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# Languages are not in competition

BY

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Recognizing and appreciating creative writers in Kiswahili de-centers the use of imperial and borrowed languages in African literatures.

The shortlisted works and authors for the 2023 Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature were announced in Nairobi on January 10. Categories in the shortlist include fiction, poetry, and short story collections. Eight manuscripts in total have made it to the shortlist, and the authors include five from Tanzania and three from Kenya.

In the category of fiction are *Dunia Duara* (Philipo Oyaró, Tanzania), *Salome Anaishi* (Nicholas Ogal, Kenya), and *Safari ya Maisha* (Ahmad Simba, Tanzania). In the category of poetry are *Changa la Macho* (Fatuma Salim, Tanzania), *Ndani Ya Subira Kichwangomba* (Lenard Mtesigwa, Tanzania), and *Ushairi wa Maisha ya Kesho* (John Karithi, Kenya). In the short story category are Edwin Omindo's *Mtoto wa Mama na Hadithi Nyingine* (Kenya), and Stallone Joyfully's *Koti la Karani na Hadithi Nyingine* (Tanzania).

The overall winners in each category will be announced at the awards ceremony to be held in tonight (February 9) in Nairobi. Cash prizes will be awarded to the top unpublished manuscript in specific categories: fiction, poetry, memoir, and graphic novels. In addition to the prizes, winning

entries will be considered for publication by Mkuki na Nyota Publishers in Tanzania, while the winning poetry will be translated into English and published by the Africa Poetry Book Fund.

The chair of the 2023 judges panel is Kyallo W. Wamitila from University of Nairobi. When giving the decision of the judges, Wamitila said that the submissions were many and varied, which attests to the plethora of talented creative writers in East Africa writing in Kiswahili. He stated:

This is something to be grateful about and augurs well regarding the future of Kiswahili literature. The idea to come up with this award, actualise and to sustain it is a major boon to young, aspiring, as well as accomplished authors since it gives them a very good platform to show what they can do.

Other judges who joined Wamitila in reading and nominating the manuscripts for the 2023 competition were Zuhura Badru of the University of Dodoma, and Ali Mwalim Rashid of the State University of Zanzibar.

Carole Boyce Davies, one of the members of the Board of Trustees of the Kiswahili Prize, will be coming for the awards ceremony. Davies is a renowned radical black feminist who wrote *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*, and has a new book out on black women's radical leadership.

The Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature was founded in 2014 by Lizzy Attree and Mukoma wa Ngugi to recognize writing in African languages and encourage translation from, between, and into African languages. The Prize is supported by Safal Group, through its subsidiaries Mabati Rolling Mills of Kenya, ALAF Tanzania, the Africana Studies Center at Cornell University, and the Ngugi wa Thiong'o Foundation.

Since its inception, the Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature has been focused on ennobling forms of creative writing in Kiswahili. This focus has not only been a big shot in the arm for African literature in Kiswahili, but also in other African languages. Language is a reservoir and carrier of people's identities, culture, and mindsets. Recognizing and appreciating creative writers in Kiswahili amplifies efforts to decenter (or in the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "moving the center") from the pursuits of expressing African literature through imperial and borrowed languages. This allows for languages rooted in African soils and pan-African identity and pride. Writing and expressing in African languages contributes to African liberation and pan-African praxes.

When announcing the introduction of the prize in Kiswahili literature, Mukoma wa Ngugi and Lizzy Attree, in the article “The Kiswahili Prize for African Literature,” wrote:

All African literature whether in European or African languages serves as a tributary to the greater ocean of the African literary tradition. A Kiswahili prize for literature is as Pan-African as a Yoruba or isiXhosa prize. If we can accept that a French and English prize is African, should we not see an African language prize as inherently Pan-African? It would be ironical to consider European language prizes to be more African than those honoring work in African languages. We need to dismantle the framework established by the Makerere generation in the 1960's of the higher Pan-African and national literatures being in English and lower and divisive ethnic literatures being in African languages. There is a need for African literature in African languages to enter a global conversation with literatures around the world on a more equal footing.

The importance of English, French, and other imperial languages has been postured since colonialism, taken to signify literary excellence and recognition. Such postures ignore the fact that even English, at some point in history, was a marginalized language. There was the old English that was largely spoken by peasants in the British Isles in the 14th-15th century. Despite its marginalized beginnings, English continued to develop and grow to be a language of global power and influence. It is also easy to forget that major literary works, such as those by Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, Haruki Murakami, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among others, are later translations into English from other languages.

But there are contentions that writing and expressing in African languages will continue to split Africa and undercut the pursuit of pan-Africanism. Such arguments run counter to the logic buttressed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o: that writing and expressing ourselves only in imperial languages is enslaving, while writing and speaking in both, imperial and African languages, is enriching. After all, this is the purpose of translation in the manner that wa Ngugi argues would “breathe life and most importantly salaries into a new generation of professional multi-linguists.” This means, “instead of seeing the thousands of African languages as a problem, we need to see them as a resource.” Seen this way, wa Ngugi adds, “Translations between African languages and between other world languages would enrich our literature while contributing to the larger body of world literature.”

There is no lesser or bigger language. All languages should co-exist and flow effortlessly through each other and across cultures. As wa Ngugi notes, “If we are to grow the African literary tradition, and increase literacy, we need more of everything.”

As a proverb from the Igbo in Nigeria (popularized by Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*) goes: “Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch, any that forbids the other from perching, let its wings break.”

About the Author

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