

## **East Africa as a Literary and Linguistic Contact Zone—Some First Reflections on it as from the Southern Pacific**

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**ABSTRACT:** The overall East African literary landscape is dominated by oral literature, and the two cited languages, English and Swahili, must stand out. Today their most dynamic contact zones are located in Kenya and Tanzania. Swahili studies and Anglophone African literary studies have long dominated the formal study of literature in East Africa, and are now extending into two new contact languages, Sheng and English, and the literature emerging from these language masses. Prominent features are code-switching, issues of translation, and the mix of narrative and public health knowledge on the topic of HIV/AIDS. This article surveys these issues, with one eye to the South Pacific parallel, and amongst the cultural lament finds much wry humour expressed

A somewhat daring idea, one born in November 2008, as to the lack of—and so the need for—a significant cultural communication as between Swahili studies and Anglophone African literary studies, has recently borne fruit in scholarly activity. An indication of this activity can be seen in *Habari ya English? What about Kiswahili?* (2015)<sup>1</sup>—the fascinating and shared reflective product of that daring idea, incorporating the bemused analysis of an overwhelmingly challenging task taken by a group of East Africa scholars, that of the organizing of a symposium on East Africa as a linguistic and literary contact zone.

This somewhat daunting plan would result in a homonymic symposium/ seminar held in February 2011 at Goethe University Frankfurt, in which the two themes were to result in a successful sharing; and so in this volume, one which has been subject to an international bi-disciplinary peer review process, there is now produced a powerful, enlightening and often witty symposium. From our South Pacific perspective, one can see various parallels to the fate of Koori English in Australia, or the clash between the Polynesian and the English tomes in both Tonga and Fiji, but left aside for the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Habari ya English? What about Kiswahili?* Leiden / Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2015. Pp. vii, 274. Laminated boards. ISSN 0932-9714. ISBN 978-90-04-29226-0 (hardback). A\$192-99. Page numbers in-text refer to this volume.

The two Africa-used languages in question have been particularly important in shaping the literary landscape of East Africa. Today, it is claimed, the most vibrant zones between literature in English and in Swahili are located in Kenya and Tanzania, and—especially challenging, in an era of struggling multi-party democracies, globalization and the assaults of the electronic media—both the larger entities of Tanzania and Kenya are to be found to be experiencing ever more social and political change. These forces will naturally impact on the contact zone as between the two languages, even as they do on the two new languages *Sheng* and *Engsh* and the literature that the last named language masses will assuredly produce.<sup>2</sup>

As this collection makes abundantly clear, the new ‘languages’, their duly created literary studies—and so the ensuing complex mental climate, and of course, these Kenyan hybrid linguistics—for all have an interest in this melting pot; and foremost here are the African and German academic dialogues, as well as the often unexpected perspectives into Swahili and ‘English’ writing in the countries of East Africa, and of their reporting on/ pondering daily life in that linguistic cauldron. As is made clear at the outset of the compendium, there were ever two perspectives to consider in a now newly created text, East African and German; Kenyan and Tanzanian—in all cases the need for sympathy in the handling of the ‘contact zone’, and, especially, is this the case in the two most significant languages for East Africa—Swahili and English, with the most vibrant contact zones located in Kenya and Tanzania, especially in the urban centres. And the message throughout is that the wealth of linguistic traditions in operation has demanded a severely abridged treatment of the clash of issues, let alone what must already seem to have been aborted movements. Accordingly we plead the economy of an initial clarity for our treatment of concepts, forms, and theories by some reference to particular contexts, and forms of art and of lifeways which will, as they must, transcend the attempted cultural, social, and disciplinary borders to the text drawn from quite specific public presentations.

And we plead guilty to the fact that the types of confusion and clashes—both those in our remarks, and in a too close enforcing of the precepts enjoined in this collection—will show remarkable similarities to different places and other times of chaotic upheaval.

<sup>2</sup> “Engsh is a cant that originated in Nairobi, Kenya in the 1980s.[1] While Sheng developed in the poorer parts of Nairobi, Engsh evolved among the youth of the richer, more affluent neighbourhoods. Engsh is English based, but mixes Swahili, and other ethnic languages such as Kikuyu and Luo. However, just like Sheng, it is a code, and therefore cannot be understood, for the most part, by standard English speakers. Both Engsh and Sheng originated as secret codes against adults, to enable Nairobi youth to communicate with each other in a language the adults could not understand.” Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engsh>

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East Africa is marked by a high degree of linguistic diversity, with more than two hundred different languages spoken in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Whereas the overall East African literary landscape is dominated by oral literature, the two cited languages, English and Swahili, must stand out. Today their most dynamic contact zones are located in Kenya and Tanzania. Obviously the great cities of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are focal points and so they have attracted the greatest attention. After independence in the early 1960s, the first generation of authors in both literatures were writing with a sense of new beginnings, and freedom from earlier thralldoms of various sorts. In this situation it is fascinating for the reader from a distance to notice how some of the new and afresh thinking universities in the United Kingdom were able to assist in this process of gaining maturity and confidence in their indigenous writings, as they might well move on from their hitherto literary experience of English authors, genres, literary landscapes, and publishing.

Particularly helpful here is the essay/paper by Gabriel Ruhumbika, entitled 'The Role of Translations in the Development of Swahili Language and Literature' (pp. 255,ff.),<sup>3</sup> an autobiographical essay on his (rueful) experience as a translator, and coping with the wide diversity of East African literary culture. Having started as a native speaker of Kikerewe, a language spoken in the Lake Nyanza region in north-west Tanzania, and started his career as an English language novelist in the 1960s, and then began translating non-literary works from French into Swahili in the 1970s, and has engaged in multi-directional translations ever since.

Not only did he work in Swahili, but has translated from Kirerewe into English, and he is of the opinion that such translations have a crucial role to play in the development of all the varieties of East African literature. The challenges he had to meet were multiple, for, as he tells us,

Not only had the medium of my colonial education been exclusively English since the seventh grade, but I had been taught to think of Swahili and all African languages as inferior to English, the language of educated people. (p. 256)

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<sup>3</sup> *Habari ya English? What about Kiswahili?* (2015). Page numbers in-text refer to this volume.

This pattern of taste/ snobbishness/ false starts and mis-experience indicates the sad ‘mentality of a colonized person’ (p. 257), self-defined in some droll observations on his earlier self ‘who, before going to France in 1964, had obtained a B.A. in English from London University, on graduating from Makerere University College, Uganda, then a college of London University for the East African colonies of Great Britain.’(p. 256).

Ironically he had had to come around to writing in Swahili, after the long exposure and education in English and French, and then to find that Swahili—in which all his (subsequent) creative writing would take place—was close to ‘Kiswahili, a Bantu language that I had been exposed to all my life’ (p. 256).

Despite justifiable exasperation at the waste of time and effort, the writer does not rail but gives us illuminating perspectives on his struggle to find technical word equivalents, or synonyms for ‘capitalism’, ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘imperialism’, and even to coin terms as for ‘nationalism’. A nice sense of humour comes in through the droll tasks assigned him, as of a series of synonyms for ‘capitalism’ and like western economic terms. In other cases he allows for words which are relatively close, allowing for a different use of/ hearing sound for western concepts.

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*And Transmission of Vital Medical Knowledge.*

Another paper explores HIV/AIDS fiction, its African links with witchcraft, and the tabooing of sexuality in public discourse, and the conflict between an older generation bent on maintaining traditional norms and values—often regarding AIDS as a sign of moral turpitude, and a younger generation clamouring for access to education, knowledge, and for understanding of the mingled/ unsavory/ still experimental. And the book tells us that there has been progress in learning of the diverse cultures of a global world that is ever more accessible. Interestingly medical debate has helped to set Swahili and English writing in Kenya and Tanzania onto converging trajectories. While this is far from an East African movement towards a global language, it is intriguing to note how English has been recovered for many and Kiswahili has become one of the major languages for East Africa.

This rise of a powerful and ever more widely respected and used language, once achieved, there is less likelihood for the old witchcraft notions to supersede so much of the thought of the masses of the people. Thus it is much less the case that it is believed that ‘HIV/AIDS victims were killed by ogres or monsters sent by bad people.’ (p. 191) Similarly

it is interesting that the word *myth* is used in this re-thought world to refer to a popular belief or tradition, with a degree of wry humour, (p. 193), and in *Ushuhuda wa Mifupa*, wisdom is conveyed by skeletons with blame and counter blame, with characters standing for an American, an African, a Cuban, and a Russian, the whole a parody of blame of ‘others’ for medical matters, yet with the whole mixed with satire of politics and national propaganda, and the sadness that HIV/AIDS was thought to be nothing but sorcery. Yet others, such as Judith Laurence Pastore, hold that some of the AIDS metaphors mould into what it means to be human, and a better insight into life than life itself.

This can be seen as the expression in a more recent context of the link between narrative and HIV/AIDS, which in the Western world has been explored by Diane Goldstein—

The coherency and logic of the legend discourses are keys to frames of local awareness, to the ways that reasonable and intelligent people make use of information—how they selectively assign importance to issues and how they turn health truths into cultural truths and cultural truths into health truths.<sup>4</sup>

In East Africa we have reasonable and intelligent people, making sense of their cultural truths and health truths, and doing so through the medium of two new identity-forming languages.

#### *Creating the East African HIV/AIDS Literary Opus*

In East Africa this story starts with the false idea, the existence of witches. For all the attitudes stigma and challenging aspects of this crisis can be traced back to this unique situation, and an initial myth to have appeared in East Africa. Skeletons talk, and the African and Western medical traditions dialogue, this indicating that HIV/AIDS was thought to have its origin in witchcraft/ sorcery. And to be cured one could refuse to be defeated by a small worm, and it was felt that death and living were closely linked, whereas a more enlightened view could be found in Elizabeth Isichei’s *Voices of the Poor in Africa: Moral Economy and the Popular Imagination*.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another aspect of recent writing in Africa is the raising of the voices of the younger generation, one pleading for the right to know what was going on in their societies. In such works as *Kilio Chetu* (‘Our

<sup>4</sup> Diane E. Goldstein, *Once Upon A Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception*, (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2004), p. 177. Also available [http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress\\_pubs/32/](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/32/)

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *Voices of the Poor in Africa: Moral Economy and the Popular Imagination* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2002).

Weeping’) and *Kilio cha Jeska* (‘Keska’s moaning’) we can see voices being raised by the younger generation, the purpose in both to appeal for health information as to reproduction, especially on sexually transmitted diseases.

In this campaign for enlightenment as to science, biology, and on epidemics, the device most common is that of interlocutor and enlightener/counselor/ wise man/woman, the latter reflecting on her/his previous life, recounting the life journey, releasing, like a safety valve, the burden of feeling guilty. And as Adalla says in her *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*,

I believe that nothing happens to us in life that is not meant to serve a cause greater and bigger than ourselves. (p. 200)<sup>6</sup>

On the surface much of the book may be perceived as a competition between two languages; however in the background there is a real political rivalry between two religious cultures—Christianity versus Islam—that have historically been contenders for supremacy in East Africa. Christianity is/ was more or less represented by the use of English words, and chants like ‘God is great’, and it is not far-fetched to argue that Islam is associated with Arabic. In the case of *Shaza’s Trials*, the dilemma is related to the taking of medicines in an impoverished society, and the strain on existing social networks, and the loss of lives in the process of attempting to save the sick and the infected.

In reality, these several papers constitute an interwoven body of texts that constitute serious and even desperate literature. As Aldin K. Mutembei comments, towards the end of his paper,

Although they encompass several genres with different focus, they have one theme that binds them together. Owing to the similarities of the socio-cultural landscapes, the creative works project a comparable social consciousness. Although modern politics may be dissimilar, the pre-colonial societies’ cultural outlook still influences people’s thinking, especially in aspects such as diseases and myths, sex and sexuality, and gender relations. The use of Kiswahili and English phrases, words, and figures of speech in creative works indicates not only the historical contexts among East Africans, but also their bilingual or, more precisely, multilingual makeup. (p. 202)

And in this same matter, we can best serve the missionary-like drive of many of these situations as they are presented, by citing the last words of reflection by the same author:

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Adalla, *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, (Nairobi: Spear Books, c1993)

these works...create an open debate that is needed to make people aware of the realities of HIV/AIDS. These realities are illustrated through figurative language and literary suspense ...almost all of the books so treated (when translated) use figurative language, or metaphors and literary suspense.

A common image is that of a crossroads, and the traveller comes to a junction and does not know where to go. And a similar dilemma, one akin to the grand theme of personal freewill, and for the vital understanding whose is the responsibility for so much of what happens to the individual, is added to the pattern in the survey's last sentence—

Characters' lives are framed in a condemnatory situation where they either have to confess or face trial. (p. 203)

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### *But the Freedom of Choice*

One of the dominant themes of the book is that popular literature in Kenya, whether it be in Sheng or in English, is that the consumption of reading matter of significance must be broadened to include products of linguistic and cultural hybrids, as a consequence of the now re-negotiated spaces, For:

Literary discourse in these hybrid codes opens up a space where the dichotomy between traditional and popular literature can be negotiated. However, they have not yet succeeded in wholly transcending criticism from advocates of the conventional and 'mainstream' literature. The new texts belong in the realm of urban youth culture, one which is to be related to 'larger socio-cultural, economic, political, and global factors that collectively influence the promotion of that literature.' (p. 251)

### *Code-switching by Women Writers*

This mark of sophistication, emancipation, and the urge for realism is a feature of Kenyan women's literature, and it has been marked since the 1980s, and we may quote from Thomas Geider's summary of this:

Scholars recognize certain sub-types in the fusion of two or more languages. They distinguish between code-switching (changing the languages in a socially or rhetorically marked way), code-mixing (lumping the languages together quite indiscriminately), language-

borrowing (inserting single foreign words or phrases into one's speech) and quoting language (using another language in one's speech by marking it formally). These sub-types often appear in a kind of continuum, so that it can be difficult to define them clearly. (p. 171)

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### *Not a Summary*

This is an unexpected book, one desperately honest, and hard to read quickly, but it is one for reference, and for re-reading, and one serving as a cautionary tale, since the clashes and misunderstandings as between the separate cultures are a tune played often as a form of cultural lament. Yet it does not have to be so, and there is much wry humour in the papers. We assume that the same qualities will be found in the now just printed version of the linked 2011 lecture, 'Habari ya English? What about Kisiwahili? East Africa as a literary and Linguistic Contact Zone.'

Perhaps we may conclude with the information that the book is Volume 46 of *Matatu*, a journal on African and African diaspora literatures, cultures, and societies dedicated to interdisciplinary dialogue between literary and cultural studies, historiography, the social sciences, and cultural anthropology. Its charter indicates that it is 'animated by a lively interest in African culture and literature (including the Afro-Caribbean) that moves beyond worn-out clichés of 'cultural authenticity' and 'national liberation' towards critical exploration of African modernities. The East African public transport vehicle from which *Matatu* takes its name is both a component and a symbol of these modernities.

*Matatu* is firmly committed to supporting democratic change in Africa, to providing a forum for interchanges between African and European critical debates, to overcome notions of absolute cultural, ethnic or religious alterity, and of promoting transnational discussion on the future of African societies in a wider world.

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### *References*

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*Matatu - Journal for African Culture and Society*,  
<http://www.brill.com/products/series/matatu>

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## 2014 Annual Conference of the Society for Folk Life Studies

The Conference for 2014 was held in September in beautiful Killarney, in Ireland, and at a house which was long to be associated with the Herbert Family, with copper mining, which would make them very wealthy during the 18th century; but this state would not endure, and the family estate would be sold to Lord Ardilaun, a member of the Guinness family, and, after a time, it would be sold to William Bourn, owner of the Empire Gold Mine and Spring Water company of northern California. After many improvements had been made, Muckross House and its 11,000 acres estate had been presented to the Irish nation, as a memorial park, and, in due course, the first National Park in the Republic of Ireland. In later years the park was substantially extended by the acquisition of land from the former Earl of Kenmare's estate.

The general impression given of the Conference was that, when in Ireland, there is a noticeable way of composing one's life and experience, positively, with the past, and a way of finding what one wants to keep, and to understand what cannot be changed. Also, there had been much reflection on colonialism, and the deep sentiments that it creates in all involved, there belong emphasis on such notions as:

the wiping of an ecosystem off the map;  
the effect of epidemics; and of  
immigration that carries families so far, whether to wane or prosper;  
and  
the human resilience that does not allow the mood to remain bitter.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the core impression of the 2014 gathering of the Society was one of the haunting stories told, and of the ever splendid hospitality.

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