



**The Intellectual Biography as an Entry Point for Literary and  
Epistemological Analysis  
International Conference  
10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2024  
Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean  
University of Naples L'Orientale**

Riding the wave of “cultural decolonization” (Wiredu 1997) movements led by “Epistemologies from the South” (Santos 2014) and bearing in mind the need to expand and compare methodologies to conduct research in both African philosophy and Afrophone literatures studies, this conference proposes to reflect on research focused on intellectual biographies. Indeed, researching biographies of African literary figures or “sages” (Oruka 1990) endowed with local knowledge and wisdom (Kresse 2007) triggers multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies, that interlink history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literary critique and philosophy.

The study of the life and 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).

The participants at this conference are invited to reflect on the life, thoughts and works of African intellectuals, with a focus on Swahiliphone countries. Specifically, the conference will engage with biographies of both well-known and little-known authors be they poets, songwriters, playwrights and novelists and their oral and/or written literary productions. We are also interested in investigating plural literary genres and how the authors chose and/or inter-textualized different genres. Moreover, works of translations and self-translation of the authors presented are also of interest.

The conference is held in a hybrid format at the conference hall of Palazzo Corigliano, Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean, at the University of Naples L'Orientale and on the Zoom platform: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82672797892> . Each paper will last 25 minutes of presentation plus 15 minutes of discussion.

## Convenors and organisers:

**Dr. Cristina Nicolini**  
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at the University of Naples L'Orientale)  
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## Conference Programme

<b>Wednesday 10</b>		
9:30-9:45	Welcome address (Head of Department)	
9:45-10:00	Opening address (Organisers)	
10:00-12:40		<b>Panel I</b>
10:00 – 10:40	Dismas Masolo (online)	Shaaban Robert: Sketching A Philosophical Reading
10:40 – 11: 20	Cristina Nicolini	William Mkufya and his Flowers. An intellectual Bio-Graphy
11: 20- 11: 40	William Mkufya (online)	Je Ziraili na Zirani ni Epiki?
11: 40 – 12: 20	Abdilatif Abdallah & Kai Kresse	Ustadh Ahmad Nassir (1936- 2019): wit, wordplay, and deep language as dimensions of casting the human
12: 20-12: 40	Najeeb Ahmad Nassir (online)	Maisha na Harakati za Malenga wa Mvita
12:40-13:40	Lunch break	
13:40-15:40		<b>Panel II</b>
13: 40 – 14: 20	Farouk Topan	Sheikh Ali Muhsin al-Barwani, “poet, scholar and politician” (1919 – 2006)
14: 20 – 15: 00	Aldin Mutembe (online)	Contextualizing the Post- Independence Socio-Cultural History of Kiswahili development through the Autobiography of Kaluta Amri Abeid

15: 00 – 15: 40	Graziella Acquaviva	From biography to narrative subjectivity: the history of postcolonial Tanzania in Kajubi Mukajanga's novel Mpenzi
15: 40 – 16: 00	Coffee break	
16: 00 – 17: 00		Musical performance by Francesca Buonadonna and Alexandre Patouillard
<b>Thursday 11</b>		
10:00-12:00		<b>Panel I</b>
10: 00 – 10: 40	Benedetta Lanfranchi	Stella Nyanzi: Uganda's Digital Intellectual
10: 40 – 11: 20	Irene Brunotti	Sensing Swahili aesthetics with and through (the wor(l)ds of) Mzee Farouk Topan
11: 20 – 12: 00	Lutz Diegner	Wasifu wa Kisomi kama Mwingilianomatini/Mwingilianomedia
12:00-12:30	Coffee break	
12:30-13:50		<b>Panel II</b>
12: 30 – 13: 10	Annachiara Raia	Epistemologies of individual private spaces: researching on and with Swahili female poets
13: 10 – 13: 50	Roberto Gaudioso	Biography and artworks: what relationships? Limits and opportunities of biography in the interpretation of the verbal arts
13: 50 – 14: 00	Closing remarks	

## ABSTRACT BOOKLET

### *Shaaban Robert: Sketching A Philosophical Reading*

**Dismas Masolo, University of Louisville (online)**

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There is a good and interesting upsurge of interest in the works of Shaaban Robert. The goodness of this upsurge is what it encourages in the development of indigenous thought systems. While this is not exactly new, the study of Swahili cultures may have been submerged under the pile dominated by the Southeast Asian studies as part of the so-called Indian Ocean Rim. German Schools of African Studies have done a commendable job in propping and encouraging interest in Swahili literary traditions, interests that have the potential of inserting Swahili literary traditions into the global arena as a powerful segment of African Studies. Yet, as witnessed in the recent Conference or Workshop on Shaaban Robert at the Islamic University of Morogoro, it is evident that the reading of Shaaban Robert's works remains limited to the focus on his influence on Swahili literary style and cultural identity. I propose to suggest how Shaaban can be read as a philosopher in a manner that suggests deeper and more complex and critical conceptual nuances developed under complex historical and cultural circumstances.

## ***William Mkufya and his Flowers. An intellectual Bio-Graphy***

**Cristina Nicolini, University of Naples L'Orientale**

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This study reconsiders the role of biographies as a privileged entry point for literary and philosophical analysis to sift epistemologies and ethical pillars through fictional texts. Indeed, this research is devoted to a Tanzanian intellectual William Eliezer Mkufya, a writer, but also a translator and an editor, and to his novels *i.e.* *The Wicked Walk* (1977) and *Kizazi Hiki* ('This Generation', 1980); *The Dilemma* (1982); *Ziraili na Zirani* ('Azrael and Zirani', 1999); *Ua La Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation', 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ('The Existence of Flowers', 2019).

The empirical research has been conducted through a methodology that can be framed into the project of philosophical sagacity and that includes both ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth textual analysis. The textual analysis on the novels will illustrate not only how themes and style of the texts developed tightly interlaced to author's life and thoughts, but also how these texts illustrate the shaping of Mkufya's interpretation of *utu*, humanity. The analysis of Mkufya's fiction demonstrates that Swahili novels are a privileged genre to produce knowledge and philosophy with a particular focus on ethics and community development.

This research project is funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

## ***Je Ziraili na Zirani ni Epiki?***

**William Mkufya** (online)

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In this video clip, recorded in Dar es Salaam on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2023, Mkufya gives a talk in which presents his own defence for the novel *Ziraili na Zirani* (Azrael and Zirani 1999) as an epic genre. By doing so, Mkufya introduces the main themes of the novel. In addition to this, he presents briefly his last published novel *Kuwa Kwa Maua* (The Existence of Flowers, 2019).

***Ustadh Ahmad Nassir (1936-2019):***  
***wit, wordplay, and deep language as dimensions of casting the***  
***human.***

**Kai Kresse, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient &**  
**Abdilatif Abdallah, University of Hamburg**  
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Ustadh Ahmad Nassir from Mombasa (1936-2019), the ‘Malenga wa Mvita’ (which is also the title of his famous collection of poems published by Oxford UP in 1973), was one of the most highly regarded Swahili poets. By his fellows, students, and followers, he is being remembered and admired for his capacity of wordplay, his scope of vocabulary and linguistic creativity, the depth of philosophical insight into human life, and the historical range of classic Swahili poetry that he knew by heart. I was fortunate to get to know him during my longer fieldwork in Mombasa in 1998-99, then working mainly on his *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*, and later during many subsequent visits until 2018, spending many hours in his company during informal baraza meetings, and listening in on conversations and discussions.

Over the past few years, I have been assisting Abdilatif Abdalla to gain an overview over the range of poems Ustadh left behind after his demise, and his son Najeeb has been actively engaged in this as well. But our progress has been slow, for many reasons. In autumn 2022, Ustadh Ahmad’s son Najeeb and I conducted a series of interviews about him, his life, and his status and influence as a poet with a number of Ustadh’s former peers, friends, followers, and fellow poets. These were video-recorded by Najeeb, who is a professional filmmaker as well as also a poet, and has also drafted a longer text on his father’s life and works in his memory. I shall use the occasion of this workshop, to draw from the materials mentioned, and from my collaborations with Abdilatif Abdalla and Najeeb Ahmad Nassir to present a characterization of Ustadh Ahmad’s life and works that seeks to be adequate to the way he lived his life, and that draws from his poetry as well as from commentaries on him by his close friends and peers.

***Sheikh Ali Muhsin al-Barwani, “poet, scholar and politician”***

***(1919 – 2006)***

**Farouk Topan, Emeritus Professor Aga Khan University**

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The three aspects of Ali Muhsin al-Barwani’s career and status given above are quoted from Peter Frankl’s adorable obituary published in 2006 in the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (33, 2, 263-265). Of the three - given the political events that unfolded in Zanzibar during the 1950s and 1960s - it is not surprising that al-Barwani was then well known as a politician, a role which has been well documented and discussed in various scholarly print media as well as on videos on *YouTube*. Less well known are his roles as a poet and scholar whose passion and love for Swahili are embedded in his cultural upbringing. This paper attempts to discuss al-Barwani’s notions of the development of Swahili as a language, and of his contribution to Swahili literature.



*Contextualizing the Post-Independence Socio-Cultural History of  
Kiswahili development through the Autobiography of Kaluta Amri  
Abeid*

**Aldin Mutembei, University of Dar es Salaam (online)**

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Kaluta Amri Abeid was a key figure in post-independence Kiswahili development. He played a vital role in shaping the social history of the language. He was a politician, a scholar and a religious leader. His biography reflects the intersection of language, culture and political changes. It gives insights into the challenges and triumphs faced by Kiswahili during this period. Abeid's contributions includes advocacy for Kiswahili as a national language, efforts in translating legal documents, standardization of the Kiswahili language, and fostering its role in education and literature. Exploring his life can offer a nuanced understanding of how Kiswahili evolved in the socio-political landscape in post-independence Tanzania.

***From Biography to Narrative Subjectivity:  
the history of postcolonial Tanzania in Kajubi***

***Mukajanga's novel Mpenzi***

**Graziella Acquaviva, University of Turin**

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The popular novel *Mpenzi* (My Love, 1984-85) by the Tanzanian writer Kajubi Mukajanga was published in two volumes in 1984-85.

Mukajanga started writing the novel in 1982, but the first volume was published in 1984 by his own publishing house, Grand Arts Promotions.

The environment, which he describes in this first volume, is that of J.K.T (Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa /National Rebuilding Army) of Makutupora, a place that is not specified; a characteristic of this novel is setting events in places which remain unspecified. Mukajanga describes daily life as he lived it and according to the law in force in 1977; through the transposition of real people into fictional characters, he tries to unveil what was happening behind the walls to those who were living beyond the great gate of the JKT.

The second volume of *Mpenzi*, published in 1985, recounts historically verifiable events as the outbreak of the Second World War; the founding of T.A.N.U (Tanganyika African National Union) with the veiled description of Nyerere; and the 1964 uprising that is narrated through the vision of the character, who builds his own interpretation of the events day after day.

This novel is one of the best examples of popular fiction from the 1980s, and it depicts in detail individual, political and social conflicts in colonial and post-colonial Tanzania. This novel can almost be considered a diary in which fictitious elements blend with real ones, since many of the episodes narrated were really lived by him or by people very close to him.

\* Swahili will be the language I will use for my speech at the conference.

## ***Stella Nyanzi: Uganda's Digital Intellectual***

**Benedetta Lanfranchi, University of Bayreuth**

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My contribution to the workshop will focus on Ugandan intellectual and political activist Stella Nyanzi as a digital (as well as analogue) intellectual. In 2019, Nyanzi was sentenced to eighteen months of jail in for posting political poetry online in which she strongly criticized the President of Uganda. Since 2022 she has been living in Munich under the writers-in-exile program run by PEN Germany, where she continues to write and to protest. My presentation will focus particularly on her digital textual production from 2014 to the present day, and specifically on select Tweets and Facebook posts in English. I analyze her online written production over a ten-year period as a coherent literary corpus, which I have divided according to three thematical and chronological periods: grief and growing activism (2014-2016); trials, arrests and prison (2017-2019) and running for office and exile (2020-2023). I have organized her online writings as a kind of digital biography, analysing how her personal and professional experiences have informed her politics and her intellectual and poetic production.

As part of my presentation, I will show short excerpts from the interview I conducted with Nyanzi in Munich, which is meant to feature in a longer documentary film project produced under the ERC Grant “Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy” headed by Alena Rettová at the University of Bayreuth.

My research on Stella Nyanzi is meant to contribute to scholarship both by generating knowledge around Nyanzi's intellectual and literary production and by attempting to theorize the role of the digital intellectual as an expression of contemporary political and social life.

*Sensing Swahili aesthetics with and through (the wor(l)ds of) Mzee  
Farouk Topan.*

**Brunotti, Irene, Leipzig University**

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In this talk I want to argue that intellectual biography as a western scientific method does not allow us to sense nor make sense of the Swahili wor(l)ds intra-related with Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan, because it assumes the predetermined existence of the separate entities of life (bio-) and (written) work (-graphy). It assumes authors (or intellectuals) who somehow pre-exist their work and the writings of their biographies. Here, I want to try a different way to engage with Mzee Farouk Topan's intellectuality, following the *wasifu* tradition, which, as Mzee Topan himself reminds us, is not just a fixed and delimitating literary biography genre, rather it encompasses a long poetic tradition in (life) oral narrations, and, most importantly, it is born across the *Ziwa Kuu* (Karugia & Khamis 2018) carrying a sense of belonging that is uniquely and specifically Swahili (Topan 1997). This approach allows me to wonder: What if bios and graphia were co-constitutive elements of the becoming intellectual? How could we then humbly attempt to sense the unfolding becoming of Mzee Farouk with and through his work? And how can we get in touch with the situated Swahili aesthetics he co-constitutes? Exploring these questions I do not provide a critical evaluation of the life and oeuvre of Mzee Farouk Topan the Swahili intellectual. Rather, I share my encounter with his persona and his work as an experience of sensing the Swahili aesthetics he weaves in and through his own wor(l)ds (words and worlds). I start from some of his works, such as *Siri* (2000), *Mfalme Juha* (1971), *Critical Swahili Studies: a Collective Exercise in 'Concepting' Uswahili* (2023), *Conversations with Ahmed Rajabu* (2021), *Uchambuzi wa Maandishi ya Kiswahili* (1971, 1977), *Projecting Islam in Swahili poetry* (2001), *Swahili Aesthetics: Some Observations* (2008), *Swahili as a religious language* (1992), *An Approach to the Teaching of Swahili Literature* (1969). Engaging with these writings I show how Mzee Farouk Topan – the teacher, the scholar, the pious Muslim, the playwright, the translator, the anthropologist, the philosopher, the friend and companion – has always used, and reasoned on, Swahili language, words and metaphors, as well as on issues of translation and embodiment. This way he has been providing us

with unique inroads into literary and epistemological – or, in fact, onto-epistemological – analyses that gain their strength from their situatedness in Swahili wor(l)ds, and, therefore, an important and unique view of the world and humankind.

***Wasifu wa Kisomi kama Mwingilianomatini/ Mwingilianomedia  
(The Intellectual Biography as Intertextuality/ Intermediality)***

**Lutz Diegner, Humboldt University of Berlin**

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Baada ya Roland Barthes kutangaza "kifo cha mwandishi" miaka ya 1960, kwa miongo kadhaa watafiti wa kifasihi walikuwa wamezingatia hasa 'utawala' wa matini, kinyume cha kumzingatia mwandishi mwenyewe kama chanzo kama si chemchemu ya ubunifu wake.

Sasa, tangu miaka ya ishirini na ushee iliyopita, mkabala wa kuchambua kazi ya kifasihi kupitia wasifu wa mwandishi umefurahia kufufuliwa ukafufuka. Vilevile ni jambo la kuzingatia tujiulize je, tunazungumzia uwanja gani wa utafiti? Yaani kama uwanja husika umeshawahi kutafitiwa (sana) au la, au kidogo tu.

Swali lililonijia katika muktadha huu ni kuangalia upya nadharia na utekelezaji yaani uchambuzi wa kutumia mwingilianomatini/mwingilianomedia. Je, si mkabala wa kutafiti wasifu wamwandishi ama msanii kwa ujumla, kwa kiasi kikubwa, maana yake ni kuangalia mwingilianomatini/media? Yaani kutafiti mwandishi husika amesoma nini, amesikiliza muziki gani ama amepata kujua kazi gani nyingine za sanaa, ili kujaribu kuelewa na kuhusisha ujuzi wake huu yaani tajiriba yake ya kisanii na ubunifu wake yaani kazi ya kufinyanga sanaa yake mwenyewe.

Kutokana na tajiriba yangu mimi kama mtafiti na msomaji, nitazingatia kazi za waandishi nguli kama Euphrase Kezilahabi, Said Ahmed Mohamed, Kyallo Wamitila, William Mkufya na wengineo, kwa upande mmoja, na kazi za waandishi wa kike wa hivi karibuni zaidi yaani Elizabeth Mramba, Anna Samwel Manyanza, Felistas Mahonge, Laura Pettie na wenzao wengine.

***Epistemologies of individual private spaces:  
Researching on and with Swahili female poets.***

**Annachiara Raia, Leiden University**

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In the frame of my NWO Veni research, I continue being in ongoing conversation with several intellectuals from the Swahili coast. This has gifted me to enter into private collections, sit and conduct research from very private and special places. In this presentation, I'll focus on an erudite woman born on Lamu island (Kenya), who then moved to Malindi due to some life constraints. Her name is Zaynab bint Amin al-Rudayni, daughter of a *mtu wa tariqa* and author of five works, finely handwritten in Swahili in Arabic script and clustered around hagiographies of female pious figures (*Maisha ya Nana Nafisa, Maisha ya Fatima*) and historical events (*Utendi wa Hijra, Maulidi ya Rasuli, kwa lugha ya Kiswahili*). I visited Bi. Zaynab in March 2023 at her place where she lives beside her mosque, the *Madrasat al-Tayyibah*. Sitting at her home and working on her life and oeuvre confirms to me the relevance of ethnography, so intergenerational and collaborative in my Swahiliphone literary field research. Zaynab bint Amin al-Rudayni's life and works –along the line of Bi Ridhai's oral archives from Pate Island or the late Binti al-Sayyid Amina Muhaddali–have hitherto never been researched whereas they would unpack vibrant local written and oral collections shedding light on the legacy and epistemologies of Swahili erudite women (*wanawake muallimaatun*) in knowledge production and intellectual history. As part of a book project proposal that gives prominence on African sources for African history, I plan to digitise, transcribe and translate Bi Zaynab unedited works. In this presentation, I'll provide insights on her biography and how in turn it shapes and connects to her pious activities, works and readership.

## ***Biography and artworks: what relationships?***

### ***Limits and opportunities of biography in the interpretation of the verbal arts***

**Roberto Gaudio, University of Naples L'Orientale**

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All authors maintain a privileged relationship with their works, but as is now clear, they and their biographies are not privileged elements of the interpretation of their works, because they are too partial, if not misleading. In this sense, biography and authorial intent may represent a limitation to the study of texts of an artistic nature. Indeed, Karin Barber (1987: 4) reminds us of an important lesson in hermeneutics: “Texts generate “surplus”: meanings that go beyond, and may subvert, the purported intentions of the work.” On the other hand, however, biography and authorial intent do not merely represent the initial point of reference, which once taken into consideration disappear from the orbit of interpretation. On the contrary, if taken with a critical eye, the research around biography and the almost psychological probing of authorial intent can be means against reticences, omissions, and authorial contradictions. This paper explores the limits and potential of biography in two case studies on the composer Kerewe Muganga Golita and the Congolese-Tanzanian singer-songwriter Remy Ongala. These two artists come from different cultures, use different languages, have different relationships with orality (Ong would classify the former as primary orality and the latter as secondary orality, respectively), yet both would fit into the classification of popular art for which many Africanists consider the biographical or contextual datum to be central and unavoidable. This paper will attempt to argue against their centrality. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to problematise the use of biography for the interpretation of verbal artwork in African Studies.