

Cristina Nicolini. 2022. *Clash of Epistemes: Knowledge of HIV/AIDS in Swahili Literary Genres* (“A TrA, Aree di transizione linguistiche e culturali in Africa” 8). Trieste: Trieste University Press. 340 pages. ISBN 978-88-5511-327-4; eISBN 978-88-5511-328-1.

This monograph, available online (open access) from the OpenstarTs1 digital archive, is based on the PhD dissertation in “African Languages and Cultures” by Cristina Nicolini, which she completed at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London. Cristina Nicolini is a young Italian researcher in Swahili studies with a previous excellent curriculum studiorum at the University of Naples “L’Orientale.” The study, which is based on in-depth research conducted during six months of fieldwork, explores the epistemological articulations involved in the representations of HIV/AIDS in Tanzania as expressed in Swahili literature as well as in interviews and discussions with the participants, in light of the current critical debates around Afrophone literatures and philosophies. The volume, with a foreword by Farouk Topan, Professor Emeritus at the Aga Khan University, and one of the major scholars of Swahili literature and culture, consists of seven chapters, a section of appendices and a rich bibliography.

The first chapter gives a comprehensive introduction to Nicolini’s volume, including background data on HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, research objectives and methodology, a thoughtful section on ethical and positionality issues related to fieldwork, and a literature review on the conceptualisations of HIV/AIDS in Africa. This literature review comprises Swahili-language essays and volumes specifically devoted to this topic, such as Mutembei’s study on HIV/AIDS in Swahili literature (*UKIMWI katika Fasihi ya Kiswahili 1982-2006*; University of Dar es Salaam, 2009). The work stems from prior BA and MA fieldwork experiences in Tanzania, during which she carried out research on the HIV/AIDS issue from a literary perspective and where, as a volunteer, she collaborated with HIV-positive women on an HIV/AIDS education project. The present study develops the research further by conducting a thorough stylistic and thematic analysis of Swahili literature dealing with HIV/AIDS, in particular, drama and novels produced by authors from mainland Tanzania, with a view to exploring the potential of this body of literature in articulating knowledge and philosophical reflection. The research methodology has been designed as a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, with interviews, informal conversations, focus group discussions and participation in live performances. All the activities were carried out in Swahili, so as to pay attention to the subjective experiences and

¹ <https://www.openstarts.units.it/handle/10077/33718> (last access on 09/09/2022).

opinions of the research participants, who include Swahili writers, university professors, members of NGOs, members of a theatre group dealing with HIV/AIDS and a healer (we find in appendix 1 the sample of interview questions, in Swahili and in English translation, and in appendix 3 the list of the 30 interviewees).

A vast multilingual and multidisciplinary literature, which draws on literary, anthropological, postcolonial, cultural and philosophical studies, forms the basis of the discussion of the theoretical aspects of the work which is presented in chapter 2 (Epistemology and Literature). This engages with contemporary debates revolving around what De Sousa Santos conceptualises as “Epistemologies from the South,” i.e. the recognition of knowledge systems which are normally obscured by Western mainstream scientific and secular approaches. This chapter, in particular, focusses on African epistemologies, whose historical interactions with Western paradigms and discourses (clashing, negotiation, subversion etc.), starting with colonial “modernity,” has been analysed by, amongst others, V. Mudimbe. This complex scenario is further complicated in areas of Islamic influence on the African continent, such as the Swahili coast, as has been pointed out by scholars such as A.A. Mazrui and K. Kresse. C. Nicolini highlights the potential rich contribution of Afrophone literary studies to research on African philosophies and knowledge systems – building on the works of her supervisor Alena Rettová and other scholars in the field, as offered here through her case studies which are investigated in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 (Encounters between Plural Epistemologies in Swahili Literature on HIV/AIDS: Drama and Performance) concentrates on Swahili drama related to HIV/AIDS, which constitutes an example of the intersection between Swahili literary drama and African Theatre for Development inspired by Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed”, along the lines of Penina Muhando’s significant works. The analysis is devoted in particular to some selected plays: *Kilio Chetu* (“Our Lament,” 1996), written by Aldin Mutembei, *Giza* (“Darkness,” 2004), by Hadija Jilala, *Kilio cha Jeska* (“Jeska’s Cry,” 2004) and *Mwalimu Rose* (“The Teacher Rose,” 2007) by Ambrose Mghanga, *Orodha* (“The List,” 2006) by Steve Reynolds, *Embe Dodo* (“The Small Mango,” 2015) by Dominicus Makukula, and especially *Ushuhuda wa Mifupa* (“The Testimony of the Bones,” 1990), which was the very first play written in Swahili on HIV/AIDS, composed by Ibrahim Ngozi in 1989, six years after HIV first appeared in the Kagera region in 1983. The play was staged in 2019 by students of performing arts at the theatre of the College of Arts at the University of Dar es Salaam. Having attended and recorded the performance, Nicolini, in addition to the close analysis of the original work, also provides a detailed comparison with the 2019 live staging. Chapter 4 (Encounters Between Plural Epistemologies in Swahili Literature on HIV/AIDS: Novels) focusses on the analysis of two Swahili novels, namely Aldin Mutembei’s *Kisiki Kikavu* (“The Dry Stump,” 2005) and Athumani Mauya’s *Firauni* (“The Debauchee,”

2015). As in the preceding third chapter, the works are explored from a thematic and stylistic perspective, with particular attention being paid to characterisation, narrative style, intertextuality (particularly the interweaving with oral genres such as songs, proverbs etc.) and the use of language, with special focus on metaphors and tropes related to HIV/AIDS. All these are elements which articulate the complex polyphony of different, often clashing, conceptualisations of the HIV/AIDS disease in Tanzanian society, from the biomedical interpretation based on Western science to various understandings linked to supernatural entities, either local traditions (such as *uganga* ‘indigenous healing,’ and *uchawi* ‘witchcraft’) or religious beliefs deriving from Islam and Christianity, quite often in syncretic combinations. Nicolini's meticulous interpretative work continues in chapter 5 (William Mkufya's Trilogy: “Diwani ya Maua – The Poetry of Flowers” Part One) and chapter 6 (William Mkufya's Trilogy: “Diwani ya Maua – The Poetry of Flowers” Part Two), which are entirely devoted to an in-depth analysis of the first two published volumes of the trilogy on HIV/AIDS *Diwani ya Maua* (“The Poetry of Flowers”), supported by communications and documents exchanged with the author, William Mkufya. Chapter 5 focuses on the novel *Ua La Faraja* (“The Flower of Consolation,” 2004), while chapter 6 explores *Kuwa Kwa Maua* (“The Existence of Flowers,” 2019). She emphasises how Mkufya dedicates considerable space in his works to philosophical speculations aimed at overcoming not only the situations of stigma and discrimination which affect people with HIV/AIDS, especially women, as depicted in many Swahili works, but also the clashes between different forms of knowledge. By engaging in epistemological discussions and recognising local understandings, as Nicolini puts it in the conclusion (chapter 7), “he creates a kaleidoscopic panorama of co-operating knowledge, by including a miscellany of heterogeneous yet integrated ontologies.” Finally, complementing her pivotal case study, Nicolini presents in Appendix 7 a number of extracts from *Kuwa kwa Maua* (taken from chapter 6) translated by her into English and edited by Mkufya, a challenging endeavour that I hope Nicolini will continue and so complete the translation of the novel.

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