

Special Section on Literature and Literary Studies in Kenya - Preface

Martina Kopf¹ and Daniela Waldburger²

This special section of *Stichproben - Vienna Journal of African Studies* has a focus on literature and literary studies in Kenya, which emerged from several encounters and dialogues. The beginning was made with two interviews that two members of the editorial team, Daniela Waldburger and Martina Kopf, suggested independently from each other. In the summer semester 2018 our department hosted Abdilatif Abdalla to give a lecture on Swahili poetry and society in the Africa Colloquium at the University of Vienna. Abdalla gave those present an unforgettable moment when he recited one of his works and we were able to experience first-hand what a difference it makes to hear an English academic lecture on Swahili poetry, or to be part of an oral performance where the language itself speaks and resonates its aesthetics inherited from a centuries-old literary culture. Daniela Waldburger, herself scholar and lecturer of Swahili and linguistics, had organized the invitation and she used the opportunity to conduct an interview with the prominent Kenyan activist, writer and scholar.

In the same year, Martina Kopf, researcher and lecturer in African Literatures, interviewed Doseline Kiguru, a literary scholar and active member in Kenyan and East African literary networks, during a research stay in Nairobi. The conversation focused on the interfaces between literature and activism and the young, creative scene in Nairobi that has been breaking new ground politically and culturally through innovative literary and digital forums. Shortly before they met for the interview, the annual cultural festival on the

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island of Lamu off the coast of Kenya had taken place. Kiguru told how beautiful it was to hear poets perform Swahili poetry in the streets – to hear them “sing” poetry, as she said. The fact that Abdilatif Abdalla had carried an impression of this art into a Viennese seminar room a few months earlier created a connection.

Although both interviews shed light on different scenes and historical moments of the very heterogeneous cultural landscape, they express common interests: a concern for Kenya, an interest in social justice, a passion for literature as a means of intervention and change, and an interest in a literary culture that speaks to the values, imaginations and experiences of Kenyan and East African audiences rather than to the expectations of Western readers. Kopf’s essay thus explores the changing history of Nairobi’s literary scene and its significance within a larger process, in which Kenyan writers have redefined themselves and their country since the historical elections of 2002. The essay portrays some of these cultural initiatives, which have taken place since the founding of the literary magazine *Kwani?* in 2003.

Talking about literature is one thing, let literature speak on its own is another. Hence, we asked Doseline Kiguru for permission to include her short story “Sikuku”. It was originally written as part of “Kikulacho Nairobi: Remains, Waste and Metonymy III”, an exhibition that was curated in 2018. The exhibition revolved around the theme of food and involved other Kenyan artists working in different media. One larger theme in this story about a student, who gradually recognizes that she shares her room with the deceased former dweller, is uncertainty, a defining experience of everyday life in Nairobi. This theme has only begun to evolve new meaning across the globe in these past few months of the Covid pandemic.

Kenya’s literary scene is characterized by language dynamics within a plurilinguistic environment typical to most African countries. What is unique though is that Sheng, a hybrid language based on Swahili but using elements from other Kenyan languages such as Gikuyu, Luo, Gikamba and English, is increasingly becoming a lingua franca. The dominant language of modern written literature in Kenya is English, while Swahili has been the main lingua franca in which the members of more than 40 language groups in the country communicate with each other. However, Sheng is increasingly finding its way into literature and the media. The importance of a trans-disciplinary dialogue between Swahili studies and African literature studies is thus demonstrated by the cultural dynamics in Kenya itself.

While the idea for this focus on Kenyan literature took shape, the Department of African Studies of the University of Vienna set off collaborations with the Department of Literature, Theatre and the Performing Arts of Moi University in Eldoret in Western Kenya. These collaborating activities resulted from discussions during a Swahili Colloquium in Bayreuth, Germany, and the pleasant conclusion that both sides could learn and proceed by exchanging ideas and joining for activities. In February 2020, Daniela Waldburger visited Moi University to discuss the possibilities of a Faculty Agreement between Moi and Vienna University on a more formal basis and to give a guest lecture about the democratisation of knowledge production in research in the department's seminar series. Two weeks earlier, Martina Kopf, while on a further research stay in Nairobi, presented her work on concepts of development in Kenyan literature in the same seminar series and for meeting the editorial team of *LIFT – The Journal of Literature and Performing Arts*, a new journal edited at Moi University.³

Daniela Waldburger's conversations with T. Michael Mboya, who has fostered the collaboration between our departments, involved a reflection of university strategies and the politics of knowledge, but also more generally the conditions within which academics in Africa and in Europe live and act. Mboya's contribution "Policing with a human face" is a text he sent to various newspapers in Kenya. No newspaper was ready to publish his piece, challenging some of these conditions. It is a text that oscillates between storytelling and report, focusing on rituals of power in the communication between police and citizens.

During a meeting with the editorial team of *LIFT – The Journal of Literature and Performing Arts* the idea to review the inaugural issue was born. Reading the "Dialogues on African Literature, Film and Theatre" was a most inspiring encounter with Africa-based scholarship and intellectual engagement with the plurality of knowledge and cultural forms in East Africa and beyond.

This special section's focus on Kenyan literature thus results from a cross-disciplinary dialogue that we have been maintaining at our department between Swahili Studies and African Literary Studies. It developed from encounters and dialogues with Kenyan scholars and writers. It grew piece by piece, not following a pre-designed plan, but the dynamics of shared

³ Martina Kopf's research project on "Concepts of Development in Postcolonial Kenyan Literature" is financed by the Elise Richter Program of the Austrian Science Funds (FWF).

intellectual passions and ongoing conversations of which this collection marks a temporary result, and certainly not the end.