

Graziella Acquaviva. 2019. *Leggere il teatro: l'esperienza swahili* ("ATrA Aree di transizione linguistiche e culturali in Africa" 6). Trieste: Trieste University Press. ISBN 978-88-5511-115-7; eISBN 978-88-5511-116-4. 146 pages.

This work, the title of which translates into English as "Reading the theatre: the Swahili experience," is a monography on the development of Swahili-language written drama in Eastern Africa, available online (open access) from the OpenstarTs¹ digital archive, which presents both a historical outline of Swahili drama and selected analytical perspectives. The author, Graziella Acquaviva, researcher and lecturer of Swahili language and literature at the University of Turin, has here synthesised her long-standing critical readings of Swahili drama, a genre which she also effectively employs as a didactic tool for her courses by staging new workings of excerpts of Swahili works with the students.²

This volume consists of a foreword by the author, three main sections, a rich bibliography and two useful appendices: the first appendix is an updated list of Swahili plays (not only those discussed in the volume), while the second presents the Swahili terminology relating to drama and its criticism.

The first introductory section (*Introduzione*) is composed of two parts. In the first part, entitled "From tradition to modernity: origins and development of drama in Kenya and Tanzania" (*Dalla tradizione alla modernità: origini e sviluppo del teatro in Kenya e Tanzania*), the author retraces the origins of Swahili drama back to the colonial and missionary context. This period was characterised by a process of acculturation which implied, on the one hand, an attempt to assert control (in terms of censorship or even eradication) over local performative arts, in primis the *ngoma*, performances relating to the most important rites in the social life of East African communities, and, on the other hand, the introduction of (British) drama into East Africa, together with the building of theatres. At this time, the first Swahili-language written plays were composed, by Graham Hyslop, who became the British music and drama officer in colonial Kenya in 1956, and by his Kenyan pupils, Henri Kuria and Gerishon Ngugi. The second part of this section, called "Theatre and independence" (*Teatro e indipendenza*), is in turn split into two sub-divisions, namely "Development of drama in independent Kenya" (*Sviluppo del teatro*

¹ <https://www.openstarts.units.it/handle/10077/29416> (last access on 25/05/2020).

² For example, *Nirudi kwangu* ("Coming back to myself"), staged at the Araldo theatre in Turin on the 19th June 2012 by the students of Swahili Language and Culture of the Università degli Studi di Torino under the direction of their lecturer Acquaviva, with the collaboration of: Università degli Studi di Torino, Centro Piemontese di Studi Africani and Comitato Collaborazione Medica. <http://musica.istruzioneepiemonte.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Swahili-al-teatro-Araldo.pdf> (last access on 25/05/2020).

nel Kenya indipendente) and “Tanzania: the re-adapted tradition” (*Tanzania: la tradizione ri-adattata*). The first of these outlines the growth of Swahili drama in post-independence Kenya; plays which mainly deal with social, family and ethical conflicts, especially in an urban context, while also handling political themes. Since the Arap Moi era, Kenyan authors, such as Khaemba Ongeti, Kimani Njogu, Kyallo Wamitila, have increasingly denounced the corruption, avidity and authoritarianism of African leadership in disguised, symbolic forms, often by drawing upon imagery and devices from the oral tradition. The second sub-division focuses on post-independence Tanganyika and Zanzibar, which formed the United Republic of Tanzania after the Zanzibar Revolution, under the leadership of Julius Nyerere and Abedi Karume. This context was greatly influenced by the ideology of Nyerere, who considered the Swahili language to be a fundamental medium for the project of *ujamaa* (African socialism) and the building of a Tanzanian national identity. Nyerere’s government promoted the development and re-evaluation of local performative arts, such as *ngoma* and *ngonjera* (dialogued and dramatised poetry), which were used for political divulgation (in Swahili) during public and school events. The same happened to the *vichekesho* (comic sketches), which developed in colonial times. As remarked upon by Acquaviva, these genres were also often re-adapted by Swahili playwrights, such as Ari Katini Mwachofi, Penina Muhando, Farouk Topan and many others.

The second section, “The myth of ‘resistence’” (*Il mito della ‘resistenza’*), is articulated in four parts: “Myth – Revolution – Drama” (*Mito – Rivoluzione – Dramma*), “The myth of unity in Kinjeketile and Mkwawa wa Uhehe” (*Il mito dell’unità in Kinjeketile e Mkwawa wa Uhehe*), “The tragedy of resistance in Kenya” (*Il drama della resistenza in Kenya*), and “Not only heroes: the dramatic figure of the female combatant” (*Non solo eroi: la figura drammatica della combattente*). In the first part, the author underlines how the relationship between literature, history and ‘revolution,’ in other words writers’ commitment to social change, is particular vivid in drama, due to its double, written and performative, nature, and was therefore chosen by many East African authors in order to artistically recreate individual and collective memories of the liberation movements for the audience. In the second part, Acquaviva provides a detailed analysis of two plays based on historical figures who led anticolonial struggles, namely *Kinjeketile* by Ebrahim Hussein (1969), about Kinjeketile Ngwale, the diviner who became a leader in the Maji Maji war, the first cross-ethnic rising by the peoples of southern Tanganyika against the Germans colonialists (1905-1907), and *Mkwawa wa Uhehe* (1979) by Mugyabuso Mulokozi, about Chief Mkwawa, who led the Hehe resistance against the Germans (1891-1898). *Kinjeketile* and *Mkwawa* are both presented as forerunners of the independence movements and nation building, as tragic, misunderstood characters who convey a sense of unity conceived of in terms of inter-ethnic dialogue and, especially in *Kinjeketile*, sustained by critical thinking (as exemplified by *Kinjeketile*’s doubts after

his own prophecy). In the third part, the focus is on Kenyan Swahili historical plays, the topics of which range from the old Mombasa under Portuguese rule, in Rocha Chimerah's *Mnara wawaka moto* ("The burning minaret," 1998), to the memory of recent inter-ethnic violence in *Maua kwenye jua la asubuhi* ("Flowers in the morning sun," 2004) by Kithaka wa Mberia. A central theme, which has inspired many Kenyan literary works (the most well-known of which are those by Ngugi wa Thiong'o), is the anticolonial resistance of the so-called 'Mau Mau' fighters (and the contemporary betrayal of their ideals of freedom and equity), in such plays as Farouk Muslim and Said Mzee's *Mkuki wa moto* ("The burning spear," 1980) and Njiru Kimunyi's *Upotovu* ("Decadence," 2000). The final part of the second section analyses how some Swahili playwrights have represented the great contribution made by women to East African liberation movements, both as fighters and/or supporters (of money, food, guns), by depicting courageous female heroes, such as Mtage in Mulokozi's *Mukwawa wa Uhehe* and Tsitsi in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Tone la mwisho* ("The last drop," 1981), a work set in Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe) during the liberation struggle against the regime of Ian Smith.

The third section, "Itineraries in theatre" (*Percorsi teatrali*), is divided into two parts, i.e. "Women's writing and popular theatre" (*Scrittura femminile e teatro popolare*), and "Mobile trajectories: Ebrahim Hussein" (*Traiettorie mobili: Ebrahim Hussein*). In the first part, Acquaviva focuses on the emergence of a number of East African women playwrights and activists, such as Angelina Chogo Wapakabulo, Amandina Lihamba, Ari Katini Mwachofi and Penina Muhando, who conceive of their works as a means of popular mobilisation and social development, with special attention to the condition of women, by promoting their rights while recognising the necessary process of social negotiation between tradition and modernity, often within the multifaceted female world. Moreover, their *engagé* theatre, frequently meant to be staged in local, sometimes rural, communities during social campaigns (on education, health etc.), often draws upon ethnic repertoires by creatively incorporating elements of the oral tradition (often defamiliarised *à la Brecht*), such as songs, *ngoma* dances, the narrator figure (*mtambaji*) etc. in order to enhance communication with the audience, especially in the works by Penina Muhando and Amandina Lihamba. The second and final part of this section is devoted to Ebrahim Hussein, born in Kilwa in 1943, and among the most famous Swahili playwrights, not least due to his translating *Kinjeketile* into English (1970), and its then being performed at the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Lagos 1977) and included in many reference works on African theatre. The author presents a multifaceted reading of Hussein's works, dwelling on selected long excerpts from the texts (in both the original language and translation). Her analysis includes and moves beyond the common socio-political interpretation, which partially overshadows the complex language, imagery and symbolism of Hussein's works. Acquaviva identifies in the concepts of 'time' and 'doubt' the generative

topoi of Hussein's writing of both drama and poetry, two genres that he has practised separately and even mixed in his most experimental plays, namely *Jogoo kijijini* and *Ngao ya jadi* ("The village rooster," "The ancestors' shield;" 1976).

To conclude, on account of its well documented historical overview and analytical contents, enriched by the two (bibliographical and terminological) appendices, this book represents a valuable Italian-language resource for both students of Swahili language and literature and scholars investigating modern Swahili drama.

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