

The Kampala Writes Litfest Comes to Makerere University

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When on Aug 15 the Kampala Writes LitFest made its return in a second edition, the aim is to establish an annual tradition. The three-day event brought together African writers and scholars from Uganda and the diaspora to consider the very slippery and intriguing subject of belonging. The festival curator, Goretti Kyomuhendo, of the African Writers' Trust, speaking at the opening event, said the theme was both important and timely. This year's edition, hosted at the Yusuf Lule Auditorium of Makerere University under the auspices of the University's Department of Literature, is a continuation of a partnership with the British Council, Goethe Zentrum, the Germany Embassy in Kampala, and the African Writers Trust.

Both Sheila Akwanyi, the Director of the Goethe Zentrum, and Millicent Mugabi, the British Council's Country Director, agreed on the festival's critical importance. Akwanyi lauded the festival for filling the void it set out to in its inaugural edition by "providing a space for literary creatives to showcase and share insights of their works". Mugabi emphasized how it resonated strongly with their Culture Connects Programme. She acknowledged that the festival meant different things to different people, but hoped, it would create a "platform for dialogue and celebrate the voices that shape our country and world".

The Head of the Department of Literature, Dr Eve Nabulya, welcomed all guests and pointed out that it was gratifying to see that the great number of participants particularly in the context of literature as a field is under great pressure to explain its existence. "Children in Uganda," she noted, "have to forego quite a lot to be able to study literature." Then turning to the Vice Chancellor, represented by the CHUSS Principal, Prof. Hellen Nambalirwa Nkabala, she assured her audience that "literature contributes a lot to global efforts to achieving the global development goals" by creating "stable hypothetical worlds very similar to the real world". These worlds, she argued, function as "laboratories where the human condition is captured and examined in various versions" for they provide more stable data than can be collected through regular social research methodologies.

Represented by the Head of Department of Journalism and Communication, Dr. Aisha Nakiwala Ssembatya, the Dean of the School of Languages, Literature and Communication, Prof. Saudah Namyalo, was also very pleased with the turnout at the festival. Congratulating the festival curator who was due to launch a new novel *Promises* on day two of the festival, her attention was turned to the students who were represented in large numbers. "We are sure our own students will learn a lot from this event and will also be back here in the future to launch their own books and works".

The festival's deliberate effort at engaging writers from within and in the diaspora, she observed, afforded the student's a "chance to think beyond the limits of boundaries and see how Uganda relates to the broader world in the era of the global village."

Professor Nkabala was heartily welcomed her guests to the 'Mine of excellent minds'. "Such events as these remind us of our position in the country," she reasoned. In keeping with the spirit of the festival, the reminder came down in poetic style and fashion. "We are the bridge between society and science. We are the bridge between action and development. We are the vehicle of transformation," she stressed re-echoing Dr Eve Nabulya's comments. "The challenges that we (the world) are having currently, are simply because we have forgotten the most important aspect of societal transformation". The festival, she noted, was an opportunity to seize with both hands, to remind the world of the essential element of being human.

In opening the festival, the vice chancellor, Prof barnabas Nawangwe represented by the Principal of CHUSS drew enthusiasm for the festival from "Makerere University's strong ties and interest in African orature and Literature and the university's renowned position for hosting historic literary events, particularly the 1962 African Writers' Conference of English expression". He was especially proud of the University's association with the "great number of literary luminaries that have become a vibrant part of Makerere University's image and history". And at that point, he took time to pay tribute to such recently transitioned luminaries as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okello Oculi, and most recently Hon. Mary Karoro Okurut who departed only three days to the festival. He saw the festival as an opportunity "for literary scholars and creative writers to engage and further research on the literary community in Uganda and Africa and enhance the visibility of these efforts." This, for him, was a means to a vibrant literary community. "May we all feel that we belong here to this festival and even after, as we build for the future," he said, concluding his remarks.

The festival's keynote was delivered by the renowned Uganda novelist Jeniffer Nansubuga Makumbi, who was introduced by Dr. Susan Kiguli. She used the opportunity to show off the Department's very own Julian Namiyingo whose recently concluded PhD thesis is on the work of Makumbi. This was a way of emphasizing her point that Makumbi is a "celebrated Ugandan writer in the diaspora and household name here at home". She described Makumbi as cutting the typical figure of the resisting writer for "even when writing in English she actively ...adopts an idiom with which she is familiar." Makumbi, Kiguli noted, "is a thinker and writer who is deeply sensitive to interrogating how values and assumptions are built into words". She described her writing and speech as "vigorous, energetic, fast moving and full of quotable quotes".

Makumbi in her keynote acknowledged that she stood on the shoulders of her literary ancestors, whom she listed as including Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu, Rose Mbowwa, John Nagenda; Okello Oculi; Okot p'Bitek, her former lecturer, Lubwa p'Chong and Mary Karooro Okurut. "I fly," she told her audience, only a little boastfully, "because I was launched on such strong shoulders". In considering the festival's theme, she thought it "one of those nebulous concepts that are hard to pin down to a single precise meaning". Belonging then, for her, can only manifest in a myriad of ways. She emphasized that when belonging means being at home, stories had the "unique power to make us belong". She described story as the very lifeblood of belonging, "the invisible threads that anchor us to our past, help us make sense of the present and guide us towards a shared future". Communities from the smallest family unit to the largest nation are built around shared narratives. "They define who we are and differentiate us from them," she argued.

As promised by the curator, the festival was a literary feast of engaging and captivating panel discussions, workshops, a book fair, and performances. The curtain of the festival was drawn by the Yenze Theatre Conservatoire who honoured the transitioned literary luminary Ngugi wa Thiong'o in a captivating tribute reading of the play *I Will Marry When I Want*.