

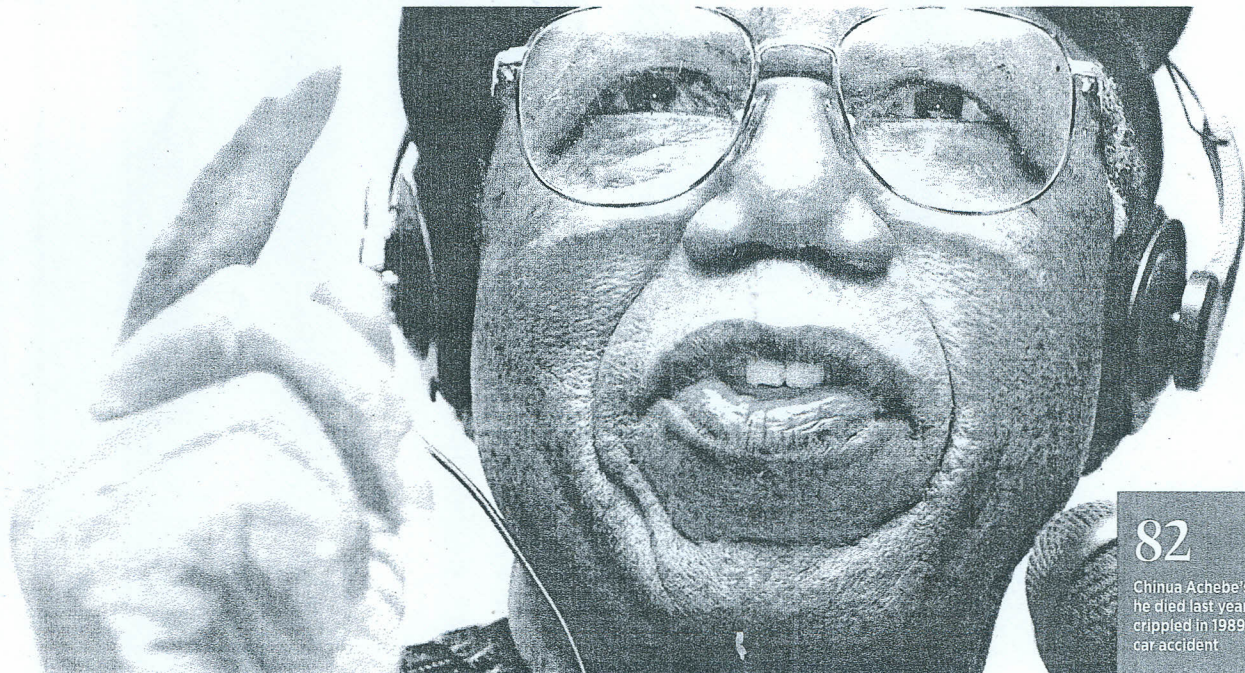
SATURDAY NATION

Weekend



**TABU LEY'S ORPHANS
PLAN A REUNION**
Band members of Afrisa
International to hold series of
concerts in the US
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LITERARY DISCOURSE | Prof Indangasi takes a hard look at the life and legacy of the continent's most renowned novelist



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Chinua Achebe's age when he died last year. He was crippled in 1989 following a car accident

Day I invited Achebe to Taifa Hall



Celebrated literature scholar writes for the first time on Chinua Achebe's visit 26 years ago — and why he believes the Nigerian was a fine writer, but not the greatest

BY HENRY INDANGASI
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Chinua Achebe has been dead for one year. When he died, we all praised him and said the legendary father of African literature has passed on. Achebe died at the age of 82, the same age at which another famous writer, Leo Tolstoy, died; and some scholars wondered whether there were parallels to be drawn from the coincidence.

On this first anniversary, I want to add a personal touch to his memory even as I reflect on his legacy.

In 1988, in my capacity as chairman of the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, I received a call from Henry Chakava of the East African Educational Publishers. Chakava

asked me if the University of Nairobi and EAEP could co-host Chinua Achebe. "We will pay for his air ticket," he said, and added, "He doesn't like flying economy; he prefers first class." Chakava suggested the University of Nairobi pay for his accommodation in Kenya; and could we book the writer at the Norfolk Hotel?

In order to justify the expense, I wrote to Shem Wandiga, the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Administration and Finance), requesting if we could formally appoint Achebe as visiting professor. I promised in my memo that the department would ask the Nigerian novelist to give a few lectures to our students. Luckily, my request was granted and the DVC agreed to pay for Achebe's accommodation. I can't recall what happened with the Norfolk, but I do remember we ended up booking the author at the Nairobi Safari Club.

When he paid me a courtesy call, Achebe struck me as singularly warm, friendly and unpretentious. I must confess, I had reason to be apprehensive about this encounter with a famous Nigerian.

Long before, I had met Wole Soyinka in America, and this gentleman who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature treated me literally as a non-person.

With Achebe, it was different; it

was a pleasant surprise to meet a man, nay, a Nigerian, who turned out to be so charming and so personable. He made me feel we had been friends all along. I had gone through school reading his books, and here he was, flesh and blood, talking to me like a long-lost brother. The experience was unforgettable.

I walked him to Taifa Hall, where a large audience had gathered to listen to the celebrated writer. And as we were entering the hall, I couldn't help noticing that there were as many people inside as there were outside. A banker friend of mine who had never before given me the impression he cared about literature rang me later and told me he stood outside. The only other time I saw such a crowd was when the then Senator Barack Obama spoke at the same venue in 2006.

I sat next to Achebe on the stage. And before I stood to invite him to speak, he leaned towards me, fished out a journal from his briefcase, and asked me in low tones: "Have you read this?"

"Yes," I whispered.

I had read the journal in which Achebe's friend Chinweizu had written an article pouring cold water (if you can excuse the cliché) on the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Wole Soyinka.

Chinweizu believed Achebe was the more deserving; but in the same breath he argued that the Nobel Prize was not an African prize, and we shouldn't pay too much attention to it.

The reason I recall this incident is that it revealed a side of the fabled writer that still makes me cringe. Arrogance, vanity and lack of modesty that are ironically borne of artistic success.

Okay, Soyinka got the Nobel Prize and Achebe didn't. Soyinka was the first black African to get this prize and he remains the only one to have got it. Nigeria and Africa rejoiced. So, why was Achebe feeling bad about it? The world is full of many fine writers who for one reason or another will never get the prize. Why this mean-spiritedness in the famous writer?

When he spoke in Taifa Hall, Achebe did something a Kenyan audience couldn't have expected. He read sections of his newly published novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. With a somewhat noticeable Nigerian accent, he wasn't a particularly good reader. But what made some listeners uneasy was the mere fact of reading; they were clearly not used to it.

I didn't have a problem with that. Having lived and studied in the West, I was used to seeing

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In his later years, this extraordinarily gifted writer was pandering to the vulgar sociology of the Post-colonial Theory and Cultural Studies, two conceptual constructs championed by scholars who missed out on traditional literary appreciation" Prof Indangasi

authors read from their books in order to give their listeners a sense of the intonations and rhythms of their works. However, the then principal of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Onesmus Mutungi, told me he wasn't impressed.

Achebe gave lectures in other parts of the country. The one recurrent theme during his lecture tour was the language of African literature. The Nigerian novelist had taken issue with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's view that African writers should write only in African languages. And to dramatise his rejection of English, Ngugi had, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, demonised Achebe.

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CULTURE TALK | People sing because they can — not simply to escape poverty as some brokers would want us to believe

Art is all about expression, and not fat bank accounts



“

If the creative economy is about jobs, why are qualified architects out singing and recording?”

Dr Joyce Nyairo

BY JOYCE NYAIRO
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One of my friends at the University of Nairobi was Chris “nine-and-a-half fingers” Karuki; an accomplished guitarist who was studying Law while still recovering from his fame with Gravity, an early 1980s band made up of students from Alliance and Lenana School. Chris kept us entertained playing medleys of Kenny Rogers and Don Williams with such easy skill. These side-shows did not stop Chris from qualifying as an advocate.

Later, he became Joroge Benson. In 1999 he released two brilliant songs — *Gichichio* and *Sammy*. In them, Joroge fused that old Kikuyu benga sound of the 70s with a rap and ragga gambit that anticipated the global sensation rap music would become in the millennium.

Joroge’s vocal range was simply stunning. It was equally evident in *Nakupenda Bibi*, complementing the emotive power of the exceptional Tanzanian guitarist, Ally Makunguru.

Joroge died in November 2001 and looking at his career choices has often led me to reflect on the impetus that drives the Arts. How can our music thrive, what will it take to invigorate the Arts, to raise aesthetics and standards of performance?

The Africa Music Project run by the Nokia Research Centre emphasises that music provides an opportunity for development. To dramatise the point, their promotional video featuring Jusio Impio, the lead researcher on the music project, dutifully carries striking images of want, neglect and brutality from Nairobi’s Huruma slums. The youth here presumably become musicians to escape poverty

This argument has held persuasive

sway for many international policy-makers. At last year’s Berlin Music Week, I was forced to address this idea that in Africa, music is a gateway out of poverty.

Gritting my teeth with the kind of controlled fury that one adopts when reprimanding a recalcitrant toddler, I exhaled slowly, severally, as I patiently pointed out that in Africa — just as on any other continent — people sing because they have a song in their heart.

They sing because they have a melody that buzzes around their brains refusing to go away; a thought to ponder, a story to tell. It’s about expression, not bank accounts, otherwise architects would not be mixing their sketches with songs and accomplished scientists would not leave the lab for the recording studio.

Those like Nokia who craft projects that purportedly start with “understanding the current aspects of music as a creative act” invariably ditch the aesthetic for the commercial.

Africans do not just sing about poverty, neglect and socio-political injustice. They also sing of love and laughter; of hopes and aspirations with regard to relationships, to careers, to places on the ground and spaces in their minds. To limit the motivation for African music solely to the poverty index plays neatly into old stereotypes and feeds inverted policies.

Local cultural bankers — those who use their knowledge of the Arts to rake in funding and allied support for the sector — have lately followed in the footsteps of international brokers and adopted the grammar of business and industry to deconstruct what our Arts need. Nothing could be more misguided. It aims to build the national GDP rather than to further creativity.

This grammar of industry and shillings detracts from the substance of the

Arts. It also cripples the goal of securing patronage for the sector because it speaks to those who have the intellectual skills to punch furious holes into the value and investment sense that our cultural bankers try to net.

The creative industries approach to winning state recognition for the Arts is a refusal to speak on one’s own terms, an apology of sorts that falls into global fads. By all means, squeeze the Arts into Excel data sheets and graphs, but don’t turn those templates into the *raison d’être* of the sector’s existence.

No. The primary impetus and function of the Arts is to tell our stories; to make known who we are to ourselves and to the rest of the world.

Art is not nurtured by projections in tables and value chains, it is whipped up by human emotion. Why else do we find the most sophisticated artistic expressions wherever there is severe pain? You know the old joke from the 2010 award-winning film, *Beginners*: “Jews and Blacks have the best music; they suffered the most”.

Not too long ago, the Kenyan writer Tony Mochama pronounced that, “Every really good writer needs an early tragedy and a slightly malfunctioning childhood to fire up their inner imagination”.

If ongoing estimations about the creative industries are meant to nurture the sector into exponential growth, how will we(re)create the requisite pain that Mochama recommends to shape the next generation of artistes?

We are told that the creative industries account for 1% of our GDP. But aside from a few general surveys — deceptively called “mapping” — who has really crunched the numbers of what shillings go into feeding an ar-

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1999

The year Joroge Benson released his chart-topping tracks ‘Sammy’ and ‘Gichichio’. He died 25 months later

FILE | NATION
Accomplished guitarist Joroge Benson during a performance.

Unlike Joseph Conrad, Achebe dwelt on only one theme

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Besides, the Kenyan writer had reinvented the English language and was now referring to our ethnic and tribal languages as national languages; and this was something that didn’t sit comfortably with Achebe.

So, wherever he went, the Nigerian novelist kept harping on what he saw as Ngugi’s dogmatism. “Where one thing stands, another one can also stand,” he would cite the Igbo proverb. When Achebe’s views were published in an essay called *The Politics of Language*, the following words rang a bell: “As long as Nigeria wishes to exist as a nation it has no choice in the foreseeable future but to hold its more than two hundred component nationalities together through an alien language, English. I lived through a civil war in which probably two million people perished over the question of Nigerian unity.”

The irony of criticising Ngugi in his home country when the Kenyan author was in exile did not seem to bother Achebe; he sounded too infuriated to worry about our national sensibilities and sensitivities.

In that year, 1988, *Things Fall Apart* was a set book for the KCSE exam. Achebe visited a number of schools fielding questions about the book.

This was the third time Achebe’s famous novel had been selected. In 1967, when I sat the Cambridge School Certificate examination, *Things Fall Apart* was a set text; and it is needless to add that was my first time to engage seriously with the writing of this famous novelist.

In 1978, I was pleasantly surprised when the English teacher at Iten Secondary School invited me to talk about *Things Fall Apart* to the Form Four class. Reason: the novel was a set book. So, in 1988 Achebe had a captive audience in the schools he visited.

We organised a farewell party for Achebe at the Pan-Afric Hotel, and again I had yet another chance to interact with the novelist. In him I saw a man who was very careful about what he ate and how much he ate; and I also noticed the author did not touch any alcohol, even as he watched a number of us getting drunk.

I bought one of his children’s books which were on display; and when I

took it to him for an autograph and told him I was buying it for my son, he asked: “What’s the name of your son?”

“Joseph,” I answered.

I didn’t tell him I had named my son after Joseph Conrad, the man he had called a “bloody racist” in reference to the novella *Heart of Darkness*. My son Joseph was born in 1980, the year I obtained my PhD from the University of California, Santa Cruz, having written a dissertation on Conrad. I was passionate about the Polish-born English novelist; so, I thought the way to signal my enduring love for him was to give his name to my son. But Achebe would probably have spat on me if I had told him this.

And I didn’t tell Achebe that he was part of the reason I chose to do my doctorate on Conrad. In 1976, when I was a graduate student at UC Santa Cruz, I came across a paper Achebe had delivered at Amherst in which he called Joseph Conrad a “bloody racist.”

The paper had no context and Achebe had not done any research in order to write it. Besides, the Nigerian novelist, himself a master of irony, had

missed this important stylistic feature in *Heart of Darkness*.

So, part of my agenda when I embarked on my doctoral research was to argue with the celebrated novelist and to prove him wrong. My other agenda was to disagree with Western critics who had, in my opinion, downplayed Conrad’s impassioned opposition to colonialism.

Generations of Kenyans have engaged with Chinua Achebe. If they weren’t reading *Things Fall Apart* as a set text, they were reading *No Longer at Ease*, or *Arrow of God*, or *A Man of the People*. It was, therefore, not surprising that when he visited in 1988, he was treated like a state guest. And when he died, our nation was in mourning.

I began this discussion by referring to the coincidence that Achebe died at the same age as Tolstoy, the greatest novelist that ever lived. But this coincidence of dying at 82 should not mislead us into thinking Achebe was a great writer.

The Nigerian novelist had the potential to be great: but great he was not.

First, he dealt only with one theme,

politics or variations of it, leaving out vast areas of human experience unexplored. His justification: writers must tackle the big issues of their society; and that they shouldn’t be like the absurd man who leaves a burning house in pursuit of a rat.

Picture this: after a near-fatal car accident in 1989, Achebe was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. But instead of writing about this defining experience as a cripple, he revisited the historically tired theme of Biafran secessionism in a poorly written book called *There Was Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

Second, in his later years, this extraordinarily gifted writer was pandering to the vulgar sociology of the Post-colonial Theory and Cultural Studies, two conceptual constructs championed by scholars who missed out on traditional literary appreciation.

Achebe wasn’t great, but he was the finest writer in Anglophone Africa.

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DISCUSSION | As first generation of writers exit stage, their replacement is not readily available

Conference honours Wanjala's role in Kenyan literature

Top university dons converge on Masinde Muliro campus for brainstorming session on setting a new literary agenda for the country

BY EGARA KABAJI
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The 1962 Makerere University conference on African literature has served as a reference point while assessing the road we have travelled in literary development for the past 52 years.

The significance of this conference is twofold. First, it was the first ever gathering of modern African writers and provided a fertile ground for networking in an era that was devoid of modern communication channels. Secondly, it laid the basis for much of the debates that have occupied us in cultural and literary studies.

Among the issues discussed was that of language in African literature, which has occupied us for all these years and of which Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is the tsar of one of the schools of thought.

Significantly, this is the conference that revealed the talent of the first generation of African writers. In a very momentous way, it inspired the rise of the "Bolekaja" critics, of whom Chinweze has emerged as the high priest and the foremost polemicist of that generation.

Unfortunately, these writers are slowly exiting the stage, not

much because of anything else but natural attrition.

Fifty two years after this conference, African literature has definitely gone through a multiplicity of transformations. The first generation of African writers has made its contribution for which we should be grateful. Isn't time to set a new agenda inspired by new realities? Where do we go from here on matters cultural and literary?

The one-day national colloquium today organised by Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology is designed to interrogate our contribution to literary and cultural development and, hopefully, generate a watershed that will define and chart a new direction in our intellectual engagement of literary and cultural issues.

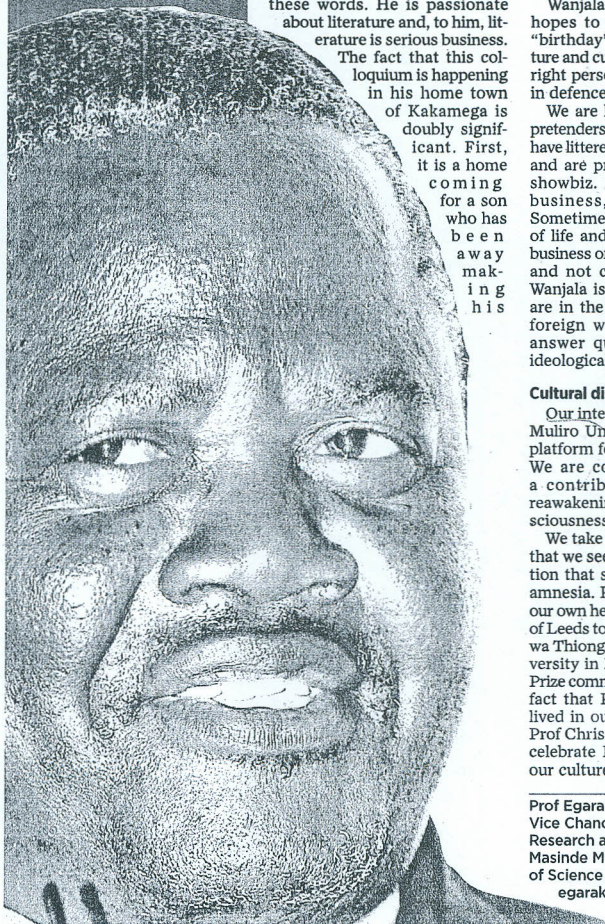
Moses

It is organised in honour of a man who has stridden the literary landscape like Moses, who led the children of Israel to throes of Canaan. Prof Chris Wanjala has consistently built his career for the past 40 years to emerge as the indisputable foremost literary critic Kenya has ever produced. No doubt he plays in the league of the great African critics.

Prof Wanjala holds very strong views on the role of a true literary critic. He has argued that "to be

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The age of literary critic Prof
Chris Wanjala



a literary critic, one has to start as a lover of literature, a student of literature, and ultimately a practising debater on books as they arrive, and issues literary as they emerge. A literary critic must be encompassing in time and space."

Give it to him; he has lived by these words. He is passionate about literature and, to him, literature is serious business.

The fact that this colloquium is happening in his home town of Kakamega is doubly significant. First, it is a home coming for a son who has been away making his

contribution and has attained the prime age of 70.

But, more importantly, it is happening at a university that bears the name of his ideological father and political icon Masinde Muliro. The colloquium brings together the who-is-who in literary circles in the country.

Wanjala has intimated that he hopes to make a fundamental "birthday" statement on literature and culture. He is, indeed, the right person to do so, especially in defence of his calling.

We are living in an era where pretenders to Wanjala's profession have littered the literary landscape and are promoting literature as showbiz. Literature is serious business, it is not showbiz. Sometimes it becomes a matter of life and death. We are in the business of generating knowledge and not cheap entertainment. Wanjala is critical of those who are in the habit of worshipping foreign writers not mature to answer questions on matters ideological.

Cultural discourses

Our interest in this at Masinde Muliro University is to create a platform for cultural discourses. We are committed to making a contribution to a national reawakening of our cultural consciousness.

We take cognisance of the fact that we seem to be building a nation that suffers from collective amnesia. Rarely do we celebrate our own heroes. It took University of Leeds to honour our own Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o before any other university in Kenya did. The Nobel Prize committee woke us up to the fact that Prof Wangari Maathai lived in our midst. To celebrate Prof Chris Lukorito Wanjala is to celebrate Kenyan literature and our culture.

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To be a literary critic, one has to start as a lover of literature, a student of literature, and ultimately a practising debater on books as they arrive"

Prof Chris
Wanjala

FILE | NATION

Prof Chris Wanjala of the University
of Nairobi.

Cultural brokers are doing more harm to our arts

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tiste's imagination and effort from the moment she first conceives an image on canvas to the time when it hangs on the wall ready for the "wows" and "ahs" of curious onlookers?

This is not an empty defence in the mould of the "Arts for Arts sake" ideology. It is a plea for calling things what they are, for describing more accurately what they actually do rather than embellishing them in fluffy borrowed terms whose ethos and logic cultural brokers barely understand

If the Arts were simply about creating jobs, why do some of our Architects sing; why do Scientists play the piano; why do accomplished lawyers double as actors or as writers of fiction?

Isn't it possible to sell the Arts as the ultimate site in the expression of our shared humanity? Can't we talk of creativity as the free execution of speech, a place where people can feel, purge, take stock of pent up emotions and unpack woody thoughts?

The Arts piggyback on any medium, any vehicle that can bear the weight of their primary logic — expression.

Languages, canvases, instruments, print presses, computers and cell phones, have all fallen prey to the insatiable need that people have to express themselves.

This is what we should be emphasizing. How new digital platforms have given rise to a whole new body of media arts is a story about expression, it is not a template for job creation and national GDP designs based on video games. To paint the Arts in the colours of monetary value and workplace occupation is a shyster trick that lies at the same time as it apologises.

Art represents that which many have thought of but which is seldom expressed with the stunning clarity that the Arts give it. Its reward is not solely financial. Indeed, its greatest bonus lies in that involuntary bodily response to a sound, an image, a line in a poem or a gesture on stage.

New-fangled talk of creative cities, based on the book by Charles Landry is a useful experiment for urban planners. But in adopting it and trying to zone off sections of our towns into little cultural hubs, we run the risk of

over-running the creative logic that is already at work in our towns.

If you ignore the audio commentary in that Nokia Music Research video, for a moment, you can actually pick out numerous images of ingenuity and diligence that confirm that we don't need special corners for theatre and music. Every street is a performance space and the highway is a market for (pirate) film, music, crafts and canvases.

Our music industry works differently and we must gauge and plan for it differently. If you attend a Pharrell Williams concert in Europe or North America, you pay for your ticket well

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To paint the Arts in the colours of monetary value and workplace occupation is a shyster trick that lies at the same time as it apologises"

Dr Joyce Nyairo

in advance and Pharrell pretty much knows what his earnings from that show will be long before he appears on stage.

Unlike the African musician performing at some *kibanda*, no fans move up to Pharrell's stage to "spray" him with dollar notes. How much does the Congolese atalaku earn for his band in one night of shouting out loud the names of popular patrons and revellers?

Charles Landry's work was inspired by a desperate need to resuscitate decaying European cities where the decline of the industrial age resulted in abandoned warehouses and declining populations.

Those needs are very different from our own urban centres

Not even the logic of Paul Collier, then director of the World Bank's Development Research Department, about the economic miracle that an African Nashville would give us comes close to understanding our socio-cultural trajectories.

We are no longer trapped in the dwindling post-1992 Kanu economy. Today, centres spring up overnight,

choking with irreverent thrift and young vibrant populations.

Scientists don't bother employing rhyming couplets to tell you why laboratories are necessary. Mechanics don't borrow colour codes and existentialist philosophy to pitch for more funding to build roads and bridges. And doctors are not challenging the damaging effects of the mosquitoes' nightly buzz by singing emotively outside the Treasury.

So why do artists and their advocates feel compelled to hobble on the precarious crutches of Economics in their hungry walk in search of paying patrons and enabling policies? Our cultural policy must not be reduced to a game of numbers to hoodwink the Treasury.

It must be an expression of human will and skill; of the emotional power of the Arts, its immense capacity to explain life, to crystallise a thought, a feeling, a relationship, to tell our stories.

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