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A Comparative Study of Contemporary East and West African Poetry in English

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, in fulfilment of the requirements for award of a degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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ABSTRACT

Modern African poetry in English is a product of a number of literary traditions broadly categorised as either 'indigenous' or 'alien' to Africa. Working on the premise that these vary from one region to another, this study seeks to compare the myriad of poetic influences and traditions as manifested in contemporary East and West African poetry of English expression using a corpus of selected contemporary African poems. The contemporary era, here temporally defined as the post 1980s period, is typified by borrowing across literary genres and traditions to the point where the boundaries of what may be designated as 'indigenous' or 'alien' has become difficult to determine and distinguish. Core to my thesis is what Jan Ramazani (2001) designates as the hybrid muse, which ensures that contemporary poetry or poetic discourses explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that they are defined by their relationship to others, hence regarded as 'epochal continuities' of foundational poetics. The study seeks to illustrate how creative writing, in particular poetic composition, emerging from the two regions exhibits affinities, parallels, as well as inter-connectedness despite the much emphasised disparities and peculiarities. Central to contemporary poetry examined in this study is 'song' as a metaphor for its characteristic hybrid nature. The following chapters engage with different facets of song; from the praise song – hatched as a dirge in Chapter Two, *mashairi* as a Swahili sung poem tradition influencing poetry in written English in Chapter Three, what Osundare calls 'songs of the season' in Chapter Four and how the experiment dialogues with journalistic discourses, song school and the different 'Lawinos' singing in contemporary times in Chapter Five, through to Mugo's mother's poem and other songs in Chapter Six. Recent poetry from Africa is replete with and informed by diverse texts and intellectual discourses available to the poet in East or West Africa. Despite the much emphasized differences, I argue that there need not be explicit intertextual relations; that even when produced or consumed in the East/West African region ('solitary speaker'), contemporary poetry still typically includes 'language' or textual material derived not just from a 'socially diverse discursive formation' but econo-political and intellectual environment underpinning the 'other'. The contemporary socio-political and economic conditions as well as various institutional parameters ensure that sharp differences in thematic preoccupations and aesthetic – are not as much as they may have been portrayed in "foundational poetry". Considering the commonality in contemporary poetry issues from more or less the same pool of texts, intertextuality marking the era therefore evidences dialogues within and across the regions examined

Keywords: Contemporary African Poetry, Influences, Dialogue, Hybridity, Song School, Presoetry, East Africa, West Africa, Comparative Frame.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university. Parts of this thesis appear as a chapter in a recent (2012) book, *Rethinking Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes*; "Influence of *Mashairi* tradition on Contemporary East African Poetry in English."



Edwin Mosoti

12th July, 2012

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DEDICATION

For Vic

"my song is space
beyond wails
beyond walls
beyond insular hieroglyphs
which crave the crest
of printed waves"

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