

Intellectual biographies as an entry point for literary and epistemological analysis in African studies

An introduction

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This volume proposes an investigation and a re-examination of intellectual biographies, as both a genre and a methodology, in African studies. This call was inspired by my research on *Philosophy and Community in William Mkufya's Swahili Novels*,¹ focused on the homonymous Tanzanian intellectual, and engaged in examining methodologies to conduct research in both African philosophy and Afrophone literature studies.

As part of this research project, I co-organised, in collaboration with Flavia Aiello, an international conference on “The Intellectual Biography as an Entry Point for Literary and Epistemological Analysis International Conference,” which was held at University of Naples L'Orientale on the 10th and 11th of April 2024.²

International scholars from Europe and East Africa engaged from different multi and interdisciplinary perspectives with the biographical approach as a methodological entry point for literary and philosophical discussions. Indeed, scholars, intellectuals and researchers in conversation engaged with both well-known intellectuals, political figures, public personas and little-known intellectuals from East Africa comparing them both diachronically and synchronically. The thought-provoking discussions led in different ways of interpreting biographical criticism and even beyond it, thus broadening the horizon of African studies.

Subsequently, a further endeavour to expand the research has emerged: publishing an edited volume that appeals to reflect on the life, the thought and the artistic productions of African intellectuals.

This volume proposes to reflect on research focused on intellectual biographies and autobiographies by riding the wave of ‘conceptual decolonization’ (Wiredu 1995; 1998; 2002)

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² See also: The University of Naples L'Orientale events: <https://www.unior.it/it/eventi/convegno-intellectual-biography-entry-point-literary-and-epistemological-analysis>; Association for African Studies in Italy ASAI events: <https://www.asiafrica.org/international-conference-the-intellectual-biography-as-an-entry-point-for-literary-and-epistemological-analysis-10-11-aprile-2024-universita-di-napoli-lorientale/>

movements led by “Epistemologies of the South” (Santos 2014) and by bearing in mind the need to expand and compare methodologies to conduct research in both African philosophy and Afrophone literatures studies. Indeed, researching biographies of African literary figures or ‘sages’ (Oruka 1990) endowed with local knowledge and wisdom (Kresse 2007; 2009) triggers multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies that interlink history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literary critique and philosophy.

The study of the life and the thoughts of an intellectual, a philosopher or a writer, seems to be a privileged entry point to connect the historical and political events lived by the author with not only literary and philosophical streams, but also local epistemologies. This is also an empirical method to further explore interconnections between ethnographies and a deeper reading of texts and intertexts (Barber 2007: 4-5).

Having been ascertained not only the role of African philosophy as academic discipline, but also of literature in African languages as media conveying philosophical thoughts (Wiredu 1980; Hountondji 1983; Oruka 1990; Masolo 1994; 2010; Appiah 2004; Kresse 2007; Rettová 2007; Nicolini 2022), investigating intellectual biographies is aimed at expanding both research methodology and literary critique. The concept of intellectual biography, including both biography writing and a ‘biographical approach’ as a methodology, is aimed at investigating the following points: firstly, exploring the potentialities of the biographical approach as a privileged epistemological entry point to conduct both literary and philosophical analysis. Particularly, focusing on an insightful ‘point of view’ to quote the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1980: 115-116), who was a representative of postcolonial African philosophy, with the objective to ‘decolonise the mind’ (Thiong’o 1986) and the literary genre.

Secondly, rethinking the role of biography writing, which means moving beyond the historical archives, telling the life and deeds of well-known figures, so as to engage in ethnography, highlighting life and thoughts of little-known sages. This also means to pursue Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy project, whose importance has also been stated by recent scholarships on ‘rethinking sagacity’ (see *Rethinking Sage Philosophy*, Kresse and Nyarwath 2023) by engaging with ethnographies including interviews with sages.

Thirdly, introducing biography as a critical approach which can be a new lens to conduct textual analysis by exploring if and how the life and the thoughts of an intellectual or sage are interlaced into their fiction. This analysis can also be of help to determine a peculiar literary stream and historical period, from a bottom-up perspective.

In other words, the biographical approach analyses literature as an ethno-philosophical ontology connecting *bios* (life and thought) with *graphia* (fictional works) to sift epistemologies and philosophies

from the text. The bio approach is an entry point to both conduct textual analysis, revealing further potentials of fictional genres written in African languages, and extend methodology to investigate Afrophone philosophies.

The contributions in the present volume explore different examples of biographies, autobiographies and ‘biographical critiques’ conveyed by different genres, *e.g.* novels, poetry and digital media. The aim is to explore the following questions: the position of intellectual biography nowadays; the meaning of intellectual biographies ‘in-con-text’ (in context and text simultaneously); the possible achievements that can be obtained through ethnographies aimed to investigate life and thoughts of local individuals from the inside; the possibility for biography writing to become a tool to conduct philosophical and literary investigations from a decolonial point of view; the potentiality of a biographical approach to advance textual analysis; and, exploring risks and pitfalls of engaging with a biographical criticism.

The contributions to this volume are mainly focused on Swahili literature from East Africa. In this regard, ‘biography and autobiography writing in Swahili’ not only contributed to the development of Swahili language (Topan 1997: 299), but it also provided insightful sources into African history (Biersteker 2018: 367). Indeed, the first ethnographies known as *Habari* ‘Chronicles’ represented a valuable historical source about the Swahili coasts and their inhabitants (Topan 1997: 299; Bertoncini *et al.* 2009: 22-30). Later, the *wasifu* ‘biography’ was pioneered by Shaaban Robert through his biography on the Zanzibari *taarab* singer Siti bint Saad (Topan 1997: 300), and he also wrote his *tawasifu* ‘autobiography’ *Maisha Yangu* (‘My life’) and *Baada ya Miaka Hamsini* (‘After Fifty Years,’ Topan 1997: 305; Garnier 2012). Furthermore, the Swahili classic epic poems, *utenzi*, conveyed Muslim biographies in poetic forms expressing the connection between biographies and religion (Topan 1997: 301). Particularly, biography writing expresses ‘identity:’ “This is not surprising, as biography is in essence an exposition of identity and of its reinforcement and adaptation through the life of an individual, community, or people” (Topan 1997: 304).

Not only does this volume aim to sift different literary genres so as to unearth biographical elements infused into the narrative, but also to examine literature through biographical lenses as a way into the hidden messages enclosed in the textual canvas.

Moreover, the analysis of fiction, in certain cases, suggests the presence of ‘biographical intertextuality,’ where not only autobiographical but also biographical elements of historical and political figures can be discovered.

Even though the focus is on Swahili literature, the volume broadens the horizons including plural multimedia genres such as documentary films and digital literature in English from Uganda and Nigeria as well.

Indeed, a further objective of this collection of articles is overcoming boundaries and embracing cultural pluralism. Therefore, the volume is characterised by epistemic pluralism and polyphony. The contributions connect not only East and West Africa, Anglophone and Swahiliphone literature, but also plural media poetry, prose, digital literature and films. Most of the articles display long quotations from the original texts, and particularly, the voices of intellectuals and writers can be read through several quotations from interviews.

In the following paragraphs, the structure of the volume, thematically divided into three sections, and the content of the contributions, which consist of different interdisciplinary and multi-perspective articles, will be outlined.

The first section investigates *Intellectual Biographies and Philosophies, Ethics and Aesthetics*:

D. A. Masolo's *Outline of Shaaban Robert's Idealism*, through an insightful text-based philosophical approach, identifies and interprets Shaaban Robert's political philosophical theories. By mastering the Swahili language and by means of innovative story-telling techniques, Robert's novels are accessible to both intellectuals and a broader audience, while they expose a socio-cultural and political critique of his time. Masolo defines Robert as a 'critical thinker' and unearths from Robert's novels the writer's chosen self-identity defined on a cultural basis. Indeed, Robert's philosophy is based on the importance of individual choices to build up communal virtues. Particularly, Robert's novels identify and reflect on the universality of human nature—*utu*, while conjuring the ideal state and its perfect citizens.

Cristina Nicolini's *William E. Mkufya and his Flowers: An Intellectual Bio-Graphy*, firstly, provides a biographical account on the Tanzanian intellectual's life. Afterwards, the article engages with an analysis of Mkufya's novels divided into three main periods according to his life events. This study demonstrates how William Mkufya's intellectual thought development is a lifelong commitment, which progresses in connection with the stylistic development of his narrative. The literary analysis also explores how Mkufya personally develops the concept of *utu*-humanness through his literary productions.

Irene Brunotti's *Sensing Swahili Aesth-Ethics with and through Mzee Farouk Topan's Wor(l)dings* focuses on Mzee Farouk Topan's 'intellectuality.' At first, it critiques the Western scientific perception of life (bio-) and written works (-graphy) as separated entities. Then, it engages with the Swahili tradition of *wasifu* by embracing the bodily perception sprouting from the onto-epistemologies of Swahili words

and their ‘aesth-ethics,’ which is connected to “utu, humanity and humanness” (Topan 2008: 89). The article leads its readers onto a sensory path, paved by words, by awakening the public's psychophysical stimuli to let them see, hear, touch and feel ‘Swahili wor(l)ds.’

The second section explores the interconnections between *Auto/Biography and Historiography*:

Aldin Mutembei, in his article written in Swahili, *Makutano ya lugha, utamaduni na mabadiliko ya kisiasa Tanzania kupitia tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abeid* (‘The criss-crossing of language, culture and political change in Tanzania through the autobiography of Kaluta Amri Abeid’), reflects on the life and the thought of Kaluta Amri Abeid. This is done through both the autobiography of Abeid and a biography devoted to him by Mathias E. Mnyampala. Amri Abeid, as Robert did, chose his own cultural identity as a ‘Swahili,’ despite of his Congolese origins. Abeid, as a scholar, a poet as well as a religious and political leader, was one of the leading figures of the post-independence period, especially the transition phase from Tanganyika to Tanzania. Mutembei also demonstrates how the study of Abeid’s autobiography reflects not only the Tanzanian history but also the development of Swahili as the language of national identity.

Graziella Acquaviva’s *From Auto/Biography to a Historiography of Post-Colonial Tanzania in Swahili Popular Literature* explores biographical elements in Swahili popular literature called *fasihi pendwa* (lit. ‘beloved literature’). By analysing Kajubi D. Mukajanga’s novels *Mpenzi I-II* (‘Lover I-II,’ 1980s) and Freddy Macha’s collection of short stories *Mpe Maneno Yake* (‘Give him his words,’ 2006) alongside interviews with the authors, Acquaviva highlights autobiographical elements that reflect personal memories contributing to draw a historical biography of postcolonial Tanzania. In these texts, both the autobiographical elements and the historical biography of Tanzania are transposed and mixed into a fictional context.

The third section focuses on *Intellectual Biographies and Philosophies through Digital Writing and Film*:

Benedetta Lanfranchi’s *Stella Nyanzi: A Digital Biography* introduces an original way of interpreting and investigating biographies that she termed “digital biography” by drawing a biographical outline of the Ugandan intellectual and political digital activist Stella Nyanzi. The biographical approach is based on plural media sources *i.e.* Nyanzi’s online texts, Facebook posts and Tweets, and a published collection of poetry in English as well as a personal interview and a short film. By displaying extensive excerpts both from the interviews and Nyanzi’s online poems, Lanfranchi highlights not only Nyanzi’s biographical elements, but also the literary and political impact of her digital writing.

Juul van der Laan's *Intellectual Biography in Film: portraying Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé* introduces documentary filming as a medium to conduct empirical investigation on comparative philosophy through the process of filming life and thought of the Nigerian philosopher Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé. This original study, firstly, engages with the comparison between Western and Yoruba concepts of personhood; then, it illustrates Sophie's concept of "binary complementarity" as an approach to phenomenal reality rather than Western binary oppositions. In conclusion, the article illustrates 'filming' as a way to 'philosophise.'

At the conclusion of this volume's overview, I let readers discover life and philosophical thoughts of African intellectuals as reflected into the biographical portrayals depicted by our contributors.

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