A Companion to African Literatures

Edited by Olakunle George

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Notes on Contributors

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Preface

*A Companion to African Literatures* is designed to serve as research resource for critics, teachers, and students of African literature and related fields like world literature, comparative literary studies, and postcolonial studies. In contemporary literary and cultural criticism, notions of “world literature” and ”globalism” have become central and influential. Here, the notion of world literature is to be understood as a set of theoretical perspectives and protocols of interpretation, rather than simply a corpus of literary works. In the turn to broad transnational perspectives, however, there is always a risk of de-emphasizing the specific backgrounds, thematic concerns, and significant transformations that characterize African literatures. This *Companion* addresses the need for richly contextualized accounts of the diversity of literary production on the African continent.

The book contains twenty-eight historically grounded and theoretically informed chapters, written by an international team of distinguished as well as emerging leaders in the diverse subfields of the study of African literatures. One chapter has previously been published as a journal article. Taken as discrete individual chapters or as a whole, the volume will be useful to both advanced students and beginners in the academic study of modern African literatures. It will likewise be useful to teachers who seek rigorous and lucid essays that can be assigned in college courses.

*A Companion to African Literatures* is divided into five sections. The first four concentrate on the geographical regions into which Africa is conventionally divided: namely, East and Central Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa. Each of these sections begins with an introductory chapter that offers an overview of the region’s literary landscape and explores pertinent conceptual or historical questions. Chapters in the fifth section take up theoretical issues and material that range across the regions, or concentrate on film and digital media. With regard to genres and forms, the chapters discuss novels, poetry, dramatic literature, nonfiction, digital media, visual art, and film. The focus is mainly on modern African literatures from the nineteenth century to the present. Even though literatures in Amharic, Arabic, and Swahili date much farther back, in order to make the volume manageable the focus is on the historical span that extends from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.
One challenge that any volume on African literatures has to confront is that of practices of specialization. While some national literatures and languages are highly visible, others are marginalized or relatively less studied. In terms of the institutional organization of our field, the common practice is to specialize in literatures from a region, a national configuration, or one or two languages. It is not common to find individual scholars who possess the linguistic competencies to do African literary and cultural studies across multiple intra-African regions, languages, and traditions. Even for comparatists, the tendency is most often to frame “African literature” as a composite unit of analysis, alongside one or more literary traditions from other parts of the world, one of which is usually Western European. As students of African literatures, then, the prevailing situation is such that we often end up knowing a lot about one region, and much less about other regional or national traditions. Against this background, each of the chapters that introduce the regions in Parts I–IV will be of interest to the reader whose primary area of interest lies elsewhere. The book’s organization allows readers to appreciate differences between the regions and see how, amid the differences, some issues and concerns recur, together with innovative artistic responses.

All the chapters are attentive to the rich discursive genealogies of African literatures even as they are informed by recent developments in literary and cultural criticism. Contributors speak in various ways to issues of nationhood, transnationalism, diaspora, media and digital culture, gender and sexuality, and race. They explore such questions as the following. How have the literatures taken shape since their current modern manifestation and proliferation? What are the major questions and lines of interpretation enlivening African literary and cultural criticism at the present time? Who are the most visible writers, and how do issues of marginality and exclusion emerge? What are the interactions between the literatures and audio-visual forms made possible by digital media? How might the study of African literatures inflect ongoing conversations about nationalism, identities, and violence in the age of globalization? In addressing such questions, the chapters inform us and also model how we may approach specific texts and traditions within the wide span of African literatures.

There is more than one way of benefiting from A Companion to African Literatures. Readers can decide on specific sections or chapters upon which to concentrate, or undertake a methodical engagement of the entire volume. It is assumed that readers will probably come to the volume with different levels of prior grounding in African literatures. Depending on whether they are advanced interlocutors or non-specialist beginners, readers will in all probability get varying rewards – varying but substantively robust – from the book. Indeed, only such variation will be properly commensurate with the breadth and heterogeneity of the literatures.

Considered as a whole, the volume raises questions and opens conversations; it does not close them. Contributors developed individual chapters in line with their methodological preferences, paying attention to issues that may be specific to the literary tradition or confluence of traditions. The chapters, including the introductory overviews that open Parts I–IV, do not take the form of simple “surveys” in the traditional sense, and coverage is not the goal. Rather, the approach is to explore the different literatures in relation to selected aesthetic, social, historical, or philosophical questions. Some chapters dig deep into well-studied writers, others introduce less-studied figures or newer artistic exertions. Contributors thereby elucidate the social conditions, intellectual contexts, and aesthetic textures of the literatures.

In a volume devoted to networks of cultural objects as capacious as “African literatures,” some gaps and omissions are unavoidable. Readers will undoubtedly see areas they would have liked covered or issues they would have liked taken up. As already indicated, the volume is not
designed to accomplish what advocates of traditional literary studies would call “coverage.” The option adopted in *A Companion to African Literatures* is to be selective and cognizant of the advantages, as well as limits, of the choices made. To give one illustration: of the hundreds of non-European languages in use in Africa, only literatures in Amharic, Arabic, Swahili, and Yoruba are represented in this book. It is of course always important to challenge conservative and essentialist views on indigeneity and foreign-ness. Likewise, it is productive to take seriously the understanding that Afrikaans, English, French, and Portuguese are by now African languages too, used in official discourses as well as in the daily lives of Africans. Nonetheless, in a volume such as this, and without mystifying indigeneity as essence, the utmost ideal would be to have more chapters devoted to literary traditions in precolonial or “indigenous” African languages. That has not been possible here. However, the hope is that the chapters devoted to African literatures in the precolonial languages will serve to attune readers not only to these literatures in themselves, but also to the vibrancy of multiple languages, expressive practices, and literatures on the continent. Thus, by the lights of what it covers, *A Companion to African Literatures* hopefully draws attention to the need for, and possibilities of, further study.

Taken together, the chapters that follow confront us with questions and insights about language, the contact of histories and peoples, and the existential dimensions of African literatures and related arts. In this way, *A Companion to African Literatures* equips readers to appreciate anew the heterogeneity of Africa as well as the broadening meanings of the literatures it continues to set in motion.
Part I
East and Central Africa
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 deposition 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 Rwanda 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 “experienc[ing] 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, Andreya 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
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 *Uburu 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 Bulihwali*, 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