
La revue Kwani? comme contrat social : considérations sur la renaissance littéraire sub-saharienne au tournant du XXIe siècle

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Writer, journalist and Kwani? editor Billy Kahora gave the following lecture during the workshop organized at Paris 13 University in July 2017. He recalls how Kwani? emerged in Kenya in the two-thousands, and how it can be read in the wider context of what some scholars have called a continental “literary renaissance.”

[Ce qui suit est une transcription de la conférence donnée par Billy Kahora, journaliste, écrivain et rédacteur en chef de la revue kenyane Kwani?, lors de la journée d’étude organisée à l’université Paris 13 en juillet 2017. Il revient sur les conditions d’émergence de la revue au début des années 2000 et la « renaissance littéraire » continentale dans laquelle elle s’inscrit.]

Kwani? can be described as a literary space—the broadest signifier possible—and this is on purpose because even for us who work there, who drive its direction, pause when we try and think of an exact definition. Kwani? is in essence many things to many people who are involved in it at one level or the other. Kwani? is a journal, a space, a series of imprints, a literary festival amongst many other things. Back when Kwani? started—some, especially those who were there at the beginning and this was towards the end of 2001 (two years before official registration) saw it as a small movement of sorts. A space for literary innovation. With time it has become difficult to separate myth from fact—this is generally true of spaces that see themselves as movements. The idea of a post-2000 continental literary renaissance also involves myth-making and self-fashioning. Talking, pontificating and writing about Kwani is of course also part of this myth-making.
2 Helon Habila has written about the “post-national” nature of this renaissance. Quoting Paul Zeleza he says: “[...] this generation incorporated in their literary imaginations disdain for colonialism and distrust of nationalism,” both of which inform the context of Kwani?’s beginnings. Kwani? seems to have emerged from a transitional period of Kenyan “nationalism”—what Habila refers to as the post-national condition.1

3 In 2001 a young writer called Binyavanga Wainaina returned to Nairobi after living in South Africa for about a decade where he had been part student, part layabout, part cook and part illegal immigrant. He had left Kenya a decade earlier to study at the University of Transkei—he left the University three months short a Bachelor of Commerce degree, and came back to Kenya with writing as the only thing he was interested in. On his return he wrote a piece called Discovering Home that would go on to win the Caine Prize for African Literature. While he was writing and being a layabout he was also trying to find a “community of writers” in Nairobi. What he found was a loose group of people who were interested in literature in very broad terms. These individuals were mostly part of a new urban generation with middle-class leanings and pretensions that started meeting as part book club, part cultural elite and part drinking set. In fact some of the most repeated tales of this time other than Yvonne’s winning of the Caine Prize for her short story Weight of Whispers are about the drinking. Back then these individuals were also working in some of the fledgling civil society gigs that were still surviving during the last few years of the Moi regime. These individuals who were part of the forming Kwani? were from a generation born mostly in the seventies, who grew up in the eighties and came of age in the nineties. Within a Kenyan context these are seen as distinct socio-political periods. There is a lot of political and cultural nostalgia for the Kenyan seventies a time when the dreams of the newly independent nation were still thought to be realisable. The eighties are however seen as the beginning of political and economic turmoil with the nineties a death-knell for any hope. This narrative extends to the arts, culture and literature. The seventies were the golden age of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Grace Ogot and Meja Mwangi followed by the eighties which are seen as a time of decline followed by what is described as the death of systematic formal literary fiction publishing in the nineties. There is something about growing up across these times for the individuals who would coalesce to form Kwani? that bred a distrust of societal “official” structures and a resultant and acquired instinct for surviving those times through informality, adaptation—a tendency towards “informality” would eventually influence Kwani? when it came to content production. This was coupled with a dark and cynical approach to the world that was both creative and humorous. This is to be noted outside of Kwani? in the wider creative contexts of the time in music (Kalamashaka) and standup comedy (Redykulass). There is a realistic, irreverent, escapist aesthetic to these artforms. An informal approach that eschews formal structure. And this is what Kwani? was in those early days.

4 It is worth noting however that most of these individuals at the core of Kwani? or even in the larger creative space came from educated, relatively well-off backgrounds. They had been part of a solid public education that would come under severe challenges for different reasons; most of them were the children of senior civil servants who had started their careers in the seventies when government was seen to work. And so they had experienced in childhood the full potential of Kenya and a belief in a new independent nation built on the blood and tears of the freedom struggle. Their parents were products of Uhuru (Freedom) and Harambee (pulling together).2 The Kwani? generation therefore came from a generation of believers in the nation and this had its advantages because it
suggested that structure was possible. But because of perceptions of a failed dream the *Kwani?* generation had become disillusioned. And thus the creative context within which *Kwani?* emerged was also of a social and political nature.

5 These individuals were also products of a Nairobi space where the elite had always congregated. In fact most of them had gone to the same schools, hung out in the same social circles. It is often forgotten that there was a strong middle-class dynamic to *Kwani?* in those early days. But many of them had also left to pursue educations in the United States, the United Kingdom and South Africa so they had also been part of a Kenyan diaspora. They had brought back their Western experiences and contacts.

6 There were also key contextual factors that provided key advantages to the formation of *Kwani?*. As mentioned earlier publishing in Kenya had mainly regressed to text-book publishing in the nineties. The only fiction that was being systematically produced was for the text-book market. And even in this the process was corrupt and produced books that were mediocre based on a government tendering system. For many literature was actually a dreaded discipline that many endured at school and forgot about. This challenge provided an opportunity for *Kwani?* that was quite important.

7 In spite of all this because all these emerging writers at *Kwani?* were a generation removed from immediate post-independence African writing and African writers they could tangibly see what was possible from these older writers. They strongly felt that it was necessary that the narrative of their generation be presented, written about and celebrated. One major aspect of the idea of the post-national is a resentment of having few representative writers—one of Binyavanga’s early *Kwani?* editorials attacks this idea of “one” recognised national writer in the person of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who seemed to dominate national literary conversations in mainstream print media and the academy.

8 These contexts provide insights into the nature of the *Kwani?* that emerged—an identity that was multi-faceted. It also explains why this was not a disadvantage in the production of what was deemed necessary. Because of a practical knowledge of pre-existing structures *Kwani?* was able to also emerge as:

- A Journal
- An Open Mike space
- A Litfest
- A *Kwani?* and Kwanini Series
- A series of writing workshops

And based on its influences and its multi-faceted identities accompanied by practical aspects *Kwani?* with time has become many things to many people but at the same time retains a fluidity that keeps its brand relatively new and exciting. And therefore *Kwani?* could be the following things:

- A community of writers
- A literary network
- A journal
- A publishing house
- An NGO that promotes literature
- An Open Mike Event that happens every first Tuesday of the month
- A series of workshops
- A literary Mafia
- A vehicle of possibilities for Founding Editor, Binyavanga Wainaina
- A literary festival
A Trust
A Brand
A group of upstarts

This ability to function as many things comes from an evolution of processes over time and within a widespread informal network of relationships. From the beginning there always was an unspoken commitment and agreement of the need for a new Kenyan writing between the main players, Kwani? editors and its contributors at all levels, almost like a social contract that became the driver of Kwani’s post-2000 literary production.

Beyond Kwani? all that I have described has of course replicated itself in many other ways across the continent. And in many ways a social contract seems to have been drawn up between creative individuals within the borders of Kenya that replicated itself across the continent. A friendship struck up on an online workshop on Zoetrope between Binyavanga Wainaina and Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi and cemented during the Caine Prize awards in 2002 grew into a larger network and institutional relationship that involved Farafina and Kwani? So, conversations on distribution, attendance of respective fellowships and workshops between different institutions such as Chimurenga, the Caine Prize, the Commonwealth Prize, Femrite, African Writers Trust have emerged from individual contact. The informal social contract has given way to institutional agreements that are bred in similar societal conditions in sub-Saharan urban spaces. That is why the story of Kwani?, Farafina, Chimurenga and more recently Jalada, Saraba and Bakwa trace their trajectories to individual relationships akin to social contracts that have grown into institutional networks that now inform the idea of a post-2000 sub-Saharan literary renaissance. These emergent literary space(s) have completely circumvented the traditional nationalistic spaces that housed literature in early post-independence years in Africa.

A few years ago I was invited to the Hargeysa Book Fair and I appeared on a panel with Kenyan writer Stanley Gazemba and Kenyan poet Phyllis Muthoni. On the panel when we were asked what was happening in Kenyan Literature. Gazemba complained that the problem with Kenyan writing recently was that young writers in Kenya were writing for the West. It was not clear whether Gazemba meant that these young writers were outward rather than inward looking, whether they were writing for Global Prizes such as the Caine Prize or whether their concerns were not local. This outward looking-ness is of course one of the great qualities of the idea of the post-2000 literary renaissance which is of course not unique to Africa and its literature. Milan Kundera has outlined in his book The Curtain how Kafka made an overt choice to leave Czechoslovakia and go to Germany and write in German. Kundera uses this example of Kafka’s choices to illustrate a tension that artists and writers face between being citizens in a national space and being artists/writers within a larger historical context of art and literature. Defining provincialism as an inability to see outside one’s culture, Kundera goes on to state that all nations inculcate in the writer the conviction that he belongs to that place alone. And that to set his gaze beyond the boundary of the homeland, to join his artistic colleagues in the supranational territory of art, is considered pretentious, disdainful of his own people. He adds that the tension heightens because the national context is always morally justifiable because the nation in many ways is always arguing and justifying its existence. Kundera adds that the professors of literature to demonstrate their expertise make a great point of identifying with the national context of the Literatures they teach—they adopt its opinions, its tastes, its prejudices. This is the same tension that strongly informed the
emergence of Kwani? within the context of a larger idea of Kenyan and African literature going back to the sixties.

Kwani? and other mentioned spaces came to congregate in quasi-official and informal networks outside the nation. Brought together often by common pasts through common schools, neighbourhoods, common social practices, they work in offline and virtual spaces. New spaces with a youth demographic are now emerging through online platforms. The most visible in Kenya, Jalada Africa offers an interesting case in point. Describing themselves as pan-African they have connections in Nigeria, Kampala, Zimbabwe, Rwanda. They also have become part of similar international networks whose conversations play out on social media. Therefore, national spaces are completely surpassed for the local and the international. Production, circulation and reception of literary works has followed suit. Over the last sixty years the print cultures which informed nationalism, literary and cultural production have now shifted to multi-media, to the local and specialised which is also paradoxically international.

There is also a shift in narratives and stylistics. Emerging themes of sexuality, gender, and radicalisation are re-invested with meaning or re-inscribed within specific contexts such as the city or through larger subjects such as migration new genres like life writing. There seems to be a lot of stylistic and formal experimentation with new forms linked to new technologies i.e. autowriting, sms writing and blogging. There is an emergence of minor and relatively new genres such as Afro-futurism, Afro fantasy, crime fiction and erotica. Experimentation with language is no longer a national debate. Writers no longer seem to have hangups on the question of language. In Kenya the growth of the Kenyan urban patois Sheng signalled by popular music and its role in contemporary writing is a given not a matter for debate.

From the post 2000 literary renaissance to the present there is observable growth in the possibilities for the individual writer. Literary content is being re-purposed in ways that go beyond the dictates of production and publishing. With new technologies individual writers are able to produce work that is self-fashioned and created around individual public personas. From a sense of the collective that came with Kwani? it has now become easier for the writer as individual to focus on his own energies and capacities.

NOTES

1. Though Kwani? was formally registered in 2003 those involved in those early days had already started meeting in 2001. This period involved the transition between 24 years of President Daniel Arap Moi’s regime widely considered as despotic ushering in democratic change. Kwani’s emergence and that of other youthful artistic and cultural institutions and collectives reflects the socio-political euphoria of the time.

2. Editor’s note: Kenya obtained independence (Uhuru) in 1963. The first Prime Minister, and later President, Jomo Kenyatta (1891-1978) developed the idea of “Harembee” (“pulling together” in swahili) as a collective effort in nation-building, through

3. “Quite a number of interviews I have had in Kenya have asked me questions like: So you have replaced Ngugi? One person even asked me when we will “topple” him. My answer always has been “why?” [...] I do not intend to replace anybody else’s view of the world, I simply seek to make mine readable” (B. Wainaina, “Editor’s rant”, Kwani?3, Nairobi, Kwani Trust, pp. 307-309, p. 308).