

*NGANO*

**THE JOURNAL OF EASTERN AFRICAN  
ORAL LITERATURE**

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**Eastern African Oral Literatures  
Permeations into Global Literatures**

**Number 3, June 2025**

A Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) Publication  
in Conjunction with  
The University of Nairobi & Moi University

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The Department of Literature  
University of Nairobi and Moi University, Kenya

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Introduction  
Materials and methods (if any)  
Discussions  
Conclusion/Recommendations  
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## **BACKGROUND**

The Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) is a professional association of writers, researchers and scholars in Kenyan universities and oral artists from various communities in Kenya. The basic interest of KOLA members is to advance the study of orality and oral literature as a means of community appraisal. This is achieved through research, publications, workshops and conferences, and performances. KOLA has been in existence since 1986.

The vision of the KOLA is grounded on the understanding that today's reality has its genesis in the ancient wisdom of the people. For people to understand themselves in the rapidly modernizing environment, they have to appreciate, nurture and apply the positive stream of their culture as revealed through their oral tradition-narratives, songs, dances, proverbs, and artefacts. KOLA strives to enhance the preservation of oral literature as a response to the UNESCO objective of revitalizing intangible heritage.

The organization has a membership of over two hundred researchers and scholars from the University of Nairobi, Moi University, Egerton University, Maseno University, Kenyatta University, Masinde Muliro University, Kibabii University, Kabarak University, Universitet Gent, Laikipia University, Maasai Mara University, Bomet University, University of Eldoret, St. Olaf College Northfield, Earlham College Richmond, Koitaleel Samoei University College, University of Free State, Bishop Stuart University, United States International University, Muhimbili University, Africa Nazarene University, University of Johannesburg, Chuka University, Kisii University, University of Bayreuth, Turkana University, Baraton University, Daystar University and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa among others. KOLA equally has over a hundred members who are oral artists from various Kenyan communities. It has experience in hosting international, regional and national conferences and regular workshops focusing on oral literature, culture, research and scholarship.

## FOREWORD

This issue, which captures “African Oral Literatures Permeations into Global Oral Literatures”, has thirteen well-researched papers by both seasoned researchers and educators, and emerging graduate students and doctoral researchers. Most of the papers were originally presented in the December 2023 Annual KOLA Conference in Diani, Mombasa, which brought together senior researchers and their students, and generated extremely explosive debates. These extended discussions had detailed input on how each author could improve their research paper, and they were subsequently incorporated before they were submitted for consideration for publication. A panel of editors then combed through the submitted articles and selected sixteen, which were sent to various reviewers in round one double blind review. When the reports trickled in, two articles had been rejected, leaving fourteen that were sent for further revision to the authors.

After the authors had revised and resubmitted, the fourteen articles were disbursed for the second round of double blind review. While the thirteen that appear in this volume sailed smoothly through round two, one author had not sufficiently worked on the reviewer’s recommendations and the paper was rejected at this stage. Two of the papers are rendered in the Swahili language, not only in recognition of its dominant usage in the Eastern African region, but also as an affirmation of the fact that it has become a recognized global language, especially in the academy. This was a step that should have been taken in the earlier editions of *Ngano*, but there was a dearth of Swahili editors who only became available towards the end of 2022. It is our hope to see an increase in the number of articles in Swahili in our future editions, since much of the oral literature in this region is rendered either in local languages or in Swahili, rarely in English.

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## EDITORIAL

# Eastern African Oral Literatures Permeations into Global Literatures

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## INTRODUCTION

Between late November and early December 2023, a group of oral literature scholars and their postgraduate students met under the aegis of the Kenya Oral Literature Association's Annual Conference in Diani, Mombasa, to delve into the broad theme: 'African Oral Literatures: Resilience, Permutations and Permeations into Global Literatures'. The cascaded subthemes ranged from 'Comparisons, Convergences, Divergences and Confluences of Oral Cultures', through 'Decoloniality, Histories, and Emerging Genres' to 'Research Centres of Excellence and Resources in Eastern African Oral Literatures.' This was informed by the fact that African Oral Traditions have persisted alongside written and other oral literatures of the world. African Oralities from North, South, West, and South of Africa have contributed richly to the Literatures of the world and have exhibited similarities with the oralities of the Asian, Americas, Europe and Indian regions within diffusions approaches. African Oral Literature has benefited from a number of theories such as eco-criticism, ethno-poetics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism among other theories, originating principally from Anthropological, Sociological, Cultural, Linguistic and Literary disciplines. Major approaches like ethnography and multi-disciplinary practices have influenced research in African oral literatures with varying results. As the world evolves, the place and relevance of African oral literatures in contemporary society is still a vibrant scholarly debate. Further, globalization, cross-cultural communication and transport and reconfiguration discourses have afforded African oral literatures the opportunities to engage with world oral literatures.

## A BRIEF ON THE ARTICLES

Felix Ayioki Orina, Joseph Juma Musungu and Jairus Omuteche, in their incisive article, 'Postcoloniality and Criticism in Orature: A Globalectic Reading of Three Oral Poems,' examine how theoretical approaches grounded in postcoloniality could help enrich criticism in orature. Adopting a cosmopolitan/globalectic framework, their study focuses on how contemporary approaches in interaction with traditional styles could replenish both content and insights in orature by espousing a syncretic approach that avoids a discontinuous and biased engagement with broad theory and criticism. It selects three songs, 'The Elder That Can't Sing,' 'Give me a Hoe' and 'The Moon,' and subjects them to formalist and postcolonial theoretical dissection. This enables them to measure the literariness of verbal art within the high standards of all literatures, such as expression of emotions through elevated language, evocation of listeners' emotions and expression of thought in a moving manner. To this end they not only amplify the potency of verbal art, but also successfully demonstrate its union with universal (written) art and its ideals, by paying equal attention to all genres without prejudice or preconceived notions. Their study further identifies translation and advances in ICT as some of the methods that help globalise the study of spoken art—hence cyberture, cyberorality, techno-orality and technauriture which demonstrate its dynamic and resilient nature. Drawing

from the ideas of comparativity, the notions of exchange, interconnectedness and interpretations among cultures, translation as the language of languages and the idea of riches of poor theory, the study concludes that globalectic approaches embraces open mind sets and abhors discontinuity, bias and discrimination by treating culture as a conglomerate of both universal and unique features.

In ‘The Folktale and Contemporary Theory: Psychoanalytic Reading of Three Borana Oral Narratives,’ Fugich Wako deploys the psychoanalytic theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud to analyse three Borana folktales namely ‘Chulle and Her Family,’ ‘The Girl and The Chewing Stick,’ and ‘The Girl and The Ogre’ all collected from Sololo in Northern Kenya. The oral narratives are explored as manifestations of the cultural psyche and collective unconscious, revealing complex themes surrounding incestuous desires, gender dynamics, societal taboos, and the navigation of cultural norms. The analysis thus demonstrates the potential richness of applying the psychoanalytic approach to interpreting African oral narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of the profound truths about human nature, cultural values, and collective experience encoded deep within them. In all the three folktales, the Borana community confronts the deeply rooted fears surrounding female sexuality, the ever present threat of male aggression, and the complexities of family dynamics and power structures within patriarchal societies. In essence, the symbolic representations and psychoanalytic underpinnings present in these narratives offer profound insights into the cultural psyche and collective unconscious of the Borana society. They shed light on the intricate interplay between individual desires, societal expectations, and the symbolic language used to give voice to these often suppressed or taboo subjects—which offer appropriate healing to the society on the contentious subjects of incest, inappropriate desires of relatives, rape, forced marriages, premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies—which remain perennial problems in the society.

Jacinta Akinyi Muyuku and Evans Nyongesa Odutsa in their article, ‘Cultural Creative Dances and Environmental Consciousness in Kenya,’ sample five creative dances performed over a five-year period at the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama and Film Festivals to determine how the environment defines the structural scope of the dances by shaping song, movement, sound and colour, thereby being a representation of different segments of setting within the environment and, further demonstrate that these performances have both entertainment and educative value. These cultural creative dances showcase a link between the human body and the environment, a form of expression of our appreciation of the environment, a means for spreading ecological consciousness, connectivity and synthesis. For this reason, the government needs to adopt a policy of listening to, and cooperating with, the local communities as espoused in the creative dances to engage in home-based solutions to environmental challenges which cannot simply be solved by brute military force and enforced subjugation. The study argues that as an art form, the script of the cultural creative dance lends itself for encoding content in environmental conservation, achieved through features of plot, setting, character and characterisation, themes, language use, song, movement and staging – which are in turn affected by participants—script writers, choreographers, cast, audiences and more importantly, the adjudicators.

‘Moving Texts: Popular Inscriptions/Slogans in *Matatus* as Protest Discourse,’ is Sammy Thuita Maina’s paper in which he investigates *matatu* slogans (sayings) as a new frontier for protest discourse, replacing mainstream oral literature genres—songs, narratives, proverbs, riddles—that were used to undermine colonialism and neo-colonial governments and to pass crucial resistance messages. Deploying Critical Discourse Analysis and the Speech Act Theory, the study explores how the *matatu* sector has played a key role in Kenya’s biggest political battles, including the struggle for multi-parties and the economic reforms of the late 1990’s, using 150 sampled *matatu* sticker slogans from Nakuru and Eldoret cities. It further explores

the history, arching themes, and language of the protest to see how it has transitioned over the years from violent rallies and rough music to witty and satirical texts in stickers stuck inside and outside bodies of *matatus*. The paper argues that exploring new orature forms in a similar light can expose how protest discourse is adapting to the rapidly evolving realities of the continent. It designates *matatu* slogans as muted but powerful literary tools that the *matatu* man—an often disregarded member of the society—uses to self-identify, negotiate power dynamics and inspire true change. The study also presumes that though a consumer of slogans may remain assimilated to the imposed order, he or she develops a new set of rules that govern his or her actions, well hidden from the established order. Using Norman Fairclough's (2003) model of critical discourse analysis, the study further investigates how and why members of the *matatu* subculture manufacture textual acts of dissent, the relationship that exists between these texts and the wider social and political rhetoric, and how the power relations negotiated through *matatu* discourse influence the creation of *matatu* protest slogans, and positions members of the *matatu* subculture against the political class, the wealthy, law enforcement officers, and other members of the society in general. In essence, the paper concludes that through the use of symbolism, allusion, metaphors and other literary devices, the moving text alters imposed order, and further camouflages it through the use of Sheng—a coded language only understood among the low class urban youth. Thus the study reaches the conclusion that *matatu* slogans—moving texts—are a rich source of Kenyan protest discourse and an ideal space within which resistance is as alive today as it was during the fight for independence several decades ago.

Christine Namayi and Catherine Laura Mamuli, in 'Beyond Laughter: An Analysis of Selected Bukusu Stand-up TikTok Performances,' draw upon the general theory of verbal humour to analyse selected Stand-up comic performances of two Kenyan artists on TikTok, Chesoli and Choffuri. Their study delves into the conversational techniques employed by the comedians, and the paralinguistic elements of their performances by focussing on their utilisation of music, symbolism, caricature, subtle irony and improvisation, along with the interactive dynamics between performers and audiences. The study further engages the concept of entextualization to dissect the underlying layers of comedic expression, to unveil the profound societal role played by stand-up comedy, transcending its perception as mere entertainment to emerge as a significant cultural phenomenon. Central to the essence of stand-up comedy is the art of storytelling, often imbued with personal anecdotes, keen observations, and witty commentary on contemporary issues, which mark it as a nuanced reflection of society's collective consciousness, offering both catharsis and commentary on the human condition. Also explored is the profound psychological effects of laughter, noting its ability to trigger muscular activity, enhance cardiovascular function, and stimulate the release of endorphins in the brain. Ultimately stand-up comedy emerges as a vehicle for bridging divides and initiating meaningful dialogue on sensitive and challenging topics, thereby lowering the threshold for important discussions between and within social groups.

In 'Form and Content in Spoken Word Poetry in Digital Spaces: A Case Study of Performances by Thony Voks,' Beatrice Grace Munala investigates the form and content of contemporary spoken word poetry in digital spaces. Combining the theories of Intertextuality and Hyperreality, the study demonstrates that spoken word poetry is a form that is made up of 'other literary' in literature. The paper analyses how the artist Thony Voks uses narratives, short forms, songs, wordplay, historical and Biblical allusions, background music and code switching not only to achieve meaning and rhythm, but also to entertain and educate his audience. With the availability of digital spaces such as YouTube, 'liveness' now involves technology mediated co-presence and the feeling of always being connected to each other, resulting in immediacy and intimacy being achieved and enabling the performance to transcend

into the realm of hyper-reality. The poet also uses external digital images, background music, props and backdrops, and interacts with and also directly receives comments from the 'live' audience, which then further shapes the direction of his performance, since he comes to know their immediate needs to be addressed. In this context the poet also gets an opportunity for self-criticism and for criticism of fellow artists in the industry who fail to live up to the expected moral standards of societal poets.

Florence Muteheli Anyonje, in her paper 'Nabong'o Cultural Centre: A Heritage of the Wanga Kingdom in Kakamega County, Kenya,' uses *Eshiembekho* (Nabong'o Cultural Centre) to highlight the rich cultural heritage of the Wanga in order to create local and international awareness so that researchers, students, tourists among others can all learn Wanga Kingdom's history by carrying out research through participant observation, interviews, document analysis and archival studies. The paper demonstrates the important contribution of such cultural centres to oral literature, since here we find a rich oral history of the Wanga Kingdom: How one of the sons of the Buganda King in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Kimenye, fled from his father's kingdom because of kingship rivalry, and travelled all the way to Tirikiland in Kenya. Here he settled incognito as a herdsman, but he had his Royal Bangle with him. One day, one of his wives saw him dutifully cleaning the Royal Bangle and informed the others. An investigation was launched which confirmed the bangle was indeed genuine and it belonged to him. The Tiriki apologised for 'enslaving' a King, gave him a vast piece of land in compensation, and allowed him to establish his kingdom. The richness of the cultural centre cannot be gainsaid—it is a mausoleum for Wanga kings since the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, a tourist attraction site, a research and education hub, a historical monument, an entertainment place—and above all a traditional food and drink resort. More importantly, it is a repository of Wanga oral literature—folktales, songs, proverbs, riddles and other genres and subgenres—which are both recorded and also available among the living people of the area, passed on from generation to generation.

In 'An Ecofeminist Reading of Egara Kabaji's "The Blacksmith, His Pregnant Wife and the Ogre," Catherine Nyawira Mwai focuses on this YouTube narrative rendition of a popular Kamba folktale 'The Ogre and The Blacksmith,' to explore representations of feminine subjugation in the natural world through the lenses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. She examines ways in which the narrative represents the relationship between woman and the environment, and how this connection reflects the domineering patriarchal structures in African landscapes. The study further infers that a fight against environmental injustices and repressive patriarchal systems would offer a solution to the woman's problem, and acknowledges the pivotal role that man must play in order for this to be achieved. In the narrative, the man travels deep into the forest to engage in blacksmithing and earn sustenance for his family, leaving his pregnant wife home, where she forges a symbiotic relationship with a dove and an ogre, both of whom sustain her in her moments of need. The study presumes a symbolic link between the reproductive capacities of woman and nature, both of which are feminised in their shared ability to nurture and give life. But both the man and the (male) ogre embody patriarchal traits that are not only exploitative toward nature but also toward woman, thereby stripping both of their natural beauty and vitality. That the story ends with the blacksmith abandoning his profession, killing the ogre and reuniting with his family, the study concludes, is a transformation that reflects the ecofeminist call for man to reject patriarchal dominance, work alongside woman, and participate in healing ecological and social injustices, ultimately advocating for a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment.

Evans Nyongesa Odutsa in his paper 'Elements of Traditional African Theatre in Contemporary African Cultural Performances,' evaluates traditional African theatrical elements evident in contemporary African cultural performances in a bid to demonstrate that elements of both ancient and modern African theatre existed prior to the introduction of

Western drama in the continent. The study deploys a combination of Performance and Theatre Semiotics theories, and also relies on postulations of Solomon Obidah Yamma and Ruth Finnegan on the relationship between orature and theatre in Africa. It also heavily relies on qualitative data obtained through participant observation and textual analysis of selected cultural performances, and deploys descriptive and analytical methods to underline important practical, philosophical, aesthetic and psychological considerations in determining the artistic quality of traditional African performances. The study finds that traditional African theatre is rooted in secular and sacred rites that exist in the form of festivals, myths/legends, narratives and other artistic pieces which Africans created for themselves. In essence, the study contributes to the curation and preservation of indigenous theatrical elements evident in traditional African performances as a bedrock of modern African theatre, and enriches discourses on the place and the role of traditional African indigenous literary performances.

Benon B. Mukundane, Magdalene N. Wafula and Nathat O. Ogechi writing in the Swahili language in 'Narrative Action of Ankole Folktales: The Speech Act and Functionalist Perspectives,' investigates the claim that Ankole folktales in Uganda are facing extinction due to advances in Western education, which has no support policies for Banyankole oral art. Traditionally, narration of folktales among the Banyankole was an opportunity and a tool that enabled society members to interact and develop a sense of unity and identity as members of the same society with similar culture and values. Using face to face interviews and participant observation, the paper advances the view that indeed the Western education system that is in place does not accommodate or develop Banyankole folktales – it is designed to inculcate Western values rather than Ankole oral traditions. The researcher then seeks to discover ways in which Western Education can be used to uphold the virtue of narrating Banyankole folktales and therefore preserve them for generations to come. The research is therefore guided by the Functionalism Theory as advanced by Malinowski (1922) and improved by Mesthrie, et al (2004), where survival of oral art is pegged on its continued relevance to the society that practices it. The researchers hopes that the proposed strategies of using Western Education to promote Ankole folktales and keep them for the generations to come will be taken up and implemented by the relevant policy advocacy bodies.

Juma Job Nyongesa, also writing in Swahili in 'Paradox as the Stylistic Device in Less Wanyika and Simba Wanyika Songs,' foregrounds the fact that of all the animal species, only human beings have the distinct ability of dancing as a way of entertainment and education. Using the examples of the Less Wanyika and Simba Wanyika Rhumba bands, the study focuses on how paradoxical statements are widely applied in the songs played by these artists. The songs present normal and day to day happenings in a paradoxical way – in direct imitation of the dilemmas we face on a daily basis. That every given situation in life presents several possibilities, sometimes two strong contesting options, from which we must choose the action to take or the path to follow. Whatever choice we make impacts either positively or negatively on our immediate and future lives, and we have no way of rewinding time to make a different choice. Therefore, through their sampled songs, the study shows how the masses are educated on how to choose wisely whenever confronted with an ambiguous situation. The songs are done in Rhumba, a form widely loved in the Eastern African region, Africa in general and several areas around the world. The entertainment and educational impact both locally and internationally of the two bands can thus not be underrated.

Kimingichi Juma Wabende, in 'Defining Oneself in the Eyes of the Other: Identity and Othering in Bukusu Oral Literature,' examines how the Bukusu community, through its oral literature, has defined and located itself through encounters with other communities around and within them. The article explores images and symbols of the 'other' and the community's constructions of the resistance strategies to deal with the encounters. Applying New Historicist

tenets, the article treats the past as a form of textualized representation where myth assumes its own reality as an ideology guiding future action. The article attempts to foreground the subaltern history – the history of the losers, of the voiceless and the powerless – as captured in orality and as opposed to the recorded official historical records. It analyses the fears and admiration the Bukusu’s have for their neighbours, their ambivalent attitude that condemns and praises them in equal measure, perhaps in recognition of the symbiotic relationship that they have with them in spite of significant differences in their socio-cultural practices. At a deeper level it is also a pointer to the shifting nature of the underdog, where it becomes a relational and moving target, changing positions as a weak community encounters a weaker one and becomes dominant, and a strong community encounters a stronger one and assumes the position of the underdog. Societies are ever dynamic, with exchange of ideas, adaptations and adoptions of better rival community’s practices, which not only gives credence to diffusion theories, but also affirms the inter-dependence of human communities. The study’s findings reveal that the inherent contradictions in different oral genres dealing with the same community are a manifestation of the overt and covert tensions of interacting with neighbours, who both need each other but must be cautious of how quickly they can turn against one another, sometimes permanently.

In the last article, ‘Oralising the Written Word in the Audio-book: Technology Mediated Transformations of the Narrative Space,’ Rose Akinyi Opondo analyses the effects that digitisation of written texts has had in the distinctions between the reception of the oral and the chirographic, whereby oral narratives are perceived aurally while written texts are experienced by both visual and tactile senses. The paper brings the theoretical perspectives on listening into a reconfigured discourse within sociological Symbolic Interactionism by George Mead and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic human development to tease out the implications of the audio-book. The audio-book is thus a return to the uncanny familiarity of oral presentations that seem to have both universal and basic human appeal. She concludes that the reassertion of the oral narrator in the audio-book does not return the written text into an oral text in the traditional sense, but reconfigures it through secondary orality, where the narrator lends his/her voice to both the author and the narrative voice—presenting a one-dimensional third interpreter—into the reception of the text in a simulacrum that presents an ecclesiastical return to orality.

## CONCLUSION

These papers have covered a wide range of topics within African oral literature studies, foregrounding the interconnectedness of poetry/song, spoken word, myths, folktales, festivals and cultural centres, stand-up comedy, slogans and audio-books among others, not only within Africa, but all over the world. Noting that all contributors are Kenyan scholars, we invite scholars from other African regions for our next issue. We therefore aim to expand beyond the Eastern Africa and receive submissions from Western, Northern, Central and Southern African regions. Beyond English, we are also accepting papers written in Swahili or French, as we expand our horizons to serve more scholars within and without the continent. This will further reflect African oral literatures permeations into global literatures, thereby reflecting the reality of an emergent intercultural global village.