

“Looking at all the background behind the story”: Interview with Doseline Kiguru¹

Martina Kopf²

Born in Kenya, Doseline Kiguru is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at Rhodes University, South Africa. Her research focuses on literary prizes and the production of African literary and cultural value. As a scholar, writer and editor she has witnessed and been part of the emergence of new literary initiatives, which changed the landscape of contemporary writing in East Africa. This interview was conducted in Nairobi where she was a Humanities Research Fellow at the British Institute of Eastern Africa from 2017 to 2019.

Q: You are a literary scholar and a writer greatly inspired by the idea of “writivism”. Could you open up what writivism means to you?

A: I call myself a student of literature and my current interest is contemporary literary production and mechanisms in Africa, so looking at the background behind the story. When you see a text, there are usually so many things that have influenced the production of that text in its current form – whether it is digital, or a printed text or a performance. Writivism is actually an initiative that was started by Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire and a group of young people in Uganda which has been taking to a pan-African collective³. It involves many young people, writers or people who are interested in the arts in Africa. I cannot claim it as my own, it is just that I have taken part in some of their festivals, writing workshops and things like that. But I believe in their cause. Their idea is to merge writing with activism, realizing that in the era we are in today it is just too lazy to just

¹ Doseline Kiguru, Rhodes University; contact: dosiekiguru@gmail.com

² Martina Kopf, University of Vienna; contact: martina.kopf@univie.ac.at

³ See www.writivism.com

say, my writing is not going to be political in any way. Because for you to be able to say that, you have to be speaking from a point of privilege. The things that we are facing at the moment involve that every kind of art – whatever art you are practicing – has to connect with the current economic, social and political context. When you do that you are actually involving yourself in activism.

Q: So you consider writing itself as a form of activism?

A: At the moment yes, I believe that it is. When a country or society is facing a lot of turmoil, that is one way of having your voice heard, that is a first step. If you don't make your voices heard, then it means that you are not even moving towards finding a solution for what is ailing the society. Basically, this is not new in East Africa or Kenya. It has always been the case with writers everywhere. In fact, it is difficult to put a post on where one era ends and another begins, and some of the problems like censorship, oppression and economic troubles cut across generations and are not unique to East Africa.

Q: Let us talk about literary initiatives, which pursue this idea. Literature has experienced a great flourishing in Kenya in the past 10 years. Writing workshops, public readings, open mics and literary festivals are hugely popular in Nairobi. Initiatives such as *Kwani?*, *Jalada*, *Enkare Review* and *Storymoja* have created platforms for many young people to meet, exchange and publish. They have brought a new dynamic into contemporary African literature which is receiving a great deal of international attention. What characterizes these initiatives?

A: What makes them different is the fact that they have tried as much as possible to move away from mainstream literary platforms. By mainstream I mean institutions like the university literature departments, university publishing presses or other mainstream literature publishing presses like the East African Literature Bureau. It is like you are very aware of the context in which your readers, your audience or your writers reside. One of the ways that you see that is the experimentations with form, experimentations with style, experimentations even with language. With the mainstream institutions, for instance, it will probably take a long time for you to move through the bureaucratic steps to authorize to publish a

book that is written in Sheng⁴. When you are looking at these platforms, a literature platform like *Jalada*, you are avoiding these hurdles and you realize that your writers are young people, they are more interested in showing what is current, not following rules and stuff like that. Look at the literary publishing mechanisms or outfits that were there in Kenya or East Africa before 2000 and imagine, would it have been possible to publish a literary text that was written in Sheng? You had to follow the rules. Or a literary text that is performed, somebody takes a video with and puts it on Youtube: How do you as an audience meet this story? Things like that were impossible to find. But now the Youtube link is linked to a literary magazine, an online magazine.

Q: How would you describe the relationship between the established literary institutions in Kenya and this kind of new wave literary activism?

A: One of the major problems we have are literary critics saying that these new writers do not follow the rules, that they do not necessarily understand the techniques of writing. Yet there is another angle in this that you don't hear talking about. For you to get at that level you must first understand the rules and then be able to break them. You don't break the rules blindly. You know exactly what you are doing. Take for instance Binyavanga Wainaina's "Wangechi Mutu wonders why butterfly wings leave powder on the fingers, there was a coup today in Kenya"⁵ – I don't know how to describe it, let me just call it an essay. It is hard to put it specifically within a kind of a genre and say what it is – this is a poem, or this is a short story or whatever. No, it is not, but it is a form of literary expression that is allowed within this

⁴ Sheng is a hybrid urban language based on Swahili and widely spoken in Nairobi. It has evolved from a stigmatized 'ghetto' code in eastern Nairobi into an identity marker spoken mostly, but not only, by the urban youth, symbolizing "ideological affinity, in-group identity, coolness, generational rebellion, linguistic innovation, and rejection of tribal identities" (Kaviti 2015: 223). It has only recently begun to be used as a language of written literature. Most of Kenya's written literature is in English, with fewer writers writing and publishing in Swahili and still fewer in other national languages such as Dholuo, Gikuyu, Luhya and Kikamba. Linguistically, Sheng has been described as "an unstable code whose grammar is largely but not always based on Kiswahili with a highly lexicalized vocabulary that is sourced from various codes blended with several innovations." (Ogechi 2008: 79).

⁵ Wainaina, Binyavanga. 2014. Wangechi Mutu Wonders Why Butterfly Wings Leave Powder on the Fingers, There Was a Coup Today in Kenya. In: *Jalada*, 17 Oct. 2014.

platform. I think this is the greatest plus of these new platforms that they allow experimentation with all these different types of expression.

Q: It seems to me that in this young literary scene there has been at least as much experimentation with new ways of publishing, with new ways of finding and creating your audience, as there has been with language and style. Talking about the role of social and digital media, you were mentioning before a recent critical debate about how strong these digital platforms actually are.

A: I was referring to a recent newspaper article⁶, which triggered a debate on social media. It was about the digital literary platforms in Nairobi. The article starts out well, but then at the end you have a feeling that it is not actually celebrating these kinds of writing platforms, it is actually saying that it is not easy to maintain them and they keep dying. But what does it matter? Historically, if you go back and look at the history of small magazines in Africa and anywhere, that is usually the trend. It is not a big deal, that is how literary platforms are created. The most important thing is that they capture the spirit of the moment, that the audience appreciates this idea of writing and that they can associate with it. The fact that young people have come together and created this platform is enough reason to celebrate.

Q: Your current academic research is on literature beyond the book. What exactly does this mean?

A: When you see a published literary text, it is important to realize that before it got to that level, there are so many mechanisms involved and also to realize that the text exists beyond the physical borders of the text. This is basically, what I am interested in.

Q: Could you give an example?

A: Let us look at Yvonne Owuor's novel *Dust*⁷. It is one of the greatest novels that have been written in Kenya in recent years.

⁶ Mwaniga, Gloria. 2018. Online Literary Magazines Have Not Been Spared from Digital Turbulence. Daily Nation, 1 December 2018.

⁷ Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo (2014): *Dust*. London: Granta.

Q: [...] which, by the way, has also been translated into German thus reaching a German speaking readership, too.⁸

A: Hey, imagine that. Then you find somebody creating a theater or a stage performance of *Dust*, like Mshai Mwangola did, who created a theater performance of this novel. Of course, it is not going to stick exactly to the text, but the fact that you are able to consume that text beyond the novel itself is something that should be celebrated. Or – different example – look at the availability of digital platforms. They make it so easy for us to be able to consume a literary text beyond the physical book. Or like having a performance and you go to a Youtube link to be able to view the performance. Or the fact that we are experimenting with different modalities and media. That's something that could not happen before. Of course, this is because of the availability of the internet, but it is also because there are more freedoms for writers in Kenya today. I do not want to understate that. Right now, especially in Kenya, it is so easy to express yourself in literary forms, while before you were always under self-censorship, always looking behind your back. We have a lot of freedom of expression now. As much as we want to celebrate the availability of digital media, the freedom of expression is something we should be talking about as well.

Q: Let me take up the question of language again. You were saying that the young literary platforms do not stick so much to Standard English and that they represent more the actual language situation, that they publish texts written in Sheng and allow to experiment with language. Taking a look at the publications of *Kwani?*⁹, *Enkare Review*¹⁰ and also *Jalada*¹¹,

⁸ Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo (2016): *Der Ort, an dem die Reise endet*. Transl. Simone Jakob. Köln: DuMont.

⁹ *Kwani?* (Swahili for "so what?") as Isaac Otiidi Amuke (2020) aptly put it, "burst into the literary scene in 2003", as a new and vibrant literary magazine "which captured a generation's imagination and desire for a different conception of Kenya and the world." It was founded in Nairobi by a group of writers and Binyavanga Wainaina as its founding editor. A number of well-known authors – including Yvonne Owuor, Billy Kahora, Stanley Gazemba, Muthoni Garland, Parselelo Kantai and Billy Kahora, who also was the chief editor for several years – have come out of the *Kwani?* environment (see Wallis 2016 and Strauhs 2012). With the magazine as its flagship publication, the literary network *Kwani Trust* has been active as a literary publisher, has organised writing workshops and literary events and initiated with the manuscript project a prize for African fiction. Since 2017, the project has suffered a stasis.

with exception of the latter's two special issues on translation and language, their primary language is English. *Storymoja Publishers*, which came out of a collective of writers and the goal to put "a book in every hand", has published a number of books in Kiswahili, but most of them for children. Looking at reading culture, would you say there is a language gap in Kenya between the educated middle and upper class and people without higher formal education? Is there a language gap between popular culture and written literature?

A: I would not call it a language gap. I think the best way to approach it is to look at different organizations and their target markets. With regard to *Storymoja*, their target market is schools and young learners. Then you realize the school curriculum insists on language acquisition, which means standard language acquisition. So if that is your target market, you cannot go very far in experimenting with hybrid languages like Sheng. You have to stick to Standard Kiswahili, Standard English or standard whatever language it is. The problem – I do not want to call it a problem – the thing with a language like Sheng and its hybrid nature is, it keeps evolving every day. Even if we are talking about including Sheng as a teaching language at school, you have to be very aware of this aspect, that it is a language that keeps evolving and keeps changing every day, acquiring new things and losing others. I think that is hard, especially when you are talking about school children. But then, if your market or your target audience is outside of the school you realize that people do speak Sheng, also people highly educated. It does not mean that this language is only for people who do not

¹⁰ Founded in 2016, *Enkare Review* (enkare.org) is a literary magazine founded in Nairobi by a group of young writers in their twenties. The magazine publishes fiction, poetry, non-fiction and visual arts from all parts of the globe – with submissions coming from Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, India, Latin America and the US, but the primary focus is African literature.

¹¹ The pan-African writers' collective *Jalada* formed in June 2013 as a result of conversations between 22 young African writers drawn from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Nigeria, who participated in a Creative Writing Workshop in Nairobi. To date, *Jalada* has published ten issues of the same-titled digital literary magazine (<https://jaladaafrica.org>). *Jalada* has engaged in publishing and translating African language literature, with the translation of a short story by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in more than 50 African languages as one of its most successful projects (on <https://jaladaafrica.org/2016/03/22/jalada-translation-issue-01-ngugi-wa-thiongo/>). In 2017, the collective organised the *Jalada Mobile Literary and Arts Festival*, that ran for 30 days and went to five countries in East Africa.

have mastery of English, of Kiswahili. It is just another language in addition to what is there. Initially, it started as a youth language in low income neighbourhoods in Nairobi and other urban cities. The people who were young in the 1990s are now older, and they are still speaking it. So I do not think it is more of a language gap. I am also a writer, and you realize that there are several language levels. If you are targeting a market of young readers whose English acquisition is not that high, there is a level of language you can use to access them. It does not mean that you completely leave English out of their reading curriculum, or Kiswahili. So I would not say it is really a gap, it is just literary outfits shaped according to the market demands.

Q: Let us talk about your own writing. I recently read your short story “Sikuku” which came out of the multimedia and interdisciplinary ethnographic project *Nairobi Becoming*¹². The story is a first person narrative of a female student in Nairobi who gradually becomes aware that she is sharing her room – an overpriced, shabby room – with a deceased person. We can assume that he was the former tenant, a student called Sikuku. His name gives also the title to the story. The story tells of the growing closeness between the living person and the spirit, or, if read metaphorically, between the living and the dead. It is a story full of joy and enjoyment – I am thinking here of the delicious meals that the ghost prepares for the first person narrator, which she very much enjoys. It is also a story full of grief. It is a story of how close these two are. I am thinking here in particular of one scene. It is a dreamlike scene, where the protagonist is floating above a crowd of people who are celebrating. She is not sure whether the people are crying, and then she realizes that what she is witnessing is a funeral. It is also a story about very harsh living and studying conditions. I was trying to imagine what it means to study at the university, when you live and sleep in a room like the one you describe – and I guess this is the housing reality for a great number of students in Nairobi. It is also a story of surviving and resisting this harshness through moments of joy and enjoyment. What is your story beyond the text? What made you write it and what were your thoughts about it?

¹² First published 2018 in Halliday, Craig/ Fontein, Joost (eds): *Kikulacho Nairobi: Remains, Waste & Metonymy III*, 27-31. Available at: <https://www.biea.ac.uk/nairobibecoming/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/catalogue-FINAL.pdf>

A: You are actually right in your interpretation. The story must be understood within the context of its production. It was part of an exhibition that was curated around the theme of food and involved other Kenyan artists working in different media, mostly visual artists. "Sikuku" in Swahili means holiday, celebration. It is also a name given, for instance, to children who were born during a holiday or during celebrations. The idea behind "Sikuku" was mainly about the aspect of dehumanization. It is so real, especially within urban cities, with people having no access to food, all these kinds of things. It was a kind of experimenting with a kind of genre to highlight these kinds of issues.

Q: Where and how does dehumanization come in? Can you open this a bit up?

A: Look at the problem of urban housing, the kind of housing people live in. Look at the problem of access to food. Even going beyond the story. Just go the streets of Nairobi, and there are people who actually survive on picking vegetables that have been left behind by vendors.

Q: Maybe we should also mention that the meals in the story whom the protagonist feasts on are imaginary, and not real.

A: Exactly. You can see the financial situation of these people. They are not going to be able to afford such kind of meals. That was the main reason for experimentation with that genre. So even while you are reading, you are not so sure, whether it is real, whether it is fiction, whether it is in the imagination of the protagonist. It evokes just that kind of uncertainty.

Q: I also found the story technically very interesting. You play with this kind of uncertainty and build up a certain suspense by leaving the reader with the narrator uncertain about the nature of this other person. There are many small surprising moments, in which you as a reader start to realize a second reality, a parallel world in the story. How important is technique for you in writing?

A: I think I go back to the whole context of the exhibition. Uncertainty is one of the major themes that defines an urban city like Nairobi. That is why I did not want to directly say what is happening. I did not want to use a form of narration, in which I as a writer, is telling you, as a reader, this is what is happening. I want the reader to be also part of the narration, part of

discovering, part of interpretation, so that you can interpret it in any way that you want, because this is part of reading the modern, urban town in Africa. That level of uncertainty is what characterizes most of our contemporary cities.

Q: Is there anything I did not ask which you would like to add?

A: One thing that we usually fail to discuss when we are looking at literary outfits in Africa – even I, as a literary critic – is the economic aspect, and that drives a lot of the things we are doing. I know right now when we write the story of the digital literary platforms in Kenya or in Nairobi, you will not fail to talk about the quarrels that come among the writers of these platforms, like writers taking to the social media saying fuck you for doing this and this. When you look at it, at the end of it all, it all has to do with money. And then the writers feel that these platforms are slowly going back to what was there before the year 2000, when the publishing institution benefits from the writers, and the writers do not get the money. We never speak about the money aspect of it. Maybe it is because we keep saying, literature is a calling and do not associate it with money, but it always quite has to do with money.

Works published by Doseline Kiguru:

- (2013): Kiguru, Doseline/ Odhiambo, Tom: Disavowing Conventions and Proclaiming Convictions in Contemporary Kenyan Poetry. In: *The Nairobi Journal of Literature* 7: 55-68
- (2013): Children of the Postcolony and Violence: Starting from the Hearth. In: *Youth and Peaceful Elections in Kenya: Peace Studies Series 1*: 136-147.
- (2016): Literary Prizes, Writers' Organisations and Canon Formation in Africa. In: *African Studies* 75/2: 202-14.
- (2016): Prizing African Literature: Creating a Literary Taste. In: *Social Dynamics* 42/1: 1-14.
- (2017): Monte, Ernest Patrick/ Wanyama, Mellitus N. and Kiguru, Doseline W.: Challenges and Innovations in Africanising Music in the Classroom: A Kenyan Experience. In: *Kabarak Journal of Research & Innovation* 4/2: 93-101.
- (2018): Sikuku (A Short Story first published) in: Halliday, Craig/ Fontein, Joost (eds): *Kikulacho Nairobi: Remains, Waste & Metonymy III*, 27-31. Available at: <https://www.biea.ac.uk/nairobibecoming/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/catalogue-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 27 May 2020).
- (2018): Monte, Patrick/ Kiguru, Doseline: Music, Memory and Forgetting: Patriotic Choral Music in Kenya. In: *SAMUS: South African Music Studies Journal*, 36-37/1: 110-128.

(2019): Language and Prizes: Exploring Literary and Cultural Boundaries. In: Adejunmobi, Moradewun/ Coetzee, Carli (eds): *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 399-412.

References:

Amuke, Isaac Oti (2020): The Struggle for Kwani's Soul. In: *Brittle Paper*, <https://brittlepaper.com/2020/03/the-struggle-for-kwanis-soul-isaac-otidi-amuke/> (accessed 27 May 2020).

Kaviti, Lillian (2015): From Stigma to Status – Sheng and English in Kenya's Linguistic and Literary Space. In: *Matatu* 46: 223-253.

Kimutai, Kiprop (no date): The Strides of Jalada Africa: A Pan-African Writers' Collective. On: *Africa Writes*, <https://africawrites.org/blog/the-strides-of-jalada-africa-a-pan-african-writers-collective/> (accessed 27 May 2020).

Mwaniga, Gloria (2018): Online Literary Magazines Have Not Been Spared from Digital Turbulence. *Daily Nation*, 1 December 2018. https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/weekend/Online-literary-magazines-digital-turbulence/1220-4876572-view-asAMP-kfi3mtz/index.html?__twitter_impression=true (accessed 27 May 2020)

Ogechi, Nathan Oyori (2008): Sheng as a Youth Identity Marker: Reality or Misconception? In: Njogu, Kimani (ed.): *Culture, Performance and Identity: Paths of Communication in Kenya*. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications, 75-92.

Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo (2014): *Dust*. London: Granta.

Strauhs, Doreen (2012): Anglophone East African (Women's) Writing since 2000. Femrite and Kwani Trust. In: Gohrisch, Jana/ Grünkemeier, Ellen (eds): *Listening to Africa: Anglophone African Literatures and Cultures*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 93-120.

Wainaina, Binyavanga (2014): Wangechi Mutu Wonders Why Butterfly Wings Leave Powder on the Fingers, There Was a Coup Today in Kenya. In: *Jalada*, 17 October 2014. <https://jaladaafrica.org/2014/10/17/wangechi-mutu-wonders-why-butterfly-wings-leave-powder-on-the-fingers-there-was-a-coup-today-in-kenya-by-binyavanga-wainaina/> (accessed 27 May 2020).

Wallis, Kate (2016): How Books Matter. In: *Wasafiri* 31/4: 39-46.