

## English Translations of the Kiswahili Special Issue of *Eastern African Literary & Cultural Studies*

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## English Translations of the Kiswahili Special Issue of *Eastern African Literary & Cultural Studies*

This special issue of *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies (EALCS)*, is not only historic but has come out at an opportune moment in the growth of Kiswahili. There has lately been a new sense of animated interest in Kiswahili in East Africa and beyond, an interest that echoes the aspirations that Kiswahili enthusiasts have entertained over the years. The father of modern Kiswahili literature Shaaban bin Robert, also known as Shaaban Ulenge, is one of the most significant contributors to Kiswahili literature and advocates of East Africa's lingua franca. In defending Kiswahili Robert alludes to a Kiswahili proverb '*Titi la mama litamu japokuwa la mbwa*' [One own's mother's breast is sweet even if it is a dog's] in penning his verse "Kiswahili." He writes:

Languages such as Arabic, Latin and English  
Abound in magnificent attributes  
And as for me, I have tried to learn these languages  
Yet like a dumb person, whenever I speak them, I am derided  
One own mother's breast is sweet, no other can satisfy (Robert 1966, 27)

The publication of this special issue of the *EALCS* in Kiswahili goes a long way, not only in recognising this language and its literature, but also in recognising milestones reached as far as Kiswahili is concerned in a wide range of spheres in the post-independence period.

The development of Kiswahili has been historically phenomenal especially in Kenya and Tanzania where it was widely used to mobilise and to unite indigenous peoples in their struggle for liberation from the colonial yoke. In these two countries Kiswahili has been used as the national language for a long time, regardless of whether or not its status as a national language resulted from official declaration or constitutional stipulation. However, in recent years other member states of the East African Community (EAC) have found themselves obligated to use the language in their internal and external interactions. The protocol that established the EAC specifically states that Kiswahili is the lingua franca of member states, which include Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan Kusini, apart from the two aforementioned countries. Moreover, the EAC Legislature has decreed that Kiswahili shall be the official language of the Community.

This declaration has come nearly a decade after the African Union had endorsed Kiswahili as one of its working languages besides Portuguese, Arabic, English and French. Further, the EAC has set up the East African Kiswahili Commission, (EAC) which a special vehicle for coordinating and overseeing the growth of Kiswahili in the East African region.

The elevated status of Kiswahili in East African implies that not only will the language be taught in the entire region, but also its literature will inevitably gain huge significance. For decades a number of countries outside East Africa and even beyond Africa have enthusiastically gravitated towards the teaching of Kiswahili. For instance, during of the Cold War between the United States of America and the United Soviet States of Russia, Kiswahili was widely taught in countries on both sides of the divide. And even since the end of

the Cold War, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kiswahili remains a huge attraction in institutions of learning in countries such as Russia, Germany, Japan, China, Austria, Canada, Britain, USA, and Mexico. In Africa, outside of East Africa, countries like Ghana, Nigeria, and Egypt have a long history of teaching Kiswahili language and literature at various levels. Quite recently, South Africa and Zimbabwe joined the bandwagon of countries that find Kiswahili alluring by deciding to include it in their primary school curricula (Khumalo 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Granted, the literature and culture of East African is ordinarily expressed through local languages such as Kisukuma, Ikinyarwanda, Dinka, Lugisu, and Kitaita or foreign languages such as English and, to a certain extent, French. East Africans have the capability to innovatively compose and perform oral literary and written compositions using their indigenous languages or foreign tongues. Nonetheless, it is evident that there is currently no other language in East Africa that captures the very essence of life, literature and culture in the region as Kiswahili does.

For years criticism on Kiswahili literature has been published in English or French journals. Even this very journal, the EACLS publishes its articles in English which examine aspects of East African literature and culture that are expressed or articulated in indigenous languages. Let us not be detained here but the debate about whether or not Kiswahili is indigenous or foreign or whether it occupies some place between and betwixt.

Suffice it to say this language that some scholars label hybrid or creole from Bantu and Arabic fusion, while others claim it is authentically African, is the *lingua franca* of East Africa. It is therefore imperative that this language is used as well in evaluation or analysing the literature and culture of East Africans. We recognise the contribution of journals and other publications that have given priority to critical pieces written in Kiswahili and we are obliged to congratulate the editors and directors for realising the importance of doing so. By this special issue in Kiswahili we too are plunging in the deep sea of publishing critical articles in Kiswahili as a way of making our contribution and affording the critics an opportunity to utilise this sublime language in their undertakings.

The contributors in this journal have used Kiswahili as the language of their analysis, focusing as they do on a wide range of aspects of East African literature and culture under the umbrella of what we calling "New trends in Kiswahili literature." We are not oblivious to the fact that novelty or newness is highly debatable. Here is not the place for delving into that debate. Yet it is clear that at least there is newness in this journal's maiden attempt to publish in Kiswahili. There is newness in the literary approaches and styles embraced by the East African artists. The fact of newness in approaches may deserve no particular significance in this introduction. However, it is important to point out that the critics herein direct us toward what might exhibit tendencies of new approaches in Kiswahili literature. For instance, in his article on gnomic poetry, Ahmad Kipacha focuses on innovation and newness in the idioms that Euphrase Kezilahabi uses in his poetry, while Michael Gromov concentrates on "the new novel" in Kiswahili by revealing the stylistic and philosophical newness if not the thematic. On his part Angelus Mnenuka refers to an entirely new domain when he discusses online oral performances as Evans Makhulo analyses the songs of Tanzania oral artist Mrisho Mpoto.

In sum, the critical articles in this journal encapsulate a new wave blowing the East African literary and cultural landscape. It is our hope that by including these articles in this special issue, we have opened opportunities for further newness, newness that would catalyse the elevation of Kiswahili to front and centre in the global scene. It has been my humble pleasure to serve as the guest editor for this very first issue of this journal to use Kiswahili, the language that Shaaban bin Robert equated to one own


mother's breast. What a joy it would be to see more Kiswahili issues of this splendid journal in the years ahead!

## Note

1. Several international radio stations have been using East Africa's *lingua franca*. The list that follows contains radio stations that have broadcasted or continue to broadcast in Kiswahili: BBC Swahili Service, Radio Moscow; VOA Swahili Service, Channel Afrika, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, etc.

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