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## Sheng Literature in Kenya: Socio-Linguistic Borders and Spaces in Popular Poetry

Since late 1960s Kenyan literature has been known as one of the largest, richest and fastest developing literary systems in sub-Saharan Africa. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written about the works of various Kenyan authors, different trends and periods in Kenyan writing. However, very few of these scholarly books – if any – paid special attention to social aspects of Kenyan writing, namely, the “division” of the entire corpus of Kenyan writing depending on the audience or, rather, social groups that the writers were allegedly addressing. J. Roger Kurtz in his seminal monograph *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: the Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (1998) states that “one could discuss the Kenyan novel thematically. [...] Alternatively, it would be possible to discuss the works on the basis of geographical or ethnic categories” (20). As we see, social dimension of Kenyan literature – be it Kenyan novel, short story, drama or poetry – has never been in the focus of scholars’ attention. Meanwhile, in order to understand at least some recent developments in Kenyan writing it seems important to tackle the issues of “social addressees” or specific audience targeted by different trends in Kenyan literature. In our opinion, very rough picture might look as follows:

Since the very first years of its existence, Kenyan literature was divided into two major trends – “serious” and “popular” literature (these terms in relation to Kenyan writing are used, for example, in Kurtz’ study above, as well as by other authors, such as Angela Smith and Tirop Simatei). “Serious,” or “high-breed” writing, represented by such well-known authors as novel writers Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Meja Mwangi, poets Jared Angira, Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye, playwrights Francis Imbuga and Kenneth Watene, was frequently called “elitist.”<sup>1</sup> This name may be ascribed to the fact that these writers have always been targeting the upper-middle-class

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<sup>1</sup> In this brief survey of Kenyan “elitist” writers we deliberately do not mention any Kenyan authors writing in Swahili. The reason is that until 1990s Kenyan Swahili writing was pronouncedly “school-oriented,” and the number of titles was rather scarce. Only in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty first century Kenyan literary scene saw the real outbreak of Swahili fiction, with the emergence of such “high-breed” writers as Kyallo Wadi Wamitila, Ken Walibora, Kithaka wa Mberia, Mwenda Mbatiah, and others.

readers – well-educated, well-off, well-acquainted with creative writing as such and well-conversant with the urgent problems of the society.

Oddly enough, that part of literature that was usually labelled as popular (the authors are numerous, and, as Kurtz puts it, these texts “continue to dominate the Kenyan market” [Kurtz 19]) could, in our opinion, be qualified as no less “elitist” than the “serious” writing – for popular novels target the same middle-class (probably lower-middle class) readers.

The factors that confine these two trends to predominantly middle-class audience are numerous, among them the crucial ones being those of education (the possession of “reading habits”) and economic wealth (only the middle-class readers can merely afford buying fictional books). Because of this, lower social groups – rural population (the rich farmers, being a part of middle class, do not fall into this category) and the inhabitants of lower-cost city areas, e.g. slums– in other words, the majority of the country’s population is simply and completely “excluded” from the consumers of Kenyan creative writing. As regards the rural dwellers, the reasons are multiple – for example, it is no secret that even the distribution of school books in Kenya’s rural areas remains a major problem, thus it looks like that the coverage of the country’s rural population with fiction reading even in schools belongs to not-so-foreseeable future. Thus, creative writing in all its forms still remains the privilege of urban dwellers – we would state that this observation applies to the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. But, returning to Kenya, does it also mean that it remains the privilege of middle class? Has there been no form of creative expression that was commonly acceptable and commonly needed for both upper and lower strata of urban population in Kenya?

A glance along the historical perspective of Kenyan literature’s existence would tell us that since the early years of independence creative writing was serving mostly – if not only – the aesthetic demands of upper social groups. We can even assume that lower-class urban dwellers – the inhabitants of slums, “ghettoes” and “lower-cost” residential areas – did not have any kind of “their own” literature that could be likened, for example, to Onitsha market publishing in Nigeria. Even the “cheaper” publishers in Kenya, like Spear Books, later appropriated by one of the country’s largest publishers, or Comb Books once run by a prominent Kenyan writer David Maillu, were basically targeting the middle-class readers. The reasons were the same – educational and economic: the poorly educated lower groups of urban population (whose educational facilities and therefore standards are very low even now) were not able to afford buying books, their economic priorities being bound to the needs of daily survival.