

ELENA ZUBKOVA BERTONCINI, "OUTLINE OF SWAHILI LITERATURE - PROSE FICTION AND DRAMA."

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Elena Bertoncini (Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli) has emerged in recent years as one of the most prominent scholars on written Swahili literature. She has translated a collection of poems by the great Tanzanian poet Kezilahabi into Italian, and has written numerous articles on literary stylistics and thematic analysis. This reputation of in-depth and fine scholarly work will no doubt be fortified by the publication of her "Outline of Swahili literature".

The book contains four chapters and two appendices. In chapter 1, Bertoncini presents a survey of literature in the pre-colonial era. In this chapter, she adequately highlights the institutional incentives taken for the promotion and development of literary activities in East-Africa, and the way in which various forms of competition allowed prominent authors to emerge. The major figure in this period, as adequately and extensively noted by Bertoncini, was Shaaban Robert.

Chapter 2 concentrates on contemporary prose fiction. Here, Bertoncini uses a regional distinction, treating Zanzibari, Kenyan and Tanzanian-mainland writers separately. Given the considerable thematic and (foremost) stylistic differences that appear between writers from the various parts of the East African Swahili-speaking community, this subdivision is appropriate, and allows for a search for trends and major themes which develops along particular sociohistorical lines. Bertoncini gives adequate space to discussions on the emergence and development of new genres such as epistolar novels and short stories/essays.

Chapter 3 treats contemporary Swahili drama along the same regional subdivisions as those used in chapter 2. Given the novelty of theatre as a literary genre, Bertoncini's discussion is substantially shorter than the one on prose fiction. In her conclusions (chapter 4), Bertoncini briefly points to some of the leading figures in Swahili prose. Not surprisingly, all the ones mentioned here are Tanzanians : Shaaban Robert, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Mohamed Suleiman and Said Ahmed Mohamed as novelists, and Ebrahim Hussein and Penina Muhando as playwrights. Bertoncini's personal preference for linguistic skills (including the capacity to add some "couleur locale" to the narrative by means of idiomatic expressions) as well as her conviction that "Kenyan Swahili writing is in fact relatively less prolific and its impact on the society is less marked" (p. 188) may account for this selection.

Throughout the chapters, Bertoncini makes ample usage of extracts from prominent works, each time with an English translation added. This not only makes reading more informative, but it also adds to the overall documentary value of the book. This documentary purpose is demonstrated by the two spacious appendices added to the expository chapters. Appendix one gives a tentative list of contemporary authors (both prose fiction and drama), while appendix two provides a list of novels, collections of short stories and plays. Bertoncini provides the reader with a marvelous instrument which is, in many ways, a shortcut to learning about Swahili contemporary literary production.

The book has very few shortcomings. The only fundamental critique one could voice about the conception of the book is the fact that Bertoncini has concentrated on "serious" literature, bypassing the massive amount of (sometimes highly readable and mostly terrifically interesting) pulp literature. Some Tanzanian scholars view the emergence of pulp literature as the most important literary evolution of the late 'eighties. But this is a matter of preference, selection of a field of research, and probably feasibility as well (she doesn't treat poetry either). The book as it stands is a fine piece of work. One negative side-remark that could be made, is the price of the book. When purchased through a bookseller, the book becomes outrageously expensive -- a forbidding price for students' purses. This is the more deplorable since this book could be a fantastic instrument for Swahili students, students of general and comparative literature and their likes.

In short, Bertoncini's "Outline of Swahili literature" is a marvelous book which provides the best introduction to contemporary Swahili literature so far. It should become an indispensable instrument for everyone interested in African and other literatures.

Review by :

J. BLOMMAERT
Seminar of Swahili
Rozier 44
9000 Ghent