

2005

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Recommended Citation

Strauhs, Doreen, A new day has dawned: The future of anglophone Kenyan literature belongs to Jambazi Fulanis, *Kunapipi*, 27(1), 2005.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss1/12>

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Abstract

Imperial discourse and literary works from the colonial centre, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, nurtured the image of Africa as the 'dark continent' and espoused the idea that its inhabitants are 'inarticulate dirty savages' (Conrad 20). In concordance with the colonial idea of the muted and naïve native, Rudyard Kipling's popular notion of the 'white man's burden' became a synonym for the European imperial mission: the poor 'blacks' of Africa had to be lifted onto the stage of sophistication and civilisation and to be led into the light and blessings of Jesus Christ.

DOREEN STRAUHS

A New Day Has Dawned: The Future of Anglophone Kenyan Literature Belongs to Jambazi Fulanis¹

When your image and who you are is informed by somebody who does not know you, it becomes very difficult to break away from that mental slavery.
(Aghan Odero)

Imperial discourse and literary works from the colonial centre, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, nurtured the image of Africa as the 'dark continent' and espoused the idea that its inhabitants are 'inarticulate dirty savages' (Conrad 20). In concordance with the colonial idea of the muted and naïve native, Rudyard Kipling's popular notion of the 'white man's burden' became a synonym for the European imperial mission: the poor 'blacks' of Africa had to be lifted onto the stage of sophistication and civilisation and to be led into the light and blessings of Jesus Christ.

The first literary piece to reach out from the dark heart of Africa, the novel *Things Fall Apart* by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, finally brought enlightenment in 1958, albeit this time to the Western European world. The native of Africa could speak, and in a socially intelligible English! Ever after things have fallen apart for the Western construction of the 'black' African, and an increasing number of voices from the 'dark' continent have found their place in the literary world and confirmed that English has become one of their natural tools for expression.

In fact, Africa is a 'living laboratory of languages' (Schmied 205) and especially in the metropolitan centres, such as Nairobi, where the linguistic levels mingle and intertwine as speakers code-switch between at least three linguistic dimensions: their local languages, an African lingua franca, such as Kiswahili, and English as an international and pan-African language. In every day communication and creative writing, English is nativised² and blended with various local and national African languages. '[T]here is an inevitable fusion of English and the rest of the languages each looking for accommodation in the phrases and sentences of the other' (Mavia 2005)³ English is no longer just the coloniser's language but in its indigenised varieties it clearly informs parts of African identity in every day life.

In this sense, David Mavia, alias Jambazi Fulani, represents a new generation of metropolitan Kenyan writers who, despite Ngugi wa Thiongo's demand, did not abandon English but, with their amazing novels, short stories and poems, relate to their African cultural and social backgrounds with their multiple linguistic capital very confidently through a variety of transference and code-switching strategies. In Mavia's short story 'Nyof Nyof', English blends in with Kiswahili and Sheng⁵ in a way that reflects the actual linguistic interaction in the vibrating centre of Nairobi and likewise provides evidence for the fact that the africanisation of English with its grammar and lexicology in Kenya is both a natural element of every day speech and a vital mechanism for creative writing. Mavia 'experiments with the ever evolving of language forms in Nairobi and has frustrated the embarrassment of writing in some of the street language [that is, Sheng]' (Mavia 2005). In the new millennium, Kenyan artists have thus started to re-inform their image, that is, to re-create their identity and to break away from colonial mental slavery. The shadow of Ngugianism is fading while a new generation of Jambazi Fulanis is arising and enriching the Kenyan literary landscape anew.

Mavia is a creative mind and a critical thinker. He sees himself as an upcoming writer, a photographer, a poet, a designer, and a lecturer. Most recently he indulged in scriptwriting and film shooting. Mavia 'loves issues that build around culture especially when linked to language, artistic expression and history' (Mavia 2005). Transmedia is his credo and the motivation of fellow Kenyan writers is one of his goals. Born in 1972, 'into the Kenyan bridging generation; this is nine years after the Kenyan independence flag was hoisted' (Mavia 2005), Mavia grew up in Nairobi before attending boarding school upcountry. Rural and urban divides inform his personality; 'so he is a *ruban*' (Mavia 2005). Between 1992 and 1996 he energised the philosophical discourse at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya, where he 'pursued an undergraduate Degree in Education specialising in English and Literature' (Mavia 2005). After Moi University, he permanently relocated to Nairobi.

David Mavia and I became acquainted in the winter months of 2003 while I was undertaking research on my Master Thesis Paper, which I devoted to the linguistic tapestry of Anglophone Kenyan Literature from 1964 to 2004. With his astute sense of languages and broad knowledge of Kenyan literary movements, he provided great insights and criticism. The mutual exchange of ideas has been a unique pleasure — *asante sana*.

NOTES

- ¹ David Mavia offers a translation of the Jambazi Fulanis: 'Sheng as a language is spoken most among the hoodlum folk. They are a gangsta/posse/thugish culture and identifying with them on a name level can tend to be imperative. Jambazi Fulani by direct translation stands for 'Certain Thug'. It is being anonymous yet having a sense of belonging among the Sheng speakers.'

- ² Nativisation is 'the linguistic readjustment a language undergoes when it is used by members of another speech community in distinctive socio-cultural contexts and language contact situations' (Kachru 1992 235).
- ³ Personal email from David Mavia about himself.
- ⁴ Engsh and Sheng are rapidly changing and still unstable Nairobi youth peer languages (cf. Abdulaziz and Osinde 46). As can be drawn from the terms themselves the languages are mixtures of English and Kiswahili: English is the dominating linguistic code in Engsh, whereas Kiswahili constitutes great parts in Sheng.
- ⁵ From the point of linguistics, the way David Mavia blends English with Kiswahili and Sheng can be described as congruent lexicalisation — a linguistic phenomenon which is typical for multilingual settings such as Kenya.

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