Making the Case for Popular Songs in East Africa: Samba Mapangala and Shaaban Robert

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ABSTRACT

The relative exclusion of popular song vis-à-vis other forms of expression in scholarship on African literature and oral verbal art is a serious oversight that needs to be reconsidered and rectified. This article constitutes a comparative analysis of two wordsmiths from East Africa whose works embody the salient relationships and overlapping tendencies of works considered “high” literary art and popular songs, which are thought to constitute a different type of artistic productivity. A consideration of the poetry and prose of Shaaban Robert, one of the giants of Swahili literature, in conjunction with the songs of Samba Mapangala, a popular singer who has become a household name in East Africa, reveals that there are significant points of contact between both popular songs and other forms of verbal art in the region.

Scholarship in African literature tends to exclude songs from the canon. But song is one of the most widely communicated forms of verbal art on the continent. Popular songs are dynamic and widespread, and permeate the lives of people throughout Eastern Africa. This exclusion raises many questions. Are songs merely superficial entertainment for their immediate audiences or do they operate on deeper aesthetic and intellectual levels for the songwriters and audience members in their respective communities? Do they convey information that may provide a key to understanding the people who produce these lyrical traditions? The purpose of this paper is to provide answers to these questions through a comparative analysis of two exemplars of Eastern African literature and song, to modify Western academic paradigms in order to construct, assemble, and to tailor them to the imperatives of the current realities experienced by those living in Eastern African countries.
The questions that such a comparison raises are multiple: what formal, linguistic, and thematic attributes do the artists share? What are the expectations of their audiences? What is their relationship to their audiences? And finally, how have they contributed to the creation of a panethnic or supercultural sense of identity in the region? Such a comparative analysis will, I hope, serve to challenge the “modal” bias of much of comparative literary studies, which, in the words of Alamin M. Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Shariff, “concerns the values imposed upon the written word. The written, even if peripheral, is thus given prominence over the oral, even if the latter is more central in a given tradition” (96–97).

I will be drawing upon the work of two canonical verbal artists, one a writer, Shaaban Robert, and the other a songwriter and singer, Samba Mapangala, in order to provide compelling examples of the significant affinities between the written and performative works of these two figures. My choice to focus on two individual artists has been motivated by a desire to provide an in-depth analysis of the techniques and sociocultural strategies employed by Mapangala and Robert in their respective attempts to create works relevant to their projected audiences. Furthermore, my comparison of the works of two artists operating in the same region who oftentimes employed the same language (though in different ways) is a deliberate attempt to countermand some of the basic assumptions of the field of comparative literature, a field of scholarly endeavor that apparently makes linguistic disaffinity a prerequisite for comparison to take place, and displays a predilection for comparisons that involve Euro-American creativity as at least one part of every comparative equation.

As J. H. Kwabena Nketia has made clear in The Music of Africa, there is much to be gained from comparative analyses of the works of African artists. His study has demonstrated that their works and the structures upon which they are based do in fact display similarities and dissimilarities that are as striking as they are educational. Nketia’s scholarship has also challenged some of the accepted wisdom that defines and separates expression into seemingly distinct categories. Nketia’s observations on dance and its accompanying musical performance point us toward a more nuanced comprehension of the ways these forms of expression can be deployed within and integrated into multiple social situations. In the case of dance he writes that it “[. . .] may be regarded not only as an avenue for bodily response to music or a means of communication, but also as a serious art form” (230). He also makes clear the extent to which the “traditional,” as a concept used in contradistinction to the popular and the contemporary, is inadequate at best and destructive to the very nature of artistic creativity in many African contexts. In his opinion, maintenance of the status quo in expressive culture, especially that of music, is nearly impossible due to the fact that “[a]lthough in every generation performers are supposed to play what is passed on to them, each generation may reinterpret it, particularly with respect to those fluctuations arising out of subjective feeling” (240). Changing demographics in African contexts inevitably bring additional changes because “[i]n addition to internal changes [in African musical traditions], there are also changes that are brought about by the interaction of African societies with one another, as well as changes that are made in response to acculturation” (245).

Within this paper, the generic proclivities of Robert and Mapangala, as well as the different eras in which they work(ed), provide a rich and fruitful field for
inquiry. The numerous salient points of commonality in their work, despite the seemingly disparate manner of their composition and dissemination, speak to the need for studies that demonstrate the ability of African artists and audiences to carry on creative productivity and appreciation, dialogue and debate, in ways and by means emergent from internal, indigenous processes of socialization as well as sensitive to external influences. Consideration of the work of two artists rather than a superficial survey of numerous personalities and their works allows one to profoundly and comprehensively investigate the nature of their productivity both in isolation and conjunction. Close attention to the works of both will reveal the resonance and crosspollination that is manifest in art forms throughout the region as evidenced in the œuvres of these two artists.

Whereas academic disciplines condone the dissection of artistic endeavor, my project here is to problematize such prescriptive processes of categorization. A growing body of scholarly work emphasizes that “[…] popular culture is understood as a site of struggle, a place for the negotiation of race, gender, nation, and other identities and for the play of power” (Dolby 33). Recent publications such as Nadine Dolby’s build upon the perspectives put forth by Karin Barber in her 1987 essay, “Popular Arts in Africa”:

The most obvious reason for giving serious attention to the popular arts is their sheer undeniable assertive presence as social facts. They loudly proclaim their own importance in the lives of large numbers of African people. They are everywhere. They flourish without encouragement or recognition from official cultural bodies, and sometimes in defiance of them. People too poor to contemplate spending money on luxuries do spend it on popular arts, sustaining them and constantly infusing them with new life. (1)

In addition, Barber strives to fabricate a systematic understanding of the nature of the “popular” and how it relates to African artistic creativity. Her insights into what she calls the “apparently infinite elasticity” (5) of African popular art succeeds in effectively dissolving the shaky foundation of divisions between the “folk” and the “popular” and, ultimately, even those forms of cultural expression that can be labeled “elite or high arts” (9). Shaaban Robert and Samba Mapangala produce art that could be called “high” and “popular,” respectively. At the same time, however, it is essential to acknowledge the antecedents of their creativity, many of which lay in expressive genres and forms that have their basis in folk or traditional expression.

Within this paper I will largely be dealing with the verbal content of the works in question, both songs and literature, and their activation in different social contexts. It should be clear, however, that this abbreviation and elision is carried out in cognizance of the fact that, as Nketia states, “the functional use of song in social life or its value as source material should not make us overlook the importance of the musical content of songs. […] We must thus recognize that the basis for the appreciation of a song may be linguistic, musical, or both” (205).

It is not my project here to present Robert or Mapangala as traditional or contemporary, high or popular, dichotomies that grossly oversimplify the interplay and interpenetration of all types of creative expression in East African contexts. I likewise recognize that both of these artists achieved notoriety through their access to and exploitation of institutions such as publishing houses and recording
companies. As Harold Scheub describes in his research on the Xhosa Ntsomi-performance, however, so-called “traditional” modes of expression can also have a basis in conventional technical and sociocontextual paradigms. To the outside observer it may appear that “[t]he ntsomi is a fabulous story, unbelievable, a fairy tale, a seemingly insignificant piece of fantasy, endlessly repetitious” (“Technique” 119). To a literate member of that community, however,

[i]t is also the storehouse of knowledge of Xhosa societies, the means whereby the wisdom of the past is remembered and transmitted through the generations, an image of private conduct and public morality, a dramatization of the Xhosa world-view. This ancient wisdom is communicated in an artistically pleasing manner, so much so that the artists and their audiences have developed an intricate set of esthetic principles, which has in its turn produced a demanding system of art criticism. (119)

Scheub likewise emphasizes the degree to which the translation of orally created and disseminated works such as the ntsomi-performance into written forms divorces it from the “educational-philosophical system” (“Translation” 31) in which it is completely integrated. These performances, therefore, are of complex artistic composition, are intellectually demanding, and constitute highly significant presentations intimately related to the mundane and metaphysical realities of their respective communities. In these senses, they overlap and display more fundamental similarities with than differences from the works of singers such as Samba Mapangala.

When I refer to Mapangala as a “popular” singer, it should be clear to the reader that I am not erecting a barrier between those singers and songwriters who receive publicity and remuneration from presentation on electrified sound-stages and in radio studios, and those who perform, more often than not, in social contexts that lie outside of the modes of performance. Musicians such as Hukwe Zawose and Saida Karoli in Tanzania, or Jabali Afrika and Kayamba Afrika in Kenya—musicians who over the course of their careers have recorded and performed in a variety of contexts—are ample evidence of the extent to which the divisions between these “types” of music are fluid and diffuse.

In *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, John Chernoff observes that, in the case of African music, “the aesthetic point of this exercise is not to reflect a reality which stands behind it but to ritualize a reality that is within it” (36). Chernoff’s research supports my own contention that popular songs serve, among other functions, to create new forms of identity for individuals confronting what Veit Erlmann has called the “dialectic of social practice, identity, and power relations in a modernizing society” (*Nightsong* 21). The societies analyzed by these African and American scholars did not emerge ex nihilo. They have long histories maintained by professional time-binders or keepers of the memory of the past. This is a phenomenon that was unknown until recently by many Western scholars. For example, as late as 1963, a scholar as well-known as Hugh Trevor-Roper could assert with impunity that at that present time there was no such thing as African history, only “darkness” (qtd. in Mazrui, *Power of Babel* 27–28). He was unaware of the existence of oral epics, long poetic narratives that tell of the past.

As a well-documented corpus today, oral epics function as keys to understanding sociocultural interactions in and across many geographical environments
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But in the case of popular songs, researchers, both African and non-African, have tended to marginalize the lyrics in analyses of verbal art—written and oral—produced by Africans. Eleonore Schmitt and Werner Graebner have noted, however, that “[p]opular songs, distributed via phonograph records and the radio, have enjoyed growing popularity among the urban population since the 1950s and are veritable repositories of the urban life experience in East Africa” (145). The work of Erlmann illuminates many of these issues as well as the scholarly biases surrounding popular music. One of the most fundamental of these, he states, is the fixation upon what he calls a “textual paradigm” (“But What” 2). In order to move away from the limitations of this theoretical system, Erlmann proposes an emphasis on a wider sensory vocabulary, with special attention to the auditory. He points out that “[t]he ways in which people relate to each other through the sense of hearing […] provide important insights into a wide range of issues confronting societies around the world […]” (3). Erlmann’s analysis of South African popular music and its relations to African American and Anglo musics has also been influential in shaping my perception of the ways in which popular songs in Eastern Africa can be deployed in order to energize dynamic and often radical sociocultural identity systems (see Modernity). He emphasizes the ability of these songs to articulate the tension experienced by African people who are forced to exist in multiple worlds due to changing economic conditions: “[A] genre such as mbube in itself offers a medium for working through the complex experience of moving in and out of multiple social contexts and identities while at the same time offering a symbolic universe for the construction of personal identity and character” (Modernity 257). This mediating and even ameliorating influence can be seen in Eastern African popular songs as well. Alice Dadirai Kwaramba likewise affirms the core value of songs when she states that “[i]n Africa especially, songs have continuously played an important role in shaping social relationships. In early oral societies songs, dance and performance embodied the people’s aspirations and expectations” (1).

Such realities are reflected in the work of numerous scholars who deal, often in depth, with African music from throughout the continent. John Collins and Kofi Agawu have concentrated primarily on Western Africa while providing many useful insights into the methods and means of exposition of various African musics. Linda Hunter’s work on Hausa verbal art clarifies some of the ways oral artists develop and exploit techniques that are unavailable to writers (Hunter and Oumarou, “Towards a Hausa Verbal Aesthetic”). Wolfgang Bender’s work on the Kalindula music of Zambia, which he describes as a “neo-traditional music” (146), has also been helpful in providing important historical context for the interrelations between Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. By drawing upon his own academic background as a student of literature, Tejumola Olaniyan’s study of Fela Kuti’s songs (Arrest the Music!) likewise resonates with my own work.

My own intention is to explore the associations between popular songs in Eastern Africa and other forms of verbal art, specifically those that enjoy privileged status in academic circles. These positions of prominence are maintained due to what Agawu has referred to as the “extraverted” nature of academic scholarship on African music (xii). But oral forms are related to written literature. The relationship of these different oral forms—epic, song, story, proverb—to contemporary
written genres has only recently been studied in any depth. Scholars such as Eileen Julien correlate oral forms of African artistic expression to the novel in modern and contemporary Africa. Julien’s work stresses the potency and relevance of oral expression as it provides a foundation for verbal art in exclusively written generic forms. She draws upon cultural forms such as epic, initiation accounts, and fables to illuminate the extent and nature of African novelists’ dependence on oral forms of verbal expression. She does not, however, deal with popular songs.

Many in the academic world do not grasp the significance of forms of expression that lie outside the canon. One exception was Pierre Bourdieu, whose text *The Field of Cultural Production* offers a useful analysis of the aesthetic and culturally bound preferences inherent in Western models of cultural productivity. Bourdieu shows how political hegemony works hand in hand with cultural elitism to disparage and emasculate forms of expression that disagree with one or both of the foci of influence. This is a strong argument in favor of including these forms of verbal expression in comparative analyses of African literature.

Sociological and ethnomusicological research carried out in the last forty years by both Europeans and Africans (Kavyu, Graebner, Askew, Ntarangwi, Perullo, Ben Ali) supports the view that songs do indeed convey much more than meets the eye—or ear—of listeners. Additionally, recent findings and reassessment of observations that were previously termed empirical and objective have progressively unraveled the skein of Eurocentric discourse at the heart of much academic analysis of culture. One of the most obvious aspects of this Eurocentrism, and the most relevant to my study of Eastern African popular songs, is what Jacques Derrida has referred to as the “violence of the letter.” Derrida’s phrase refers to the imperializing and subordinating power of the written and printed word as it has come to dominate discourse on a global scale. Written and printed expression too often appears as the highest development in a hierarchy of intellectual, cultural, even civilizational achievement. As scholars such as Kelly Askew have pointed out, “Print media simply cannot prove as essential in situations where literacy is not widespread” (“As Plato Duly Warned” 10). This has led to a situation, as explained by Christopher Waterman, in which scholars pay insufficient attention to African musical creativity and fail to understand or articulate the profound and far-reaching messages that it communicates. This is because “it is often the case that the musical practices and the musicians that we study are more sophisticated than the theories we apply to them” (33). Olabiyi Yai has expressed similar sentiments: “The possible existence of indigenous African traditions of oral African literary criticism, is still beyond the epistemic horizon of the vast majority of students of African oral literature” (“The Path” 7). He adds: “Critics of oral literature, in other words, should be questioned about their critical competence based on criteria that are specific to oral literature” (12).

Popular songs occupy a position within Western academic discourses on literature that is multiply isolated. Ironically, songs also activate intimate and powerful functional values within their communities of origin. They are, according to Miriam Camitta’s definition, “vernacular” forms of expression, insofar as they ignore and/or prove incompatible with institutionalized and elite systems of discourse. Camitta observes that while “traditional definitions of the vernacular associate it with political or social subordination, vernacular discourse is often eschewed in institutions of education as deviant or non-standard” (229). Critics
such as Okot p’ Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong’o have both emphasized the importance for Eastern Africans to reclaim the interpretive and expressive tools at their disposal.

If we can learn about the cultural dynamics of Eastern Africa from comparisons of literary texts with song lyrics, then two wordsmiths who provide excellent evidence for viewing verbal art in such a broader context are Shaaban Robert and Samba Mapangala. But before turning to a comparative analysis of their compositions, it will be useful to provide some background on each artist. Shaaban Robert is one of the most famous writers in the Swahili language in modern times and has been credited by some as being the father of modern Swahili literature. M. M. Mulokozi calls him “Tanzania’s greatest writer” (Mulokozi and Sengo 38). In his fifty-three-year life, spanning the years from 1909 to 1962, he became one of the most important forces in the definition and creative expression of Tanzanian society, in colonial times as well as during its struggle for independence. As Clement L. Ndulute asserts, “Shaaban Robert saw and interpreted the world in terms of humanity [ ], not family, city [ ], state or ethnicity. [He was] an internationalist who had transcended the parochial concerns of earlier versifiers” (12). His prolific output extends across a broad spectrum of literary genres including autobiography, biography, poetry, and essays as well as novels. As Abdilatif Abdalla clarifies, Robert’s output can be divided into three broad categories according to contemporary perceptions in Swahili society: “Kazi za Shaaban Robert zapatikana katika tanzu tatu za Fasihi ya Kiswahili—mashairi, hadithi na insha—kati ya nyingi zilizoko” ‘Shaaban Robert’s work is found in three broad branches—poetry, narrative fiction and essays—among the many [genres] that there are’ (x). He emphasizes, however, that “alielemea zaidi kwenye utanzu wa ushairi” ‘[he [Robert] was much more inclined toward his poetry’ (x). I have selected him in order to combat a perceived bias in Western literary scholarship of African literature, which emphasizes prose narrative such as the novel and dramatic works such as plays to the relative exclusion of poetic traditions.

Samba Mapangala is a contemporary singer who hails from the western reaches of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire. Over a career spanning three decades, Mapangala has established himself as a major force in Eastern African music. His widely traveled career has taken him from Zaire to Uganda, from Uganda to Kenya, and now to the United States, where he presently resides. His songs, which combine danceability and didacticism, are sung in a combination of Swahili, Lingala, and French, with the occasional phrase in English. His recent compositions, however, reflect his desire to communicate more specifically and effectively with his projected audiences in East Africa, the vast majority of whom are more familiar with the Swahili language than with any other. He has emphasized that he still feels a direct and vital link with East Africa and that he sees himself as informing and educating his listeners through messages relevant to their lives (pers. interview).

Mapangala is a performer of music and verbal art whose life story in many ways serves as the epitome of geographic dispersal as experienced by Africans of all walks of life in contemporary settings. His movements throughout Eastern and Central Africa attest to the diasporic, itinerant nature of his existence, even while still on the African continent. The fact that the term “diaspora,” when applied to the African continent and its inhabitants, has come to refer to those who have left
the geographical, physical location of the continent as it appears bounded on the
two-dimensional surface of a map belies the reality of diasporic dispersal that
is encountered, even forced upon, Africans daily although they are still living
on the African continent itself. Some of them, such as Mapangala, have moved
across international borders in order to seek economic advancement. Others have
crossed intranational boundaries, often for the same or similar reasons. Thus
their sense of sociocultural continuity has been significantly disrupted. This does
not necessarily create what we would refer to as a vacuous state, a condition in
which these individuals totally lack a sense of identity and cultural grounding.
It does, however, bring about contacts, frictions, and upheavals that need to be
resolved. Mapangala responds to these crises by adapting himself to his environ-
ment in ways that bring him into closer affinity with the milieu in which he has
found himself. Mapangala was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in
1960 in the city of Matadi near the west coast of Africa. He left what later became
Zaire as a teenager in order to travel to Uganda following a failed musical tour of
Eastern Zaire. His success and the string of hits that put him in the limelight were
created while he was in residence in Nairobi in the eighties and nineties. It was
there that his particular brand of *soukous*, the highly danceable music from Zaire
that has dominated much of African musical creativity over the last thirty years,
became popular. This music was combined in turn with Eastern African musical
sensibilities and styles such as benga, a type of music most closely associated with
the Luo ethnic group whose roots are in the region surrounding Lake Victoria.
Mapangala’s music appealed to Eastern Africans for a variety of reasons. There
were evolutionary adjustments that Mapangala brought to his songs through his
association with Ochieng Kabaselleh, one of the greatest benga bandleaders, at
the head of his Lunna Kidi band until his untimely death in 1998. Mapangala has
explained that “[f]rom the time I arrived in Kenya in 1977, Kabaselleh was my best
friend [. . .] he was a friend inside and outside the studio” (see Bloomberg).
The interaction with artists such as Kabaselleh led to Mapangala’s incorpora-
tion of idioms and styles that brought his music immediately to the attention of
citizens in Eastern Africa. As Mapangala himself reports, he influenced and was
in turn influenced by a host of Kenyan performing artists, such as Kakai Kilonzo,
D. O. Misiani, and Okoth Biggy, in addition to Ochieng Kabaselleh. As he describes
it, he and these artists would “*kamatia mastyle,*” or grab styles from one another
(pers. interview). Equally, if not more important, was Mapangala’s decision to
write and sing songs in Swahili. While he did and does still sing some songs in
languages other than Swahili, such as Lingala and French, he has demonstrated
a strong desire to express himself in Swahili. Earlier in 2006, he was working on
his seventh album and residing here in the United States, where he has been liv-
sing since the late nineties due to the volatile political and economic conditions in
Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Both Shaaban Robert and Samba Mapangala are, in very different ways and
through very different means, canonical verbal artists. Robert is a recognized liter-
ary figure. Some, however, may challenge my definition of a popular singer such as
Samba Mapangala as “canonical.” I have drawn upon the work of E. Dean Kolbas
for my justification. According to the characteristics he lists in *Critical Theory and the
Literary Canon*, Mapangala’s work fulfills even Western definitions of canonical sta-
tus. According to Kolbas, “To be canonical means to be exemplary” (2). Mapangala’s
songs have helped to define the course of Eastern African popular music and many of them are still a part of everyday conversation. A case in point is “Vunja Mifupa” ‘Break the Bones,’ which has acquired proverbial status, the title being used as a catch-all phrase denoting the toughness and dedication needed to tackle life’s problems. Kolbas notes that “[in the concept of canonization] artistic excellence [. . .] [is] mingled closely with that of knowledge and morality” (14). Didacticism and specifically education of a moral sort are mixed in at least even measure with aesthetic quality in Mapangala’s songs as a constantly motivating force. The relevance of these songs to the intellectual and practical lives of Eastern Africans makes them a part of what Kolbas refers to as the “collected body of texts” (15) that are another defining characteristic of literary (or verbal) canons. Each of these verbal artists has created works that are didactic and widely appealing to Swahili-speaking audiences throughout Eastern Africa and Eastern African diasporic communities around the globe. Both of them are public figures whose works are well known to the population at large in Tanzania and Kenya. While their most productive periods of work are separated by nearly thirty years, their œuvres demonstrate various linguistic and formal similarities as well as related strategies and thematic concerns. These concerns make an exemplary case for the revaluation of distinctions between folklore, “orature,” and literature in scholarship.

A major focus of his writing, and a factor that has been selectively embraced and rejected by writers in Swahili speaking regions over the past fifty years since Robert began to achieve notoriety, is his defense and development of the “standard” variety of Swahili initially propagated through the British colonial system. Samba Mapangala has also, since early on in his career, been devoted to the use of Swahili in his songs and has increasingly applied himself to the use of the standard, Zanzibari dialect in his songs. The title of Mapangala’s album *Ujumbe*, or The Message, is a restatement of his intention to make use of the standard Swahili dialect. The songs on his forthcoming album constitute a further articulation of these ideas through tracks giving advice on AIDS, unscrupulous suitors, irresponsible spouses, and numerous other topics.

While Mapangala states that he has no knowledge of Robert or his works, some of his songs are strikingly similar to Robert’s compositions in thematic terms. One such pairing is the poem by Robert called “Rangi Zetu” ‘Our Colors’ (*Masomo Yenye Adili*) and the song “Kwa Nini” ‘Why’ by Samba Mapangala. These two works, one a poem and one a song, are both composed in Standard Swahili. In remarkably similar ways the two pieces deal with issues of racism and the pride in self required of African people to combat such sentiments. Both verbal artists, possibly related to the fact that they both reverted to Islam from previously Christian backgrounds, invoke divine design as a major and benevolent force in their skin color. Both artists also draw upon the metaphor of flowers to convey the diverse beauty of humanity as expressed in their various skin tones. The communities these compositions target surely have a great deal to do with the strategies Robert and Mapangala employ in conveying their messages. Robert writes in “Rangi Zetu”:

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Rangi pambo lake Mungu, rangi haina kashifa,
Ni wamoja walimwengu, wa chapatti na mofa,
Walaji ngano na dengu, wazima na wenye kufa,
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Rangi pambo lake Mungu, si alama ya maafa.  
Hupamba nyota na mbingu, na mawaridi na afu,  
Rangi adhama ya Mungu, na mwilini si uchafu,  
Si dalili ya machungu, dhambi wala upungufu,  
Rangi heba yake Mungu, Mwenyezi Mkamiliifu.

Our Colors  
Colors are God’s ornament, colors are unable to degrade anyone,  
Everyone in the world has theirs, all of us who eat chapati and porridge,  
The eaters of wheat and millet, the healthy and the infirm,  
Colors are God’s decoration, not a curse.

He adorns the stars and the heavens, the roses and the blossoming jasmine,  
Color is God’s glory and not filth on the flesh,  
It is not a sign of suffering, sin or deficiency,  
Color is God’s glory as the almighty. (38; my trans.)

Mapangala, in turn, sings:

Kuwa na maringo ndugu heshimu ngozi yako oh  
Ni Mungu aliyekupa, alijua kwa nini ih,  
Kutaka kuyabadilisha ni mbaya kaka ah  
Uweupe wa kuzaliwa huu ni sawa ah, lakini kuutafuta kwa nguvu  
Hayo ni makosa.

You should be proud brother and respect your skin  
It’s God that gave it to you and He knows the reason.  
Trying to change it is a sin brother  
Being born white is fine, but trying to inflict it by force  
That’s a huge mistake  
(“Kwa Nini”)

These artists’ works are intended first and foremost for audiences that circulate in East African environments. I concur with Mary-Louise Pratt’s assessment that much of colonial and postcolonial literature constitutes a “writing back” to the colonial metropole from its political, economic, cultural, and geographic peripheries. At the same time, it is important to stress that there are colonized or postcolonial subjects and actors who are engaged in different forms of discourse whose project (if there is an explicit one) is the creation of a discursive arena within which members of these communities can interact unencumbered by and uninterested in foreign intervention of a political or scholarly nature. Whether or not such exchanges attract the attention of those in local or distant loci of power is irrelevant to the success of these artistic endeavors. In fact, in the case of popular songwriters, they may, paradoxically, hope for public success and notoriety without garnering any attention from persons in positions of political influence.

Both Robert and Mapangala utilize Swahili in their works, although to different extents and using different varieties. Their motivations for selecting this language may be different and may achieve divergent objectives. At the same time, however, both Robert and Mapangala have striven in their work to generate and subsequently exploit enthusiasm for the de-ethnicized variety of Swahili that has come to be known as “Standard.” It could be argued that a writer such as Robert
had little choice in his selection of a language, given that he grew up in the coastal region of Tanzania where this dialect of the language was prevalent. At the same time, however, Swahili contains a variety of registers and dialectal variations. Robert’s decision to employ the “Standard” variety was a political, nationalistic, and pragmatic one.

The varied use of language in Robert’s as well as Mapangala’s verbal art serves as an immediate and powerful marker and affirmation of their loyalties to their audiences within Swahili-speaking Eastern Africa. The Swahili that Mapangala employs is especially pertinent to such discourses of affiliation, similar to the West African musical genre zouglou. Simon Akindes observes that “[a] characteristic of zouglou is its language. Most bands use a mix of Nouchi and local languages, which gives the genre an anti-conformist and close-to-the-common-person feel” (98). Similar claims could be made with regard to Mapangala’s language and diction. His use of Swahili and his relative (until his latest album) lack of concern with adhering strictly to Kiswahili sanifu or grammatical, standard Swahili, has made his songs accessible to listeners from most communities in Kenya and Tanzania, many of whom do not speak or promote Swahili as a first language. This is in contrast to Shaaban Robert whose Swahili is taken as not only grammatically correct, if not perfect, but in fact radically so. He has been credited with several important innovations and developments within the language. Euphrase Kezilahabi has stressed that “[n]i dhahiri kwamba Shaaban Robert aliandika akiwa na nia hasa ya kukuza lugha, na hatuwezi kukana kwamba amaikuza (sic) kifasihi, kmsamiati na kisarufi” ‘[i]t is abundantly clear that Shaaban Robert wrote with the express intent of furthering the [Swahili] language, and we cannot deny that he did indeed further it stylistically, in terms of vocabulary and grammatically’ (24).

Robert made use of the standardized Unguja, or Zanzibari, dialect in all of the various genres in which he was so prolific. His dedication to the Swahili language was such a prominent aspect of his work that he saw fit to immortalize it in a poem, many of the lines of which have come to be a part of everyday speech and common expression in Tanzania. This poem, appropriately named “Kiswahili,” describes the Swahili language as a mother’s breast. This descriptive choice is significant in that it creates an emotional response in the reader/listener rather than making an appeal to rational thought. This is so, due in part to the fact that for the majority of the Tanzanian population Swahili was not, in fact, their mother tongue, but was merely a lingua franca since the German occupation of Tanganyika in the nineteenth century. In conjunction with the ruling party’s plan of making Swahili the national language of education, commerce, and government, Robert attempted to impress upon his audience the power, beauty, and intimacy of the language. The first stanza of the poem reads:

Titi la mama litamu, hata likiwa la mbwa.
Kiswahili naazimu, sifayo iliyofumbwa,
Kwa wasiokufahamu, niimbe ilivyoo kubwa,
Toka kama mlizamu, furika palipozibwa,

A mother’s breast is delicious, even if it’s A bitch’s,
Kiswahili, to you I swear, in your hidden glory,
To those who can’t grasp you,
Surge forward and flood into the spaces denied,
Titi la mama litamu, jingine halishi hamu.  
(qtd. in Ndulute 43)  
(my trans.)

The poem sums up the power and majesty of the Swahili language as well as its utilitarian value in a country and throughout a region teeming with dozens, if not hundreds, of languages in use. Robert manages to draw upon combinations of all of the senses in the course of his poem in order to envelop the reader completely in the warm and intimate presence that he wishes to instill. The senses of touch and taste are brought on by the first line, where the universal experience of a mother’s breast is called to mind in the memory of each reader. These descriptions combine with the sublime, roaring sound and fury of a pent-up flood breaking its banks and rushing headlong into those regions previously blocked off. The taste and feel of a mother’s breast and nurturing milk is repeated at the end of the stanza in an epanaleptic refrain. These sensations are reenergized with the emphasis of the heaviness of a child’s tongue, numbed by its incompetence. The sense of olfactory and intellectual pleasure is called into play through the comparison of the language to a perfume filling the heart and nose. Contrary to the stifling, irritating sensation that can be experienced when one breathes in perfume, the heady sensation Robert records when speaking, hearing, or writing the Swahili language is, the poem implies, both refreshing and satisfying. The second epanalepsis that closes out the poem brings the reader back once again to the now familiar, soothing image, feel, and taste of the mother’s breast to close out the exposition.

Although Robert does have other poems, such as “Lugha,” that explore similar themes, “Kiswahili” is his most famous on the subject.

While Mapangala does not have any songs whose lyrics represent such an explicit elaboration of his position with regard to the Swahili language, his creative output over the last fifteen years attests to his personal and public adoption and adaptation of the language to his needs. He has stated that he strives to present his songs in a version of Swahili that will be accessible to the greatest number of listeners in East Africa. Though he does still have some sections of songs that are sung in Lingala or the rarer French, his creative output from the 1980s until today has shown a decided move away from Lingala and French in order to concentrate more precisely on Swahili. As Mapangala explains, he is searching for a medium “ambayo itaeleweka na watu wengi” ‘that will be understood by many people’ (pers. interview). Because he has decided to target his songs at East Africans, he has even gone so far as to employ the assistance of a Swahili instructor to review his song lyrics and correct the grammar and spelling prior to recording the songs and to correct his pronunciation during the recording session. Such an approach to language in his songs demonstrates sensitivity to the realities and dynamics of audience motivation in Eastern Africa. It also points to an awareness of the political reality motivating language use in the region. When asked about his feelings toward Kiswahili, he also emphasizes that “[i]mekuwa lugha yangu sasa” “[i]t has become my very own language” (pers. interview). In other words, he has internalized its rules and discursive contexts to the extent that he feels the same affinity to it that Robert describes in his poem cited above. The adoption of this widespread lingua franca has increased the accessibility of Mapangala’s songs tremendously and allowed his didactic messages to hit home with East African audiences, especially in Kenya and Tanzania. The use of the Swahili
language and idiom has also permitted him to enter into discursive interaction with other popular singers who were well established in Kenya upon his arrival there. Perhaps the most famous example of this in his case is the exchanges that took place surrounding the wedding song “Vidonge” ‘Pills’ that brought Mapangala to engage in what Mwenda Ntarangwi refers to as “mashairi ya malumbano,” or conversational poetry (229).

As he has confirmed in recent interviews, Mapangala did not speak Swahili when he arrived in East Africa from Zaire:


> When I left Zaire, I didn’t know even a single word of Swahili. I learned Swahili while in Kenya. Kenya was the place where I really learned my Swahili. And furthermore, I am a Kenyan who was born in Zaire. I have really become a Kenyan, it’s my place, my home. (pers. interview)

His early songs confirm this assertion as they are composed almost exclusively in Lingala, with the occasional phrase in French and an even less significant percentage of the lyrics in Swahili. “Malako” is exemplary with regard to this linguistic emphasis. The narrative segments of the song are almost entirely in Lingala. Despite the rather heavy subject matter, dealing with the deathbed last will and testament of a parent to his children, the song’s appeal to East Africans in Kenya and Tanzania would seem to be more a result of its masterful and bubbly musical composition, as it is doubtful whether many Kenyan or Tanzanian citizens would have understood the issues involved in the Lingala lyrics.

That Mapangala’s Swahili-speaking audiences in Kenya and elsewhere were unable to digest and debate the messages in his songs because they could not understand the language was a serious impediment. Nathalie Arnold proposes that “poetry is a fundamental indication of Swahili identity [. . .] a consistent feature of all aspects of social life, and a focus of a great many conversations. Debate about what the composers of particular songs may have intended, and what the interlocutors may feel about it, is a prevalent social preoccupation” (144). Abdalla further points out: “[W]ajibu wa mshairi wa Kiswahili ni kuwa na tangamano na kushirikiana nao [washabiki wake] katika kuyatutu matatizo yaliyowazingira badili ya kujitenga kando na akawa yuwaishi kwenye ulimwengu wake pekee. Ni lazima awafuate wenziwe waliko, azungumze nao kwa lugha na namna watakayoifahamu” ‘It is imperative that a Swahili poet should join and strive together with them [the audience members] in order to solve the problems that are besetting them instead of separating himself and living in his own world. The poet must seek out companions wherever they are, and speak to them in a language that they will understand’ (xv; emphasis added).

In the same way that Robert’s poetry and prose rely upon the socially adhesive qualities and potential of Swahili, Mapangala needed to harness this language in order to enter into such debates with his audiences. Without such intellectual exchange, he would be unable to adapt to the community that he intended to constitute through his songs. Mapangala himself states that he now attempts to make use of 

*Kiswahili cha kawaida*, or everyday Swahili, in composing his songs.
His terminology reveals two levels to his linguistic strategization, one of them in confluence with Robert’s strategies, the other bearing an ambiguous relationship to them. Both Robert and Mapangala make use of the Unguja, or Zanzibari, dialect of Swahili. Robert’s Swahili is concerned with maintaining a strict adherence to grammatical rules, spelling, and pronunciation as outlined in the “Standard” dialect, while Mapangala has, at least until his forthcoming album, followed a more relaxed attitude toward such requirements. This is likely a function of the fact that Mapangala learned Swahili in Kenya, where attitudes toward the rules of the Unguja variety of the Swahili language vary from indifferent to hostile. W. H. Whitely observes that “[t]hough Kenya has a long coastline, along which Swahili is spoken as a first language, this coastal form has never been accepted upcountry; while the various up-country varieties of Swahili that have developed (especially among Nilotes, Asians, European settlers, and residents of Nairobi) have never been adopted on the coast” (65). It should not be assumed, however, that Mapangala’s choice is an imperative one for any verbal artist in Kenya or Tanzania. As Ndulute has pointed out, there is a host of dialects of Swahili (7).

Other East African writers have been similarly engaged with the issues and implications surrounding language use in verbal art. The writing of East African authors, such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, is in many ways an encapsulation of the problematic position of the Swahili language and its role as a lingua franca throughout much of Eastern and some of Central Africa. Ngugi’s obstinate support of the Kikuyu language (even going so far as to publish an academic journal in Kikuyu) during his tenure at New York University has brought the issue of African literature in African languages to the attention of numerous intellectuals globally (and some Africans outside the academic community), even if it has not succeeded in altering significantly the systems of publication outside of the continent. Ngugi has stated his position succinctly: “In Africa and the world, europhone African literature has usurped the name African literature [. . .]” (Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams 98). The politicization of language, therefore, has been an ongoing intellectual concern among numerous Eastern African thinkers (p’bitek, Hussein, etc.). It is in this framework that we find Mapangala and Robert.

Robert’s choice to create in Unguja Swahili demonstrates the extent to which he was invested in the project of postcolonial nationalization in Tanganyika. Within this new “African Socialist” structure of social interaction and political involvement, each person became a “mwananchi” first and foremost, a citizen, literally, a “child of the nation.” An important part of Nyerere’s plan of action was the adoption of the Swahili language as the primary means of communication throughout even the remotest locations in the nation.

While there are some dialectal variations throughout the republic of Tanzania, the universal applicability of this dialect was advantageous for Robert for political as well as communicative reasons. To the extent that Robert’s writing is mutually intelligible to a large population in both Kenya and Tanzania, it can be said to exploit at the same time as it builds and reinforces familiarity with and loyalty to the Swahili language. Such loyalties represent choices for Eastern Africans that can operate on a variety of levels. According to Binyavanga Wainaina:

When art as expression starts to appear, without prompting, all over the suburbs and the villages of this country [Kenya], what we are saying is: we are confident
enough to create our own living, our own entertainment, our own aesthetic. Such an aesthetic will not be donated to us from the corridors of a university; or from the ministry of culture, or by the French Cultural Centre. It will come from the individual creations of thousands of creative people. (6)

The emergence of truly indigenous art forms can be construed as one of the first concrete signs that a sense of community is being created in a given population. The most frequent form this community is given in scholarship is that of the nation-state. But this is not necessarily the most widespread nor the most intensely felt and enacted form of association used by Eastern Africans in their constitution of identity.

In Mapangala’s case this linguistic universality is not apparent, at least not at the national level. Kenya’s historical and contemporary relationship with Kiswahili is much less intimate and conciliatory than that in Tanzania. Not only is the Swahili language not a particular source of pride for Kenyans, but it is, among non-Swahili, often a source of friction and deliberate negligence. Thus both artists make use of the Unguja dialect of Swahili in order to establish a complex relationship of proximate authority with their audiences, and to effectively create social affiliations based on a language that has had a controversial history in many of those communities.

Formal elements in the work of both verbal artists reveal both the intensely indigenous nature of their creations and features that link them to other traditions. Some scholars, such as Lyndon Harries, have attempted to establish the concept that Kiswahili poetry owes its origins to Arabic poetic and other literary traditions. Recent research, however, has debunked such notions and demonstrated that poetic traditions found on the East African coast had their genesis in indigenous, African oral forms of expression that were sung, often with musical accompaniment (see Mulokozi; see also Ntarangwi). An analysis of the formal aspects of Robert’s written works as well as the oral verbal creativity of Mapangala will help to reinforce the latter conclusions and demonstrate the inefficacy of the former.

Kezilahabi, through his analysis of Robert’s poetry in *Ushairi wa Shaaban Robert*, has emphasized four formalistic elements: meter, rhyme, number of lines in each stanza, and variety of closing lines (2). I will not be relying on such categories for my exploration of Robert’s work and how it relates to that of Mapangala. It is important to note, however, that all of the categories listed by Kezilahabi could just as fruitfully be applied to song, popular or otherwise, in the attempt to dissect its formal constituents. My interest here is to emphasize those elements that bring Robert’s written verbal art into confluence with the orality or secondary orality of Mapangala and many artists like him in Eastern Africa. Thus my analyses of these works will concentrate upon those aspects of their work that bring about similar effects through three features: first, the emphasis on the fabrication of engaging narrative circumstances within the works of each author; second, the exploitation of musicality through meter, rhyme, and access to forms of verbal expression and components of verbal expression outside of the conventional parameters adopted by the verbal artists, and third, the use of naming in order to elevate characters to functional roles as rhetorical devices. One of the most crucial aspects of both their works is the extent to which each of them attempts to create and/or recreate an interactive environment.
Mapangala’s songs and Robert’s various written works, on the surface, appear to diverge in one important aspect, the construction of liminality or boundedness. Mapangala’s songs invite, if not demand, interaction from their listeners, literally in the context of live performances where audience members, by the very fact of their presence at the event, are participating in its constitution. They likewise are expected to validate the musical skill of the band through dancing. Performance space also allows for interaction through their recitation of the lyrics in time or counterpoint with the singers.

The static, two-dimensional presentation of Robert’s written works on the printed page may appear to lack this interactive potential, but there are many interactive levels in Robert’s poems. On a sociological level, Swahili poets of the stature of Robert are, as M. M. Mulokozi and T. S. Sengo point out, members of a close-knit community: “Strictly speaking, the poets are a well-knit group, who meet often, visit one another, interact socially and help one another when in difficulties. Intermarriages among poetic families are common” (77). This intellectual society extends across national boundaries and has now, with the spread of the Swahili language, moved into sehemu za bara, or upcountry, in both Tanzania and Kenya.

While it is unlikely for the reader of one of Robert’s works to engage physically in his poems, it is useful to remember that there is a tradition of dramatic recitation in Swahili poetics that has now extended throughout various portions of Eastern Africa, specifically, throughout the public educational system. This poetry, known collectively as ngonjera, is more than mere static recitation and often involves physical, dramatic action on the part of the individual reciting the poem. Likewise, the tradition of taarab music as it has manifested itself throughout Eastern Africa is basically a form of recitation that is carried out to the accompaniment of musical instruments. According to Askew, within the framework of these performances the poetry becomes a vehicle that individuals can draw upon in order to act out social friction and conflicts. Much of what Askew addresses in her work relates to interpersonal conflicts (see Performing the Nation). Scholars such as Arnold, however, have pointed to the political value of taarab songs, focusing on the ability of listeners to appropriate messages in order to carry out their own political agendas. These appropriations can be made without the consent of the songwriters themselves. Often they are related to only one of many possible interpretations of the song’s text.

Robert’s poems recall, in many cases, different generic forms of verbal expression, some of which are inherently interactive. One example of this is found in some of his shorter, aphoristic poems that recall methali, or proverbs in their condensed, informative construction. An example of this is the poem “Si Kitu,” from the book of poems Koja la Lugha [The Adornment of Language].

Si kitu kwatajiri, wala mtukufu sana,
Watu wenji fikiri, watametukuka majina,
Si kitu kwazu mzuri, kwa umbo kuonekana,
Mambo mengine ya heri, watendaji ni wabaya.

Wealth is nothing, nor is it to be exalted
Ponder that many are praised in name
Beauty is nothing, to be seen as comely
Much good is done by those who are ugly.

(15)
The poem, brief as it is, is structured around the same two part structure, or balance noted by scholars such as Adélékè Adéèkó in his *Proverbs, Textuality and Nativism*. The abbreviated wisdom communicated by the work could likewise be related to any number of Swahili proverbs such as “Kila ndege huruka na mbawa zake” ‘Each bird flies with its own wings,’ which have similar knowledge to impart.

Such strategies of poetic construction encourage the reader who is aware of the social conditions surrounding proverbs to fill in such details while reading. As Yaw Adu-Gyamfi observes in the poetic works of Wole Soyinka, it is possible for the poet to demand that the readers of his works behave as “participants as much as listeners, people who, by encountering a reference” can successfully draw upon their cultural experiences in order to fill in the missing details in an interactive manner (112).

One might reasonably argue that Robert has fashioned much of his work on oral models of storytelling and narration. In fact, upon careful observation it appears that some of his works are even structured in such a way as to imitate informal modes of song that might crop up simultaneously in the lives of Tanzanian people. A case in point is Robert’s brief “Nenda Zangu,” or “I’m on My Way”:

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Leo nenda zangu Tanga,
Nikaokote kaure.
Kimenishia kiranga,
Nimekoma na ukware.
Kwa ulevi na kuzinga,
Fedha hupotea bure.
Bila mke ni ujinga,
Naoa nisijikere.
(1992 [1969]: 8)
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The title of the collection in which this poem is included is entitled, appropriately enough, *Mwafrika Aimba*, or “An African Sings.” Likewise, the brevity and strict rhyme and meter of the poem are reminiscent of those that would be found in such forms as limerick in European traditions. The subject matter itself and its lighthearted treatment of the same remind one of the tales of woe narrated by numerous singers throughout East Africa, from Bernard Kabanda, to Michael Enoch, to Sam Muthee.

The discursive style of both Robert’s extended verse in the *utenzi* format and his shorter works reinforces such a proposition. A well-known example of this deliberately discursive style in a longer form is the poem “Utenzi wa Hati,” which is a work designed specifically to give guidance to the poet’s young daughter and, by association, to all young women confronted by life’s complex issues. The poem opens with an invitation:

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Leo nataka binti,
Ukae juu ya kiti,
Ili uandike hati,
Ndogo ya wasia
(1966: 7)
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[my translation]
Following this introduction, Robert goes on, in another 396 lines, to try to protect his daughter from all of life’s social snares through a style of discussion filled with gentle commands and explanation, in effect attempting to anticipate her questions and objections and to effectively answer them through a comprehensive discussion of topics ranging from greed, to marital disputes, to gossiping. All of this, delivered as it is in direct address and with a note of encouragement as much as warning, reads as a sort of intimate fireside chat rather than a sterile, declamatory poem. The publication of his poems in such media as newspapers likewise marks their insertion into dialogic modes of communication. Often, such poems were in fact formulated as responses to or instigations of conversation or malumbano (see Ntarangwi) that have a close parallel with songs, especially in the taarab tradition.

Mapangala’s songs follow similarly interactive formal techniques. The most obvious of these is undoubtedly the musical and collective-performative nature of his songs, performed in front of audiences during live shows and encouraging the activity and interactivity of listeners in the constitution of the text as event (see Amuka; Bukenya; Kabira and Okombo). The performative event at which the musicians and singers themselves are present as participants can also be reconstituted in a variety of ways by members of the audience outside of the concert situation. By reciting and reinserting the text into daily conversation, they reformulate and redirect the meaning of the text in order to apply it to their everyday existence. One of the ways that verbal artists, especially oral artists such as Mapangala, do this is through the careful selection of their words and the poetic manner in which they weave them together in relevant messages. This transformability and transmutability leads to what Peter S. O. Amuka refers to as a simultaneity of forms and formulations. He states that “one text of an oral performance is therefore, simultaneously, many texts” (6). Daniel Avorgbedor has given examples of how such constructions are realized:

Song texts are full of proverbs, proverbial sayings, riddles, gossips, euphemisms and personifications: endless examples can be cited to illustrate these linguistic manipulations and proliferations. Apart from being artistic and poetic devices, alliteration, assonance, and parallelism all help in creating pleasurable effects that are necessary in the comfortable and easy reception, recollection, and involuntary evocation of the text. These poetic devices are special forms of word and sound patterning, and, united with the appropriate music and gesture; they appeal to and leave lasting impressions on the minds of the listeners. (223–24)

The song “Sungura” ‘The Hare’ by Mapangala is an excellent case in point. This text, as Mapangala has admitted, is more or less a carefully concocted admixture of traditional sayings, proverbs, and wisdom. The title of the song itself is a reference to the widespread tale of the race between the tortoise and the hare, which is also part of Aesop’s popular collection of fables. This familiar tale becomes the basis of the song text and effectively encapsulates the message of the song. Mapangala is attempting here to impress upon his listeners the importance of steadfast determination rather than haste and frenetic energy in shaping a proper and stable life for an individual. He thus imparts his message by referring to a touchstone of identity that occurs in most Eastern African communities. He effectively places
himself in a position analogous to that of a storyteller engaged in the narrative act. Having clarified the position that he wishes to assume and the responsibility and authority that goes along with it, he reinforces the validity of his message and the strength of his arguments through access to well-known proverbial sayings. The proverb “haraka haraka haina baraka,” or haste and pressing have no blessing, is inserted into the song’s text in order to drive the point home further. The song rounds out with references to hasty individuals seeking to build a house in a single day simply because they see someone else living comfortably in their own dwelling. Mapangala sings:

| Wataka kujenga nyumba kwa siku moja. | You want to build a house in a single day. |
| Hujui mwenzio amejenga kwa muda gani. | Not knowing how long your friend has been building for. |

Here Mapangala is referring to common sense that would make obvious the impossibility of building a complicated structure such as a house in a single day. He may also be referring to the social conventions that would oppose strongly such an action. While I was living in Nairobi in 1993, it was explained to me that many people who build homes there, even in such an urban and apparently “modernized” setting, will tend to delay the completion of the project by carrying the work out piecemeal in order to deflect the resentment and jealousy that could lead to negative effects through witchcraft or more conventional means such as vandalism and arson.

These similarities in form, combined with the exposition above of Robert’s and Mapangala’s thematic concerns and linguistic strategies reveal the relevance of both artists’ works to their audiences and the significance of both in understanding the varied and energetic nature of verbal art in East Africa. It is not my intention to assert that the works of Robert and Mapangala are identical or that they should necessarily be equated one with the other in all respects. This is an assertion that would ignore the necessary limitations that both written and performative works take on by their very means of transmission. However, by comparing and contrasting a canonical writer such as Shaaban Robert with an equally canonical singer like Samba Mapangala, it is possible to make a case for the inclusion of popular songs in the same categories as literary verbal art and demand that they receive equitable critical attention. It is clear that these artists, coming from different geographies and chronologies, are both engaged in constructing and breathing life into communities of self and collective identity that exceed, supersede, and explode conventional notions of nation and ethnicity as expressed through Eurocentric models of identity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

“Kwa Nini” (Song and Dance, Virunga Records, 2006), “Sungura” (from Feet on Fire, Stern’s, 1991), and “Vunja Mifupa” (Vunja Mifupa, Vunja Mifupa, 1997) are printed with permission from Samba Mapangala.
WORKS CITED

Primary Works

Secondary Works


