

East and Central Africa: An Introduction

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Apart from the annual ritual of declaring Ngugi wa Thiong'o the preferred winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, other tropes that come up when mapping Eastern and Central African literary imaginaries are: Taban lo Liyong's infamous declaration of East Africa as a literary desert; the Makerere Conference of 1962; the abolition of the English Department; and the seeming overshadowing of Malawi, Zambia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti by the region's literary and economic powerhouses, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

In his preface to a study of East African literature co-authored with Evan Mwangi, Simon Gikandi underscores what he terms a "strong sense of regionality" in East African literatures, which he considers to be partly a result of the region's attempt to sustain political and economic stability in the 1960s and 1970s, while other parts of the continent were rocked by strife; but also, because the region's authors enjoyed access to a flourishing publishing industry and academy which were heavily invested in the promotion of literary culture (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, vii). Gikandi also attributes the relative youth of Anglophone East African writing to three factors: the relative smallness of the region and its population; its belated colonial contact that meant late establishment of colonial institutions central to literary production; and its writers' regional locatedness, in comparison to writers from elsewhere (vii). For Gikandi, this regionalized sensibility had two effects: regional household names such as Okot p'Bitek remained unknown elsewhere for a long time, while the region's Anglophone writing found itself doubly-marginal, both in African literary history and relative to the region's indigenous-language literatures. Remarkable in this regard is the case of Anglophone literatures in Tanzania and Ethiopia, both of which retain much stronger local language (Swahili and Amharic, respectively) literatures.

Ethiopia and Tanzania both have a much older and larger catalogue of African-language writing compared to English-language writing. In both cases, history has had a major hand in crafting this literary scene: Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika and Zanzibar) was initially a German

colony (1880–1919); after World War I, Germany handed Tanganyika over to Britain. An important fragment for Tanzania's literary history is the Maji Maji resistance (1905–1907), in which various communities of Southern Tanganyika came together to protest forced labor in cotton plantations, among other grievances. While Tanganyika suffered heavy fatalities due to German-engineered famine and war casualties – prophet Kinjeketile Ngwale's reassurance that the special water would render combatants bulletproof failed to materialize – the resistance nonetheless distilled local communities' grievances and enabled them to articulate these to themselves and the Germans in ways that earned the resistance an iconic place in Tanzanian national history. The resistance is the subject of one of the best known and most widely performed and taught Tanzanian plays: Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970), easily an anticolonial classic, in the same category as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977). L. A. Mbughuni (1984, 256–257) emphasizes that both plays cast a glance back at Kenyan and Tanzanian histories of anticolonial resistance, pivoting around iconic leaders, Kinjeketile Ngwale and Dedan Kimathi, who, despite losing the battle, retain moral victory that eventually translates to anticolonial victory.

Tanganyika's unification with Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania in 1964 was soon followed by first president Julius Kambarange Nyerere's launch of Ujamaa or African socialism. From 1967, Tanzania's national development was framed around Ujamaa, whose insistence on self-reliance and equality inevitably impacted cultural policy, particularly given Nyerere's investment in Kiswahili as a unifying national language and as a literary language. Nyerere took literature and Kiswahili seriously enough to personally translate Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into Kiswahili, in part because these two plays' concerns resonated with Ujamaa's political project. By the time Nyerere conceded that Ujamaa had failed in 1985, leading to the liberalization of Tanzania's economy and politics, the cultural impact of Ujamaa had taken root, resulting in a vibrant Kiswahili literary scene which, while building on a legacy of over three hundred years, was nonetheless strengthened by Ujamaa's principles, in ways that allow Kiswahili writing to retain literary prominence to date in Tanzania (Mbise 1984).

On its part, apart from the distinction of never being colonized, Ethiopia also holds the distinction of having “the only extended written tradition predating both the Arabic and European incursions into the continent,” initially in Ge'ez, then in Amharic, whose literary tradition is over a thousand years old (Griffiths 2000, 262). Griffiths notes the influence of this tradition on English-language Ethiopian writing, evident in works such as Sahle Sellassie's *Warrior King* (1974) – a historical novel reimagining the unification of Ethiopia under Kassa Hailu aka Emperor Tewodros II – and plays such as Tsegaye Gabre-Mehdin's *Collision of Altars* (1977). For Griffiths, Ethiopian writing in English retains a fascination with historical settings, as seen in more recent writing such as Bereket Habte Sellassie's reimagining of the unseating of Emperor Haile Selassie, in his 1993 novel *Riding the Whirlwind*. However, it is Daniachew Worku's *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973) that Griffiths considers the most accomplished Ethiopian English novel of the twentieth century, in part owing to its sophisticated treatment of modern Ethiopian cultural struggles with the tensions between traditional animist practices and the equally traditional Ethiopian Coptic Christianity (Griffiths 2000, 263–264). Gebra Selasie Tesfay's *The Company of My Shadow* (1993) offers autobiographical insights into the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime that succeeded Emperor Haile Selassie's rule, by reflecting on the author's own involvement in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which ousted the Mengistu-led Derg regime in 1991. This is a subject he shares with Maaza Mengiste, whose debut novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010) reimagines the fall of the emperor and the transition into the

Derg's rule that plunged Ethiopia into a seven-year reign of terror under the autocracy of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Hama Tuma's *The Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories* (1993) uses black humor to sketch out the absurdities of the ostensibly socialist Derg regime in Ethiopia following Emperor Selassie's deposition and death. Dinaw Mengestu's writing too is preoccupied with the impact of the fall of the Selassie empire and the scarred lives that have since unfolded for Ethiopians in the diaspora. With three novels to his name so far – *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007), *How to Read the Air* (2010), and *All Our Names* (2014) – Mengestu's meditations on the emotional costs of the displacement and the infinite betrayals of the American dream for African migrants remain remarkable in their sensitive rendition of the scalding emotional scars of migrant experience.

Gikandi considers East African writing over the last century as having been driven by “the dialectic between [the] forceful desire by European powers to reshape the region to serve imperial interests, and the equally powerful need of colonized Africans to secure their autonomy” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 1). Yet, he is quick to point out the uniqueness of the region, owing to its encounters with the two forces that have proven decisive in shaping African literary imaginaries: globalization and Christianity. Of the former, growing scholarship on Indian Ocean Worlds emphasizes what Isabel Hofmeyr has described as Indian Ocean Worlds' transnational modes of imagination that preceded European imperialism (Hofmeyr 2012, 585) and which were largely embedded in religious and cultural Islam. At the same time, while Christianity and the mission school remain key protagonists in East African letters, “Christianity in East Africa, introduced to Ethiopia from the Near East in the fourth century, is older than the European Christian church” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 2). Despite seemingly pulling in different religious directions, the predominance of Islam in the Eastern African coast and its powerful imprint on Swahili literatures and cultures have meant that even decidedly Christian communities are in some ways culturally inflected with Islam, a scenario that is most visible in Tanzania and coastal Kenya.

Gikandi flags a number of historical moments in the region: the growth of mercantile civilizations along the East African coast between 1000 and 1500, coupled with the encounter with Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498, resulting in a two-century Portuguese reign over the region's coastline before their expulsion in 1699. In the interior, Gikandi writes, 1600–1850 was marked by elaborate patterns of mobility, settlement, and resettlement of communities. This is followed by the rise of the East African slave trade, which reached its peak in the 1820s. The end of the East African slave trade in 1917 somewhat overlapped with the intensification of colonial rule in the region, predominantly British driven: “from 1844 to 1866, missionaries, traders and adventurers turned their attention to East Africa, finally ushering the region into the orbit of empire” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 4). Further, he notes, the early decades of the twentieth century “focused on transforming the infrastructure of the countries of the region to fit the larger framework of colonial governance, [through] building of both the Kenya-Uganda and central Tanganyika railways; the introduction of cash crops such as coffee, cotton and sisal as widely as possible; and the settlement of white settlers in Kenya,” along with the establishment of “the first institutions of colonial governance” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 4).

World War II had two important effects on the East African region. Coming as it did five years after Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and exile of Emperor Selassie, the Italian alliance with Germany and their occupation of British Somaliland provoked Britain into mobilizing African troops against Italy, turning Northeast Africa into a fierce battle ground. Ethiopian Abbie Gubegna's *Defiance* (1975) and compatriot Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019) explore the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, while Somali British novelist Nadifa Mohamed

revisits these histories in her 2009 novel, *Black Mamba Boy*, interweaving her father's autobiographical tale with regional histories spanning Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. At the same time, the recruitment of young Africans to go and fight in India, Burma, and Palestine remains an important sliver of military histories in the region, since, as Gikandi notes, these young East Africans "were first exposed to the larger world, discovering other Africans and Asians whose colonial experiences and grievances mirrored their own and, in the process, cultivating the spirit of nationalism. Returning home after war, these young men radicalized the nature of politics in the region" (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 6). Indeed, a recurrent trope in African literature – and East Africa is no exception – is the figure of the Burma war veterans who return with a new sense of urgency and possibility of freedom. But these wars also wrought extensive damage to the region's communities, not only as battle grounds, but in the shape of the loss of young energetic men. This loss is the subject of a distinct body of writing by Kenyan women novelists on the impact of World War II on the Nyanza basin. David Yenjela's forthcoming work on the fiction of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Grace Ogot, and Yvonne Owuor explores literary reflections on the cost of war on the region's economies and histories.

Meantime, Somalia – which attained political independence in 1960, following the unification of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland – is a country whose turbulent history puzzles many observers because, unlike many other ethnically and culturally diverse African countries haunted by conflict, Somalia is ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. After eight short years of relative peace, Somalia found itself under the military dictatorship of Mohamed Siad Barre, who remained in power until his deposal in 1991 and the subsequent secession of British Somaliland. Griffiths emphasizes the centrality of oral poetry in Somali literary imaginaries, where, in part owing to the clan system, "the poet plays a vital role in creating cohesion within the clan and in negotiating relationships between subgroups, as well as between conflicting internal factions" (2000, 267). Among the titles Griffiths surveys are translations of Somali oral poetry into English, including Canadian Margaret Laurence's *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954) and B. W. Andrzejewski's *Leopard among the Women: A Somali Play* (1974). Early Somali writers in English include Omar Eby, whose anthology *The Sons of Adam: Stories of Somalia* was published in 1970; Ahmed Artan Hanghe's autobiographically inflected *The Sons of Somal* (1993); and Ahmed Omar Askar's biographical anthology, *Sharks and Soldiers* (1992). Apart from the prolific Nuruddin Farah (see below), three interesting women writers drawing international attention are the aforementioned Nadifa Mohamed, with two well-received novels to her name; Somali-Italian Christina Ali Farah, whose novel *Little Mother* (2011), translated from Italian, is a gripping portrait of the experiences of Somali migrants in Italy; and British Somali poet Warsan Shire, whose collections *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), *Her Blue Body* (2015), and *Our Men Don't Belong to Us* (2015) have attracted widespread attention from scholarly and general readerships alike.

A different kind of conflict – the 1994 genocide – casts a massive shadow over the literary landscapes of Rwanda and, to some extent, neighboring Burundi, which is no stranger to conflict. The sheer volume of writing on the Rwanda genocide – primarily by non-Rwandan authors – almost overshadows the country's pre-genocide literatures. However, before the massive and growing library of Rwandan writing in English and French on the Rwanda genocide, there were a number of other writers. Theologian, historian, and poet Alexis Kagame (1912–1981) is believed to be among the early Rwandan writers, whose interest was mainly in Rwandan oral history, although he also had a passion for poetry. A second early Rwandan writer is Saverio Naigiziki, author of a 1949 autobiography, *Escapade rwandaise* (Rwandan Adventure), and a novel, *L'Optimiste* (The Optimist), published in 1954, which examines inter-ethnic marriage.

In a review essay on the film *Hotel Rwanda*, Kenneth Harrow offers a compelling argument against historicist readings of the Rwanda genocide which emphasize its exceptionality, and in the process occlude the role of international players and institutions in making the genocide possible. Harrow's summary of the broad strokes of Rwanda's history that often recurs in such historicist readings is instructive: Starting with an originary discourse of tensions between the Hutu and the Tutsi, Harrow writes that Rwanda's history tends to be mapped by tracing the Hutu–Tutsi relations through German and Belgian colonial incursion and “the racist Belgian anthropologies, with the privileging of Tutsis in political and economic arenas; the build-up of resentments; the Hutu Revolution of 1959 and the Hutu ascension to power with independence in 1962” (Harrow 2005, 223). He goes on to map the various factors and players believed to have conspired to produce the 1994 genocide, and the literature that emerged in response. Elsewhere, Mahmood Mamdani offers an equally fascinating meditation on these histories, by underlining the distinctions between racial and ethnic identities and noting that in colonial Rwanda, unlike other parts of the continent, “the census did not identify any tribes. It only identified races: Hutu as Bantu, and Tutsi as Hamites” (Mamdani 2004, 14). These distinctions would later be mobilized to mark boundaries of un/belonging and competing claims to indigeneity.

Perhaps the best known fiction on the Rwanda genocide emerged from the project commissioned by Chadian writer Nocky Djedanoum under the project “*Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire*” (Rwanda: Writing Against Oblivion), which produced a range of powerful fiction in English and French, including Ivorian Véronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* (2005) and Senegalese Boris Boubacar Diop's *Murambi: The Book of Bones* (2006). Expectedly, much of the early writing on the Rwanda genocide was by non-Rwandan authors, both from across the continent and beyond. Subsequently, a growing body of Rwandan-authored life writing and fiction filtered through. Among these are Immaculée Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (2006) and *Led by Faith: Rising from the Ashes of the Rwandan Genocide*; and Marie Béatrice Umutesi's memoir, *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire* (2004), which was originally published in French. Umutesi's memoir is unique in its focus on the ordeals of Hutu refugees who escaped into Zaire after the 1994 genocide, or what she calls the invisible genocide. The atrocities allegedly committed by Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers against fleeing Hutus in Rwanda are a subject of much debate, with firm denials from the state.

Over in Central Africa, Malawi had a more visible literary culture, compared to Zambia. Before Legson Kayira, Aubrey Kachingwe, and David Rubadiri's novels (see below), there was George Simeon Mwase's rendition of the Chilembwe Uprising in 1915, named after Baptist minister and nationalist icon John Chilembwe, who mobilized Malawians in protest against British recruitment of carrier corps who were dying in large numbers in Tanganyika and Somalia (Currey 2008, 257). Mwase's *Strike a Blow and Die* (1967) was rescued from the national archives by a visiting Harvard scholar, Robert Rotberg, who arranged for its publication by Harvard University Press in 1967. It was actually written in 1931–1932, during Mwase's term in prison for tax embezzlement (Currey 2008, 257).

Across in Zambia, John Reed underlines the uniqueness of Zambia's history as a British colony largely governed from South Africa. As a result, Reed writes, Zambia's encounter with Europe came “transformed, harshened and provincialized, by way of South Africa” (Reed 1984, 83). Owing to this unique encounter of “experien[cing] European culture as the colony of a colony” (83), Zambian fiction not only lacked an Africanist or protest impetus, as would be the case with Zimbabwean, South African, and Eastern African writing, but also Zambian writers felt no compulsion to take British or American writing as models. Reed counts among their influences

journalistic training, non-literary fiction in magazines, school set works, and African novels from other parts of the continent. Just as East African literature has been haunted by Taban lo Liyong's charge of a literary desert, Zambian writing is often considered to be overshadowed by the more robust neighboring literary scenes to the south and the east, especially where English-language writing is concerned. For Ranka Primorac, part of the issue is that Zambian English writing not only resists easy categorization, it finds itself "asserting its existence and visibility, yet being undermined by conditions of economic crisis and lack" (Primorac 2013, 101). In her view, though, the challenge Zambian writing poses is one that invites the "postcolonializing and localizing" of analytic categories, genres, and ideas of literary value, in part because, for instance, "the generic term *bildungsroman*, with its Eurocentric and realism-inflected textual and cultural implications, may not be entirely adequate in describing non-European configurations of emergence narratives" (Primorac 2013, 109). Alongside a robust body of local-language literatures, post-independence Zambia saw a growing list of English-language short fiction by writers such as Kafungulwa Mubitana, Simon D. Katema, and William Saidi. A recurrent concern across these narratives is the tension between tradition and modernity, inflected with moral questions of right and wrong, which also features in the first two Zambian novels in English, Andrey Masiye's *Before Dawn* (1971) and Dominic Mulaisho's *Tongue of the Dumb* (1971). Other early authors are Gideon Phiri, author of *Ticklish Sensation* (1971); William Simukwasa, author of *Coup!* (1979); Grieve Sibale, who wrote *Between Two Worlds* (1979); and Joseph Muyuni, author of *A Question of Motive* (1978). In Primorac's words, much of this fiction seeks to "thematise and transmit social change [and] transact a cultural coming to terms with modernity" (Primorac 2013, 109).

The different political trajectories of the region's countries inevitably shaped their socio-cultural impetuses and, by extension, their literary cultures, at the levels of both form and content. Thus, Somali and Ugandan literature features a longer engagement with questions of civil war and post-independence conflict, as seen in the work of playwright John Ruganda (*The Burdens*, *The Floods*) and Nuruddin Farah and Nadifa Mohamed's fiction; while Tanzania and Ethiopia's socialist encounters differently inflected their respective literatures, when one considers Hama Tuma's satirical anthology, *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, or Tanzania's extensive Ujamaa literature, both in English and Kiswahili. At the same time, Kenya's trajectory as a settler colony, coupled with its post-independence embrace of neoliberal capitalism, in some ways made for a more vibrant economy, with rich returns for the literary publishing scene; but these returns would soon be scuppered by increasing autocracy and the eventual hollowing out of the intellectual community, as Dan Ojwang, Atieno Odhiambo, and Thandika Mkandawire variously show.

African-Language Literatures and the Language Question

Gikandi remarks that where Anglophone East African writing is considered young relative to other regional literatures – prompting Ugandan Sudanese writer Taban lo Liyong to declare the region a literary desert – African-language literatures in the region go back centuries. Examples are the aforementioned Ge'ez literatures of Ethiopia, going back to the middle ages, while Swahili literature traces its roots back to the fifteenth century (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, viii).

In retrospect, it is clear that East Africa had not been a literary wilderness. While the region did not produce writers with international reputations until the 1960s, it had a substantial literary culture

in African languages such as Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, Somali in Somalia, and Amharic in Ethiopia. Because these literatures dated as far back as the fifteenth century, they often had a local and regional authority and reputation that writing in English could not easily match.

(Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 9)

An important paradox for Gikandi, though, is that despite being a late arrival on the continent's literary scene, Anglophone East African writing "is fundamentally connected to older forms of literary expression in African languages" (viii). Elsewhere, Fiona Moolla (2014) remarks on the tendency to read Nuruddin Farah's *From a Broken Rib* (1970) – which holds the distinction of being the first Anglophone male-authored novel to feature a female protagonist – with emphasis on its oral features, which are in turn deemed to signal Farah's novels' emergence from orality, an idea that gains stronger resonance given that the author's mother was a poet. Moolla's reminder here, though, is that Somali orature deviates from popular perceptions of African orature in two important ways. First, it is individually composed and does not rely on formulae. Second, Somali society takes this format of individual composition so seriously that any subsequent renditions of the poem must acknowledge the composer and rely on memory to ensure accurate recitation of the original poem. In this context, then, Moolla's reading unsettles assumptions about African orality as symbolizing "the collective outpouring of the communal spirit" which, in an evolutionary logic, "develops into individual expression articulated through writing, [and] in particular, the novel" (Moolla, 2014, 2). For her, on the contrary, Somali orature underscores the affirmation of the individual against what she terms the "social-transcendental horizon" (2).

Interestingly, this influence between African-language and European-language writing in the region goes both ways, as Alamin Mazrui's *Cultural Politics of Translation* (2016) illustrates. Mazrui discusses Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's conviction that translation of Shakespeare and other classics into Kiswahili would modernize the language and Tanzania, while giving Kiswahili the nourishment it needed to develop into a literary language in its own right. Remarkable here is the success of the Nyerere project in socially engineering a powerful Kiswahili literary tradition which continues to outshine the Anglophone literary tradition in the country, decades after the demise of the Ujamaa project and Tanzania's return to the neoliberal fold. Equally noteworthy is Kiswahili's hospitable embrace of literatures from other regions of the continent and the world, and the ways in which these literatures were to leave a powerful imprint on regional sensibilities. Although translations of classics such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as *Okonkwo Shujaa* or Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* as *Mchimba Madini* will be familiar to Kiswahili scholars, they enjoyed less popularity with readerships compared to their originals, in part because readers had already been exposed to the English originals, largely through school curricula, which in turn spilled beyond the school gates as students influenced friends' and colleagues' reading lists. However, Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* would have completely different fates in translation as *Masaibu ya Ndugu Jero* and *Mabepari wa Venisi* respectively, because they became Kiswahili set works in schools, and therefore entered Kenyan and Tanzanian literary imaginaries in Kiswahili. For many Kenyan readers, present company included, Brother Jero was decidedly East African, and located in our Kiswahili cultural imaginaries, even after we encountered Soyinka's other works in English.

Gikandi underlines the paradox that colonial literacy in African languages meant that many aspiring writers started by writing in African languages, but because many never attained university education, their views were absent in the literary debates of the 1950s and 1960s; "in the end, the identity of East African literature was determined in university departments and literary

journals and thus reflected the interests and anxieties of a small elite” who subsequently shaped the region’s literary cultures and institutions of literary production (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 9).

Elsewhere, Adrian Roscoe’s discussion of vernacular literatures in East Africa emphasizes the role of missionary societies, and later vernacular journals, as the early institutions for the promotion and publishing of African-language literatures from the region (Roscoe 1977). Roscoe speculates that possibly because of connections to Muslim verse, poetry was a better developed form in Swahili writing than prose, which only emerged much later, partly thanks to vernacular newspapers and vernacular teaching in school curricula (Roscoe 1977, 8). Among the early Kiswahili fiction and life writing that Roscoe surveys are Martin Kayamba’s *Tulivyoona na Tulivyofanya Uingereza* (1932), James Mbotela’s *Uhuru wa Watumwa* (1934), and Mohammed Said Abdalla’s *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* (1960) and *Kisima cha Giningi* (1965). Another notable title in the region’s vernacular literature, which appears to be overlooked in Roscoe’s list, is Aniceti Kitereza’s *Mwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka, Ntulanalwo na Bulibwali*, a historical novel which, though published in Kiswahili in 1981, was actually completed in 1945 in Kerewe, but lacked a publisher. Kitereza’s book has since been translated into German and Swedish, while fellow Tanzanian novelist Gabriel Ruhumbika translated it into English in 2002, directly from Kerewe.

It is fascinating to revisit concerns about the forms of artistic and social alienation that confronted the first generations of African writers in East and Central Africa, who found themselves struggling to reconcile the new aesthetics culled from the literature curricula of schools and universities – inevitably steeped in “the great tradition” and the English canon – with their concerns about their communities’ lives and aesthetics on the one hand and, on the other, the promise and challenge of the artist as an individual. In Gikandi’s view, though, these tensions, which have often been read as irreconcilable and alienating, may actually have given these writers’ works a particular, distinctive edge: “early East African literature in English was defined by the obvious tension between European forms of literary expression and local materials or topics” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, 10).

Zambian literature appears to complicate this dynamic further, owing to local-language fiction, primarily in Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, and Tonga, published after World War II. Reed describes the Nyanja fiction as short novelettes, often with a moral at their core, whose structure and logics might be a blend of both indigenous morality tales and Victorian moral tales and the English magazine story (Reed 1984, 84).

An interesting development in recent years has been the emergence of Sheng – a Kenyan urban patois – as a language of cultural production, primarily through music, short fiction, and popular poetry, with the latter two popularized by *Kwani* literary magazine and online literary platforms. Chege Githiora’s *Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili Vernacular* (2018) is an important research resource that is bound to generate more scholarly engagement with Sheng cultural productions. Still on the language question, John Mugane, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Biodun Jeyifo rebooted this topic in a 2017 issue of *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, debating whether English was an African language.

The Makerere Conference

It has now become traditional to nod to the 1962 Makerere Conference of African Writers of English Expression when thinking about the histories of Anglophone African writing. Reporting on the conference for the Kenyan newspaper *Sunday Nation*, in an essay that was subsequently

published in the August 1962 issue of *Transition* magazine, J. T. Ngugi (subsequently known as Ngugi wa Thiong'o) writes of his excitement about meeting South African Ezekiel Mphahlele and Chinua Achebe,

The young Nigerian novelist whose two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, seem to herald the birth of a society in which writers, freed from the burden of political protests and jibes at a disintegrating colonialism, can cast an unsentimental eye at human relationship in all its delicate and sometimes harsh intricacies ... With the death of colonialism, a new society is being born. And with it a new literature.

(Ngugi 1962, 7)

As Ngugi wa Thiong'o would soon discover, he was being a tad optimistic about the future. In fact, his own writing career for the next fifty years would be preoccupied with various incarnations of what Gikandi, in a reading of Ngugi's own *A Grain of Wheat*, terms "arrested decolonization" (2000, 98).

It is hard to contest the fact that the debates at the conference articulated a foundational set of questions that were to preoccupy African writers and critics alike for decades to come. Expectedly, the question of defining African literature, and the related one on the language of African literature, particularly preoccupied delegates, and the discussions at the conference, and subsequently, remain foundational to critical and creative approaches to African writing to date. Interestingly, the focus on definition and language overshadowed another set of debates that were broached at the conference but did not gain as much traction subsequently: the question of audience and its implications for the circuits of production and consumption of African literature. While this set of questions is better known to contemporary scholars and writers via the work of Eileen Julien (2006) and Akin Adesokan (2012) on the extroverted novel, Pascale Casanova and Sarah Brouillette on the literary marketplace, and James English on literary value, these concerns were first flagged at the Makerere conference. In his post-conference reflections, South African writer Bloke Modisane writes:

Sparks flew during the session devoted to a dialogue between two publishers. Vital and sometimes penetrating questions were thrown – like poison arrows – at the publishers. Were African writers getting a square deal from publishers' readers? Were they guided by preconceived ideas as to what an African novel ought to be? Did the publishers have African readers? Were the selections guided by the considerations of a European audience? At times the questions implied a difference between a European and an African audience and then the need for a publishing house in Africa was discussed.

(Modisane 1962, 5)

Like the issue of definition, this set of questions on the production and consumption of African writing was largely suspended, and to a large extent remains unresolved, returning to haunt East African writing in interesting ways. Notable here is the duo of Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina and Ethiopian American Dinaw Mengestu. Wainaina's satirical essay, "How to Write about Africa," and his subsequent work with the Kwani Trust and *Kwani* magazine (see below) broach the question of problematic contemporary representations of Africa, which retain a strong appeal in the international literary market; while Dinaw Mengestu takes this challenge a step further in his novel *How to Read the Air* by using an unreliable narrator, Jonas Woldemarian, to both stage and subvert versions of what Mengestu terms "the Africa narrative," precisely by weaving elaborate lies that mock American assumptions about migrants' heartrending journeys to the US.

At a time when debates about the extroverted African novel, as Eileen Julien and Akin Adesokan's work illustrates, are at their peak, Gikandi's reminder about the region's receptiveness to experimental styles of writing in the 1970s – and local readerships' embrace of these forms – is instructive. The East African Publishing House was receptive to Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, inadvertently challenging international publishers' rigid conceptions of literary value (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, viii), and subsequently attracting prominent authors such as Ayi Kwei Armah, who opted for East African publishers for *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, both of which represented a shift from “the high modernist norm that had won him international prominence” (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007, viii).

The Abolition of the English Department

In 1968, a short six years after the Makerere conference, three academics based at the University of Nairobi – Taban lo Liyong, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba – submitted a memorandum to the acting head of the English Department at the university seeking the abolition of the department, to be replaced with a Department of African Literature and Languages. The submission was in response to a presentation by the acting head of the department to the faculty board, discussing the place of cognate departments such as Modern Languages (French) and disciplines such as Linguistics and African Languages in relation to the English Department. The three academics took strong exception to this line of thought, particularly for the manner in which it was underpinned by “a basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage” (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1995, 439). Instead, the three scholars emphasized the need to “orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre,” not so much as a rejection of other literary cultures, but as a reconfiguring of the patterns of dominance inherited from the colonial academy in Eastern Africa which centered English studies, by “establish[ing] the centrality of Africa in the department” (441). Recognizing the influence of European literatures, Portuguese, French, Swahili, Arabic, and Asian literatures in shaping modern African literature, the three proposed that the new reconfigured department center African oral literature, modern African literature, and “a selected course in European literature” (440). Curiously, they also felt strongly about Francophone African literature and proposed that knowledge of English, Kiswahili, and French be compulsory (440). The emphasis on oral literature was in part motivated by its interdisciplinary possibilities, as it would encompass anthropology, history, psychology, religion, and philosophy while simultaneously encouraging students' sense of rootedness and innovation. In their words, supplementing modern African Literature courses with Oral Tradition courses meant that “the new literature [would] be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other hand, be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots” (441). Overall, the emphasis was on placing “Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or satellite of other countries and literatures,” following which one could then “radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us” (441).

The subsequent public memory of this moment in the shorthand of “abolition of the English Department” rendered the memo and the moment open to oversimplification in succeeding renditions. In the process, an important conversation about working assumptions of literary value that determine syllabi decisions has largely been under-explored, yet it is one of the more

interesting and prescient concerns the three academics raised. As they argued, the emphasis on teaching works of “undisputed literary excellence” not only obscures questions of positionality that shape literary value, but is also counterintuitive, as in any society “it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated ‘classics,’ either of their own or of a foreign culture” (441).

In the end, the three main universities in the region – the Universities of Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Makerere University – replaced the English Department with Literature Departments. It would be a while, though, before the questions of value were embraced in the spirit proposed by the three scholars, especially where local popular fiction was concerned, as many of these departments retained inherited ideas of great literature and its centrality to literary studies. These same dynamics would later play out as cross-generational tensions between the academy – primarily the University of Nairobi professoriate – and the emerging generation of young writers affiliated with the *Kwani* literary magazine and their iconoclastic approach to notions of the literary. A second unforeseen result was that the beneficiaries of the Ngugi–Anyumba–Taban 1972 revolution were left “stuck in their grove of stylistics, oral literature and the nineteenth-and-twentieth-century European canon” to the exclusion of popular literature and cultures and postmodernism (Siundu 2016, 1549–1550). At the same time, it is interesting to revisit these debates and their implications in the region, at a time when the South African academy finds itself confronted by these same issues through student demands for what they term the decolonization of curricula.

Selected Writers

Long before it became fashionable for Africans to travel across the continent and write on their journeys – a trend popularized in recent years by South African writer Sihle Khumalo – Legson Kayira (1942–2012) had traveled from Malawi to Khartoum and on to the United States, accompanied by his Bible and a copy of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Roscoe 1977, 215). Kayira wrote about his journeys in his 1965 memoir, *I Will Try*, which “remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for sixteen weeks” (Ross 2012). In both his journey and its narration, Elliot Ross notes, Kayira understands himself to be following in the footsteps of missionaries such as David Livingstone, a perspective possibly imparted at the Livingstonia Mission School where he had studied (Ross 2012). Kayira’s first novel, *The Looming Shadow* (1967), inaugurated his comic spirit, which he would retain in much, though not all, of his subsequent fiction – *Jingala* (1969), *Things Black and Beautiful* (1970), *The Civil Servant* (1971), and *Detainee* (1974) – despite being at odds with the sober narratives of postcolonial disillusionment that were beginning to germinate at the time. Kayira shares the honor of being among the first Malawian novelists, along with poet and playwright academic David Rubadiri, whose sole novel, *No Bride Price* (1967), was followed by a range of poems, including the much anthologized “An African Thunderstorm,” and an equally well-known poetry anthology, *Poems from East Africa* (1971), which he edited with David Cook. The third novelist in the trinity is Aubrey Kachingwe, whose highly political *No Easy Task* (1966) remains his only novel, as he turned to short fiction after its publication. Another major voice from Malawi is Jack Mapanje whose oeuvre of poetry is widely recognized and studied. Mapanje’s *Of Chameleon and Gods* (1981) is easily the most widely read poetry collection from the country, and indeed, fairly well known across the continent.

Meantime, in Zambia, Dominic Mulaisho, a senior civil servant – whose early writing was done through dictation into an audiophone at lunchtime – is probably the second best known Zambian writer after Kenneth Kaunda and his 1962 autobiography, *Zambia Shall be Free*. That Mulaisho's novels – *The Tongue of the Dumb* (1971) and *The Smoke that Thunders* (1979) – are both interested in power dynamics is unsurprising, as a good number of the region's keenest analysts of power dynamics variously served in their countries' governments. Here, Malawian David Rubadiri's poem, "An African Thunderstorm," and Ugandan Henry Barlow's popular "Building the Nation" come to mind. Rubadiri served as Malawi's ambassador before a fallout with the Kamuzu Banda regime which led to a long exile in Uganda and Kenya, while Henry Barlow's cutting satire about the hypocrisies and wastefulness of civil servants was written during his term as a minister in the Ugandan government. But John Reed is skeptical about Mulaisho's stylization of both the 1940s mission and the village in *The Tongue of the Dumb*, though he nonetheless believes it offers "a poetry of place, closely woven with the richness of growing things and the hardness of hunger" (Reed 1984, 92), which strengthens its link to the Old Testament that lends it its title. For Gordon McGregor, an academic at the newly launched University of Zambia, writing in 1969, Mulaisho's novel was distinctive thanks to "a touch of satire and sardonic humour" that ran through it (cited in Currey 2008, 253).

The region has also produced its quarter of playwrights and dramatists, although this genre would seem to be under-explored in recent decades. Among the major dramatists are Uganda's John Ruganda whose plays *Black Mamba* (1973), *Covenant with Death* (1973), *The Burdens* (1972), and *The Floods* (1980) were variously staged in Kampala and Nairobi. *The Burdens* and *The Floods* are particularly well received and have been regularly featured on the Kenyan school and university curricula. Fellow Ugandan Robert Serumaga is equally recognized for his role as both actor and playwright. Among his better known plays are *The Elephants* (1971) and *Majangwa* (1974). Serumaga's exploration of the absurd is evident both in his drama and his sole novel, *Return to the Shadows* (1969). Ruganda and Serumaga have a shared concern in their writing with social decay through abuses of power, corruption, and violence. Across in Kenya, Francis Imbuga holds the mantle of the foremost playwright in the country, up to his death, with *Betrayal in the City* (1976) as his most performed and studied play in the region. At the time of his death in 2012, he had published twelve plays, with *Aminata* (1988) and *Shrine of Tears* (1992) being particularly well received. Among the women playwrights, Micere Mugo's *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti* (1976) is lesser known than *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), co-authored with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, while Uganda's Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu is an important part of the first generation of East African playwrights.

Diasporic Imaginaries

Peter Nazareth remarks on the diasporic impetus as a central element embedded in foundational East African writing, thanks to the porous intellectual and creative borders which writers and scholars criss-crossed between the 1960s and 1980s. Illustrative here is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's first play, *The Black Hermit*, which was first performed in Kampala as part of Uganda's independence celebrations in 1962 (Nazareth 1984, 7), while his first two novels were also written during his stay in Uganda. In similar vein, Malawian David Rubadiri's *No Bride Price* was written in Uganda, as was much of his poetry, while Kenyan playwright and scholar Ali Mazrui wrote *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971) in Uganda (Nazareth 1984, 7). In many respects,

then, the current wave of diasporic writing on East and Central Africa by figures such as Ethiopia's Dinaw Mengestu and Maaza Mengiste, Somalia's Nuruddin Farah, Ali Farah, Warsan Shire, and Nadifa Mohamed, Zambia's Namwali Serpell and Rwanda's Immaculée Ilibagiza is heir to an older legacy of diasporic voices in the region's letters.

At the same time, the East African Asian community has been prolific in its contributions to the making of East African writing. Long before Idi Amin's expulsion of the Asian community in Uganda, preceded by Tanzania's Africanization program, which equally displaced the East African Asian community, novelists and poets such as Ugandans Bahadur Tejani, Peter Nazareth, and Jagjit Singh were a major part of the literary scene, with Rajat Neogy's *Transition* magazine, edited from Uganda, as a vital platform of literary formation in the region. The magazine, which continues to provide cutting-edge literary insights, has since relocated to the US. On the Asian expulsions, Jagjit Singh's poem "Portrait of an Asian as an East African" remains one of the classics among literary meditations on this historical moment. These disruptions aside, the East African Asian community remains a prolific and key voice in the region's literature, with contemporary figures such as Tanzanian Kenyan M. G. Vassanji and Kenyan poet Shailja Patel as widely recognized writers, and younger voices such as Canada-based Iman Verjee, whose 2016 novel *Who Will Catch Us As We Fall?* is set in post-millennial Kenya and variously nods back to the country's entangled histories. An important addition to this library is Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2016), an accomplished historical novel interweaving a triracial tapestry of black, Asian, and British encounters in the region, from the building of the ill-fated Kenya–Uganda railway all the way to post-independence interactions. If, as Godwin Siundu's reading of M. G. Vassanji's writing suggests, the genealogies of East African Asian intellectual trajectories are "subsumed both in political histories of the region and overcast by a dominant pan-Africanist logic whose exclusivism intimidated and then killed what had initially promised to be vibrant Afro-Asian dialogic creativity" (2018, 7), then Kimani's novel offers fresh breath to the promise of this Afro-Asian creativity, through his novel's riveting reimagining of cross-racial solidarities and forms of reciprocal hospitality.

While Idi Amin's Asian expulsion and the resultant exiling of writers is better known, in fact many East and Central African countries have forced their writers either into detention without trial or exile, at one point or another. In addition to the Asian writers, Okot p'Bitek, Richard Ntiru, and John Ruganda were similarly forced into exile. Across in Kenya, the Jomo Kenyatta regime imprisoned Ngugi wa Thiong'o over his theater activities with the Kamirithu community, while the Moi regime sank into deep paranoia and repression of writers and intellectuals in the 1980s, following the failed 1982 coup, sending writers Micere Mugo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and intellectuals Atieno Odhiambo and Alamin Mazrui into exile, while another group spent time in detention without trial, bequeathing Kenya with a sizable body of post-independence prison literature. In recent years, increasing censorship has pushed several Ethiopian writers and journalists into exile, including satirist Habtamu Seyoum.

Present Directions

Among the key institutions of literary production in the 1970s and 1980s in East and Central Africa were cultural initiatives and literary magazines, most of which were hosted at universities, including *Penpoint* at Makerere University, *Darlite* and *Umma* at the University of

Dar es Salaam, and *Busara* at the University of Nairobi. Perhaps the best known of these was *Transition* magazine, run from Kampala from the 1960s by Rajat Neorgy, and which has since relocated to the US. Related to these platforms were various foreign-funded cultural spaces such as the British Council, Goethe Institute, the Ford Foundation, and Alliance Française, each of which variously invested in arts and culture as part of their cultural diplomacy initiatives.

In many respects, these dynamics remain at play, with various literary initiatives and arts and culture platforms continuing to serve as important catalysts of literary production. Among these are the feminist writers' initiative Femrite in Uganda, which has been an immense success in inserting women's voices and narratives into the region's literary landscape, albeit with a heavy inflection of gender and development impulses. Femrite has either published or mentored a cross-generational mix of Ugandan writers including Doreen Baingana, Mary Karooro Okurut, and Monica Arac de Nyeko, among others. While the novels and narratives produced under the Femrite banner would occasionally appear modest in their choices of gender epistemologies, they nonetheless shifted the East African literary scene in ways that are impossible to ignore. In similar vein, the Kwani Trust, whose entry coincided with Kenya's so-called second democratization wave after the 2002 exit of both the ruling party and President Daniel Arap Moi, inaugurated a fresh redefinition of the literary in Kenya, with a regional sensibility and a passionate embrace of the experimental. *Kwani* magazine started off by offering new writers space to explore the widest stretch of their literary imaginaries, often to the irritation of the professoriate at universities, who subscribed to different ideas of the literary. The primarily donor-funded Kwani Trust has since extended its mandate to include hosting the Kwani Literary Festival, which is pan-African in scope, starting a Kwani bookshop, and, most interestingly, awarding the Kwani Manuscript Prize. The inaugural prize went to Uganda's Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, whose historical novel *Kintu* (2014) was first published by Kwani and has been very well received, both in the continent and overseas, resulting in the release of an American edition in 2017. At the time of writing, *Kintu* is widely considered the most important novel to emerge from the region in recent years, alongside its sister novel, also published by Kwani Trust, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* (2014). In a region that, like many other regions on the continent, has held greater promise for male writers, it is remarkable that the two top recent novels are both female-authored historical novels, meditating on the nation project in Uganda and Kenya respectively.

Other noteworthy initiatives are *Jalada* magazine, which is primarily digital; *Jahazi* magazine; and Writivism, which started off as a literary festival but has since expanded to include a literary prize for short stories, which are subsequently published in a Writivism anthology; and, more recently, writers' workshops aimed at mentorship and promotion of the art of writing for emerging writers. There is also the Mabati Prize for African-language literature, which has tended to be associated with Kiswahili writing. Marie Kruger's work on Femrite, Doreen Strauhs (2013) on literary NGOs, Doseline Kiguru on literary prizes, Kate Wallis (2018, 2019) and Stephanie Bosch Santana (2019) on literary networks as well as Shola Adenekan (2012) on digital literature offer generative insights into current directions in East African literatures.

Overall, then, the East and Central African region's literary histories continue to sketch out fascinating patterns of literary practice, through a riveting blend of new terrains of literary practice and uncanny recalls of preceding practices.

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