



# Literary festival celebrates African writers as Kenya marks an anxious anniversary

*October 16, 2014 at 6:05 PM EDT*

In September, writers and readers gathered at Storymoja, an annual literary festival in Africa. A celebration of books and ideas, it was also a time to remember Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor, one of the 67 victims of the Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi one year ago. Jeffrey Brown reports on new voices of African literature and the future of literacy in Kenya.

## TRANSCRIPT

**GWEN IFILL:** Finally tonight: Amid terror and tragedy in Africa, another side of the continent that we see less often told through its writers.

Jeffrey Brown is back with a report from his recent trip to Kenya.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** A lovely fall day on the grounds of the Nairobi National Museum in Kenya, and the sixth annual Storymoja Festival is in full swing. Storymoja — the name means one story — is a four-day celebration of books and ideas bringing thousands of readers together with leading writers and thinkers from all over Africa.

There are master classes, poetry performances, theater, and music.

But one year ago, there was also this, an attack on the nearby Westgate Mall, an upscale shopping center, by gunmen from Al-Shabab, the Somali Islamist terror group. The siege lasted four days, shocking this nation.

Poet Clifton Gachagua:

**CLIFTON GACHAGUA, Poet:** I just remember that day going home and feeling, like, a complete sense of nothingness.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** When it was over, 67 people were dead, among them Kofi Awoonor, a 78-year-old Ghanaian poet and diplomat known throughout the continent.

Nigerian novelist Teju Cole remembers meeting Awoonor the day before.

**TEJU COLE, Writer:** I was so moved and awed and impressed, the way one is when you meet a name, a person you only know as a name in a book, in a school syllabus, and here he is. He is real. He exists. He was very warm and he was very congenial. The day after I met him, he was shot dead by terrorists in Nairobi.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Cole says the massacre inspired writers like himself to return to the festival this year.

**TEJU COLE:** Coming back here is an act of solidarity with Kenya, but also an act of solidarity with Ghana, an act of solidarity with African literature.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** As Kenyans marked the anniversary of the attack with a vigil outside the mall and a memorial in a nearby park, the mood was anxious and the security tight.

But in the tented village of Storymoja, there was a new sense of purpose, to remember Kofi Awoonor and to celebrate a new African literature that the older masters say is flourishing, even amid a growing threat from extremist groups like Al-Shabab here and Boko Haram in Nigeria.

WOLE SOYINKA, Writer: Just by being writers, for being noticed, by flooding the bookshops with our works and pushing their works in the face of these throwbacks, these religious throwbacks, that is already an engagement.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Eighty-year-old Nobel Prize-winning poet, playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka came of age with Kofi Awoonor in the 1960s, a decade shaped by the hard-won struggle for independence.

Both were forced into exile for their activism. Half-a-century later, Africa still struggles with war, poverty, and disease, now the Ebola outbreak. But a new generation of writers is exploring new themes.

**WOLE SOYINKA:** The younger generation feels liberated from the burden of independence, from the burden of literally creating contemporary society from scratch. They feel they can move in any direction they want.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** At 27, Clifton Gachagua finds inspiration in the many contributions of his hometown, Nairobi, Kenya's capital and largest city, a city with so much crime its nickname is "Ni-robbery," but also a deeply religious place, with traffic and more traffic, but also quiet family Sundays in the park, and with dire poverty, but also new wealth, including foreign investment from China.

Gachagua, an editor at a literary journal, says these contradictions have freed him from Western stereotypes of African literature.

And so what voice do you want?

**CLIFTON GACHAGUA:** I want to write in my own African voice. It's a voice that has been influenced by so many sensibilities, some of them global, some of them local. And it's a voice that understands that he has a million and one choices.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** At the Storymoja Festival, Gachagua shared a panel with another rising literary star, 26-year-old Okwiri Oduor.

**OKWIRI ODUOR, Writer:** People think of African writing think of it in a narrow sense. I know people who write romance stories or science fiction or graphic novels, we don't think of these people, or even comics, we don't think of those as forms of African writing.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** But for many young Kenyans, discovering literature of any kind remains nearly impossible, because books themselves are so hard to come by.

Just 2 percent of Kenya's elementary schools have libraries. We visited the Five-Star Academy, a ramshackle building in Kangemi, one of Nairobi's largest slums, children living in great poverty, surviving on the obvious enthusiasm of its students and the energy and optimism of head teacher Charles Oduor, who grew up here and knows every family.

**CHARLES ODUOR, Five Star Academy:** The parents, I know them. I walk to their houses. I see what they do, how they live. And, actually, sometimes am I shedding tears. And that's what put me in the spirit of helping these kids.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Storymoja has stepped in to help as well with books. Today, the school has a dozen storybooks for its 250 students, and they're thrilled.

Do you like reading the storybooks?

**STUDENT:** Yes, I do.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** You do?

**STUDENT:** Yes.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Why?

**STUDENT:** Because the storybook are very — have helped the school and helped I, myself, to write a better composition and to speak a good English.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** The Storymoja project also brings writers like Wangari Grace to schools to share the joy of reading. It's a small but

important effort in this country where a year after the terror siege, the Westgate Mall sits empty. No one has been convicted in the attacks. The trial of the four suspects is stalled indefinitely.

And more recent smaller attacks have put Kenya on edge. Writers like Clifton Gachagua say it all remains hard to process.

**CLIFTON GACHAGUA:** I find myself really, really unable to write about terror and Westgate. And maybe when I'm writing about other things, I'm writing about terror. It's probably that I don't know.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** At Storymoja this year, remembering Westgate came in a moment of silence for the victims of the attack, including one of its own. A new collection of Kofi Awoonor's poetry, published posthumously, is titled "Promise of Hope."

It's a sentiment shared here, as well as this one from writer Teju Cole.

**TEJU COLE:** Something about that encounter last year also gave me a new understanding of the urgency of literary work. You don't know when your last day is.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** A peaceful fall day, a clear urgency to read and write a new story for Kenya and Africa.