THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

KWANI? Features of Open-mic Poetry Performances in Kenya

Christopher Okemwa
Lecturer, Department of Literature and Languages,
Kisii University, Kenya

Abstract:
This paper examines the feature of open-mic poetry performance, a sub-genre of spoken word poetry in Kenya. Since 2003, Performance poetry has gained greater recognition in Kenya, illustrating the impact of captivating verbal choices at play in crafted, theatrical, and nonlinear dialogues between open-mic poets and their audiences. This paper uses selected open-mic poems to describe how this sub-genre engages various verbal inflections in (re)presenting our everyday societal issues. Anchored on an interactionist stance, the study proceeds from an understanding that art should be viewed not as a disembodied product but as a collection of dynamic social and interactional processes. While using textual analysis, this paper unravels verbal inflections used in selected open-mic poems in Kenya. It further interrogates how open-mic poets deploy various performance strategies to make their performances lively and captivating and deliver their intended messages. The paper argues that the emergence of open-mic poetry in Kenya has prompted performance poets to construct their own identities as artists. In doing so, these poets strive to define a uniquely Kenyan open-mic poetry sub-genre that enables them to preserve their identities while capitalizing on the benefits that this emerging art brings to them in (re)presenting societal concerns.

Keywords: *Kwani, open mic poetry, performance features, slam poetry, representation, identity*

1. Introduction: *Kwani?* Open-mic

'Kwani? Is open mic one of the flagship activities of the *Kwani?* Trust', as has been noted, was started in mid-2003. The Open Mic was first held at Café Crème, which was on the second floor of Yaya Centre. It then moved to the Kengeles Bar in the Kilimani area, later to Club Soundd, and finally to its current location (in 2015) at Imax Cinema --Arfa Lounge.

When the Open Mic began at Café Crème, Mike Mburu (*Kwani?* sales and marketing manager) recalls: 'It was difficult to get poets. Only four or five poets turned up for the monthly event. Poets had to be requested to perform twice or thrice during the event to fill in the time.' In addition to the poets who later came from both the Goethe and Italian Institutes, more poets joined *Kwani?* Open Mic. These included African poet (Njeri Wangari), Grandmaster Masese (Dennis Mosiere), Leon Kiptum, Dennis Inkwar, Mike Kwambo, and many others. Two pioneering poetry groups also joined. These were the hip-hop groups, Kalamashaka, and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau.

The *Kwani?* Open Mic is partly funded by the gate collections and partly by Ford Foundation. According to *Kwani?* Trust General Manager, Velma Kiome, the event has grown such that there are months when the gate proceeds are enough to meet its running costs.

2. The Formation of *Kwani?* Trust

The history of *Kwani?* Trust can be traced back to 2000 when several artists and writers felt they needed space to grow. According to Tom Maliti, the custodian of memory at *Kwani?* Trust and Chairman of its Board, two questions were frequently asked by artists and writers:

- Are Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Meja Mwangi the only writers Kenyan publishers are interested in?
- Why aren't new writers being published in Kenya?

Tom Maliti recalls that during this period of dissatisfaction among young artists, the filmmaker Wanjiru Kinyanjui evolved into a moderator and wrote an e-mail that she circulated among artists. The e-mail read, in part: 'There are interesting new writers out there. However, they do not have a space to flourish, to be the next Ngugi wa Thiong'o…' Maliti remembers that the artists who received this e-mail added other artists and friends to the e-mail's cc line. The conversation grew and continued for months. This e-mail and subsequent ones attracted all types of people, including artists, activists, journalists, teachers, and literature lovers. According to Maliti, Wanjiru Kinyanjui convened the first meeting of the group that would later become the *Kwani?* Trust. That meeting was held at a cafe on the corner of Ronald Ngala Street and Moi Avenue in Nairobi, where Family Bank now has a branch. Subsequent meetings were held in the home of sculptor Irene Wanjiru and her husband, Ali Zaidi, now Deputy Managing Editor of the weekly *The East African*. *Daily Nation* columnist Rasna Warah also hosted some meetings at the poolside of her apartment block.

The people who participated in these meetings included Wanjiru Kinyanjui, journalist Tom Maliti himself, sculptor Irene Wanjiru and her editor husband Ali Zaidi, journalist and editor Rasna Warah and her husband, journalist Gray Phombeah. Others included the satirist Wahome Mutahi, thespian Gichora Mwangi, journalist Parselelo Kantai, thespian Mumbi Kaigwa, Alvas Onguru, activists and poets Atsango Chesoni and Muthoni Wanyeki, photographers Andrew Njoroge and Githahi Thomas, writer and filmmaker Judy Kibinge, writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, accountant and writer Alnoor Amlani, environmentalist and journalist John Scully, management consultant Gitau Githongo and writer Binyavanga Wainaina.

These meetings pondered over the state of Kenya's literary scene and demanded new writing. They agreed to start a literary journal and gave it a Sheng name, *Kwani?* (So what?). Around this time, according to Tom Maliti, the Ford Foundation had a program called 'Special Initiatives for Africa' and was looking for ways of encouraging what looked like a new generation of African writers. Binyavanga Wainaina, who had been short-listed for the Caine Prize for African Writing around that time, and Muthoni Wanyeki, now the Executive Director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, talked to the Ford Foundation. They wrote a proposal seeking funding for the new writing and the new journal, *Kwani?* The proposal was successful.

Kwani? became a trust on 20th January 2003. Since then, the Ford Foundation has been its main funder. Since 2010 the trust has also been able to get funding for its activities from other organizations, such as Doen Foundation, Lambent Foundation, and the Prince Claus Fund. The *Kwani?* Trust runs four projects:

- It produces the literary journal, *Kwani?* every year,
- It organizes the Biennial LitFest project,
- It organizes the Poetry Open Mic every month, and
- It holds a slam poetry competition once a year in December

The monthly poetry open mic and the once-a-year slam poetry competition are the subjects of this thesis.

According to Tom Maliti, therefore, *Kwani?* Trust was formed to break the Kenyan canon and provide a more inclusive space for writers and other artists. It was meant to provide an alternative platform for upcoming writers who, at that time, could not be published by mainstream publishers. In addition, Maliti notes, *'Kwani?* is also a more defiant statement that represents the aim of what we hoped to do, which is to challenge the existing order of things in the arts. *Kwani?* was never intended just to be a journal of new writing but a place where writing was mixed with photography and other visual arts.' (Tom Maliti, 3rd May 2014, Arfa Lounge, Imax Cinema)

According to Maliti, one way the Trust challenged the order of things was in the language. Standard English and Kiswahili were challenged by embracing Sheng. Also, the purity of genres was undermined by embracing writing that was mixed with photography and other visual arts.

We can deduce from the above history of the beginnings of the *Kwani?* Trust that the aims for its formation resonate with the aspirations of the performance poetry movements in the US who came earlier-- such as Beats poets, Black Arts poets, and blackface Minstrelsy/minstrel performers – who 'resisted the dominant literary aesthetics of their times' (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.66). According to Somers-Willett (2009), these performance poetry movements that predate *Kwani?* Open Mic were anti-academic and rejected the existing literary and artistic standards.

These movements are referred to as America's popular verse, and according to Somers-Willett (2009), they imply poetry that exists outside of the 'official verse culture,' 'the cadre of literary journals, conferences, and academic MFA programs' that are a mainstay of contemporary American poetry (p.39). Somers-Willett notes that each of these movements in popular verse emerged from unique historical contexts. Somers-Willett (2009) views popular verse as 'marginal, that is, it exists outside the dominant center of poetry's production, criticism, and reception, which is often located within academic culture' (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.40). She adds, 'Popular verse in performance also engages in a larger tension with the dominant culture, one often located in or embodied by the American white middle class. Its artists are bohemian, vagabond, militant, or otherwise countercultural' (p.40). She presents that the popular American verses:

- Inspired rebellion and experimentation in a young generation of Americans, and
- Resisted the status quo established by both the academy and white, middle-class culture' (p.40)

We find this characteristic in the tenets of the 'Literary-Gangsta' Performance Poetry at *Kwani?* Open Mic. This is the main reason for our considering the poetry popular.

We have traced the history of *Kwani?* as a Trust and learnt that the reason for its formation was to resist the dominant literary aesthetics of its times—just as did the popular poetry movements in America that predate it. We now look at one of its flagship activities - the *Kwani?* Open Mic – that is the main concern of this thesis. To do so, we first provide highlights of performance poetry activities in Nairobi before the formation of the Open Mic.

3. Context of Open-mic Performance Poetry Sub-genre in Kenya

Spoken word poetry, also known as performance poetry, has gained much traction in Kenya today. In spoken word, poets attempt to engage the audience using a combination of literary and oratory aesthetics. Performances can also include physical movement, dramatic performance, music, and song. For example, hip-hop is widely considered a branch of spoken word poetry (Eleveld, 2003). The growing popularity of the spoken word is widely attributed to poet Marc Smith. He is credited with bringing the art form to prominence by hosting some of the first modern poetry slam competitions in Chicago, Illinois, in the 1980s. In slams, poets face off against each other in audience-adjudicated poetry competitions. No props, costumes, or instrumental accompaniments are allowed in these contests.

A slam creates a place of energy, motion, and encouragement that spikes from a competition of poets, all wishing to stay true to themselves while captivating their audience. According to Lesley Wheeler in *Voicing American Poetry,* 'slam

seizes contemporary poetry, redefines its audiences and goals, and sounds and embodies it for public consumption. Moreover, it manages to offend and delight various listeners through its very orality and insistent populism' (141). With this communication flow, competitive performance poetry is 'the marriage of text and the artful presentation of spoken words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back and let the poet performer know whether he or she is communicating effectively' (Marc Smith 8). This relationship between the poet, words, and audience brings truth to life for everyone involved. Although the poet is the person who experienced a certain emotion or event that sparked the poem's inception, the unique words and delivery of performance poetry create an all-new, powerful experience that both the poet and audience feel.

The poet acts as a mediator between knowledge and the audience, weaving connections between the two by creating an experience through the delivery of his or her words. An example of this mediation is the movements (or lack thereof) that accompany a poet's words, such as standing rigid during a serious, intense poem or flapping limbs during a poem of calamity. By developing a deeper meaning of a word through movements, voice, tempo, and many more delivery devices, the poet stands more of a chance to connect his or her message to the audience members. The addition of delivery gives each word, and the entire piece, multiple layers that the audience processes and the additional layers give more options for the audience to 'get' a poem.

Since 1984, performance poetry has developed into an ever-growing art form for diverse groups in the United States and the world. The inaugural National Poetry Slam in the United States began in 1989. Since then, the national championship has migrated from city to city and country to country, Kenya being no exception. Inaugural spoken word poetry was witnessed in Kenya in mid-2003 with the formation of *Kwani?* Open Mic. However, even before then, there were Performance Poetry Activities in Nairobi that had been going on at the British Council (ICEA Building, Nairobi). Between 1996 and 1998, artists including Tony Mochama, Caroline Nderitu, Caroline Mbuthia, John Kiarie, Moses Man, Alfred Omenya, Jeremiah Ambasa, and Wambui wa Murima performed poetry at the British Council. In the year 2000, when the Goethe Institute-Nairobi started hosting the poetry event, these poets relocated there.

Since 2003, performance poetry in Kenya has grown like a bushfire taking place in different venues, such as 'Poetry Spot,' 'Hizia Zangu,' 'Fatuma's Voice,' 'Eve of Poetry,' 'Slam Africa,' and the most popular venue being at *Kwani?* Open Mic. Performance poetry takes different forms, such as open-mic, among others. It is worth noting that Kenyan Poetry Slam is one of the most anticipated poetry events in the calendar. It provides a platform for young poets, mostly unpublished, to perform their poetry and battle it out until a slam king/queen is found through elimination. Quite passionately, the young poets, using various verbal inflections and performance strategies on open-mic, canvass a number of everyday concerns in Kenyan society.

4. Methodology: Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation

This descriptive chapter is situated in a holistic analytic paradigm insofar as 'holists seek the larger meaning or significance of fragments by identifying wholes of which they are coherent parts' (Bredo, 2009, p. 444). The study employs multiple qualitative methods and lenses but is largely embedded in phenomenological inquiry as it aims to understand the lived experiences of open-mic poetry in Kenya. For this chapter, purposive sampling was made up of selecting open-mic poems. This selection technique was deployed to gather what Patton (2002) refers to as 'information-rich cases,' which 'are those [cases] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry' (p. 230). Participants here were of varying genders, between the ages of 18 and 30, and performed open-mic poetry in various performance spaces in Kenya. There were two reasons for the mixed sample group. The first was to achieve maximum variation in the data source for this study. The second reason was to examine the ways, if any, in which the open-mic poets deploy verbal inflections and performance strategies in rendering their poetry. Poems from each participant were watched and recorded for the study. After the performances, the researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews. In the present study, the collected poetry, along with the interview transcripts, comprise the research data.

Informed by textual analysis practices, the data obtained were organised into themes and subthemes in readiness for interpretation. Emphasis was placed on verbal inflections and performance strategies used in the poems. Van Manen (1990) argues that the study of poetry is conducive to phenomenology because it 'allows the expression of the most intense feelings in the most intense form … A poet can sometimes give linguistic expression to some aspect of human experience that cannot be paraphrased without losing a sense of the vivid truthfulness that the lines of the poem are somehow able to communicate' (pp. 70-71). Not only does this observation hold weight in analysing verbal inflections in open-mic poetry, but it also demonstrates the philosophical congruence of method and subject here. Since phenomenology lends itself well to the study of poetry, its methodological underpinnings lend themselves well to the analysis of verbal variations and strategies used in the performance of open-mic poetry in Kenya. Merleau-Ponty (1973) argues that '…phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world' (as cited in Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). Hence, literary phenomenology formed the interpretive canvass upon which this chapter is anchored.

5. Features of Open-mic Poetry Performances

Open-mic poets employ various performance strategies, such as:

5.1. Verbal Inflections

One of the key markers of open-mic poetry is how they utilized verbal inflections. Asides are the common form of verbal variability. A case in point is Nafsi Huru's (Silvanus Ogallo) poems: 'Spring Ever Flowing,' and 'My Lover's River,' performed on the 3rd and 5th of December 2013, respectively. Nafsi Huru deployed asides during their performances to draw the attention of his audience from time to time. After two or three stanzas and sensing that the long piece is monotonous, he could pose a question, 'Tuko pamoja?' (Are we together?), to which the audience would respond, 'Ndio!' (Yes!). In other times, he would deviate from the poem with phrases, such as 'Gini wase kao!' (We have already won this trophy!), to which the audience would respond with 'Wase kao!' (We have already won the trophy!). 'Gini wase kao!' is a phrase drawn from the Luo ethnic community and was popularised during the 2013/2014 Kenya Premier League. Gor Mahia Football Club, largely comprised of supporters from the Luo community in Kenya, coined this phrase to indicate that they were confident of winning the league – which they eventually did win. The phrase has, since then, become Nafsi Huru's signature salute and stage name.

Deviation from the poetic script to keep the audience glued to the performance is also aptly utilized by Jicho Pevu (Steve Biko). In most of his long performances, he tended to stop abruptly at some point and engage in a question-answer technique with his audience, thus:

Jicho Pevu: Na wacheki!
Audience*: (Quiet)*
Jicho Pevu: Si muniambie munanicheki? Na wacheki!
Audience: Tunakucheki!
Jicho Pevu: Nawacheki!
Audience: Tunakucheki!

This question-and-answer exchange between the poet and the audience is seen as an aside since it was introduced in the performance as a way of connecting with the audience. Other than the question-and-answer technique, Jicho Pevu's performances were characterized by other forms of verbal inflections. While performing the poem 'This Ma World,' on 4th June 2013, he appeared to forget his lines; he closed his eyes, paced around the makeshift stage for a while, and talked to himself, thus: 'I have the best lines; I have the best lines I swear!' which amused the audience who responded by clapping their hands.

While performing the poem, 'Nyama, Nyama, Nyama' on 3rd September 2013, MVP (Fidel Ongolla) employed an aside as a form of verbal variability. Like in the case of Jicho Pevu, he appeared to have forgotten his lines while performing. When this happened, he started addressing the poem, thus 'Kuja! Kuja!' (Come! Come!). He then turned to the audience and told them about his girlfriend, who, in his own words, is the persona in the poem, thus 'huyu dame wangu labda nimwongeleshe' (Maybe I need to sweet-talk this lady of mine). Amidst laughter, claps, and murmurs, MVP found his lost lines and carried on with his poem.

Verbal variability in open-mic poetry is largely affected by the context of performance, hence contextual verbal inflections. Finnegan (1977) opines, 'Many oral recitations arise in response to various social obligations which, in turn, are exploited by poet and narrator for his own purposes' (12). This is clearly manifested in open-mic poetry, where a number of poets infer the contexts of their performances. Contextual verbal variability is evident in Kennet B's (Kennedy Odongo) poetry. Kennet's poetry is malleable, depending on the context of his performance. He, therefore, alters and modifies the pieces in whichever way he deems necessary. He does this in response to the occasion and the type of audience he performs for. One notable example is when he was invited to perform at Open mic poetry competition on 16th October 2013. He had been asked to put aside his old pieces and compose a new poem that carried a Kenyan theme. When on stage performing his new piece, he spotted a personality from an NGO that deals with the environment. He switched with ease to his old piece on environmental awareness. He had to infuse the two pieces, one piece on Kenya and the other on environmental awareness, and brought them out as one.

Unlike traditional oral forms, this transcendence of context is made possible by the way open-mic poets craft words in their poems to provide a verbal variability that exceeds the type used in the African oral traditions. In doing so, the poets rely on multiple themes to diffract or/and modify, shift or transfer, exchange, include and exclude materials, and blend and assemble them within and among their poems without affecting their performances. In Jicho Pevu's poem 'This Ma World', for example, he talks of a world of art and craft in which you can live without certificates. He says, 'Ni world ya craft na art/Pekee unaweza go vi-freestyle na utravel/worldwide bila kujisumbua na story za ma-cert/…' However, in the second stanza, he talks of a world that has become full of lies and deception to the extent that even if a cockroach is sprayed upon, it will not die since it has become used to lies:

World imekuwa used na uwongo
Mpaka imefika place
Mende haiwezi kufa ikisprayiwa
Juu imezoea hao ma-prophets of doom na ridsect

In the third stanza, he talks about money as a necessary evil. The poet has bricolaged various thematic materials so that it is easy for him, while performing to different audiences and on different occasions, to diffract or modify materials without affecting the piece or to simply select one or several relevant stanzas from the poem and use them (them). In the 9th stanza of Tear Drops' rap poem: 'Watoto Wangu We!', he talks of the rich and the poor:

Niliskia eti wallet za waheshimiwa
ni kama amboseli ama tsavo,
zimejaa na mandovu

While mifuko ya mahustler ni kama
workshop ya carpenter zimejaa na mambao.

In the 10th stanza, he talks of the idea of saving money, while in the 11th stanza, he talks of 'wachawi' (witches). These confirm that open-mic poets are influenced by the contexts of performance. They employ verbal variability in a much more varied and modified way than how the oral storytellers and griots used it in traditional societies. They have indeed transcended the influence and carved their own niche that defines their generation.

5.2. Antiphony

Antiphony, commonly referred to as call-and-response structure, is utilized in open-mic poetry to draw the audience's attention during their performances. Before Mimi performed his poem, 'Writing Things on the Wall,' on 5th November 2013, he told the audience thus: 'When I say the line 'For those who don't listen,' kindly end it with 'write things on the wall'.' Then he began his performance:

I speak in written, correct my flaws,
twice shy, once bitten, abide by laws,
love struck am smitten, notes stuck on doors,
and for those who don't listen…..

At the end of this stanza, the audience responded with, 'Write things on the wall!' Somewhere in the middle of the poem -- as though this refrain had become monotonous and, therefore, a disservice to the poem -- the poet stopped and called for a response from the audience, thus:

Mimi: Kila mjames ni aje?
Audience: Poa
Mimi: Mko danjey?
Audience: Tuko da-a-a-nje-e-e-y!

The call-and-response technique was effective at keeping the audience on board. An attempt to incorporate the audience in their performance is almost the aim of every open-mic poet. Another example is Tear Drops' (Joshua Awilly) poem, 'Watoto Wangu Wee' that starts with the following lines:

Na siringi,
Ni vile mwalimu wangu wa high school
Aliniambia Tear Drops take notes
That's why situmiangi mashilingi.

After this stanza, he starts to sing 'Watoto wangu wee!' to which the audience responds by 'Eee!' He goes on and on up to the last stanza, calling the audience and allowing it time to respond with 'Eh!' Other poets who employ call-and-response formula include: Machizmo (Chris Muga), POETA (Dennis Okoyo) and MVP (Fidel Ongolla).

Noteworthy is the fact that open-mic poets innovatively use the call-response structure. Often, the poets use the formula as some kind of rap in their performances. They rap one full line at a time but do not allow the audience to repeat it, but ask them to only complete the sound of the last word. Mostly they ensure the sound is similar in all the lines to rhyme. An example is the last sound, /tʃ∂r/, of the words, such as 'fixture,' 'capture,' 'future,' and 'gesture' in the poem, 'I am Trying Hard,' by Menace (Dennis Manduku):

I am trying hard to, but I am still in a fix……..ture
Laying clueless, thinking what my mind can't cap……ture
It is not happening; probably it is in the fu……ture
What can I do? Please, God, send me a ges……..ture

The audience comes in to supply the last sound, /tʃ∂r /, of the last word in each line. At that moment, the poet will turn the mic towards the audience as an indication that it is their turn to respond.

In another rap poem, 'Sometimes I feel tired,' performed on 2nd April 2013, Raya Wambui employs call-and-response formula to implore the audience's response. In the first stanza, she says:

We had an uprising, without a solu……..tion
We had violent demonstrations, without a revolu……..tion
We have an open wound that needs ablu……..tion
And has little to do with an incomprehensible constitu……tion

She raps the lines, and the audience comes in to supply the last sound /ʃπ /. In such a moment, she will turn the mic towards them to indicate their response is needed. Other poets who employ call-and-response technique include:

- POETA (Dennis Okoyo),
- Dophan (Dennis Mutuma),
- BAUS (Claude Bakari),
- Murathe Ngige, MIMI (Calvin Okune),
- Robi Robirobbery Waziri wa Rap (Kihuri Wanyoike) and
- Machizmo (Chris Muga)

To call the audience to come in to complete the last sound in each line of a poet's poem is an innovation derived from rap culture but built on the oral tradition of call-and-response formula. The poets have clearly demonstrated that, even if the oral tradition constitutes their creations, it is still their own creation 'made by the living for the needs of the living' (Bloom, 1997:19). They can retain the terms of the oral tradition, 'but to mean them in another sense' (Bloom, 1997:14).

5.3. Instrumentation/Accompaniments

The use of musical instruments and accompaniments is a common performance feature among some open-mic poets. For instance, Oballadan (Daniel Oballa) and Edward Ododa perform with *orutu* (a traditional Luo fiddle), *Nyatiti* (a traditional Luo lyre), and a drum. In the performance of one of their poems, 'Muhoroni People,' on 3rd September 2013, the poets accompanied their performance with beats of the fiddle. Oballadan, the main performer of the poem, only played his fiddle before the start of the performance, while Ododa infused the words throughout the performance. Asked why he used the instruments during the performance in an interview after the performances, Oballadan stated, 'The use of these instruments creates the context for performance with rhythm and adds meaning to the African identity which we always attempt to project in our work.' He further added that they were inspired by the African instruments because the tools represent who they are—Africans.

Another poet, Grandmaster Masese (Dennis Mosiere), accompanies his poetry with beats of *obokano* (the Abagusii lyre). Grandmaster has also produced music albums in which his songs are accompanied by this lyre. The two poetic productions*: 'Cut Off My Tongue*' and 'Silence is a Woman: Dramatised Poetry' by Sitawa Namwalie, start with heavy beats of a drum and rapid playing of *orutu*. The two instruments are later accompanied by a flute which is played in some parts of the performance. At times the *orutu* and the flute are manipulated in such a way that they seem to respond to each other as though they are in dialogue or conflict. Overall, the fiddle and the flute help to enhance the atmosphere and mood of the production. The drum beat is used to end one poem and start a new one in the series of poems. It is also used to enhance the movements and gestures of actors and actresses.

Evidently, open-mic poets are keeping with the age-old tradition of using instruments and accompaniments during poetry performances. The poet in the traditional times used the instruments '…to lure his subjects as well as to add beauty to his performance' (P'Bitek:1986:39).

This is akin to the use of instruments among open-mic poets. For instance, the drum-beats in Namwalie's productions mark the end of one poem and the beginning of another; the drum-beats also help to enhance the movement of those on stage, and the flute and *orutu* add to the creation of atmosphere and various moods of the performance. The same happens to Oballadan and Ododa's poetry performances: the *orutu* instrument helps to create an atmosphere and mood in their messages.

5.4. Beat Boxing

Beat boxing is the use of parts of an artist's body to produce sound effects. Beat boxing is a technique borrowed from hip-hop and is referred to as vocal percussion or human beat boxing. According to Price (2006), the technique is said to have 'evolved as a human imitation of the increasingly popular electronic drum machines, or beat boxes' (Price 2006: 38). Price observes that this practice of using the human voice to produce rhythmic phrases and other sounds is an extremely ancient practice in many of the world's oldest cultures. It is observed that 'the human voice is the basis of nearly every musical instrument, the model that other instruments imitate' (Price, 2006:38).

Open-mic poets use their lips, tongue, and throat to produce various musical sounds to accompany their poetry performances. For example, Checkmate Mido starts his poem, 'What is My Name?' with the sound 'du! du! ta!' using his lips, throat, and tongue:

Du! Du! Ta! Du! Du! Ta!
Ku! Ku! Ka! Ku! Ku! Ka!
What is my name?
Du! Du! Ta! Du! Du! Ta!
Ku! Ku! Ka! Ku! Ku! Ka!
What is my name?
Why? question mark
Question that.

He punctuates his stanzas with two sound effects, 'du! du! ta!' and 'ku! ku! ka!' that he produces by manipulating his tongue, lips, and throat. The poet, Flowflani (Ayub Wakaba), employs the same technique in his poem, 'My Favourite Lady.' The poet utilizes the technique in his first and fourth stanzas. The first stanza goes as follows:

So yes, ladies and gentlemen,
boys and girls, this is a story of my favorite lady,
the one that got my heartbeat going like.....
BOOM!!! BOOM!!! TCHA!!!
Why? cuz she gave the BOOM!! And I gave the TCHA!!
So the BOOM! And the TCHA!! is a complete heartbeat
I can't be without her

In the poem, Flowflani says that his girlfriend made his heart beat like 'Boom! Boom! Tcha!' He made these sounds using his lips and tongue. Other poets who utilize beat boxing include Kennet B, JThree (Samwel Kamande), Jamik (Sarah Wairimu), and POETA (Dennis Okoyo).

5.5. Hypnotic feel/The Feel Characteristic

The feel characteristic is a style in which the poets close their eyes as they perform their poetry. This style is employed by Sitawa Wafula, Kennet B (Kennedy Odongo), BAUS (Claude Bakari), and Machizmo (Chris Muga). This research sought to unveil the significance of closing their eyes while performing:

Baus (Claude Bakari): It is my style that I use Sitawa wafula: Well, it is the way I do my poetry. I perform, closing my eyes. It is my style. Machizmo (Chris Muga): That is my swagg. Kennet B (Kennedy Odongo): It is the prayer to Jah, the almighty, the King of Kings.

Post-performance interviews revealed that open-mic poets closed their eyes when performing for various reasons. However, consciously or unconsciously, the underlined influence emanates from the sleep-like feeling akin to reggae music.

6. Conclusion

This chapter sought to examine the use of verbal inflections and performance strategies used by open-mic poets in Kenya. Evidently, verbal inflections, such as asides, local colour, question-answer technique, and contextual invariability, are widely used by open-mic poets in Kenya. In the same vein, the chapter showed that open-mic poets use performance strategies such as antiphony, beat boxing, hypnotic feel, and musical instruments and accompaniments. Further, the article established that verbal inflections and performance strategies are used by these poets in their attempts to:

- Adapt to changing elements of the pentad,
- Keep their audience glued to the performances,
- Colour their performances, and
- Create an environment of shared experiences, knowledge, and social realities where shared truths take place

By its very nature, poetry slices away the unnecessary, leaving only the lean and vital. Through managed elegance and nuance, it reveals moral truths and chances a tweak or two to our accepted notions of language use. Open-mic poets are alive to these facts since the use of verbal inflections. Various performance strategies enable them to embed meanings and messages in their finely crafted words, allowing the audience to listen past the voice into the reality that shapes the poem and helps the audience redefine its own truths toward a collective truth at the same time.

7. References

i. Anyidoho, Kofi. (1992). 'Poetry as Dramatic performance: The Ghana Experience'. *Research in African Literature1992* Vol 22: 452.
ii. Barber, Karin, and Chris Waterman. (1995). 'Traversing the Global and the Local: Fuji Music and Praise Poetry in the Production of Contemporary Yoruba Popular Culture.' Dan Miller(ed) *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*. London: Routledge.
iii. Bauman, Richard. (1975). 'Verbal art as Performance.' *American Anthropologist, New Series* 77.2(1975) pp290-311, Blackwell publishing www.jstor/stable/674535
iv. Bloom, Harold (1997) *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
v. Bredo, E. (2009). Comments on Howe: Getting over the methodology wars. *Educational Researcher, 38*(6), 441-449.
vi. Eleveld, M. (2003). *The spoken word revolution: (Slam, hip hop & the poetry of a new generation)*. Naperville, IL: SourceBooks MediaFusion.
vii. Finnegan, Ruth. (1977). *Oral Literature in Africa,* Nairobi Kenya, Oxford University Press.
viii. Grabner, Cornelia (2007) 'Performance Poetry: New Languages and New Literary Circuits?' *World Literature Today Online*. January- February 2008.
ix. Macgoye, M. Oludhe. (2008). *The Composition of Poetry*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.
x. Makhijani, Pooja. (2005). Performance Poetry Lives On in *Writing;* Apr/May 2005, Vol. 27 Issue 6, (8-11). 122
xi. Mortmer, John (1994) The 'Poetry' Man. *Poetry Review*, Volume 84, No.2, Summer 1994: London, Poetry Society.
xii. Mwai, Wangari. (2010). *New Trends in Ushairi: A Social-Historical Study of Kiswahili Poetry,* Saarbrucken, LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing AG & co.KG.
xiii. Olaoluwa, S. Senayon. (2008). 'From Simplicity to Performance: The Place of Second Generation Anglophone African Poets', *English Studies*, 89: 4, 461-481.
xiv. Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
xv. P'Bitek, Okot. (1986). *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture, and Values.* Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
xvi. Smith, Marc Kelly and Joe Kraynak (2009). *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word*. Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc.
xvii. Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy:* Ann Arbor, MI: The Althouse Press.