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East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions. Ed. by J.K.S. Makokha, Egara Kabaji and Dominica Dipio. Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2011, 513 pp. ISBN 978-3-8325-2816-4

The collection titled *East African literature: Essays on Written and Oral Tradition* is not the first contribution of Logos Publishers (Berlin) into criticism on African writing. However, this collection is particularly remarkable, since, as Ali Jimale Ahmed states in the Foreword, “what gives the volume its special contour and gumption is its intention to initiate a new way of reading and amalgamating East African literature and orature” (10).

The introduction, written by the team of editors, consists of two parts. The first part surveys the latest development in the field of literary criticism in and about East Africa, stating that the region currently undergoes an “on-going cultural reawakening” and naming quite a few newly appeared titles and authors; whereas, the second part is a brief outline of the essays included in the collection. A valuable feature of the volume is that it presents “the insiders’ view” of the present-day literary situation in the region, since the volume’s contributors are renowned academics, working in private and public universities in several countries of the region (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Somali, Ethiopia), as well as outside the continent. The variety of approaches used and topics treated by these scholars ensures the coverage of various aspects of literary situation in the region, together giving the picture of its present state and outlining some perspectives for development.

Although the titles of the essays are listed in the contents without any sub-divisions, they could in fact be divided into three general parts: the volume contains essays on East African prose writing (in English and Swahili), on oral literature, and on drama. Each section, regardless of its contents, is characterized by the same impressive variety of topics and high quality of published texts. The essays on prose writing have yet another common feature: they are all marked with the air of deconstruction. By that I do not mean that all the authors of this section employ various theories of deconstruction (although some of them do), but all of them seem to seek deconstructing certain well-fixed notions or myths about East African writing and/or social and cultural realities.

In the opening essay **Jack Ogembo** and **Christine Ombaka** show how East African authors in their works have been using the human body as a kind of ‘text’ for sending important messages. They thereby deconstruct some myths about prominent figures in East African literature, demonstrating, for example, that Okot p’Bitek was not a ‘diehard’ ‘cultural nationalist’, but in fact “condemns the repugnant cultural practices that go against social justice” (31). Another example given is that Ngũgĩ wa Thĩong’o transformed meanings of certain traditional notions (e.g., turning fatness from the symbol of wealth into the one of ugliness and parasitism), and generally advocated “aesthetics of diverse cultural backgrounds” (35).

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The sub-title of **Tewodros Gebre's** essay – *De/mythologizing the romance in Ethiopia* – is already self-speaking. The scholar outlines the once-predominant ideological concept of “state-led nationalism”, embodied in romantic fiction based on “three pillars of nature, religion and history” and epitomised in the famous poem *Abbay* by Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin. The second part of the article demonstrates how the concept was deconstructed by Daniachew Worku in his “aesthetically radical and experimental” novel *Adefris* (1970).

Alina Rinkanya, who also introduces the theme of Swahili literature, deconstructs the ossified concept of Kenyan literature as a “branch” of English-language African writing. She convincingly shows that not only does modern Kenyan writing feature variegated and growing corpus of creative fiction in Swahili, but also – that both the English and Swahili branches of modern Kenyan fiction demonstrate “mutual respect” and interest through the use of code-switching. According to the author, code-switching assists the authors of both English and Swahili expression in “integrating Kenyan novels into a single ‘literary field’ whose main task is to creatively reflect the rapidly changing Kenyan reality at the dawn of the new century” (98).

A large group of essays in the ‘prose’ part are addressing in different ways the issues of gender. **Dominica Dipio** demonstrates how contemporary Ugandan writers in their works deconstruct historical and contemporary reality. Goretta Kyomuhendo in *Waiting* (2007) changes the traditional notion of the country’s 1970s history as a realm of terror and anarchy. Instead, she depicts her characters as “daily heroes” and “ordinary people with capacity for extraordinary acts” (44), who even in the direst situations preserved their humaneness. The writer goes farther in her efforts, deconstructing “male courage and female fearfulness” by reversing traditional gender roles and delegating all the key roles to women. Contrary to Kyomuhendo’s positive approach, in Julius Ocwinyo’s novel on Ugandan social reality of the 1990s, marred by civil strife in the North, “leadership, political and religious, is portrayed as a total flop” (66), the country is “hungry for the basic human need for love” (63), and the women are portrayed mostly negatively.

John Mugubi in his article on Rebecca Njau’s novel *Ripples in the Pool* shows how the writer “contravenes the conventional principles governing the creation of tragedy” and also rejects the principles of traditional patriarchal society, thus creating a new form of tragedy where the hero falls victim rather to tragic social conditions (predominantly, those in post-colonial African societies) than to his own tragic flaws. The scholar primarily uses the figure of the main character Selina, who, according to him, may be perceived as “a new breed of self-assured women who recognise their inalienable rights” (105) and thus falls victim to her rebellion against patriarchal laws.

Jairus Omuteche uses a multi-faceted model of gender analysis to demonstrate how the late Margaret Ogola (1958-2011) in her last novel *Place of Destiny* (2005) used the form of “pseudo-autobiography”. According to him, Ogola’s purpose was not only to deconstruct the

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traditional image of women and “to counter the devaluing silencing or distortions that characterize some aspects of depiction of women in Kenyan literature” (120), but also to “depict an affirmative image of women who are assertive of their place and identity in the society”. Ogo-la’s heroines attain this purpose by accepting the system of values that are used as measures of success in contemporary society – religion, education and professionalism, and to combine their modern empowered identity at parity with men with their traditional roles as women.

Charles Kevero Tunai investigates the narrative structure of the novel *Sardines* (1981) by Nuruddin Farah, the most celebrated Somali author of English expression. He shows how the writer in “a novel of woman’s resistance on the political and domestic levels” (142), through the use of mixed mode of narration, deconstructs the established stereotype of the Somali woman as a symbol of subjugation. He thus points out that the spirit of rebellion runs through at least two generations of Somali women, reversing, as an example, the gender roles of the main characters – Medina and her husband Samater. The important point that the scholar makes is that political and gender violence in Somalia, according to Farah, are tightly linked, and the positive changes on the political scene should start on family level.

Justus Makokha in his article summarises the ideas of symbolic meanings of settings in the earlier novels by Moyez Vassanji, – the ideas and findings that were more extensively expressed in his earlier published book on the celebrated Indian-African-Canadian writer. Using the concept of ‘interstitial space’, the scholar shows how through the use of settings the writer manages to express the interstitial “in-between world” of East Africans of Indian descent, at the same time deconstructing the myth of ‘Asian Africans’ as wealth-mongers of the region, showing that in real sense they are eternal migrants, with “diamonds sewn in the belt” (page) as the sole fragile guarantee of their security in their next homeland.

Lennox Odiemo-Munara demonstrates how Elieshi Lema (so far the only renowned representative of Tanzanian women writing in English) in her novel *Parched Earth* uses the form of a love story for the same purpose – to deconstruct not only the traditional image of woman, but also the stereotype of an African male as a paragon of patriarchy. In the novel, the character of Joseph, the husband of the main female character Doreen, is presented as a rare example of a positive male character in a ‘woman’s’ writing, thus setting the example of “a meaningful co-existence of both genders” (200). Intertwining the narratives of the three main characters, the author shows how they use different strategies to achieve one and the same aim – to oppose the ‘Othering’, oppressive social practices, and construct for themselves and their offspring “own spaces of personal fulfilment” (198) in the social milieu. It is a bit surprising, though, that the author states several times that “writing in English in Tanzania is not a well developed tradition” (pages), whereas since 1960s there have been already several generations of Anglophone and bilingual writers in the country.

Beth Mutugu in her essay deconstructs the works of the doyen of the Swahili adventurous novel, Ben Rashid Mtobwa (1958-2008), from a feminist point of view, coming to a some-

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what controversial conclusion. On the one hand, the portrayal of women in novels by Mtobwa seems to be largely based on traditional patriarchal discourse, as women are depicted mostly as objects of beauty and male desires, and very rarely – as “useful and reliable people”. On the other hand, by using the explicit style (namely – by describing the scenes of rape, fornication, etc.), Mtobwa, according to the author, manages to “expose the problems that women undergo in the hands of men. Generally, the author aims at “sensitising the society on the need to empower women in all aspects of life” (215).

Retaining the focus on Swahili literature, in the last essay on prose fiction, **Pamela Ngugi** and **Wendo Nabea** survey the recent developments in Swahili children literature in Kenya. Noting the tremendous recent growth in the area, the authors point out that the style of children’s writing has so far received insufficient attention from scholars. Their stylistic analysis of three selected texts allows them to state that the writers, in order to keep the children aware of the topical debates taking place in the society, should employ stylistic devices so that “there is a rapport between the text and the young readers” (242), and the style is “simple and closely tied to what they can understand” (242). The authors use the selected texts, such as *Nyani mdogo* (Young monkey) by Nyambura Mpeesha (1991), *Safari ya kombamwiko* (Journey of a cockroach) by Emmanuel Kariuki (1999), *Ndoto ya Amerika* (The American dream) by Ken Walibora (2001) as examples of convincing and skilful employment of style.

The collection contains only two essays on poetry, and they appear even more valuable since they cover both the English and Swahili branches of East African poetry. **Godwin Siundu** speculates on what he calls “economy of hope” (probably the term should have been explained) in the works of the greatest-to-date Kenyan poet of English expression – Jared Angira, namely his latest collection *Lament of the Silent* (2004). By using “back-and-forth approach” (again clarification of the term would be advisable) the scholar traces three “main ideas” that pervade Angira’s collection – deployment of metaphors, metaphors being informed by external social factors, and concern with the damage inflicted by capitalism. He finally states that Angira’s poetry is still marked with “energy and perception that allows him to comment on a wide array of concerns that characterize aspects of post-independence life in Kenya, Africa and the world” (256), and that the sense of disappointment and absurdity of the present situation in his works is counterbalanced by an equally powerful idea of hope, “that there is something redeemable even in the most hopeless of situations” (255). The author’s conclusive remark that “Angira’s personal style is dated and in need of defence rather than praise” (256) arouses an argument – whether we are speaking of a really “obsolete” individual poetic style, or of a strong point – consistency and, hence, real poetic individuality and integrity – in Angira’s works?

The second essay on poetry by **Issa Mwamzandi** continues the research in Swahili verbal arts, tracing the stylistic transformation of metaphors in *taarab* lyrics in recent times. It is mainly focused on most common metaphors “that have a bearing on love and sexual relationship” (370). Comparing “proto-typical” and contemporary metaphors of the type, the scholar

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states that whereas the former ones were much more opaque, multi-meaningful, “less offensive and adhering to the morals”, the latter ones are more explicit and sometimes even “extreme in terms of vulgarity” (376). This, according to the author, is mainly caused by the globalization and hybridization of culture, differing social contexts, where the meaning of metaphor becomes obvious even for a non-insider.

James and John Ogone start the section on East African oral literature with an analysis of “reform discourse” in the songs of Daniel Owino Misiani (1940-2006), one of the pillars of *benga* music in Western Kenya (a musical style merging traditional music of the Luo with some Congolese and Western influences). In Kenyan popular culture songs “have [generally] been used over the years as a means of communicating political messages over the political divide” (259). Misiani was one of the most inventive poets/singers, using an extensive metaphorical arsenal for his politically charged messages (e.g. animal life and flora), and displaying “prophetic optimism” about the future of East Africa, providing a reliable gauge for generations of future musicians.

Continuing the theme of oral lore and musical culture in Western Kenya, **Daniel Ochieng Orwenjo** discusses the stylistic tenets of presenting sexually related themes in traditional *nyatiti* music of the Luo community (*nyatiti* – an eight-stringed lyre, traditional instrument of the Luo). Revealing considerable parallels with *taarab* lyrics (see above), the scholar shows how the traditionally tabooed topics are presented by *nyatiti* singers through the use of *pakruok* – “the art of spontaneous praise chanting in the course of a musical performance [...] in which lexical choices in direct reference to sex [...] are allowed only in periphrastic and euphemistic terms” (276). The author quotes various examples of *pakruok*, showing that it appears as a means of preserving traditional gender disparity, portraying women pejoratively and negatively and thus “squeezing them from public domains”.

Gender relations are also extensively dealt with in further essays of this section; **Fugich Wako** explores in this regard the still under-researched tradition of the Borana of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. According to the scholar, the naming ceremony of the Borana is a “rare show of unity” (395) between men and women, where both sexes are given “compensatory license to express themselves in public” through corresponding gender-accorded genres of oral performance. However, in spite of the seeming parity that the occasion gives to genders, the author admits that in men’s poetry “the male singers are espousing masculine ethos and privileging themselves over women” (314), in the long run cementing the underprivileged status of the latter in Borana community.

Chris Wasike treats a similar topic, speaking of after-burial verbal art of the Bukusu, a sub-group of the Luhya of Western Kenya. Stating that “death brings into sharp focus the anxieties that are often associated with the very definition of not just the ethnic personality but more so gender categories” (sic – 317), the author shows how the burial ceremony of a respected male elder presents an opportunity not only to “cement Bukusu ethnic nationalism”

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by incorporating the deceased into “community’s annals of history and memory” (320), but also serves “as a gender agency of highlighting and privileging masculinity” (325). All this is done through the performance of *khuswala khumuse* – a traditional genre performed by specially assigned experts; the art of one of them, John Manguliechi, is used by the author in illustrative examples.

Egara Kabaji continues the themes of Luhya folklore and gender relationship by tracing gender ideology in folktales of the Maragoli, another sub-tribe of the Luhya, arguing that “the Maragoli folktale discourse presents a commentary upon power relations in the society” (331), namely gender relations. The author states that “although operating ideally to enhance a certain patriarchal cultural perspective, the Maragoli folktale also works covertly to undermine it” (334) through “sub-texts that present a critique of the patriarchal system” (335), created by female performers through the use of various devices. However, while the essay clearly presents the way “patriarchal cultural perspective” is instilled into the minds of the audience, the part about “subversive sub-texts” appears to be in need of considerable expansion.

The essay by **Sheila Ryanga**, that closes the ‘folklore’ part, again deals with gender relations as reflected in *ngodya* dance songs, performed by the women of the Digo community of coastal Kenya. The author shows that along with the aim to “comment, defend and conserve societal norms” (347) these songs frequently “embody in themselves the critic on social norms” (360), as represented in some of the quoted songs – e.g., a woman who “knows her rights” demands compensation from a neglectful husband. Apart from gender issues, the article contains a very thorough stylistic analysis of *ngodya* songs, based primarily on formalistic theory of foregrounding.

The last part of the collection which is focused on East African drama is not as gender oriented as the previous parts – in fact, gender motifs are pronounced only in the essay by **Clara Momanyi**. Based on the concept that “literature [...] can be a channel through which patriarchal attitudes, ideologies or stereotypes of both men and women can be created and perpetuated” (387), she analyses literary works, which actually present features opposed to these stereotypes, taking as an example one of the most popular pieces of Swahili drama – the play *Mama ee* by Katini Mwachofi (1987). In this play, “the writer interrogates the patriarchal culture and the devastating effects it can have on women” (390) and “depicts female characters that are searching for their own ‘selves’ while trying to question the status quo” (387). Using tenets of feminist criticism, the scholar exposes the influences of marital, religious and legal institutions in African societies, as reflected in the play, as the pillars of patriarchal ideology.

James Ogola Onyango also explores drama in Swahili, but his essay investigates the use of imagery in one of the founding works of Swahili dramatic art – *Mashetani* (1971) by Ebrahim Hussein, arguing that the playwright effectively uses figurative images (namely, those of the devils – hence the title of the play – and related imagery) to depict “political and socio-economic pre-independence and post-independence East Africa”. These thematic as-

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pects are also embodied in the images of the main characters, Juma and Kitaru, “who reflect more on the question of neo-colonialism and the problems of the post-independence nation-state that is cryptic” (402).

Swahili drama is also dealt with in the essay by **Aldin Mutembei** – but here the scholar ventures into a comparative analysis of plays about HIV/AIDS written in Tanzania and the USA, since in both societies problems related to this pandemic are of prominence. The comparison between plays on HIV/AIDS by Tanzanian and American authors reveals various aspects of the perception of the disease in both societies – like “silence”, “stigma” or “acceptance”, and highlights the role of development theatre in HIV/AIDS-awareness strategies. The scholar concludes that in spite of a variety of differences, the plays are marked by common traits, such as calling to reduce stigma over HIV-positive people, and to see them as people possibly accepted rather than rejected.

Continuing the theme of Swahili theatre concerned with HIV/AIDS, **Mahiri Mwita** analyses several plays of the “Magnet Theatre against AIDS” project in Kenya. The author shows how the participants are elevating the efficacy of their performances (“outreaches”) by adapting them to various cultural contexts and increasing the participation of the audience, in order to “address the “know-do” gap by focusing at the cultural roots of the intransigence” (436). The analysis is done against a sound theoretical background that allows the scholar to categorise the plays as a separate dramatic genre of “applied theatre”. The essay also contains a very detailed and valuable description of the process of performance and its assessment by the actors and the audience.

Turning to a specific type of drama in Kenya – plays written for schools’ drama festivals – **Emmanuel Tsikhungu** analyses five plays in English and Swahili, presented at Kenya Primary Schools’ Drama Festivals from 1995 to 2003. Stating that “for any dramatic form to be of value for children” it must be “based on certain principles that subscribe to the tenets of children’s literature” (464), the scholar outlines these principles and in fact criticizes the selected authors for not observing them (and thus making their texts more suitable for an “elitist” adult audience than for primary school kids). Tsikhungu also puts forward the concept of “childcentredness” as a unifying tenet for primary school drama.

In the last essay of the collection, **Maxamed Daahir Afrax** acquaints the readers with post-independence drama in Somali language – an under-researched field in the scholarship of modern African drama. The scholar himself characterises it as “a transitional art representing the experience of a society passing through a challenging period of transition” (493). He describes it as “people-based, non-scripted theatre meant primarily for urban entertainment”, that “wavers between keeping with tradition and responding to modern influences” (493). Outlining the main creative principles of Somali drama – traditionalism, didacticism, and reliance on oral tradition – the author, however, states that many of these plays feature “the harmonious union of tradition and modernity” (498), advocating the constructive use of socially

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beneficial features of both. The importance of drama and theatre, however victimized by the on-going civil war, for a contemporary Somali society lies, according to the author, in the fact that this art has the “great potential to serve as an effective tool for peace-building, reconstruction and sustainable development” (505). Moreover, the author calls for a “joint effort by all concerned Somalis and friends of the Somali people to help the scattered Somali artists recover, reunite and do their important part in the rehabilitation of their war-torn country” (506).

This brief survey of the essays included in the collection allows me to conclude that this book can be deemed as a highly recommended reading for everyone interested in the recent developments in African writing – but it is definitely a must for those scholars (as well as for the audience of general readers) who are in any way concerned with the present state and developments in East African literature and society.

Mikhail D. Gromov