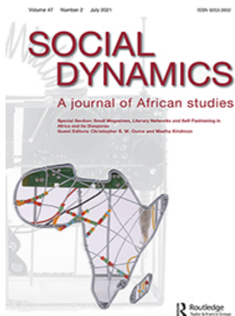

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Nexus/Busara and the rise of modern Kenyan literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of *Nexus/Busara* as one of the foundational literary magazines in Kenya. Founded in the late 1960s by literature students at the University College, Nairobi, the journal was immersed in the politics of literary and cultural production in the East African region of the time. It was one of the major reviews that gave upcoming young writers space to hone their skills in creative writing and literary criticism. Using a historical approach, this paper places the magazine in the context of the postcolonial Kenyan landscape in the period immediately after independence. Through a close-reading of specific texts in the journal, the paper also explores the influences of pioneer East African writers and underscores the pivotal role that the University played in laying the foundations of modern Kenyan literature. The study shows that literary magazines are brooding nests for creative writers and literary critics, nurture literary cultures, and build bridges between generations of writers and between traditions.

KEYWORDS

Small magazines; postcolonial; pioneer Kenyan literature

The establishment of Kenya as a republic in 1964 coincided with the emergence of a literary tradition that was spearheaded by literary practitioners whose writing first found expression in periodicals. Early Kenyan writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Jonathan Kariara had already published their short stories in *Penpoint*, the Makerere University College students' magazine, while Grace Ogot had made her debut publication of short stories in *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*. The publication of these pioneer writers, coupled with a host of literary activities that mostly involved the members of literature departments from the universities of Makerere, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, heralded the rise of written literature in English in the East African region. Most studies on pioneer-written Kenyan literature have focused on works published by mainstream publishing houses and have mostly paid attention to full-length books including novels, plays, biographies, and anthologies of either poetry or short stories. Much, for instance, has been written about Ngũgĩ and Ogot (Wanjala 1978; Roscoe 1977; Sicherman 1989; Williams 1999; Gĩkandi 1984), but little has been said about their engagement with literary magazines which provided a forum upon which they did their initial experimentations in creative writing. This paper explores how *Nexus/Busara* responded to and played a part in the development of Kenyan literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The pivotal role of literary magazines in nurturing literary traditions has been widely acknowledged. Albert Gerard, for instance, attributes the rise of Anglophone African

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literature to *Black Orpheus* – a literary review founded in the University of Ibadan in 1957 by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn. The magazine provided would-be writers from British West Africa with a "stimulus and a challenge" (Gerard 1990, 55). Gerard also sees the genesis of East African literature in English as the 1958 launching of *Penpoint* at Makerere University College, and the emergence of *Transition* (a journal founded by Rajat Neogy in Kampala, Uganda) in 1961 (98). Peter Benson has noted that *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* "were at the centre of much that happened intellectually and culturally in Anglophone black Africa during the period from the late fifties to the late seventies" (1986, ix). He further refers to the South African magazine, *Drum*, as having been "a breeding ground for young black writers in white ruled and increasingly white-repressed South Africa" (x). As Milton Krieger illustrates, these journals were "the continent's literary and cultural arbiters" (2004, 403). Similarly, Killam and Rowe (2000, 140) have observed that *Transition*, as well as university-supported magazines such as *Busara* (Nairobi), *Umma* (Dar es Salaam), and *Dhana* (Kampala) were some of the publications that nurtured creative writing and critical activity in the region. It is in the light of the above scholars' observations that this study interrogates the operations of *Nexus*/*Busara* and its achievements as a key "formative journal" (Krieger 2004, 403) in the growth and development of modern Kenyan literature.

Busara, which means "wisdom" in Kiswahili, was a students' literary magazine started at the University College, Nairobi in 1967 as *Nexus* before changing its name to *Busara* in 1969. Published until 1975, the magazine was one of the literary reviews that, as Gerard puts it, "sprung up in newly founded universities in Tanzania and Kenya starting from 1965" (1990, 98). In an apparent response to the politics of cultural production in East Africa at the time, the magazine only published four issues in 1967 and 1968 using the name *Nexus*. According to Awori wa Kataka and Richard Gacheche, the first editors of *Busara* after this change of name, the choice of the new name was in step with other publications which adopted Kiswahili names around the same time. *Penpoint* and *Darlite* changed their names to *Dhana* and *Umma*, respectively. Oxford University Press founded *Zuka: A Journal of East African Creative Writing* in 1967, edited by James Ngũgĩ (wa Thiong'o) while the *East African Journal* inaugurated an annual special issue devoted to literature with the title *Ghala*. The editors of *Busara* note that at that time, "people were deeply involved with the question of a national language for Kenya" (Kataka and Gacheche 1969, 2) and the writers for the magazine were bent on reaching a wider readership.

It is important to note that the flurry about the change of names of these magazines happened in the background of what has been called "the Nairobi Revolution" (Amoko 2010). In September 1968, three dons at the University College, Nairobi (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Awuor Anyumba, and Taban lo Liyong) wrote a letter to James Stewart who was the Acting Head of English Department. The letter led to the abolition of the English Department and its replacement with the Department of Literature which would have African literatures and cultures at the centre of its focus. It is this department that published *Nexus* and the change of name to *Busara* would not be unexpected. This renaming could have been a reflection of the spirit of cultural awakening that the dons apparently inspired in their students and which ultimately determined the content of the magazine. In the first edition with the new name, the editors promised that the magazine would continue publishing creative writing and book reviews as *Nexus* had done but

would, further, "go for more critical factual articles regarding our cultural or social scene (Kataka and Gacheche 1969, 2)." It thus appears that the levels of intellectual discourse at the university college among both the students and their teachers were rising in the spirit of the above mentioned "Revolution."

Nexus brought together established writers and literary critics. Its editorial board and contributors constituted established as well as upcoming writers and critics. Its founding editors were two students – Leonard Kibera and Amin Kassam – while the Editorial Board was constituted by James Stewart, the then Head of English Department at the University College, as well as fellow staff members, Adrian Roscoe and Angus Calder. Grace Ogot was also a member of the board though not working at the college. The other notable person who was involved with the magazine was Ngũgĩ who came to be its Editorial Advisor when he became the Chairman of the Department for the second time in 1974. Jared Angira, Everett Standa, Samuel Kahiga, and Chris Wanjala are some of the other students who wrote for the magazine. *Nexus* was conceived as a quarterly magazine and was initially published by the East African Publishing House. However, as Wanjala notes in *Busara* 6 (1) the magazine "ended up in the hands of the East African Literature Bureau in the Students' Book Writing scheme during the academic year 1970/1971 when the East African Publishing House said that they had too much in their hands already to publish it" (1974, 42).

Nexus/Busara emerged in an environment that was at once undergoing a flowering of literary talent on the one hand while still nursing anxieties of what Taban lo Liyong (1968) described as "literary barrenness in East Africa" on the other. In his essay "Can We Correct Literary Barrenness in East Africa?" Liyong lamented the paucity of creative writers in the East African region which he saw lagging behind the rest of the African continent. He averred that the Muses had been frustrated by the East African literary "babblers" (9). Since its publication, this article has elicited varied reactions among pundits of East African literature. In *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature*, Simon Gĩkandi describes it as a "seminal essay" that "urged writers in the region to meet the challenge of new African renaissance in culture and letters . . . it had set the terms in which literary production would be carried out for most of the 1960s and 1970s" (2007, 8). Liyong's statement was also, on the contrary, seen as misplaced by a majority of literary practitioners in the region. He seemed to ignore the fact that East Africa already had trailblazing writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Grace Ogot and Okot p'Bitek. Besides, the lament was obviously made with disregard to the region's literary heritage from the African oral traditions. Nevertheless, there was no doubting that West Africa and South Africa had better established print cultures considering, for instance, the Onitsha Market pamphleteering of early 1950s and the publications of a host of writers such as Sedar Seghor, D.O. Fagunwa, Sembene Ousmane, Amos Tatuola, and Chinua Achebe in West Africa or the publication of such early writers as Thomas Mofolo and Peter Abrahams and the *Drum* magazine in South Africa.

Though written Swahili dates back to the nineteenth Century, what came to be regarded as the mainstream modern Kenya literature emerged in the wake of what Roscoe (1977) called "Uhuru's fire," which refers to the period after Kenya acquired political independence. These were works which, as Jacqueline Bardolph notes, "can be said to have truly started, if a date must be given, in 1964, with what were to be its two most important features for some years to come: the collected works of young writers,

mostly from Makerere University, and the writings of Ngũgĩ" (1984, 37). Gĩkandi also notes that "the identity of East African literature was determined in university English departments" (2007, 9). *Nexus/Busara* was part of this trend that placed the university at the heart of literary production in the region. The university provided the structural support to the writers and the practitioners who offered critical appraisal of the emerging creative writing industry in the region.

The 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression, organised by the Mbari Club of Nigeria under the sponsorship of the American-based Congress of Cultural Freedom, established a critical threshold for literary production in East Africa. For Gĩkandi this conference "was a source of doubt and anxiety, an occasion to reflect on what appeared to be literary impoverishment of the very region that was holding the conference" (2007, 8). By the time of the 1962 Conference, there were no world-renowned writers from East Africa writing in English while West and South Africa were teeming with acclaimed writers. The conference was a defining moment for Ngũgĩ, then a student at Makerere, and also for East African writers at large. Ngũgĩ met Achebe and submitted the manuscript for *Weep Not, Child* which was published two years later. In Wanjala's words, "the interaction of East African writers with other writers made the event historical and the political conditions against which the Kenyan writer was to operate, more lucid" (1978, 16). The Makerere conference has been generally acknowledged as the starting point in the debate on the beginnings of modern East African literature in English.

A second major conference was held in 1965 in Nairobi. This was a conference on African culture and new East African writings organised by the East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs – a not-for-profit organisation established by Tom Mboya in 1963 and run by Bethwell Ogot. The 1965 conference examined the role of government in funding literary activities and recommended the creation of outlets for writers in East Africa, assistance by governments and other bodies for publication and distribution of magazines. In addition, publishers were called upon to set aside a significant percentage of their annual profits for the active encouragement of the local literary magazines and writing competitions. These recommendations led to the establishment of the *East African Journal* which would be published by the East African Institute. It is as a result of the policy formulated at this conference that East African Publishing House began supporting *Nexus/Busara* while Oxford University Press founded *Zuka*.

A close reading of *Nexus/Busara* reveals some of the formative trends in modern Kenyan literature in English. As Tanure Ojaide has noted, "African modernity involves historical, political and intellectual transformation occasioned by the European encounter from the traditional to new ways" (2011, 22). The magazine came onto the scene at a period defined by the dynamics of social, economic and political transition that came with the end of British rule in Kenya on one hand and the spread of modernity in the country on the other. The students' magazine created space for young and aspiring writers to experiment with form and content in creative and critical writing. These students either deliberately or inadvertently imitated the writings of the works they had read. Four major influences, discussed in this article, can be seen in the works of the students who wrote in the magazine. First was their indebtedness to the oral tradition of their forefathers, best articulated in the short stories of Grace Ogot. Secondly, a few of the aspiring poets who seemed to be beholden to the European poetic traditions wrote in

the style of "Euro-modernist poets" (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 1985, 166). Thirdly, the young writers resorted to the history of colonialism and nationalism that Ngũgĩ had popularised as material for modern Kenyan literary imagination in his early works. Finally, the writers grappled with the anxieties that were brought about in the course of the country's transition to modernity in the social and economic lives of its people.

Nexus/*Busara* published writers at an early stage in the growth of modern Kenyan literature. In *Reading Chinua Achebe*, Gĩkandi suggests that modern African literature at its outset was to be "an instrument that wills new African realities into being, that imagines alternative configurations of our real histories to either affirm or transcend them" (1991, 2). Further, he sees the novel (and by extension literature) as having an archaeological role – its narrative investigation of the social and historical conditions of African societies before and during colonialism (5). This view is shared by Ojaide (2011, 9) who sees the cultural identity of modern African literature as its utilitarian nature; its functionality in terms of social cohesion, defence of culture, and its special use of folklore and language. As initiates to the craft of modern African literature, the writers in *Nexus*/*Busara* were subject to the notions advanced by Gĩkandi and Ojaide and were inevitably susceptible to the allure of the aesthetics of postcolonial conditions that their predecessors in the region had explored. Their imitation of the earlier writers or invention of new forms was bound to an evolving praxis of what would be conceived as modern Kenyan literature.

The question of what would be the appropriate form of creative expression was one of the major issues of concern in the criticism of the works that *Nexus*/*Busara* published. The English Department was following a curriculum developed at the University of London which was the mother university to the University College, Nairobi at the time when *Nexus* was founded. English literature was the common staple and English the language of imagination for the students of literature who steered the magazine. As Wanjala notes "[f]or a long time, what held sway was the Great Tradition. The literary culture that evolved was based on English letters," (2003, vii). Gĩkandi has argued that Chinua Achebe found himself in a state of "narrative anxiety" as he tried to "conceptualize an African narrative . . . in forms and language borrowed from the European Other" (7). For the students at Nairobi, nothing had prepared them to conceive literary worlds in any language other than English. Unlike *Darlite*, their sister magazine in Dar es Salaam, which started publishing works in both English and Kiswahili from 1970, the Kenyans stuck to English as the language of their imagination. In their anxiety, some of them, especially the poets, tried to imitate European poetic forms while others resorted to their oral traditions for inspiration.

African oral traditions have been widely acknowledged as a key influence in modern African literature. Ojaide (2011, 14) notes that this literature manifests orality in forms such as the use of repetition, songs, narrative modes, and chant-like rhythms among other features and reflects the flora and fauna of the African continent. While acknowledging this fact, Karin Barber cautions against fossilising oral traditional forms in modern works by seeing the modern as mere "repositories of some archaic 'authenticity'" (1997, 2). But she does not dispute the creative intertextuality between African oral traditions and modern literature both in form and content. The contributors to *Nexus*/*Busara* clearly demonstrate this fact in their short stories and poetry. The students found

themselves caught in the struggle between "the subjective desire promoted by the ideologies and forms of high modernism" that the university curriculum provided and "the communal norms that were supposed to be characteristic of traditional African society" (Gĩkandi 2007, 10).

In *Nexus/Busara*, students who appropriated material and form from the oral traditional African were likely to have been emulating the styles of early writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot. Ngũgĩ's initial publications were short stories like "The Fig Tree" and "A Meeting in the Dark" which were first published in *Penpoint* when he was an undergraduate student at University College, Makerere. The stories are steeped in African oral traditions in their setting, form, and content just like his early novels which the writers of *Nexus*/*Busara* must have read. Similarly, most of Ogot's short stories, some published as early as 1962 in *The Black Orpheus* before being compiled in the anthology *Land Without Thunder* (1968), are infused by the socio-cultural practices and morality of the traditional society that some emerging writers in *Nexus*/*Busara* imitated.

Some of the writers who followed this trend include Magaga Alot in his story "The Demoniac" (*Busara* 2 (3), 27–30), Hanny Rugyendo in "Kemitare" (*Nexus* 4, 29–32) and Duncan Gichangi's in "Nyakiemo" (*Nexus* 4, 10–12). The stories are set in a traditional rural landscape with pathways invested with malevolent beasts including cobras, hyenas, lions, and even demons and ogres. The stories invoke some of the superstitious beliefs of the traditional African society and dramatise social evils of pre-colonial Africa such as patriarchy and ritual sacrifice. They also raise pertinent issues about the traditional African family as well as such matters as youth sexuality in a way that underscores the confluence between the traditional and the contemporary society both in their form and content. This trend is less evident in poetry published in *Busara* probably because the university student was largely exposed to European poetry and it took time before the influence of traditionalist poets like Okot p'Bitek would permeate the young literary fraternity.

A major trend that became evident as young East African poets started writing was their heavy inclination towards the European poetic traditions they encountered at the university. David Rubadiri was one of the mentors to the upcoming East African writers who decried their continued reliance on European models where "People wrote like Keats and Wordsworth – on roses and sunsets and moonshine, and this sort of subject all on a very personal and individual sort of basis" (1971, 149). David Cook, an English literary scholar based at Makerere University, also castigated his young protégés in the East African region for their lack of originality and their urge to become "later day British romantics" who presumed that the craft of poetry "lie[s] essentially in rhyme, inversions, archaisms, regular stanza forms, and a steady beat and so on, in defiance of all contemporary evidence" (1972, 32). As university teachers, Cook and Rubadiri were encouraging their students to be more original in their poetic compositions in a way that would give them a distinct identity as East African poets. *Poems From East Africa* (1971) which the two scholars edited, was a compilation of some of the poems the young poets published in *Nexus*/ *Busara* and other magazines in the region at that time.

Some of Kassam's poems are good indicators of the trend highlighted by Rubadiri as exemplars of Eurocentric style. His three poems in the maiden issue of *Nexus*, which he co-edited with Kibera, are written in the tradition of European romantic poetry. Like the English romantic poets, Kassam (1967) is fascinated by nature and the mystery of life. He

displays a marked affinity for solitude. “Were I some Velvet Wind” is a poem about the quest for “knowledge of time and place/ for the image/ that became man” (1967, 2). In three regular stanzas, the poet invokes nature – the wind, the woods, the sea and the moon – which he sees as the abode of knowledge. In “Now that the Twilight,” the poet explores the mysteries of life and death; of knowing and not knowing – truth and untruth while the other poem, “An Affirmation,” expresses the poet’s befuddlement with life. “Hazel – listen,” published in a subsequent issue explores a romantic encounter in which the weather takes great symbolic significance (1968a, 7). Kassam’s penchant for the Euro-romantic poetic style becomes more evident in the poem “Once When the Birds of a Season.” The poet starts by quoting John Keats: “The sea keeps eternal whispering around desolate shores” (1968b, 18), and then proceeds to express himself in rhyming and regular stanzas imitative of the English poet.

In *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*, Chinweizu and colleagues have rebuked early African poets who heavily imitated European poets as “Euro-modernists.” They give the example of the “*Ibadan- Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry*” (italics original) which included poets such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Michael Echeruo, and Christopher Okigbo.[1] According to Chinweizu, the poetry of these poets “tends to be craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificially difficult. Simple ideas are often deliberately clothed in esoteric idiom” (1985, 166).

A survey of a few poems in *Nexus*/*Busara* reveals the influence on some of the pioneer Kenyan poets by the so called “Euro-modernist” Nigerian poets. Angira was perhaps the most sophisticated poet of this pioneer generation of Kenyan poets. He was a student of commerce at the University College, Nairobi, from 1968 to 1971 and a regular contributor to *Busara* of which he became editor in 1969. Angira hints at his reverence for Christopher Okigbo when he introduces his anthology, *Soft Corals*, with a quote from Okigbo’s poetry: “The moon has gone under the sea, the singer has gone under the shade” (1973, i). In addition, the first poem in the anthology “Singing along the palm beach road” is written as a song in nine sections akin to the movements in Okigbo’s “Heavensgate.” In the poem Angira acknowledges this influence and drifts into personal myths in imitation of Okigbo as the poem unfolds. In “Factors,” Angira writes about: “The descamisados in the backyard stinking/ Of Sierra Maestra/ We have known them/ The Eutimios/ In any case/ We can all shout/ Venceremos!” (1973, 53). Some of his poems are comparable to Soyinka’s long poem “Idanre” which Chinweizu and colleagues accuse as being “imprecise and opaque . . . . The language is a formidable barrier” (1985, 189). Nevertheless, Angira stood out as a poet to reckon with among his contemporaries to the extent that he was appointed *Busara*’s assistant editor in 1969 (for Volume 2, Number 3) and then its Editor-in-Chief in the 1970/1971 issues. His appointments to these positions was despite the fact that he was a commerce student at a time when the journal was dominated by students of the English Department, which published it. With three anthologies published within three years – *Juices* (1970), *Silent Voices* (1972) and *Soft Corals* (1973) – he was probably the most prolific Kenyan poet of his generation.

However, the above trend did not persist in the region. In *Season of Harvest*, Wanjala aptly noted that unlike Nigerian poetry “East African poetry has cut its links with the West very fast. There is unique influence of oral tradition abroad” (1978, 96). It would appear like the undercurrents of “The Nairobi Revolution” cited earlier had taken root. Besides, the publication of Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970)

seemed to have set the tone and style for East African poetry. Aspiring poets in the region realised they could write poetry that drew material from their local setting. In 1972, Cook acknowledged the change from a Eurocentric perspective to a more locally oriented poetic tradition in East Africa saying that "I imagine that we have reached a point in time when reference to daffodils or countryside covered with snow by East African writers will raise a smile rather than a serious discussion" (1972, 45). With time there was increased synthesis of Western influences and local inspirations which shaped such distinct East African voices as we encounter in Cook and Rubadiri's *Poems From East Africa* (1971).

The influence of the earlier writers was also true of the nationalist narratives that emerged in early Kenyan literature such as the stories about the struggle for independence in Kenya. This theme was popularised by Ngũgĩ in his early works. In a paper presented at the 2nd International Janheinz Jahn symposium in 1977, Wanjala noted that, "[t]he convulsions of the Mau Mau experiences sparked off a literary fire that has kept burning since the early fifties to date" (1977, 5). Bardolph also attests to the predominance of works of fiction on the "hard times of the emergency . . . . It is as if the writers of Kenya all had to come to terms on paper with this traumatic experience before they could move on to other areas" (1984, 39). The contributors to *Nexus*/*Busara* wrote stories which displayed "the politics of nationalism . . . themes of the long period of cultural assertion and opposition that was part of the context of political independence" (King 1998, 7). In "The Growth of the East African Novel," Gĩkandi (1984, 56) makes a similar argument, asserting that the literature that emerged was anti-colonial and addressed questions of land alienation by the colonialists and the subjugation of African cultures by the imperial Western culture. Ngũgĩ's first three novels are an articulation of this anti-colonial spirit. The publication of *A Grain of Wheat*, his third novel, coincided with that of the first issue of *Nexus* in 1967.

There are a number of writers in *Nexus*/*Busara* who addressed the theme of Mau Mau and in so doing brought new insights to the history of the struggle for land and freedom in the 1950s in Kenya. Two stories in the debut issue of *Nexus* have this subject as the central focus. These are "The Oat" by Benard Mbui and Samuel Kahiga (*Nexus* 1, 5–7) and James Gecaũ's "The Ridge" (*Nexus* 1, 8–14). The trend is carried on in the magazine for the better part of its lifetime. There are other stories such as "The Land Freedom Fighter" (*Nexus* 3, 5–10) by Jan Esmail, David Gicomoya's "Gathondu" (*Nexus* 4, 7–8) and "The Night of Woman" (*Busara* 2, 46–51) by Benard Wagacha. These narratives also voice the disenchantment with the postcolonial nation-state after independence. In "Gathondu" for instance, the eponymous protagonist is a fighter in the forest who has been rendered destitute in a heartless city after independence. The questions of colonial violence, dispossession, betrayal, and disillusionment that the people suffered who joined the war and the ascendancy to power of a self-serving African political elite were issues that continued to preoccupy the Kenyan writer for a long time.

The growth of the city and its attendant challenges is another thing that preoccupied these upcoming Kenyan writers. Writing in the first issue of *Nexus*, Valerie D'Cruz underscored the fact that "the bulk of African writing centres around the polemic between the African traditional and the new mode of life and living occasioned by the advent of Christianity and Western civilization" (1967, 43). The transformation of the Kenyan society from a traditional rural society to a modern one was especially manifest in an emergent urban culture and new socio-economic realities at the time. Narratives of

the urban experience started emerging in the late 1960s and were the subject of a number of novels in the 1970s such as Leonard Kibera's *Voices in the Dark* (1970) and Meja Mwangi's urban trilogy *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979).

Kibera was one of the leading writers whose growth could be traced to his days as a contributor and founding editor of *Nexus*. He represented a new generation of writers who, though still falling back to the narrative of nationalism of the earlier writers, focused more on the problems of political disillusionment that threw the postcolonial urban subject into angst against political class who were mainly rooted in the urban centres. *Nexus/Busara* has several short stories and poems that present a portrait of life in the city in the period after independence. Invariably, the city is a squalid space, inhabited by a huge population of the poor who live in dungeons of deprivation. The urban poor engaged in all sorts of criminal activities to survive – selling illicit liquor, robbery and prostitution. In "Letter to the Haunting Past" (*Nexus* 1, 24–28) and "1954" (*Nexus* 2, 14–20), Kibera portrays Nairobi as the abode of marginalised youth; a place that is populated with beggars who "wipe their eyes on the back of the hand or the tattered sleeve in an attempt to come to terms with the new day" (1967, 14). The stories paint a bleak picture of a city that is polluted by industrial effluent and dirty beggars in equal measure.

Incidentally, it is not just the poor who are restless in the city. There is a new progressive man who is immersed in new realities of a nascent urban culture. Kahiga's short story "In Silent Shadows" (*Nexus* 3, 12–14) gives insight into the new native lower middle-class urbanites that seem "trapped in Westernization" (1968, 12). They spend their days in burdensome careers where they are servants of time. The careers are monotonous as they "spend the freshest hours of (their) day performing little tasks that allow no scope for individual expression or personal involvement" (Kahiga 12). We witness the rise of an individualistic and materialistic urban society that disarticulates the lesser fortunate urban youth who steep in hedonism for momentary consolation. The "clubbing" culture has taken root in the "modern civilized town" and brought about new issues of moral concern for the society. *Nexus/Busara* was therefore a forum where, as Bodil Frederiksen says of *Joe* – a popular Kenyan magazine also published in the 1970s, "the issues and themes voiced in the magazine were of central concern to emerging and modernizing sections of the African population" (2002, 101). Using the short story form, the writers in *Busara* created incisive portraits of the city and captured the various challenges of urbanisation as Kenyans increasingly embraced a modern lifestyle.

The colour code as a trope of conflict and conflicting universes is prevalent in other narratives of transition in *Nexus/Busara*. On the one hand, there are stories that depict an emerging urban elite that is symptomatic of the alienation of the newly educated men who ends up behaving as "black-white men." The phenomenon of "black-Europeanism" was an uncanny situation in which some Africans imitated the mannerisms of the whites in such a way as demonstrated by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon ([1952] 2008, 45) describes a post-independent black middle class which thinks of itself not in its own terms but in the terms of the more privileging whiteness it aspires to. This self-denigration was common with the Western-educated native Kenyans who had come back to the country after completing their studies in the colonial metropolis. The alienated Western-educated characters, as coded in *Nexus/Busara* came to associate their rural Kenyan roots with primitivism and pestilence. Such is the figure that John

Nginga's "The Wound of Joy" (*Busara* 2 (1), 34–43) and James Thuo's "The Begotten Son" (*Nexus* 4, 24–30) use as an interpretive focalizer of how the urban modernity is critiqued.

On the other hand, there is a preoccupation with the identity of Asians in modern Kenyan literature. In *Reading Migrations and Culture*, Dan Ojwang (2013, 16) traces the traditions of Asian writing to *Penpoint* where he cites such authors as Bahadur Tejani and Yusuf Kassam. Amin Kassam, one of the founding editors of *Nexus/Busara*, was the most prominent Asian writer in the journal. Since their migration to East Africa in the late nineteenth century, Asians have occupied a rather ambivalent place in Kenyan identity politics. Ojwang notes that the ordering of colonial society in Kenya created a hierarchy of races in which the blacks and the Indians came to occupy mutually hostile subject positions (2). He further observes that the early Asian migrants were proscribed from owning land and the only viable occupation was trading, to which they were actively channelled (5). The majority of Asians, mostly Indians, established shops in many parts of the country including some of the remotest trading posts. Their identity remained interstitial and transitional.

Stories on this subject in *Nexus/Busara* include Tom Heidlebaugh's short story "The Spring in Far Kashmir" (*Nexus* 3 24–28). The story is an account of Jethabhai C. Patel (JC), an Indian shopkeeper, who has been operating his family business in remote townships in the heart of Pokot, Tugen, and Turkana in Kenya. Patel's is alienated from the social and physical environment of this remote outpost and is subsequently cynical towards life in Africa. His interstitial subjectivity oscillates between the dreams of faraway Kashmir and the reality of his mundane life among the Pokot. The local people on the other hand see him as an intruder, "a strange, brown man, who charged too much for too little" (26). Azim Nanji's short play "When in Rome" (*Nexus* 3, 29–35) also shows the feeling of dislocation among Indians in Kenya. In the play, Jimmy has stayed for some time in England where he has picked some English habits that make him see fellow Asians as rigidly conservative and introverted. In addition, being a Kenyan-Asian, he feels unsettled and disadvantaged in postcolonial Kenya. Jimmy is a victim of the "Double-diaspora" phenomenon in which, as Ojwang explains, "The Asians are at one level products of the old diaspora expatriated to the British colonies in the era of early modern capitalism but are forced into a second migration to Western Europe and North America" (2013, 16). The contributions by Asians writers in *Nexus/Busara* vindicated racial profiling as a colonial legacy and negotiated space for the representation of the Asian experience in modern Kenyan literature.

Whereas the early editions of *Nexus/Busara* concentrated more on creative writing, the editors of Volume 2, Number 1 (1969) called upon the writers to make more contributions in the form of critical essays and readers' opinions on aspects of the literary and artistic scene. The journal had already started attracting reviews from established critics. Most of the early critics were members of staff at the Nairobi University College and most were expatriate scholars. *Nexus* 1, for instance, had essays by expatriates such as Pinnelope Minney who was a lecturer at the Institute of Adult Studies, E.W. Wright who was a senior lecturer at the Department of English, Julie Bidwell and Valerie D'Cruz. Later issues saw the entry of Calder, Roscoe, Stewart, Cook, Liyong and Bitek. A host of upcoming critics contributed to *Busara*. These included Albert Ojuka, Atieno-

Odhiambo, Chris Wanjala, Arthur Luvai, Arthur Kemoli, Mary Kimori, Peter Amuka, Ellen Kitonga and Billy Ogana Wandera.

Publishing consistently in *Nexus/Busara* and other journals of the same period, Liyong distinguished himself as an iconoclast of the first generation of East African writers and critics. He joined the Institute of Development Studies at the University College, Nairobi, in 1968 as a fresh graduate after completing his Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Iowa Writing Workshop. His arrival heralded the flourishing of a literary community in Nairobi. He initiated the University of Nairobi Writers' Workshop where young writers – mostly university students – used to meet regularly at the premises of Elimo Njau's art gallery, Paa ya Paa. The presentations at the workshop would eventually be published fortnightly in a pamphlet called *Currents* and some eventually got published in *Busara* and later in an anthology, *Faces at Crossroads*, which was edited by Chris Wanjala.

Liyong is a multi-genre writer who has written poetry, short stories, and commentaries. He advocated a Universalist approach to literary production and proposed a theory he called "synthesism." His earliest contribution of a critical essay to *Nexus* was an article titled "Post Script" published in Volume 4 in July 1968. This article reiterated his "East African literary barrenness" theme. The article was apparently provoked by a debate on whether the University College, Nairobi, should establish a Chair of African literature at that moment. Liyong found it premature to establish such a position noting that there was little written African literature at that moment to warrant it (*Nexus* 4, 5). Nevertheless, in what would seem like he had a change of heart on this matter, Liyong – together with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Owuor Anyumba – spearheaded the restructuring of the Department of English at the University College, Nairobi, that led to the establishment of the Department of Literature with the study of African literature at the centre of its curriculum. In his book, *Postcolonialism in the Wake of the Nairobi Revolution*, Apollo Amoko argues that the move by "The Nairobi troika" displayed contradictory impulses "at once rejecting and reproducing the cultural nationalist fallacies of colonial discourse (2010, 5). However, it is the practical implementation of the new curriculum that was to determine the direction literary studies would take, for though African oral literature came to occupy a central position, the department continued to offer courses in other literatures of the world.

Wanjala, who was a student between 1968 and 1972, and a member of the faculty in the Department of Literature from 1973, was one of the most consistent contributors of critical essays to *Busara* and was a member of its editorial team in 1971. He assumed the chairmanship of the University of Nairobi Writers' Workshop in 1969. Wanjala's first article in *Busara* was "Discovering New East African Poets," published in 1969, Volume 2, Number 3, in which he analysed the *Poems of Nature and Faith* (1964) by early Kenyan scholar and poet, John S. Mbiti, and *The Abandoned Hut* (1969) by Ugandan poet Joseph Buruga. One of Wanjala's most notable reviews published in *Busara* was "The Tabanic Genre" published in 1971. The essay is a critique of theories of "Cultural Synthesis" and "Genresynthesis" espoused by Taban in his books *The Last Word* (1969) and *Meditations in Limbo* (1970). In the article, Wanjala argued that Taban's works revealed his "theories of elitism, his writer-audience concepts, and above all the hilarious and narcissistic image he entertains of himself" (1971, 23). As a literary critic, Wanjala saw oral literature as a major influence on the aesthetics of

modern East African literature and emphasised the role of literature in reflecting and shaping the ideals of the society. As if to vindicate his conviction about the close ties that bind literature and society, Wanjala founded *Joliso: East African Journal of Literature and Society* in 1973.

Okot p'Bitek was another renowned writer and scholar who took a radical position in literary criticism in *Busara*. In "What is Literature" Bitek rejected the elitist perceptions of "The Great Tradition" that had taken root in the East African academy during and after colonialism. Bitek rejected Eurocentric notions of literature and emphasised the communal essence of literature in what he referred to as "an African cultural revolution" (1971, 21). Citing his personal growth as a writer, Bitek acknowledged that his mother's songs and fireside stories as well as other village poets and dancers in Gulu, where he grew up and returned to as a teacher after college, inspired his love for literature. It is this experience with the folklore of his community that inspired him to write *Song of Lawino*.

For Bitek, it was a futility for literary education to be geared towards acquiring a certificate; a false assumption that, "[t]he ability to quote Homer and Shakespeare is a mark of 'education' or 'refinement'" (1971, 27). His radical proposal was that, "In our schools and universities then, literature must be freed from the prison of examination, in which it was put by the class-ridden society of the Western world. It must be made into a *festival* as it is in the countryside" (27). Bitek's ideas were relevant and, indeed, came to inform the literature curriculum at the University of Nairobi when, following the formation of Department of Literature, a theatre arts class was introduced and part of examination for the members of this class was the actual performance of designated plays.

Incidentally, the growth of drama in the East African region took a slower pace than fiction and poetry. A few reviews in *Busara* highlighted the paucity of original theatrical performances in the region. In "What Future for Drama," Mary Kimori hailed the introduction of drama for postgraduate students at the University College, Nairobi (*Busara* 2 (3), 35–37). She however, decried the lack of plays in the region. By 1969 when she wrote the article, Kimori noted that there was only "a rough assortment of plays" (1969, 35) published in the anthology *Short East African Plays in English* (1968), which was edited by Cook and Miles Lee, and James Ngũgĩ's (wa Thiong'o) *The Black Hermit* (1968). Subsequently, most theatre groups remained beholden to European playwrights especially Shakespeare. Generally local drama took time to thrive in Kenya. It was only after the formation of the University of Nairobi Free Travelling Theatre in early 1970s and the entry of playwrights like John Ruganda that the theatre scene started becoming alive with local drama.

One other major critical issue that occasionally came up in *Nexus*/*Busara* was the question of the Negritude movement in African literature. Writers such as Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo in Nigeria, and Ezekiel Mphahlele in South Africa had dismissed the movement. Their stand influenced the critical reception of the movement in the rest of Anglophone African countries. In East Africa, Liyong had dismissed Negritude as a retrogressive philosophy that was to be shunned by progressive Africans thinkers. Lennard Okola also observed that East African poets "subconsciously" felt that "much of the colonial situation has been explained for him by the longer established West African poets and, therefore, considers negritude a dead subject which would dissipate his creative energy in vague nostalgia" (1967, 13). For

Wanjala, Negritude was “an act of revelling in ‘dreams’ when society wants the truth” (“African Response to Negritude” [1978, 42]). Negritude had little influence on Kenyan literature as the movement’s relevance in African literature continued to diminish owing to the fact that, after the end of colonialism, the African writer was now facing new realities that called for new approaches. Other than being cited in discussion forums on African literature, the literary movement did not influence the writing of poetry in the East African region the way it had done in Francophone West Africa.

The debates by critics cited above helped to shape the direction of literary production in Kenya. *Nexus/Busara* became not only a site for the sprouting of young authors, but also an avenue for the convergence of ideas from diverse schools of thought that contributed to the growth of Kenyan literature. The high modernism of Liyong was countered by the “popular” approach of Okot p’Bitek. Though it has not been properly acknowledged, Bitek inspired significant literary trends in East Africa while Liyong waited for a Homer or a Chaucer to emerge in the East African literary desert. Bitek popularised African traditional aesthetics in modern East African literature, initiated the “Song tradition” with his songs of “Lawino,” “Ocol,” “Malaya” and “Prisoner,” and also inspired the rise of the popular novel by writers like Charles Mangua and David Maillu in Kenya in the 1970s. It remains debatable whether Ngũgĩ’s, Liyong’s, and Anyumba’s “vision of literary citizenship on the basis of an invented literary tradition” (Amoko 2010, 11) in the “Nairobi Revolution” had succeeded, but *Busara* increasingly presented less European-inspired poetry in the 1970s, and students like Wanjala came to think more of literature and its relationship to society.

From the foregoing discussion, there is no doubt that the publication of *Nexus/Busara* and other literary magazines in the 1960s and 1970s marked a critical stage in the growth and development of literature in Kenya. *Nexus/Busara* thrived during a period of sustained literary production in Kenya as literary practitioners, mostly from the university community, and publishers such as the East African Publishing House (EAPH) and East African Literature Bureau (EALB) kept the literary scene alive. The magazine enabled the growth of a vibrant literary community that brought together students and teachers, the young and the old, upcoming and established writers to ventilate on matters of their past and present moments through writing. It was the 1975 demise of the East African Community and subsequently that of the East African Literature Bureau that dealt a death blow to *Busara*. In its eight years of existence, the student magazine provided aspiring young Kenyan writers with an avenue for the production of a literature that challenged Liyong’s claim about East African literary barrenness and which confirmed Bruce King’s assertion that, following the end of colonialism, “[t]he twilight of the empire and its literary traditions are being revisioned through re-examined memories and the construction of new mythologies” (1998, 9).

Note

1. They were called that because they were associated with the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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