

## East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions

ED. J. K. S. MAKOKHA, EGARA KABAJI, AND DOMINICA DIPIO

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The quality and quantity of imaginative productions from Eastern Africa in recent decades undercut Taban Lo Liyong's controversial and historic characterization of the East African literary landscape as barren. However, while literary artists, both new and seasoned, continue to churn out intriguing works, particularly in English and in Swahili (the lingua franca of the region), critical response that limns collectively such literature has not been equally vibrant. Even Chris Wanjala's seminal and magisterial text *The Season of Harvest* (1978), which attempted to counter Liyong's damning assertion, virtually excludes the Swahili works in its conception of East African literature.

*East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions* is timely because it substantially does justice to the contemporary literary scene in East Africa by transcending linguistic, generic, and national frontiers. The volume contains a total of twenty-five essays analyzing a range of oral and written works from any number of genres of adult and children's literature, composed in English, Swahili, and other languages of the region. Besides written texts, it has analyses of oral literary forms such as Fugich Wako's study of Borana oral poems and Chris Wasike's and Egara Kabaji's studies of the Luhyia oral tradition. The contributors employ diverse analytical and theoretical approaches in trying to apprehend what comes across as a truly representative East African literary corpus. Some of the contributions are quite inventive, such as Alina Rinkanya's "Code-switching in the Contemporary Kenyan Novel." This essay is somehow atypical of critical practice in the region, as it goes beyond exclusive analysis of texts in English only but also incorporates in its breadth at least one Swahili text. Whereas there is indeed imbalance between the numerous English texts, on the one hand, and only one Swahili text, on the other, Rinkanya's study heralds a new dawn in critical practice where instances of critical overlap between the two languages within one essay have been few and far between.

*East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions* addresses the thematic and stylistic preoccupations in the works of both less-known and better-known writers in the region, underscoring the edited volume's representative nature. The major authors whose works are analyzed include those who write in English, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Kenyan), Nurrudin Farah (Somali), M. G. Vas-sanji (Kenyan), Yusuf Dawood (Kenyan), and Goretti Kyomuhendo (Ugandan), and those who write in Swahili, such as K. W. Wamitila and Ken Walibora (Kenyan), and Ebrahim Hussein.

The only quibble I have about some of these essays is the uncritical and simplistic application of Western conceptual and critical approaches to African literary expressions. That being said, this new title is a welcome addition to the body of critical literature on East African literature. The volume is unsurpassed in its breadth and depth and effectively captures the essence of the evolution and dynamism of East African literature.

KEN WALIBORA WALIAULA  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
WALIAULA@WISC.EDU

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