

The TLS blog

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Poetry and social change: Storymoja



Vuyelwa Maluleke at Storymoja

By ZOE CORMACK

Storymoja is one of the biggest literary festivals in Africa. This year, the patron of the five-day literary event at the Nairobi National Museum was Auma Obama, the sister of Barack. Wole Soyinka headlined and around 170 writers and performers from across (and beyond) the continent of Africa were in attendance.

I had come to Storymoja, I must confess, with an academic hat on to attend a panel on the provisions for culture in Kenya's new constitution (which two members of my [research team](#) were taking part in). But I happily used the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the Kenyan literary scene.

Storymoja provides a space for new African writers to get exposure at an international event; it also aims to nurture a young generation of writers and promote a reading culture in Kenya. To this effect, the first three days of the festival had been allocated to schools and merry bus loads of pupils from across the country swarmed around the stalls, taking part in workshops with the visiting writers (who seemed to be enjoying the challenge of the young audience).

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In the latest in the *TLS*'s occasional series of readings, Ronald Blythe and Michael Caines celebrate Laurie Lee, the author of *Cider with Rosie*, who was born 100 years ago.

As well as the giddy children, Storymoja exhibited some of the laid back cool you might expect from Nairobi's young literary avant garde. For many attendees, poetry was the order of the day. I caught snippets of the truly wonderful performance poetry of South Africa's Vuyelwa Maluleke and other poets affiliated with the [African Poetry Book fund](#) and the [BN Poetry Awards](#) – whose founder, Beverly Nambozo, described how she'd set it up after years of frustrating work at an NGO. Poetry, she had decided, was a more meaningful way of creating social change.

The panels touched on other aspects of contemporary Nairobi life – in one of the best attended, entitled “The Future of Men in Kenya”, young male speakers voiced concerns about the erosion of men's rights. They were promptly put in their place by the audience, which was largely comprised of young Kenyan women. Even the British High Commissioner entered the fray, participating in a panel chaired by the Nigerian-American author Teju Cole on art and democracy and posing for selfies with the photographer Boniface Mwangi.

There was plenty of discussion about the state of the arts, funding and expression in Kenya. In one amusing anecdote, the musician Eric Wainaina (famous for a song complaining about corruption – “Nchi ya kitu kidogo” – “Country of bribes”) described how he'd been leapt on by NGOs trying to get their messages across to the Kenyan public. He was contracted to write a song about the Millennium Development Goals and realized this meant he needed to start thinking about things like how to get the word “sanitation” into a song.

The festival started in 2007 as the Storymoja Hay Festival – a part of the global Hay collective. This year it was a Hay festival no longer. Storymoja's founder, Muthoni Garland, described this as an emancipation of sorts. She explained that it was important for Storymoja to go it alone: to carve out the festival's own space and become more Afrocentric.

Perhaps some of this need for greater ownership has come out of tragedy. Last year, the final day of Storymoja, at which the Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor had been scheduled to perform, was cancelled following his death in the Westgate Mall attack. Many of the artists present this year had also been at the festival last year and this seemed to make it, both for them and the organisers, a site of memorial. Some writers spoke about a need, a compulsion, to return to Storymoja. In a very affecting memorial address Kwame Dawes (a close friend of Awoonor) considered how the poet himself would have decried the disregard for human life that unfolded in Westgate.

There are still many unanswered questions about Westgate, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by many Kenyans. There has been no public investigation and Kenyan Somalis have become the victims of recriminations after al-Shabaab (the Somali militant organization) claimed responsibility for the attack. In this context it is not surprising that a literary event can also provide a forum for political debate. Many at Storymoja were keen to take art to bear on social justice. How and on whose terms remains a question. As Eric Wainaina pondered, does anyone actually want to dance to the sanitation song?

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