

Editorial

I felt very complimented recently, in a conversation with a senior newspaper editor who said that he has ‘intellectual’ problems with Kwani? because it is not ‘serious’ enough. By serious, I took him to mean ‘self-important’ or ‘pompous’. The fact that Kwani? has become popular has rubbed establishment types the wrong way. Intellectual debate in the Sunday Standard Literary Forum days was very incestuous: the same old people talking to each other.

Kenya’s literary community sometimes behaves as if literature is a lineage: that some chosen somebody passes on the light to another chosen somebody, and so on. I prefer to see Kenya as a diverse place which needs diverse conversations: no publication or person can represent all of Kenya’s literary aspirations. What I hope for as a reader is as many literary engagements as possible, in all languages possible, from all schools of thought possible. I do not feel I am in competition with anybody. That sense of bitter territorialism is simply a by-product of the Moi Era (one-party, KBC, Nairobi University, KIE and ME ME ME..)

My Way. One way. The way. Fuata Nyayo.

Kwani? is a place for seekers. Not all seekers. Just some. All we try to do is find interesting, engaging writers without prescription. It is our philosophy that we do not know what is out there; that much of Kenya remains little understood. We try to make partnerships that open up new career possibilities for talented writers we find. We try to explore new ways to talk intelligently and without pompousness. We are not apolitical: we will be happy to publish any political view that we find interesting or meaningful. We respond to what we receive; we remain unable to publish all those who submit stories to us.

We avoid the sort of bitter, nativist Pull-Him-Down debates that have destroyed intellectual debate in Kenya. We avoid the intellectual ‘gossip’ that has made the careers of many. The sort of people who say Ngugi invented Mungiki, or that Binyavanga is not a Real Kenyan because he has that strange name. That sort of hate speech is responsible for Rwanda, and Sierra Leone. It is petty, and not worthy of adults.

kwani? will not apologize to anybody for being popular, or for attracting publicity. We work extremely hard to do what we do. We cannot take responsibility for what those in the local or international media say on our behalf.

It is looking like a promising year. We helped bring Ayi Kwei Armah to Nairobi, and many turned out to share ideas with him. We hope to publish several books this year, including the memoirs of a man, Joseph Muthee, who spent years in six detention camps during the Emergency. We hope to publish a novel in Sheng this year. And we will launch a CD - call it oral literature, performance poetry, Kenyan Hip Hop verse. It will be something exciting.

Kwani? 3 is by far the most complete issue we have published. The quality and variety of stories has increased. The editing process has improved; so has the design and layout. We will publish photographs that have never been seen before: of Chief Wambugu and his family in 1902. We have fiction by several new Kenyan writers; fiction and poetry in Sheng; a ground-breaking non-fiction feature by Billy Kahora about David Munyakei, a forgotten hero who learnt to shape-shift, like many Kenyans have learnt, to survive and thrive.

I am beginning to see that Kenya (the Kibaki Kenya, the Parliament and sections Kenya, the Kenya where World Bank country directors live in houses rented to them by our president) is dying. It was never anything but a way for a few D.O. types to colonize this space. There is another Kenya growing out of these ashes. It has learnt to need nobody; to be competitive and creative. It speaks Sheng. It is the Kenya we are waiting for.

Binyavanga Wainaina
Editor