is a formal binary that frames the speaker's identity as a challenger of silence.

2.1.5 Political Issues and Identity

Beyond personal and social realms, spoken-word poetry in Kenya serves as an incisive tool for framing identities shaped by political realities. Kenyan youth are acutely aware of the political landscape, marked by issues such as corruption, governance failures, electoral violence, and socio-economic inequality. Spoken-word performances, particularly through their rhetorical and performative dimensions, become potent sites for political critique and the assertion of identities as active, often disillusioned, citizens.

The political framing of identity in spoken-word poetry is often achieved through specific rhetorical devices and the manipulation of performance dynamics. Anaphora, repetition, vivid imagery, and direct address are frequently employed to amplify political messages and evoke a collective identity of shared struggle or discontent. An instance is Teardrops poem, I have a dream, which addresses political corruption:

"The ballot box whispered promises, But our hungry stomachs scream silent curses. They built grand towers, but our dreams remain in shacks. Power's embrace is a viper's kiss, leaving us the shadows, the broken pieces. We, the youth, demand accountability, not just empty speeches."

Here, the formal use of contrasting imagery ("whispered promises" vs. "hungry stomachs scream," "grand towers" vs. "shacks") formally highlights the disconnect between political rhetoric and lived reality, framing the youth's identity as victims of this disparity. The powerful metaphor "Power's embrace is a viper's kiss" formally creates a sense of betrayal and danger. Crucially, the shift to the collective pronoun "We, the youth," in the final line is a direct formal invocation of a collective political identity. This formal move transforms individual grievances into a shared demand for justice, underscoring youth agency (Kimani, 2019). The rhythm and cadence of such lines, often delivered with increasing intensity and vocal force, formally embody the urgency and anger of the political sentiment.

2.1.6 Social Nationalism and Identity

The concept of "social nationalism" in this context refers to the collective identity of belonging to the Kenyan nation, often expressed through shared cultural pride, a sense of national destiny, or critique of the nation's contemporary state. Spoken-word poetry plays a significant role in framing this multi-faceted national identity among Kenyan youth, oscillating between fervent patriotism and disillusioned critiques of the national project.

The framing of social nationalism is achieved through the strategic deployment of national symbols, geographical references, historical allusions, and the invocation of shared cultural narratives. Poets might use the Kenyan flag's colours, imagery of iconic landmarks, or references to national heroes to evoke a sense of collective belonging and pride. The deliberate choice of such culturally specific references formally signals a deep connection to the national fabric. The following line illustrates this assertion

"From these red lands, our future's penned, A Kenyan dream, broken yet unbent. The Maasai step, the Kikuyu chant, echoes of unity, though divisions haunt. We build our nation, brick by painful brick, this motherland's pulse, our hearts beat quick."



Here, the reference to "red lands" (a color in the Kenyan flag and characteristic of Kenyan soil) and the invocation of "*Maasai step*" and "*Kikuyu chant*" are formal inclusions of specific cultural markers that ground the identity in the diverse national tapestry. The phrase "A Kenyan dream, broken yet unbent" formally encapsulates the tension between national aspirations and present realities, yet ultimately asserts resilience. The use of collective pronouns ("our," "we") and the personification of "motherland" formally draw the audience into a shared sense of national ownership and responsibility. This formal embrace of both hope and disillusionment frames a complex, evolving national identity (Wambui, 2021). The rhythmic quality of the lines, often evocative of traditional chants or national anthems, formally instills a sense of shared heritage and collective purpose.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Spoken-word poetry has unequivocally emerged as a powerful and indispensable art form for Kenyan youth, serving as a vital conduit for the articulation and framing of their fluid identities. Guided by a formalist theoretical framework, this study has demonstrated how the intrinsic aesthetic and structural elements of spoken-word performances – encompassing linguistic choices, rhetorical devices, narrative structures, and performative delivery – are instrumental in constructing nuanced meanings around themes of identity.

The analysis revealed how spoken word meticulously frames identities that are culturally hybrid, navigating the confluence of local traditions and global influences through linguistic and thematic synthesis. It further elucidated how youth leverage this art form to challenge and redefine restrictive social norms, asserting autonomous selves in defiance of societal expectations through direct, confrontational, and often ironic formal expressions. Moreover, the study underscored spoken word's pivotal role in framing politically conscious identities, where youth articulate their disillusionment with governance and advocate for change through powerful rhetorical strategies and collective invocations. Finally, the paper explored how social nationalism is framed, oscillating between a proud embrace of national heritage and a critical assessment of the nation's present state, reflecting a complex and evolving sense of belonging.

By focusing on the *how* of identity construction through poetic form, this research reaffirms that spoken-word poetry is not merely content delivery but a sophisticated act of meaning-making that allows Kenyan youth to vocalize their subaltern experiences, confront pervasive stereotypes, and engage a broader public. This performance-based genre offers a unique lens through which the dynamic interplay of cultural, social, and political influences on young Kenyans' lives can be understood. As Kenya continues to evolve, the fluidity of youth identities, as powerfully captured and framed by spoken-word poetry, will remain a critical force in shaping its future narratives. Future research could explore the audience reception and impact of these performances, or delve into regional variations in spoken-word styles and identity framing across Kenya.

5.2 Recommendations

To sustain the transformative potential of spoken-word poetry in Kenya, it is recommended that educational institutions integrate it into curricula to foster creativity and critical consciousness among youth, while cultural and governmental bodies provide institutional and financial support to nurture emerging talent. Expanding mentorship programs, research, and digital access can further amplify youth voices, enabling spoken-word poetry to thrive as both an artistic expression and a vehicle for social change, civic engagement, and the reimagining of Kenyan identity in a rapidly evolving society.

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