

Poetry with a message

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Makerere poets find inspiration in Black History Month

By definition, poetry is a form of literary art in which language is used for its aesthetic and evocative qualities in addition to its apparent meaning. It has a long history, dating back to the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian (modern day Iraq) in the 3rd millennium BC. The earliest poems evolved from folk songs such as the Chinese Shijing, and from the need to retell epics such as the Homeric epics, the Odyssey and the Iliad.

But you would not be penalised for thinking of poetry as primarily a lover's companion on the journey to woo the beloved either because it's also an attempt to render the beautiful without the burden of engaging the logical and narrative process. English Romantic poet John Keats termed this escape from logic, 'Negative Capability.'

At the evening of poetry to commemorate the month long USA celebration of the Black History Month (February) at the Makerere University Institute of Technology, poetry took on new meaning; that of being a mouth piece for social change.

The origins of the black history month, it was explained, lay in early twentieth century historian Carter Woodson's desire to highlight the accomplishments of the African-Americans that had been intentionally left out of the mainstream narrative of American History.

It started with the Negro history week and in the 1960's at the height of the Civil rights movement, both American educators white and black were observing the week. But it wasn't until 1978, when President Carter officially recognized the Black History Month and bestowed the federal government's blessing on it, that the event became regular in American schools.

Jason Sabiti's recital of Margaret Walkers' poem, 'For my people' (1942) drove the message home that indeed poetry as a form of expression can be a tool for social change:

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs / Repeatedly: their dirges and ditties and their blues / And jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an / Unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power; / ...For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn / To know the reasons why and the answers to and the / People who and the places where and the days when, in / memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small / and different and nobody wondered and nobody understood...

Creating poetic rhythm varies across languages and between poetic traditions. Yet for this one, the magic was entirely in the subject matter. There was no hiding the true intentions of Margaret Walker's poem. The audience totally identified with all the emotions it garnered and it wasn't long before an encore was asked for.

But with the opening decade of the 21st century, after the election of the nation's first African-American president, Barack Obama, in 2008, there is cause to wonder if Margaret Walker's poem still applies to the civil rights movement, as the poem is loaded with such connotations.

Elizabeth Allen, who was part of the organising team at the US mission, says it still applies by explaining that on January 29, 2009 Elizabeth Alexander read her poem 'Praise song for the day' at the Obama inauguration. The poem positions the historic nature of the occasion against the struggle of every day workers who made possible the time in which an African-American could rise to the nation's highest office:

Say it plain: that many have died for this day. / Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, / Who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, / picked the cotton and lettuce, built / brick by brick the glittering edifices / They would then keep clean and work inside of.

So maybe after all it does.

Ugandan poets at the occasion included Beverly Nambozo, famed for the yearly BN Poetry Award, reciting poetry on the African woman writer and the trials of being a woman:

Africa was born in me, planted like a dream, / Fitted like a picture in a frame. / The Equator stretched across my hip / Where I laid my curious mind... / I was born woman. My private and public shame / Cause men to buy from me like a vendor on a market day...

Dr. Susan Kiguli, an interesting personality close to eccentric, recited Uganda's progress since independence through the poem 'My mother in three photographs':

Her face looks out flawless / Her sexuality electric / In a mini dress and sheer satin stockings / The girl of the 1960s... / The fortunes of Uganda / Hot and sizzling.

My mother in the 1970s / More somber but her skin still flawless / Her body wrapped in a long Nylon dress.... / It is a government decree.....Amin nvaako (Amin leave me alone.)

My mother in the 1990s / Neat short hair / Luring in its intricate curls... / a return home, a finding of uncertain peace... / a maturing of a woman and a nation.

The much acclaimed Professor Timothy Wangusa, author and poet, read from his collection of poems and more noticeably was his 'Meeting adjourned to 6,200 AD':

...And so farewell, hale-Bopp, on your cosmic way / Till your next encounter with earth / (presuming all things remain constant) / Exactly 4,200 years hence! / Farewell, Hale Dopp.

The beauty with all these poems lies in the fact that to most of these poets, English is a second language. The English language, it must be pointed out, is a stress-timed language unlike most of the tonal sub-Saharan languages. This makes us stand in awe of their prowess in conceiving poetry with a rhythmic feel in a language not necessarily their mother tongue.

Even if the poems are not as inspiring as Margaret Walkers, they are informative and carry plenty of truth in them. Bearing in mind that not all poetry is written for inspiration.

The USA Mission Uganda together with FEMRITE, an association for women writers, and the Makerere University Department of Literature organised the event. Dr. Dipio, the Head of the literature department, made the opening remarks, while the Dean of the faculty, Dr. Okello Ogwanga, gave his memoirs of his time as a student in America.

An extended version of this Poetry review has been published online at STARTJOURNAL.ORG.