

Preface

It gives me great pleasure to write this preface to a volume whose aim, well demonstrated in its papers, is to use the genre of biography and autobiography as a tool in advancing our understanding of philosophical, literary and ethical dimensions of the ‘lived lives’ of African intellectuals, and the issues and questions that emerge from that exercise. In so doing, the volume exhibits the development of the genre itself as an academic discipline since the 18th century when it had been deemed a poor relation of history!¹

Scholars from different disciplines explore the thoughts and writings of a range of intellectuals who have engaged with personal, national, and regional issues during the colonial and post-independent periods. Each scholar, inevitably, brings to this volume her or his own perceptions and conceptual framework for the analysis of the subject, thus initiating a dual discourse of thought: thoughts of the scholars who have contributed to this volume, and those of the intellectuals whose biographies and autobiographies are subjects of discussion. Such engagement leaves room for extended interpretations, thus making this volume a useful starting point for further dialogue.

A related exercise to the dual discourse of thought is the dimension of what might be termed ‘biographical intertextuality,’ that is, a consideration and discussion of the thoughts and activities of a cadre of intellectuals who have either interacted personally with one another, or whose works demonstrate an interrelationship of shared activities, knowledge or influence. The study of a network of such intellectuals, especially from the same region (and possibly even speaking the same language) might yield interesting insights into the diachronic development of thought in a particular region or among a particular people.²

I am grateful to the editors, Dr Cristina Nicolini and Professor Flavia Aiello, for according me the opportunity of writing the preface to this interesting volume.

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¹ Kendall gives us the confessions of an 18th century historian who states that he had had “several times deviated and descended from the dignity of a historian, and voluntarily fallen into the lower class of biographers, annalists, etc” (Kendall 1985: 3).

² For such an approach related to themes (rather than auto/biographies), see Brenner (2024); see also Bang (2024) for a diachronic discussion of the development of Muslim discourse of ‘modernity’ in Zanzibar, 1920-1940.

References

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- Kendall, Paul Murray. 1985. *The Art of Biography*. New York, NY & London: Garland Publishing.

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