THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Strategies to Identify Constructions in Spoken Word Poetry in Kenya

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

Abstract:
This article explores how poets construct their identities in spoken word poetry performances in Nairobi, Kenya. The article contends how the poets create their own images, and stage personae play a pivotal role in endearing themselves to the unique Nairobi audience. It does this by tracing the history of the event and comprehensively describing the performances. Preparations for the event are also brought to light. Spoken word poetry is, arguably, the premier regular performance poetry event in Nairobi since 2015 to date. Thus, understanding how the poets construct their own identities is an essential antidote to understanding the longstanding endurance of the spoken word poetry performances in Nairobi.

Keywords: *Spoken word, identity construction, image-making, strategies, performance poetry*

1. Emergency of Spoken Word Poetry Performances in Nairobi

Spoken word poetry can be traced back to the year 2000 when several artists and writers felt that 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 email that she circulated among artists. The email read, in part: "There are interesting new writers out there. But they do not have a space to flourish, to be the next Ngugi wa Thiong'o…" Maliti remembers that the artists who received this email added other artists and friends to the email's cc line. The conversation grew and continued for months. This email and subsequent ones attracted all types of people, including artists, activists, journalists, teachers, and literature lovers. According to Maliti, Wanjiru Kinyanjui convened the group's first meeting 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 subject of this thesis.

According to Tom Maliti, therefore, the *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 that:

> *Kwani? is also a more defiant statement that represents the aims 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 performances of 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 a 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. Nevertheless, she states:

> *They all circulated in conscious contrast to the academic verse and dominant culture of their times, perpetuating particular ideas about race, class, and nation to reach popular audiences. As the variety of these movements may suggest, a popular verse in performance is not bound to a particular style but is instead poetry that performs an attitude of resistance to a dominant literary elite, in today's terms, the culture of MFA programs, the canon, and literary criticism (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.39).*

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 an 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 they resisted the status quo established by both the academy and white, middle-class culture" (p.40)—a characteristic we find in the tenets of the "Literary-Gangsta" Performance Poetry at *Kwani?* Open Mic, which 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.

2. Spoken Word Poetry and Related Performance Activities

An interview with Tony Mochama on 7th May 2013 at Arfa Lounge (Imax Cinema) reveals that some poetry performances had been going on at the British Council (ICEA Building, Nairobi) before *Kwani?* Open Mic started in mid-2003. From 1996 to 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. According to Mochama, the then Cultural Officer at the British Council, George Mururi, organized for these poets to perform every other Tuesday from 6 pm to 7 pm. John Kiarie presented comedy, while the other artists staged original poems. In addition, they had also to present something British, such as T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, William Shakespeare, etc. "The audience attendance stood at about twenty members at each performance, and half of these were performers," Mochama recalls. Mururi paid each poet Ksh. 1,500, and in later years, a sum of Ksh. 3,000 to Ksh. 5,000 per performance.

Mochama further explains that at the end of 1998, the British government cut funding for the arts to the Council, and as such, these poets did not carry out any poetry activities in 1999. In 2000 the Goethe Institute, located at Maendeleo House, started hosting the poetry event, and these poets relocated there. The meetings here were held on an ad hoc basis, sometimes once or twice per month. The Institute provided the space and the cocktail at the end of each performance.

Mochama recalls that the poet, Caroline Nderitu, did not perform at Goethe Institute; by then, she had branched out on her own and focused her poetry performances at corporate functions. According to both Mochama and Jacob Oketch during an interview on 4th June 2013 at Arfa Lounge (Imax Cinema), it is here at Goethe Institute where a new crop of poets emerged. These poets included:

- Phillo Ikonya,
- Khainga O'Okwemba,
- Ngwatilo Mawiyoo,
- Anna Yardini, and
- Margaretta Wa Gacheru

Both poets affirm that in the year 2002, the Goethe Institute stopped its support for the poetry event. Around that time, the *Kwani?* Trust was in the process of formation, and the poetry Open Mic was soon to be launched in mid-2003.

Also, around that time, a group of artists, calling themselves 'Poetry Salama,' was performing at the Italian institute. It comprised Jacob Oketch, Kebaya Moturi, Humphrey Melita, Katana, Kish Okoti, and James Winjeje, among others. When the Director of the Institute, Prof. Elio Traina, left in 2006, the interest in poetry performance at the institute waned, and there was not much support forthcoming. At this time, *Kwani?* Trust, and one of its activities -- the Poetry Open Mic – had been in full operation since 2003. The members of 'Poetry Salama' joined *Kwani?* Open Mic to keep their poetry performances alive. Those who had been performing at Goethe Institute had long moved to *Kwani?* Open Mic in 2003, a year after the institute stopped its support (in 2002).

The *Kwani?* Open Mic, which is the focus of this study, has been and continues to be the biggest Poetry Open Mic in Nairobi. The Open Mic has existed for many years compared to other poetry activities in Nairobi. Take, for instance, 'Poetry at the Park,' which started in May 2013 and closed down in October 2014, lasting for one and a half years. According to Juma Wafula, the founder of the event, it closed down because the contract to use the venue—which was for one year-- came to an end. 'Words Galore' is another event that lasted for a short time. Founded by Ian Gwagi, the event began in 2010 and closed in October 2014. Held at Green House Mall at Adam's Arcade, 'Words Galore' closed down due to insecurity issues. "The landlord felt unease with the number and type of people who attended the show," Gwagi explains. Gwagi now organizes a poetry festival that is held thrice a year in unspecified venues. Another poetry event, 'Poetry at Discovery,' founded by Sitawa Wafula, started in 2010 and closed down in the same year.

Other poetry events, such as 'Poetry Spot,' 'Hizia Zangu,' 'Fatuma's Voice,' 'Eve of Poetry,' and 'Slam Africa,' though in operation, have a small attendance compared to *Kwani?* Open Mic. The latter has existed for 13 years and attracts a huge audience. It has also nurtured a number of poets who have ended up being published, something other events have not achieved. Because of these exemplary achievements, this research is justified to carry out an analysis of its activities. Therefore, let us focus on its formation in the following sub-section.

3. Spoken Word Poetry and Identity Construction

In this section, we explore various ways the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets construct their identities and signatures. Somers-Willett (2009) observes, "The context of live performance shines a particularly bright light into its inner workings, especially as those workings involve performances of identity" (p.18). She explains that due to the poet's presence on stage, slam, or performance poetry, it becomes all about the poet's performance of identity. She talks of the performance poet thus:

> *Their speech, dress, gestures, voice, body, and so on all reflect in some way on the poem at hand, and these various aspects of embodiment convey nuances of cultural difference that the page cannot. With the author's embodiment, members of the audience are instantly privy to the physical and performative markers of identity that consciously or unconsciously inform their understanding of the poem through certain cultural lenses (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.18).*

According to Somers-Willett, poets construct their identities through their ways of speech, dress, gestures, voice, body, etc. She further notes that these various aspects of embodiment "engage a whole host of cultural and political complexities before an author even opens his or her mouth" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.18). Based on Somers-Willett's observation, this chapter attempts to scrutinize the poets' stage names and their significations. It further explores their body images by discussing their dress code and costumes.

3.1. Poets' Names and Their Significations

> *One way to invent a catchy name is to think of words and phrases that communicate the selling points vital to your performance. Add to that a little silver of mystery to get folks curious about what's up and spur them to make an effort to find out more.*
>
> —Marc Kelly Smith& Joe Kraynak

The coinage of stage names by the "Literary-Gangsta" poets at *Kwani?* Open Mic is based on the notion of competition. The concept of competition arises from the practice of slam poetry in which poets present their poems before an audience who act as judges. The best poet, as selected by members of the audience, is awarded. Karen Grigsby Bates (2003) observes that the highly social aspect of performance poetry emerges in its competitive edge in the form of slam poetry competitions. The purpose of this slam poetry, she points out, is to "merge the flow of poetry and the precision of performance" (Bates, 2003, p.2). On the other hand, Somers-Willet (2009) views the competition as a way of enhancing the poets' reputations as writers and performers. She argues that "even on a local level, slam poets compete for the esteem of their fellow poets and the larger literary community. Thus, slams are competitive events in that they can be career- and-reputation building opportunities (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.28).

In the article 'Was That 'Different' 'Dissident' or 'Dissonant'?' (Bernstein, 1998), Maria Damon notes that verbal competition is not something new. It has "a respectable history in many oral traditions" (p.334). She explains that poetic competition has a typical feature of oral societies, from the legendary "contest of bards" in pre-literate Great Britain to contemporary gatherings of Ethiopian intelligentsia (which is highly literate as well as oral). The poetic competition can also be traced back to the United States among the Black arts and artists, "dozens" (a famous African American game), and "cutting contest" of Jazz musicians (Bernstein, 1998).

It is this strategy of competition that has developed a drive in the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets to coin stage names for themselves that create images of superiority and excellence. As Smith and Kraynak (2009) observe, "The slammers experience all the exhilaration, mind-bending anxiety, sense of achievement, and agony of defeat that any competitor feels"

(p.52) and therefore (we can add) are compelled to coin stage names that enhance competition. Or supreme a poet's name sounds, the more attention, and favor they will expect from the audience. They will anticipate being talked of favorably in the poetry circles and will hope to get invitations from corporate functions, overseas poetry festivals, and TV or radio entertainment programs where they will be featured.

In the quest to project images that are superior in the face of the audience, the poets' craft names such as 'Brigeddia', 'Machizmo', 'Generaly Maxima,' 'Smitta Smitten,' and 'Jicho Pevu.' Although Nyairo (2004) sees a sense in which these nicknames gesture to Western Modernity, in my own assessment, it has more to do with the culture of competition in slam poetry performances. The names gesture towards excellence and superiority.

Smith and Kraynak (2003) further note that it is advisable to have a stage name "because you're competing in the marketplace of entertainment and arts galore" (p.210). Smith and Kraynak note further:

> *A captivating name pins a memorable mental image on the audience members' foreheads, making it nearly impossible for them to forget it. Sometimes it's downright pretentious, but it's what entertainers do (Smith & Kraynak, 2003, p.210).*

According to Smith and Kraynak, the names must be captivating, and to make them so, the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets at *Kwani?* Open Mic craft names that arouse pictures of supremacy. Each poet makes themselves and their poetry sound better and greater than the poetry of their contemporaries in the face of the audience. Take, for instance, Chris Muga's stage name, 'Machizmo.' It is a corruption of the English word 'machismo.' The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'machismo' as aggressive male behavior that emphasizes the importance of being strong rather than being intelligent and sensitive.

Machizmo might, consciously or unconsciously, be trying to point towards a "black ghetto masculinity" that is "recognizable, essential, real, or authentic" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.99) in slam poetry. According to the latter, gender is a characteristic component of slam poetry. She states that slam poetry is the stage where black urban masculinity is performed and negotiated. This aspect of black urban masculinity must have started during the late1980s and early1990s, "when the artist Luther Campbell produced two videos of hip hop, and *2 Live Crew* and *Easy-E's NWA* that were graphically explicit and verbally pornographic representations of women" (Price, 2006, 71). Price further narrates that these videos brought the notion that those who portrayed women in that light were 'really men.' "Being a real man involves subjecting women to all levels of mischief to teach them their place" (Price, 2006, p.71). During the 1990s and into the 2000s, the trend of Music videos and lyrics of "revealing women as sexual and sensual objects dressed in bikinis, thongs, high-heeled stilettos, and lingerie and often dancing in ways simulating sexual acts" (p.69) continued. These misogynist aspects of hip-hop manifested themselves in various ways via images, lyrics, and other presentations. At this time, Price (2006) notes men boasting hyper-masculine personas referred to one another as 'pimps' in recognition of superficial and unrecognized sexual prowess. Often championed by rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Ice-T, 50 Cent, and numerous others, the terms 'pimp,' as well as 'mack' and 'playa,' served as indirect references to their position of power or control over women (Price, 2006).

Machizmo might, consciously or unconsciously, be imagining or aspiring to that larger-than-life image that has the power to control women. Looking at himself as a 'pimp,' 'mack' or 'playa,' Machizmo is attempting to embody one of the characteristic components of slam poetry, which is "recognizable, essential, real, or authentic" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.99). Machizmo has that masculine stature and strength of voice, but that is almost all. There is nothing else masculine in his poetry performance. His red costume is faded and not very attractive. One of his poems, 'Twisted Life,' discusses his sad life that is threatened by an uncertain future. A second piece, 'A Beautiful Life,' expresses his hope of meeting someone – a lover; while 'Life's Journey' discusses the worry of tomorrow that life always stirs. We can then look at the name not as depicting the strength or excellence of the poet's poetry performance or as depicting himself as having sexual prowess and control over women but rather as a poet's fantasy or a kind of psychological satisfaction that he derives from it.

Francis Onono goes by the name Brigeddia. This is a corruption of the English word 'brigadier.' A brigadier is one who commands and leads a brigade. The poet reinforces this image with his military costume, which he puts on when performing. His tall masculine physique and deep, commanding voice add to the military image he aspires for. Despite all these -- costume, physique, and voice – that accentuate his stage name, his poetry dealing with the youth and drugs has nothing to do with him being a brigadier. Therefore, his name has nothing to do with his poetry performance. It is meant to create a mental image of a person who is a leader of the military. In the poetry circles, where poets compete for supremacy, the name paints a picture of a poet who leads others, and thus, the best among them.

When Dembede Mido started performing his poetry in 2008, he took in the name of 'Checkmate Mido.' He dropped his first name, 'Dembede,' and retained his father's name, Mido. He says, "*Checkmate* is a name I gave myself when I began performing rap poetry. I got into the industry when a large number of rap poets were calling themselves the 'king of rap poetry,' yet they didn't have the skills to back it. So I was like, "if you're King, then I am checkmate." In chess terms, that is the final say in a game. Anyone can play King, but no King rises above checkmate. So it was a cocky move on my part because I could back it.

Checkmate is a situation in the game of chess whereby the King faces threats from which he cannot escape. In these circumstances, the King can be taken to be 'dead,' or rather 'is dying,' or 'is destroyed, or simply 'is broken.' To checkmate an opponent in chess means to win the game. In those circumstances, most players stop the play before they are checkmated since they have lost the game anyway. The use of the name (Checkmate) is intended to indicate that he is better than a King. If one is better than a King, then one is excellent, superior, and competent. The construction of this larger-than-life image is a fantasy of the poet that, in some way, gives him psychological satisfaction.

His poems, such as 'What is My Name?' and 'The Hero,' show superiority and competence in composition. Clad in a red T-shirt and protruding muscles on his huge arms and chest during most of his performances, Checkmate cuts an image

of a boxer. His huge voice and use of beat boxing techniques complement his body size. Also, his utilization of the call-and-response technique during his performance enhances his name. He shouts, "Checkmate!" and asks the audience to respond with 'Above the King!' before he starts to perform. This not only implants the name's image in the psyche of the audience but also gives him the psychological satisfaction that he is the best or perceives himself as the finest among his peers.

Tony Mochama's stage name 'Smitta Smitten' reveals a lot about the competitive nature of performance poetry at *Kwani?* Open Mic. According to the poet, 'Smitta' means to 'smite' (hit), and 'smitten' means 'in love with.' So the joint name means 'in love with smiting' or, to paraphrase it further, 'in love with hitting.' The name draws associations with the violence that hip hop artists --such as Ice-T, Schoolly D, Kool G. Rap, etc. -- offered as the main ingredient in their stylistic approaches to their music. Violence in their music and in their concerts was rife. Many hip-hop artists, including Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G, lost their lives through violence at hip-hop concerts. Other hip-hop artists who have died through violence at hip-hop hot spots include Stretch (Randy Walker), Big L (Lamont Coleman), Freaky Tah (Raymond Rogers), Jam Master Jay (Jason Mizell), Kenneth Walker, Soulja Slim (James Tapp), DJ Scott La Rock (Scott Sterling), Karizma, JoJo White, DJ Cee, Kadafi (Yafeu Fula), Seagram, Black Dynasty, and Young Lay (Price, 2006, pp.79-80).

The name Smitta Smitten is, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, alluding to the hip-hop culture of violence and fights. By using the name, Mochama perceives himself as someone who 'hits' others. The sound of this name gives the impression that he quickly hits his opponents in the fight for supremacy. He started using the name in January 2004 when he began writing 'scene at,' a column on the *East African Standard* with the purpose of –to quote him--"hitting out at celebs, so-called socialites, archaic academics, and other such folks." The name is popular and understood among members of the audience since he has used it, not only at *Kwani?* Open Mic, but also in 'Scene at' column. It is also popular among the audience because of the fact that the poet has been embroiled in controversy since 2003 over his poetry. His poetry has been discussed in daily papers by critics and scholars for over a decade now.

His stage image (glasses and dreadlocks) augments the image of an MAU MAU fighter who 'hits.' His poetry anthology, 'What if I am a Literary Gangster?" and one poem in the book, 'Poetry Police,' indicates the 'hitting' out at the 'archaic academics and other such folks' who view his poetry negatively. His other poems, such as 'To Kill a Mocking fart,' 'Whack,' 'Hummer,' etc., comprise words and phrases that hint towards 'hitting' or 'smiting.' His way of speaking his poetry while on stage is explosive. He talks with a lot of energy and puts emphasis on almost all the words. In the end, his speaking sounds like he is violent, fighting, or simply hitting out.

His popularity among the audience, his long-time use of the name, not only at *Kwani?* Open Mic, but also in a newspaper column, 'Scene at,' his stage image (dark glasses and dreadlocks), his defiant poetry, and his manner of delivery all combine to enhance the name that portrays him as a boxer, a fighter, or one who smashes his opponents. Overall, the name is a theatrical device that gives the poet the psychological satisfaction that he is the best among his fellow poets.

Generaly Maxima, whose real name is Robert Mogambi, tells me that his name means 'one who overthrows a government.' 'Maxima' is the plural of 'maximum,' he explains, and therefore he has sufficient strength to overthrow a government. In this case, 'government' refers to his competitors or opponents in the art industry. Generaly Maxima evokes images of an officer in charge of an army, a big official with strong weapons around him. Although his costumes and body stature do not reflect a General, his poems, such as 'Letter to the President' and 'The Power,' allude to his sense as a general. The poet expects the name to amplify his image as a superior poet while diminishing the image of other poets. He fantasizes about himself as a better poet than his contemporaries.

The poet Dennis Okoyo chose the name 'POETA' because, according to him, it has a meaning: 'Powerful Ornament Engraved with Talent in Art.' The image he strives to construct is one of the poets who embodies a talent in art, but the audience who may not have knowledge of what the initials (POETA) stand for, may form an image that will spring from the meaning of the word POETA, which, in Spanish, is a poet. The construction of the name has nothing to do with the audience or in trying to make them understand its meaning. However, with the poet's own imagination of the larger-than-life image he aspires for, Claude Bakari took the initial of his last name and constructed BAUS, which means 'Bakari Art Unlimited Store.' When he comes onto the stage, he shouts into the microphone thus, "Bakari Art Unlimite-e-e-e-ed---!" The audience, having learnt or been told by the poet in his past performances about the meaning of the initials, will complete his statement with "Store!" He will repeat this statement over and over, and the audience will respond the same way. The poet utilizes this call-and-response technique with the intention of not only creating rapport with his audience but also etching the name and its image in their minds. He aspires to make them visualize an image of someone whose store or mind is not limited to imagination and creativity. It is also interesting to note that there is an optical company called Baus opticals. This further creates an image of a poet with a super sight. To have good sight means one is able to see far and see things others may not. This double image is boosted by the strength of his costumes. His T-shirt and hat bear the word CB in big visible letters. He composes great rap poetry that attracts loud applause from the audience. Despite his applauded performances and T-shirts that bear the initials of his name, the underlined drive for his name is informed by his finalization of that larger-than-life image he aspires for.

Steve Biko opted for a strange coinage: Jicho Pevu (A keen eye). Jicho Pevu is a program of investigative journalism on KTN (Kenya Television Network) that has, in the past, unearthed several corrupt deals in the Kenyan government. The investigative journalists and founders of this program, Mohammed Ali and John Allan Namu have inspired Steve Biko to the extent that he has taken the name of this program. He says:

> *Mohammed Ali and John Allan Namu are my mentors. They are the ones who have inspired my poetry. In my poetry, I unearth the rot and corruption in our society. A keen eye sees far and sees things other eyes don't see. The rot in society can best be unearthed by a keen eye.*

His poems, such as 'Mababylon' and 'Wa dozi,' discuss corruption activities in the government and therefore magnify his stage name. Although his eyes are not extraordinary or different from those of other people, a picture of one on the front part of his T-shirt serves as an iconic sign that reinforces the name. In conclusion, 'Jicho Pevu' creates an image of someone who has omniscient and omnipresent characteristics and can see and know all things that take place in secret. In the world of competition, he cuts out a concept of a keen, sensitive, and investigative poet. The competitive nature of the 'Literary-Gangsta' poetry at *Kwani?* Open Mic is illustrated in the craving for superiority in the stage name 'Msooh,' chosen by Muthoni Gitau. "Msooh" is a Sheng word, which she explains as follows:

The word means 'big', which is ironic coz I am not big physically, but when it comes to intellect capacity, I am pretty big. Msooh is meant to get people expecting big before they see me and be shocked after they do.

Although Msooh uses the name to create irony and shock the audience, the underlined desire is to sound superior before them. The word 'Msooh' creates, in the minds of the audience, a psychological impression of a big lady coming on stage when she is actually a small person in size and stature. Her voice, too, is low and not as loud as the name suggests. Her poems are written in freestyle and not crafted in any extraordinary style. Her dress is casual, and she puts on no costume when performing. There is completely nothing to show for the name. In the atmosphere of competitiveness, all that matter is not the poet's stature or simplicity of dressing but the conceptions that the stage name means. As Langer (1951, p.61) observes: "Behavior towards conceptions is what words normally evoke. This is the typical process of thinking."

Tear Drops (Joshua Awilly) is a name that demonstrates the superiority every 'Literary-Gangsta' poet craves for. While he chose the name to create an image of a poet who arouses emotions in the audience with his pieces, his poetries -- most of them based on *Mchongoano* (children's humor) -- do not deal with any emotional issue. His delivery lacks emotion as his performance dwells on humor and jokes. We can then conclude that his name does not portray the truth about him and his poetry or about his performances; rather, it is meant to construct in the minds of the audience a poet with emotion, and therefore genuine before them.

Nowhere is the notion of the competitive nature of the 'Literary-Gangsta' poetry illustrated more than in the following stage names: Poppa Steve-O, Mufasa, Ronie Prince, and Grandmaster Masese. The names point towards leadership and seniority. Stephen Nzioka sought seniority and found it in the name of Poppa Stev-O. He explains his stage name thus: "Poppa is more of a title, kinda like a godfather is, and Stev-O is self-explanatory, short of Stephen with an /o/-- little Ghetto (where I have been raised) attached to it." The Oxford English dictionary describes a 'godfather' as a very powerful man in a criminal organization, especially the mafia. It also gives a second meaning: If one is a godfather of something, it means he is a person who began or developed it. According to Poppa, he ascribes to the second meaning. Although he aspires to create a 'godfather' image or a person who began or developed poetry, his poems, such as 'humanity' and 'the rain,' are composed in freestyle and are not extraordinary to warrant him the status of being a 'godfather of poetry.' He, therefore, uses the name for marketing himself. With it, he fantasizes about that larger-than-life image of a person who is an inventor of the genre.

But Nzioka might, unconsciously, be ascribed to the other meaning: a very powerful man in a criminal organization, especially the mafia. The name might be alluding to the image of the gangsta rappers in the US in the 1990s whose music was known as hard-core or thug rap, and which celebrated "black criminality, promiscuity, misogyny, drug use, and ghetto violence—capitalized on a social climate in America in which black-white racial tensions ran high" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.101). At that time, Somers-Willett tells us, one's street credentials or criminal records were marketable for any hip-hop artist. Crime was a fashion. To be 'godfather,' then, is to identify with those street African-American criminals in US, or to put it plainly, to associate with the less privileged in society. A poet who associates himself with the disadvantaged members of society is likely to win the hearts of the audience.

Ken Kibet opted to call himself Mufasa. Mufasa is the King of the jungle in 'Lion King,' a film set in East Africa. "When I am performing, I am a King on stage," he proudly tells me. Like Mufasa in the 'Lion King,' Ken Kibet perceives himself as the King of all poets in Kenya. He tells me he proved it when he came top in a spoken-word competition at Slam Africa in December 2012 and was crowned the Slam King. The audience may not know the meaning and the origin of the name, but its usage brings psychological satisfaction to the poet.

To make his name bear a unique projection, Ronald Otieno had to restructure it into Ronie and then drop Otieno, which sounds commonplace, and take in 'Prince' in its place. 'Prince' echoes the mononym of American singer and actor Prince Rogers Nelson. By preferring to go by this name, it clearly indicates the poet's longing to be associated with the American singer and, therefore, success and fame.

The Oxford English dictionary defines 'Prince' as 'a male member of a royal family who is not King, especially the son or grandson of the King or queen.' The name, therefore, can also imply or signify royalty. In an interview, Ronald Otieno admits that he is an upcoming artist, which is why he chose to be a prince rather than King. As a sign, the name indicates that he is still learning his craft and one day, he will be an expert in it and therefore become King.

As a prince, Otieno wears a befitting tailored costume. The problem with the costume is that it is grey (a dull color) instead of purple or blue -- the two colors associated with royalty. His poetry talks of Jesus and being a son of God, content that draws in other associations with the name. Most likely, he also uses the name to associate himself with the son of God. If one is a prince, then God is King. To Ronald, it may not matter what the name implies. He aims to project a superior image before his audience, which he does with Ronie Prince. He may not be a prince of any kind, but the name gives him the mental satisfaction that he is one.

Dennis Mosiere calls himself Grandmaster Masese. Although Masese means a courageous man among the Abagusii community, what stands out is the first name – 'Grandmaster.' It depicts seniority, just like 'Poppa' (godfather) in 'Poppa

Steve-O.' The poet says, "I am a master of poetry and a grandfather as far as experience is concerned." What Dennis desires to project is a poet who has the experience and, therefore, is better than others. He is one of those who started performing at Goethe Institute in 2000 when *Kwani?* Open Mic had not been formed. His poems, such as 'Biting Snakes,' 'Noc-Journalist,' and 'If God Said,' display dexterity and craftsmanship that comes with years of experience. The content of those poems enhances his image as a "grandfather" since he doesn't fear talking about issues many poets will shy away from speaking about. In the poem 'No Pain, No Gain,' he courageously says:

Hebu tuseme ukweli sisi
Kwenye office wajifanya busy
Scandals, policies
Kukula kuiba kwa kalamu
Ni kutuekea sumu
Anglo-leasing, Goldenberg freezing

He discusses scandals such as Anglo-leasing and Goldenberg that took place in the Kenyan government in the past. His poems also mention scandals that take place in the government's offices. Despite his prowess in poetry composition and his superiority in thematic concerns, the coinage of his stage name aims at projecting an image of excellence and grandeur.

Some 'Literary-Gangsta' poets take names of celebrated artists or prominent personalities and restructure them. Through this association, the poets can steer clear of doubts about their competence as performance poets. An example is Oscar Ogero, who took the name Dox from Tony Maddox, the current (2005) Executive Vice President and Managing Director of CNN International. He says: "With my obsession with his success story, I took the last letters of his name to come up with DOX. I started using it in 2009 while still in high school." Gufy Dox (Oscar Ogero) says that the first part of the name 'Gufy' is a short form of: G-Godly U- Uberous (fruitful) with an F-formation of a Y-Young star.

The name has a meaning to him as a poet. He really does not care whether the members of the audience have knowledge of it or not. "If they ask, I will tell them," he says. According to him, "the name gives me confidence since it echoes the success of CNN director." Whether the name can be interpreted by the audience or not, the underlying notion of its coinage is competitiveness. Its metropolitan sound and uniqueness work well for the poet and, by extension, the audience. We have seen how the poets coin their stage names to give themselves an identity. Let us now explore ways the poets create their images by the way they dress and appear on stage.

3.2. Posturing/Image-Making

Bowskill (1973) notes that the body speaks its own language long before it is close enough for anyone to see its details. Smith and Kraynak (2009) augment this observation when they state:

> *...the body begins the communication process even before the voice is heard. From the moment the audience is aware of the physical presence [of the performer], that presence arouses a response, establishing in them what the psychologists call a 'set,' or condition of mental readiness [expectation] toward what they are about to hear (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, p.109).*

Bowskill and Smith & Kraynak assert that body image is a vital part of communication. Smith adds, "90% of human communication is nonverbal, and that nonverbal communication is often more effective, more revealing than the words themselves" (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, p.109). However, he notes that, at times, what the body is communicating will be in obvious contradiction to what the words and the voice are saying. In this case, Smith says, "We tend to give greater weight to the visual stimulus than to the auditory clues (quoted from *Oral Interpretation* by Charlotte Lee and Frank Galati, p.133).

Since body image is a crucial component of communication, this section interrogates the construction of identity by the "Literary-Gangsta" poets by exploring their body image. I am examining the 'Literary-Gangsta's' sagging trousers, dreadlocks, bling bling, wrist bands, and costumes.

3.2.1. Sagging

Sagging, or 'low-riding,' is a male style of wearing trousers below the waist, thus showing one's undergarments. The person who sags is referred to as a 'sagger.' The saggers at *Kwani?* Open Mic include:

- Dorphan (Dennis Mutuma),
- Ronie Prince (Ronald Otieno),
- BAUS (Claude Bakari),
- Machizmo (Chris Muga),
- POETA (Dennis Okoyo), and
- Tear Drops (Joshua Awilly)

This research sought to unveil the significance of 'sag' in their poetry performances.

Dorphan: It is a swagg.
Ronie Prince: It is my style as a youth.
Baus: I like it that way since it is a style of our generation.
Machizmo: It is the thing we do nowadays as a style. New things will keep coming.
Poeta: It is just a swagg.
Tear Drops: It is a new fashion for the youth.

The above interview reveals that the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets 'sag' their trousers as a 'swag' (style). None of the six poets has knowledge of the origin of 'sagging.' Various sources claim that this manner of wearing sagging trousers originated from the prison systems in the United States. In prison, the criminals, mostly black youth, were provided with oversized uniforms. Belts were denied since it was feared they could use them to hang themselves. In 1990s, this style of sagging was popularized by hip-hop artists and music videos, and the sagging culture spread around the world. It was later on viewed as a symbol of defiance and cultural awareness among the black community in America. It, too, symbolized the black race's rejection of the values of mainstream society. Many people view the sagging style as a protest by black youth against the hard conditions they live in.

The sagging style is seen by many in the US as disrespect and a sign of bad delinquency. It is seen to be supporting gang and prison behavior. The criticism leveled against it has actually made it popular and having originated from black people, the authority fears banning it since racism will be read into it.

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets in Kenya do not understand the origin or the significance of 'Sagging.' They do so as a style, mostly copied from those American hip-hop artists they watch on videos. Since every youth is 'sagging,' no one wants to be left out—but to conform to this fashion. Theo van Leeuwen (2005) provides rules of conformity in his book, *Introducing Social Semiotics.* He states that "conformity is not quite the same thing as tradition. Rather than doing what 'we' (our group) 'have always done,' it is doing 'what everybody else appears to be doing'" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.56). Referring to the 'rule of conformity,' he states:

> *It knows neither explicit codes nor the know-how that comes from the inculcation of tradition and requires only one thing, an antenna for 'what everyone is doing.' The rule of conformity provides little room for the difference because it is based on a fear of being different, of not blending in (Leeuwen, 2005, p.56).*

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets may not want to dress differently from the way others dress. By sagging, they conform or become part of the young generation in Nairobi, boosting their image and sense of belonging. Leeuwen (2005) observes that "going against the rule of conformity has consequences – gossip, innuendo, and ultimately ostracization and social exclusion" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.56).

Conformity, Leeuwen (2005) notes, "Comes into its own in situations where we have few clues as to how to behave, and of which we have little prior experience. All we then have to go by is what we see others do because this does not constitute authentic know-how and experience. It can lead to particularly timid and repetitive forms of behavior" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.56). The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets, being part of the post-colonial society, their cultural behavior was disrupted by colonialism and therefore "have few clues as to how to behave" (p.56), and ultimately have no little prior experience and therefore have to go by what they see others do.

In the 'rule of the role model,' Leeuwen (2005) draws our attention to role models who insert influences in the way people behave. He observes that celebrities who live far away from us influence how we dress, talk, think, etc. Not following these celebrities can be a social handicap and make us appear old-fashioned, out of touch, and unable to join in conversations that matter. The rule of the role model not only provides choice but also allows for rapid and frequent change for semiotic mobility. As a result, it requires constant monitoring of the relevant media, constant comparing notes with friends and colleagues, and constant updating of the consumer goods necessary to signify one's identity and lifestyle (Leeuwen, 2005, p.57).

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets look up to the African-American hip-hop stars as their role models. They sag their trousers as they do, and if they don't, fear of being thought as old-fashioned creeps in. So they will have to look over at their friends, the media, and colleagues to see what is trending to give them their identity. Fiske (1989) sees popular culture as raw material, as a resource with which people, individually or in groups, and self-reflexively, or even subversively, construct their identities and lifestyles.

According to the 'rule of the role model,' as espoused by Leeuwen (2005), a large number of people across the globe use very similar or identical consumer goods to signify their identity. Although they do this, Leeuwen states:

> *They only talk about it differently. They give it different meanings, just as contemporary branding gives different meanings to the different labels of very similar or identical consumer goods. Insofar as it is implemented through the global media, the 'rule of the role model' controls what people do and how they do it, not what they think about it or say about it. It controls and unifies action (globalization) and divides meaning (localization). If attention is focused only on consumption, that production becomes invisible. If it is focused only on 'local' meaning and not on the deliberate control strategies of powerful global corporations, then production is treated as a natural phenomenon, which simply is there and would be pointless to criticize (Leeuwen, 2005, p.57).*

In conclusion, the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets do not wear sagging trousers to project the US prison system, or protest against the mainstream society, or send a message to the authorities concerning their social conditions; but to conform to what others are doing, to stay in fashion, and to avoid social exclusion. They intend to project the image of those African-American hip-hop artists. In a competitive environment of performance poetry, the poets aspire to win the hearts of their listeners by being 'in vogue' or 'in touch' or simply 'belonging.'

3.2.2. Dreadlocks

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets in Kenya who wear dreadlocks are Kennet B (Kennedy Odongo), Smitta Smitten (Tony Mochama), Grandmaster Masese (Duncan Mosiere), POETA (Dennis Okoyo), Checkmate Mido (Dembede Mido), Lost Child (Kamwangi Njue) and Robirobbery Waziri Wa Rap (Kihui Wanyoike). This research sought to find out why they wear dreadlocks and what it signifies in their performance.

Kennet B: They give me the "wait till you listen to him" feeling, which is a boat of hope sailing in my soul. Winds blowing through them sing songs echoing like something much is yet to be known about me, to feed me, to keep me, and to grow my tree, my family.

Grandmaster Masese: They are a beautiful expression of freedom and free thinking. It is a good style and a mirror of our collective African identity. I wear my locks as a sign of freedom, making me feel great and super as an African. My locks are like a tree and roots and branches. Every single lock has several branches. This means I connect my free spirit to the root of mother earth. I am reaching out to all through words, music, and song. This is African significance and true knowledge, the fighting spirit of MAU MAU.

Poeta: I hate shaving. I am a rastaman, and my dreads represent my art. It's a museum of thoughts. That's what they signify. They are not fashion.

Robirobbery Waziri Wa Rap: Dreadlocks give me an identity as an African. It gives me a creative look as an artist.

Smitta Smitten: I wear dreadlocks to signify Mau Mau. I started to lock in 2007, exactly 50 years since Dedan Kimathi died. He died in 1957. The year 2007 was his 50 years of commemoration, and the GoK had not yet even given him that statue (let alone bought his missus a vehicle). I wear dreads to remember him and all he represents, his rebellion against the white man, imperialism, etc. It is an aesthetic speech of rebellion, a physical confrontation. Like Koigi, who cut off his locks only after Moi left power, I will shave mine when all the Mau Mau survivors have been compensated by the UK government. My dreadlocks don't signify anything in my performance.

It can be deduced from the above interview that the dreadlocks are worn by the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets for different reasons: as a costume, to promote the image of Rastafarianism, and for others, like Mochama and Grandmaster Masese, to signify MAU MAU.

The dreadlocks of the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets have a symbolic function. It is a sign that transmits to the audience an impression of something external to itself (Rastafarianism). Dreadlocks create in the minds of the audience a Rastafarian or reggae image that, in Jamaica, is representative of the struggle for their rights. The dreadlocks (signifier) and the Rastafarian (signified) are intimately linked in the minds of the audience since, as Saussure (1983, p.66; 1974, p.66) observes, 'each triggers the other.' The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets would prefer to be perceived in that light as it creates in their audience an image of a savior or defender.

The dreadlocks of the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets are worn largely as a style. However, the locks, consciously or unconsciously, create an image of either a Rastafarian or MAU MAU member. In both cases, they project an image of a fighter, a savior, or a rebel against an oppressive system. In the competitive nature of performance poetry in Kenya, the image of a fighter, or savior, will endear a poet well in the eyes of the audience. Though accepted in the leisure industry, dreadlocks and bling blings are frowned upon by the 'official' culture.

3.2.3. Bling Blings

The poets who wear bling blings at the *Kwani?* Open Mic include:

- Dorphan (Dennis Mutuma),
- POETA (Dennis Okoyo),
- BAUS (Claude Bakari),
- MVP (Fidel Versatile Poet),
- MIMI (Calvin Okune), and
- Ronie Prince (Ronald Otieno)

This research sought to find out the significance of bling blings to these poets.

MVP: A footballer wears a jersey; I also have this as my jersey. I love art, and for me, this is an artistic expression. It is part of me.

Baus: Just to boost my appearance when on stage

Poeta: It adds to my image when on stage.

Ronie Prince: It gives me confidence when on stage. It helps people to focus on me and on what I am saying.

Funkiss: Because of respect, a King cannot come out to the public without his crown and his chains. I put on my bling bling chains because I respect myself and the audience.

Dorphans: It is my choice as an artist to wear this.

The responses from the poets indicate that they wear bling blings for different reasons: as a costume, as a style, to boost their appearance or image on stage, etc. It all goes back to what Leeuwen (2005) discusses in his book, *Introducing Social Semiotics*. He observes that "fashion designers, for instance, constantly import ideas from other periods, other cultures, science-fiction, costumes in movies, etc., to connote the ideas and values attached to those periods, cultures, and so on in the popular culture, and to provide people with resources for signifying their allegiance to ideas, values, lifestyles, and so on" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.41). In this discussion, he points out that people use the way they dress to communicate their allegiance to ideas and values, rather than their social class, occupation, etc. Through these lenses, we see the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets aspiring to be associated with the ideas of hip-hop. The 'expression' (bling blings) as Louis HJelmslev (1961, p.47) could refer to this signifier, creates a 'content' (the hip hop culture) in the minds of the audience. By wearing it, it places the poet in the image of American artists e.g., Lil Wayne, Ja Rule, LLCool J Ice Cool, Snoop Dogg, etc. and with this large image, they will expect to be perceived favorably in the eyes of the audience.

3.2.4. Wrist-Bands

In addition to bling blings, the Kenyan 'Literary-Gangsta' poets wear wrist-bands with red, yellow, and green colors. The poets who wear this include:

- Machizmo (Chris Muga),
- POETA (Dennis Okoyo),
- Lost Child (Kamwangi Njue), and
- RixPoet (Eric Otieno)

This research sought the significance with which these poets hold the colors of their wrist-bands.

Machizmo: The wrist-band with these colors makes me look artistic, and it says I am an artist.

Poeta: Why do I wear red, yellow, and green wrist-band? It's a rastaman ting. The colors have different meanings: Red means blood shed by the black man during colonialism. Yellow means freedom in religion. Green means the green, fertile land that Jah gave the rastaman that we protect. In my performance, the wrist-band gives me the image of an artist.

Lost Child: It signifies the artistic part of me.

Grandmaster Masese: I wear cultural wrist-bands and bangles with many colors. Green is for the land, yellow is for gold, and red is for the blood.

Therefore, we conclude that the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets wear wristbands of red, green, and yellow for different reasons. Leeuwen (2005) sees this as having something to do with fashion. He observes that "Not following fashion has consequences – you will be unfashionable, and hence lose some of your social attractiveness among those who orient themselves towards the rule of fashion" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.54). And since the urban youth in Nairobi are aligned towards the rule of fashion, the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets cannot go against the rule of conformity, as they will risk ostracization or social exclusion. In the competitive environment of performance poetry in Kenya, consequences include:

- One's poetry being rated low,
- Being unpopular, and
- Having a low turn-out of audience

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets have to wear red-yellow-green wrist-bands because that is what they see others wear. Leeuwen (2005) states that the dictate of fashion never comes with justifications, nor is it grounded on expertise. He explains, "while experts must demonstrate their right to rule by displaying their qualifications or basing themselves on research results, fashion designers neither poll people for their preferences nor cite any other form of research" (Leeuwen, 2005, p.54).

They simply have the power to unveil, imperatively, what will be in fashion this season. Because this will eventually influence what we can buy in the shops, it has a major impact on the range of semiotic resources available for signifying our identity through the language of dress (Leeuwen, 2005, p.54).

What Leeuwen (2005) means here is that fashion dictates and it has an influence on us. The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets, being part of the urban youth in the city of Nairobi, have to conform to what others are wearing. They cannot afford to be different from the rest of the youth since doing so will alienate them and make them feel low-esteemed before their audience.

3.2.5. Costumes

The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets use costumes to construct their body images. As noted by Bowskill (1973) and Smith (2009), body image constitutes 90% of human communication. The poet's body starts to communicate long before the poet starts to perform their poem. The 'Literary-Gangsta' poets, such as BAUS (Claude Bakari), Tear Drops (Joshua Awilly), and POETA (Dennis Okoyo), wear costumes that bear their names. BAUS wears yellow caps and T-Shirts with 'CB' written on them, while Tear Drops' (Joshua Awilly) long trousers are inscribed with the word TEAR DROPS along their lengths. POETA puts on T-Shirts that have his name inscribed on the lengths of their sleeves. In addition to inscribing names, other poets, like Jicho Pevu, wear T-Shirts that bear drawings that imply the meaning of their stage names. Jicho Pevu (Keen eye) puts on a T-Shirt that bears a drawing of an eye on it.

The writings and drawings on these poets' costumes can be related to graffiti. Archeologists first used the term 'graffiti' to describe the system of communication and expression depicted by writings, drawings, and scribbling on surfaces (Price, 2006). Price observes, "Graffiti was the product of urban revolutionaries who formed subcultures to rebel against parents, police, and other social authorities for personal satisfaction" (Price, 2006, p.28). In their rebellion, these urban revolutionaries "displayed their writings on walls, freeway overpasses, buildings, trains, public mailboxes, telephone poles, underground passages, and many other public, visible areas" (Price, 2006, p.28).

Although practiced as an art form by hip-hop artists, graffiti's main aim was to raise awareness of social, political, and economic disparities in certain parts of American Society. As Price notes, it was "a form of renewed warfare from disenfranchised and underprivileged youth against the very agencies they felt denied them access to opportunity" (Price, 2006, p.31) – in this case, politicians and bureaucrats. By using graffiti on their T-Shirts, the 'Literary-Gangsta' poets aspire to be associated with the underprivileged in society. That is why Somers-Willett (2009) describes slam or performance poetry as 'the performance of marginalized identity.'

4. Conclusions

From the foregoing, we deduce that the 'Literary-Gangsta' Performance Poets in Kenya sag their trousers and wear bling blings, dreadlocks, and red-yellow-green wrist-bands for different reasons. The sagging of trousers and wearing of bling blings are fashion copies from those African-American hip hop artists that are taken in as fashion. The

dreadlocks and the yellow-green-red wrist-bands are arguably copied from the reggae musicians and rastafarians. According to Leeuwen's (2005) 'rule of conformity' and 'rule of the role model,' these poets are dictated by fashion or by what they see others wear.

However, Somers-Willett (2009) views this fashion as an attempt to create an identity with the marginalized in society. She observes that "poets perform their identities at slams through voice, gesture, dress, and physical appearance even when they are not doing so through their words" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.71). The performance poets at *Kwani?* Open Mic, consciously or unconsciously, performs marginalized identities. Marginalized identities, in this case, can include the criminalized African American youth in the US prisons—from whom the poets copy sagging of trousers; the African-American hip hop artists—from whom sagging of trousers, wearing of bling blings and skewed caps are aped; rastafarians and other colonized societies—from whom dreadlocks and red-yellow-green wrist-bands are copied; and MAU MAU fighters—from whom the wearing of dreadlocks is copied.

Somers-Willett sees slams' 'proclamations of marginalized identities' as attracting the audience, who in turn "see poetry slams not only as literary or performative but ultimately as political events" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.72). We, therefore, can establish that the 'Literary-Gansgta' poets' sagging trousers, dreadlocks, bling blings, red-yellow-green wrist-bands are a conscious or unconscious attempt to identify themselves with various marginalized groups around the world. Like the hip-hop genre, slam poetry celebrates black criminality, promiscuity, misogyny, drug use, and ghetto violence—capitalized on a social climate in America in which black-white racial tensions ran high (characterized most dramatically by the riots that followed the verdict in the Rodney King case), projecting an urban black male criminality that white audiences seemed to both fear and revere (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.103).

The pertinent question that emerges here is, why does slam/performance poetry, like those at *Kwani?* Open Mic, celebrate marginalized identity, and particularly black identity? Why is it that slam aesthetics seem to correspond to performing marginalized identity? These are questions Leeuwen's 'rules of conformity' and 'rule of the role model' fail to answer. According to Somers-Willett, creating a black identity in slam or performance poetry is an attempt at creating a liberal socio-political space where the values of a dominant culture are suspended, and poets in traditionally oppressed groups are encouraged.

This encouragement is expressed through audience applause and as a way to assign value to marginalized voices expressed through judges' scores (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.70).

Somers-Willett's observation about slam poetry shares a lot with the aims of the formation of *Kwani?* Trust. According to the custodian of memory at *Kwani?* and Chairman of its board, Tom Maliti, *Kwani?* Trust was meant to be defiant and was formed to "challenge the existing order of things in the arts." As we saw in Chapter one, this defiance against the order in art is shared by the performance poetry movements in the US that came earlier, such as Beats poetry, Black Arts poetry, and minstrel performances, who "resisted the dominant literary aesthetics of their times." They were anti-academic and rejected the existing literary and artistic standards.

Somers-Willett notes that these poetry movements were characterized by a rebellion against society and the upper class. "They immersed themselves in 'blackness' to indulge their felt sense of difference" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p.51). Somers-Willett observes that they used "the signifier of blackness to achieve distance from the academic and dominant culture in its era" (p.51).

Therefore, we can conclude that the 'Literary-Gangsta' performance poets at *Kwani?* Open Mic, consciously or unconsciously, relies on marginalized or black identities for its image-construction. Terms used in their poetry, such as 'Babylon,' 'Zion,' 'Jah,' use of Jamaican Creole, wearing of red-yellow-green wrist-bands, dreadlocks, use of feel-characteristics, all allude to reggae, Rastafarianism, and other colonized societies. The wearing of dreadlocks is also influenced by MAU MAU. Their sagging trousers, wearing of bling blings, use of beat boxing technique in their performances, and skewed hats –all evoke images of hip hop artists, hence black criminals in USA prisons, gangsta rappers, thug rappers, poor and urban dwellers, etc.

5. 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.