

“Love, Peace, and Unity”: Romantic Nationalism and the Role of Oral Literature in Kenya’s Secondary Schools

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Oral literature has been the centre of debate in many literary circles in Kenya. Its value and relevance has been discussed extensively in schools, literary circles and even in the press. One thing that keeps coming up consistently is that its relevance to the building of our nation cannot be questioned. (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:v)

In post-independence Kenya, the study of oral literature is an integral element in the construction of national consciousness. Kenyan scholar-patriots¹ believe that teaching oral literature in secondary schools can create “a true sense of nationhood” (Akivaga and Adaga 1982:ix). Nation is defined here as an imagined community (Anderson 1991) whose individual members owe allegiance and loyalty to the idea of a nation and not a sovereign. One of the primary goals of education in post-colonial Kenya has been to “foster a sense of nationhood and promote national unity” (Eshiwani 1993:23). The discourse on unity and nation-building found in anthologies, textbook collections of oral literature, and teaching resources resembles the rhetoric of European romantic nationalism of the 18th and 19th centuries. An exploration of European romantic nationalism can therefore inform an understanding of Kenyan nationalism and the use of oral literature in Kenya’s schools.

After independence in 1963, the British left Kenya as a state seeking to become a nation (Appiah 1992:162). According to romantic nationalist ideology, the forging of a nation begins with a focus on “traditions and myths of the past—that is, [with] folklore—instead of [with] the political realities of the present”(Wilson 1976:820). Similarly, Kenyan scholar-patriots seek in the folklore of Kenya’s diverse ethnic groups the expression of core social values—hospitality, selflessness, justice, and communal cooperation—that aid in constructing a unified nation. Politicians also turn to Kenya’s pre-

colonial history for models based on these core values upon which to build political action and national ideology.

Leteipa ole Sunkuli and Simon Miruka define oral literature as “prose and poetry marked by artistry and communicated by word of mouth” (1990:36). For these scholars, oral literature is synonymous with orature and verbal art; the terms are interchangeable. They define folklore, on the other hand, as the “body of knowledge, traditions, customs, habits, beliefs and practices and oral literature of a community handed down through generations: the social, material and oral culture of a community” (1990:35). Other Kenyan schoolbook texts that inform this article adhere to this definition and focus primarily on the verbal genres of proverb, riddle, song, oral poetry, folktale, legend, and myth. Although these are European categories, the writers of these texts carefully note local classification and categories. Oral literature is presented, taught, and tested as part of written literature within the English curriculum.

European Romantic Nationalism

The philosophy of European romantic nationalism began with Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who argued that people who share a common language and tradition constitute a nation. According to Herder, nations emerge spontaneously throughout history—a product of the unconstrained flow of events and as the natural state of one people who share a common national character (Wilson 1976). Romantic nationalism was a response to the dominance of the French Enlightenment which emphasized neoclassicism and glorified reason and intellect. Early romantic nationalists turned away from these elite intellectual ideas and to rural peasants, to *das Volk* (the folk), whose culture, traditions, and language were considered to be free from the contamination of French-dominated urban intellectuals.

Romantic nationalism, as promoted by Herder, has four basic interrelated elements: land, language, folklore, and the folk. The land shapes and forms the character of a people. Language is central to a Romantic definition of nation, since speakers of one language are one nation. Folklore is the expression of the noble virtues, spirit, and soul of a nation. Finally, folklore is found among the folk, who are conceived of as people who live in homogenous agrarian communities and who are “simple and elemental, as opposed to all that is artificial and farfetched” (Cocchiara 1980:28).

According to this framework, a unique geography and topography shapes the character of a people. Different lands produce different national characters and human and national diversity are thus natural. Yet, according to Herder, one nation should not impose its character on another. In fact, this rich diversity should not contain political forces such as slavery, conquest,

colonialism, or imperialism (Barnard 1965:101–08). An organic bond exists between a people, the land, and the nation; thus, the land is “sacralized” and becomes a homeland (Abrahams 1993:22). This adds an organic, natural component to the idea of the nation.

Herder also argued that people establish themselves as a distinct, separate group primarily through language; one people speaking one tongue constitutes one nation (Cocchiara 1980). This too was a reaction against German intellectuals who embraced the French language and French intellectual thought. According to Herder, a nation was not a group of people who owed allegiance to a sovereign, but an independent, distinct, and natural political body of people who spoke the same language (Barnard 1965).

Furthermore, Herder asserted that the soul, the mind, and the spirit of a nation is found in the folklore of the common people. Romantic nationalists sought a cultural heritage and language on which to build national identity in the natural folk genius as expressed in their folklore. Herder used the term *Naturpoesie*, or “nature poetry” which included not only those folklore genres associated with an oral tradition, but also included the works of great “national” poets such as Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Ossian (Kamenetsky 1976). For the Romantics, *Naturpoesie* was “the very voice of humanity”—natural, simple, and spontaneous (1976:837).

This quest to collect folklore necessitated the invention of “a figure who embodies the past in all its glory, a representative somehow left behind on the landscape in spite of more recent historical forces” (Abrahams 1993:9), in other words, the “folk.” Romantic nationalists imagined the folk as the true, authentic source of all that was noble and good in society because they believed that the folk maintained a natural connection to the land. This fascination with the folklore of the common peasant was not just “melancholy nostalgia” (Kamenetsky 1976:839) or simply an effort to collect a vanishing past. It was also a search to “discover ‘historical’ models on which to reshape the present and build the future” (Wilson 1976:819). The philosophy of European romantic nationalism directly and profoundly affected many nationalistic movements throughout the world and “the same stirring phrases about glorious national pasts and noble destinies that once moved Europeans to action are today to be heard echoing throughout Africa and Asia”(1976:833).

Nationalism in Kenya

Under the British colonial system, nationalism in Kenya united and mobilized “all available groups of people in the country for the single struggle” (Mboya 1970:477), for independence, for *Uhuru Sasa* (freedom now).² After independence, the unifying agenda of *Uhuru Sasa* was no longer a factor and, lacking a common goal, Kenya’s diverse ethnic groups pursued

conflicting agendas. The new nation of Kenya was defined by colonial cartography rather than a shared sense of history. Even though Kenya's citizens shared one geographic area, they did not share one language or one folklore—the basis for the romantic definition of nation. After 1963, the sense of nationhood that had developed during the independence movement began to disintegrate. As Eric Hobsbawm argues, the people of such decolonized countries like Kenya feel no national or protonational sentiments and do not form a shared sense of nationhood (1990:179).

Leaders of African countries emerging from former British colonies sought ways to forge patriotic bonds between diverse ethnic, religious, and political communities in order to construct a sense of nationhood, “a state of mind...in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state” (Kohn 1961:149, quoted in Wilson 1976:819). This became *the* “national question” in Africa:

The national question has become the major internal political problem in African countries. In most newly established states, national emancipation was not completed by the formal declaration of independence of the population within the boundaries of former colonies. The slogan ‘one nation, one state’ expresses the desired unity which is essential for the consolidation of young African states and for their economic and democratic development. The establishment of a new nation by means of decree (of a party, a government, the military, or of mass organizations) cannot be an adequate basis for the more subtle processes of internal economic, national and social integration, that is, for the gradual and equitable fusion of different ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and racial segments of the population into a single nation. (Nobilo 1992:218, italics in original)

The process of nationalism has been addressed in Kenya through the rhetoric of “nation-building.” Under the governments of Mzee Kenyatta and President Moi, nation-building has meant three things: (1) creating a “national political community as a basis for maintaining state power”(Ogot 1995b:234), (2) modernizing industry, the infra-structure, and agricultural production, and (3) creating unity, or inventing a “homogeneity-encompassing diversity” (Handler 1988:6)³ through the construction of a national (as opposed to a regional or ethnic) consciousness.⁴ This last point is the focus of the energies of Kenya's scholar-patriots.

Like European romantic nationalists, Kenya's leaders and scholar-patriots look to pre-colonial customs, traditions, and values to find “historical models” on which to build a national consciousness. Guiseppe Cocchiara explains that for romantic nationalism, “folklore, the study of various manifestations and the assessment and reassessment of values, was the bridge between past and future” (1980:273). Likewise, Kenyan cultural nationalists

try to find models rooted in an ancestral spirit on which to build ideologies of nationalistic ideology. This pursuit resulted in the *Harambee* movement and in President Moi’s *Nyayo* philosophy.

The term “Harambee”, “pull together,” refers to a concept rooted in the tradition of Kenya’s diverse communities. It denotes “collective effort, community self-reliance” and all forms of collective and cooperative enterprises (Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977:14). The Harambee movement is a concrete example of traditional communal values and customs that were recontextualized in the process of nation-building, and evidences how traditional elements function as a bridge between the past and the future. Most Kenyan ethnic groups have a word for this concept of “working together” that in pre-colonial times might have included clearing bush for planting, building villages, or herding cattle. Harambee was instituted by President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta immediately after independence as a self-help movement through which communities could identify and fulfill their needs by using their own resources without substantial aid from the state or foreign donors (Ngau 1987). It became a national slogan, a motto on the national crest, and a rally cry (Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977). Harambee projects addressed the immediate needs of a community such as health centers, cattle dips, churches, roads, bridges, irrigation projects, and water storage. The most sought-after project was the building of schools. More than 75% of all secondary schools are the product of Harambee projects, and about 60% of all secondary school students are taught in these schools (Shiman and Mwira 1987:369).

While Harambee projects assist in the development of many rural areas, they also create a system of indebtedness among politicians. Political leaders are expected to contribute large cash donations at Harambee conducted in their constituencies. Many must ask their political superiors for assistance, thus creating a client-patron network. Mzee Kenyatta and later President Moi, for example, used Harambee to control politicians (see Widner 1990).⁵

Today, nationalism in Kenya is subsumed under President Moi’s philosophy of *Nyayo*, or *Nyayoism*. “Nyayo” is a Swahili word for “footsteps,” and implies following in ex-president Kenyatta’s footsteps by continuing his development projects. “Love, peace and unity,” the crux of Nyayoism, is a philosophy which has its (invented) roots in a “universal African spirit—the spirit of the forefathers” (Moi 1986: 19).⁶ All nationalisms are imagined, invented, and potentially dangerous,⁷ and Moi’s nationalist ideology of *Nyayo* is no exception. In Kenya, *Nyayo* has become a blanket term covering all other African ideologies including constitutional democracy, Christian socialism, African socialism, anti-tribalism, development, nationalism, and patriotism. Consequently, anyone who opposes Moi’s *Nyayo* philosophy is perceived as a government opponent: “In short, being anti-

nyayo soon meant being anti-government and anti-party, because nyayoism was already depicting a new social order and restructuring political categories” (Ogot 1995a:193–94).

According to Tom Mboya, an important leader in the movement for independence, returning to the traditions of the past in order to build a future did not mean a return to “living in a mud and wattle hut or walking barefoot” for this was not tradition but “poverty” (1965:28). Mboya called for an amalgamation of the best and positive values of African culture and tradition with “all that we can usefully learn and borrow from the rest of the world” (1965:28). Mboya proposed, for example, that the role and station of women in African society adapt to that of the West,⁸ but also argued that other traditions, such as bride price, need not be dismissed since the process of negotiating and paying the bride price brought the familial communities together. Keeping in mind the warning of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, O.J.E. Shiroya, a contemporary Kenyan educator, writes that “a nation that refuses to learn from foreign cultures is nothing but a bunch of idiots and lunatics.”⁹ Arguing along similar lines as Mboya, Shiroya claims that Africans in general, and Kenyans in particular, need to “psychologically” return to African cultural and historical roots. He argues that this backward glance will liberate the African mind and set it free from colonial legacy. Only then will Africans independently contribute to the development of human civilization (1992:109). Mboya’s and Shiroya’s conceptions of nationalism echo romantic nationalism. Both envision an African future founded on the traditions of Africa’s “folk.”

Unlike the romantic nationalists of Europe, who tapped the lore of a relatively monolingualistic and monocultural people, Kenya’s scholar-patriots must contend with a diversity of peoples, languages, religions, and cultures. Indeed, a nation like Kenya would seem to romantic nationalists as an unnatural “wild mixture of various breeds and nations under one scepter” (Wilson 1976:820). Politicians and scholar-patriots, therefore, must delve deeper to find core cultural and social values shared by all Kenyans. They find these core values expressed in oral literature.

Oral Literature in Kenya’s Secondary Schools

Folklore is one of the primary tools used by romantic nationalists to construct national cultures. In Kenya’s schools, folklore (as oral literature) is an important element in the strategy for building up the nation from a post-colonial state. Scholar-patriots believe that since oral literature “is a medium through which a people’s core values and philosophy are transmitted,” its study will help to create one people “firmly rooted in the best of its traditions” (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:1). Kenyan educators propose

that the proverbs, riddles, songs, legends, folktales, and myths contained in anthologies and textbooks "will instil [sic] basic moral and social concepts" in Kenya's children (Onyangu-Oguto and Roscoe 1974:5). These values, philosophies, and moral and social concepts are rooted in a pre-colonial past collected from rural folk—people who remember the old ways and stories. According to Kenyan educators, these core values will be systematically passed on to new generations through the study of folklore in secondary school classrooms.

In 1965, two years after independence, the government commission on education, the Ominde Commission, published its findings and recommendations. First among the Commission's objectives was to ensure that "Education...foster[s] a sense of nationhood and promote[s] national unity" (Eshiwani 1993:26).¹⁰ To achieve this goal, education should respect cultural traditions but at the same time de-emphasize "division[s] of race, tribe and religion" (Eshiwani 1993:26). In 1971, 1976, and 1981, other education commissions appointed by the government reiterated and supported the goals set forth by the Ominde Commission (Eshiwani 1993). However, the study of oral literature did not become part of the school curriculum until 1981.

The study of oral literature is part of "the need for a curriculum that is oriented in the national soil of Kenya" (Mphahlele 1965:27). When the Ministry of Higher Education made the study of oral literature compulsory in 1981, there was strong opposition. Those opposed argued that oral literature would encourage "tribalism,"¹¹ especially among Kenya's youth, and promote cultural practices that were "irrelevant" and "obsolete" in modern Kenya. Furthermore, opponents questioned what the Kenyans of Indian and English descent would study, since the oral literature used in the schools stemmed only from the oral traditions of Kenya's native African population. Finally, they warned against the dangers of romanticizing the African past. On the other hand, the proposal's proponents, including such notable Kenyan scholars and writers as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Owuor Anyumba, Taban lo Liyong, and Okot p'Bitek,¹² argued that oral literature was part of a living, vital, and vigorous tradition and that African students must be exposed to this authentic reservoir of culture (Lillis 1986).

Oral literature is part of the literary core that between 1989 and 1992 included *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, Kenyan short stories, African poetry, and *Romeo and Juliet*.¹³ Since most textbooks are geared toward the Form IV subject exams, the exam content is a good indicator of course content and of how the subject is taught. The Form IV English exam consists of three separate tests, each lasting from one hour and fifteen minutes to two-and-one-half hours. For the English grammar test, students complete a number of grammar exercises. For the second exam, students write a composition on topics unrelated to any particular text. The Literature Exam asks for essays

or for a series of short answers on literary texts. In the oral literature section, a short folktale is presented in English translation and students identify and discuss examples of irony, satire, metaphor, repetition, ideophone, characterization, story, plot, and other features of narratives.

The following discussion of the Kenyan materials is derived from oral literature anthologies, collections, and textbooks that were primarily produced as textbooks and teaching aids for secondary and university level courses (Adagala and Kabira 1994; Akivaga and Adaga 1982; Chesaina 1991; Kabira 1983; Kabira and Mutahi 1988; Kipury 1983; Miruka 1994; Mwangi 1970; Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe 1974; Sunkuli and Miruka 1990). With the exception of Benedict Onyango-Ogutu, a poet and cultural researcher, the other collectors and writers are or have been teachers or lecturers at the secondary school level and in Kenyan universities. Wanjiku Kabira, for example, teaches oral literature. Karega Mutahi teaches linguistics in the University of Nairobi. Okumba Miruka taught in secondary schools and was the assistant chairman of the Kenya Oral Literature Association in 1994. Kavetsa Adagala was a lecturer at the University of Nairobi in the Literature Department. Although Adrian Roscoe is not Kenyan, he also taught at the University of Nairobi. Naomi Kipury, at the time she published *Oral Literature of the Maasai*, had taught in a secondary school and later continued her own education in the United States. These are some of the men and women who have shaped the study of oral literature in Kenya's secondary school and universities, adopting a mission of secondary education by fostering a sense of nationhood and developing a curriculum to accomplish this goal.

The anthologies and textbooks (Adagala and Kabira 1994; Akivaga and Adaga 1982; Miruka 1994; and Sunkuli and Miruka 1990) rely primarily on the fieldwork collections of other researchers (Chesaina 1991; Kabira 1983; Kabira and Mutahi 1988; Kipury 1983; Mwangi 1970; Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe 1974). Except for Adrian Roscoe, the collectors are members of the communities in which they conducted research. C. Chesaina (1991), Kabira (1983), Kabira and Mutahi (1988), and Kipury (1983) even provide the oral literature texts in their original languages (Kalenjin, Kikuyu, and Maasai). Although the anthologies try to use examples of oral literature from the different Kenyan peoples, those from the Kikuyu, Luo, Maasai, and Swahili are over-represented.

Although these texts were intended for school use, they are infrequently used in classrooms.¹⁴ The purchase of classroom textbooks for the English curriculum is generally limited to novels and plays. Many secondary schools cannot afford to purchase classroom copies of these books and instead use their scarce resources to buy only those texts that are specifically mentioned in the official syllabus.

The inclusion of oral literature as a school subject is part of the move to Africanize the curriculum in Kenya. It was developed with the aim of stressing national unity through the development of a national consciousness which preserves and enhances local traditions and cultures (Urch 1968:193–223). It is part of a pan-African movement of cultural nationalism which advocates changing the literature curriculum of universities, as well as that of secondary and primary schools (Thiong'o 1971). Kenyans who support the study of oral literature view it as a means to create national unity. This rhetoric, couched in the language of African cultural nationalism, echoes romantic nationalism:

The teaching of oral literature in most African countries is either totally neglected or haphazard where it has been introduced. In Kenya, the attempt to restructure the literature syllabus dates back to 1974 when the first Conference of Literature Teachers was held at Nairobi School. It was then agreed by the teachers of literature in Kenya that literature teaching must have amongst others the objective of enabling students to recognize the positive stream in their own culture so that they may look critically at their present day society, thereby developing a *true sense of nationhood and national pride*. The study of the African and black experience must be placed at the core of their studies. (Akiyaga and Adaga 1982:ix, emphasis in original)

The introduction of oral literature into Kenya's classrooms is also part of a reaction against colonial education which, as Tom Mboya criticized, was designed to "belittle African traditions and customs and replace them with habits and attitudes developed in Western Europe" (1965:27). The discussion of colonial degradation and the effort to repair this cultural damage also echoes the language of romantic nationalism:

For communities like many Kenyan communities whose culture, self image, history etc. were on the verge of total distortion and destruction by colonialism, the study of oral literature becomes very important. Through oral literature people can correct the false image and distortions of their past that have occurred through colonial experience. From there they can recreate and create a more positive image of themselves and their culture. Through the same medium, people can create faith and self confidence in themselves and become better nation builders. In the Kenyan situation, the study of oral literature offers the students and researchers ample opportunities to understand the values of the different communities. It is on these values that our nation can cultivate and enhance the creation of unity and nationhood. (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:3)

This emphasis on traditional culture as positive and valuable counters the hegemonic discourse of the colonial legacy. Kenyan scholar-patriots see traditional value systems embedded in oral literature and highlight its importance and pan-Kenyan presence to their secondary school audience. This traditional system of values plays an important role in nation-building. Two Kenyan educators explain: "Many people recognize that the development and the future of a nation depends on the ability of that nation to create a people firmly rooted in the best of its traditions. Such a people are proud of themselves as individuals and as a nation"(Kabira and Mutahi 1988:1).

According to these scholars, oral literature reveals some of the common elements and values shared by all Kenyan ethnic groups. Since "Kenya is a nation of different peoples[,] a study of the oral literature of our different peoples gives us a sympathetic understanding of each others' cultures; such intercultural understanding is very important if we are to prosper together as one nation" (Akivaga and Adaga 1982:4). The search for core values shared by all Kenyans in oral literature becomes an important project since "narratives play a very major role in *reflecting a people's values and philosophy*....Through them the morals of the society are communicated to the audience and the needs and hopes are articulated" (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:18, italics in original).

Part of the educational rhetoric contained in this national discourse is that, since they share the same core values, the study of the oral literature of various communities will foster an understanding between ethnic groups. The review questions at the end of a secondary school level textbook anthology associate this national project with learning oral literature:

8. Using any five narratives in this collection show how culturally related the Kenyan peoples are.
9. Discuss the values and philosophy of the Kenyan nation as a cultural entity using the narratives in this collection.
10. "Oral literature as one aspect of culture can be used to unite a nation." Discuss.

(Adagala and Kabira 1994:87)

These questions reveal the heart of the nation-building strategy: bonds between groups can be promoted by establishing that diverse groups of Kenyan people share common core values. These bonds create unity and forge a national identity. This strategy is explicit in a collection of Kikuyu oral literature:

Through the studies of various Kenyan peoples, we shall be able to identify and develop the values that unite us as a nation. Only through such studies can a true Kenyan identity and a truly Kenyan culture be nurtured. (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:1)

What are these core values shared by all Kenyan communities as reflected in oral literature? According to the interpretation by Kenya’s scholar-patriots, oral literature texts highlight, endorse, and promote the values of social justice, hospitality, sharing, generosity, and selflessness, and illustrate the dangers of personal greed. A strong emphasis is placed on communal values which reflect mutual concerns and reciprocating responsibilities, values which will significantly help to create a nation. The discussions of hyena, for example, a character known for greed, gluttony, and selfishness, stress the fact that he is punished and condemned for these very anti-communal qualities. This interpretation subtly teaches a moral lesson against these vices, vices which could destroy nation-building efforts. I was surprised when one day one of my students spoke of corrupt officials as hyenas.¹⁵ In contrast, characters who embody noble virtues are lauded, as exemplified by the Kikuyu narrative “The woman and the bird,” which takes place during a time of drought. The most beautiful girl in the village is sacrificed to appease the gods and save the community. This “teaches the audience the value of individual sacrifice for the good of the whole society” (Kabira and Mutahi 1988:11–13). Likewise, in a small book of Kikuyu folktales, Rose Mwangi interprets the ogre character as a representation of “the alienated and dehumanized member of the society, and just as the wizard and the thief were eliminated from the society, so should the greedy and lazy person who could not leave his world of greed and egotism and come to terms with the world of communal unity” (1988:36). In the introduction to *Kenyan Oral Narratives* (Adagala and Kabira 1994), the value of “working together” is presented as a thematic concern. This value is discussed in the same section as the choice of language, tone, detail, repetition, song, and comparisons. Working together is considered an important element of oral literature which is to be learned and identified as part of testable knowledge. It is the narrators, the oral artists, who are described as embodying and communicating these communal values (Kabira 1983) which:

encourage the collective effort of people in their societies. [Oral artists] show that individualism *per se* is negative and that is why we find that individualistic characters...are condemned...[and] the audience is expected to condemn and not emulate such destructive and anti-social characters. The individuals are expected to work, collectively with others, for the good of society. (Adagala and Kabira 1994:xviii–xix)

The value of working for the communal good lies at the heart of Kenya’s diverse communities. When this ideal is expanded to encompass the country, its importance in nation-building cannot be overemphasized. In the stories themselves, the characters that embody anti-communal values,

the hyena and the ogre, are always defeated. The value of working together, of "communal unity," and of collectivism is stressed by the writers who interpret the narratives and also by the focus of the review questions. The interpretation of collective community action echoes and reinforces the government's nationalist philosophy and practice of Harambee.

Both oral literature and Harambee utilize similar values drawn from a pre-colonial tradition to legitimize and authenticate nation-building strategies. Like European romantic nationalists, Kenyan scholar-patriots searched for and found these national building blocks embodied in Kenya's elders and expressed in their verbal art. In Kenya, as in much of Africa, the elders are considered to be the keepers of wisdom, culture, traditions, and knowledge. They are, by virtue of their age, closer to a pre-colonial mythic past. Kenyan children should learn traditional values from them, and, by extension, Kenya should learn the values necessary to create a unified nation. In the stories communicated by Kenya's elders "lies the stability which is the basis for social, political and economic advance" (Mboya 1965:29).

Within this context, the purpose of the required fieldwork project mandated by the syllabus becomes clear; students will hear and learn from important educators in Kenyan society who are not found in the classroom:

One major thing needs to be said here; that fieldwork is the greatest teacher of oral literature....Many [students who] go to the field [find] there are great teachers and philosophers in their respective cultures that are hardly recognized in and outside their communities. (Adagala and Kabira 1994:90)

The image projected by this description of fieldwork is powerful. The photograph on the front cover of Wanjiku Kabira's *The Oral Artist* (1983) is of Kabebe, a respected elder and storyteller in his Kikuyu community, narrating a story to a group of school children in school uniforms on a grassy field. In the background there are two school buildings.

Oral literature collectors provide scant information about their informants. Except for riddles collected primarily from children, proverbs and prose narratives were collected from old people. In *Kikuyu Folktales*, Rose Mwangi hints at her "various sources" in a footnote. She quotes Njoki, her grandmother, "whose age was approaching 90" (1970:30, n. 10), in a discussion on the meaning of the ogre. Naomi Kipury's also provides little information on her sources in her collection of Maasai oral literature. In her acknowledgments, however, she thanks her mother "for spending many hours narrating patiently most of the stories in this book" (1983:v). Only Kabira (1983) provides detailed biographical information. Nonetheless, it is almost an accepted fact that the elders are the story-tellers in Kenya's different

communities (Miruka 1994:157). It can be argued that, drawing on long-standing, established ideas about elders, Kenyan scholar-patriots have invested romantic nationalist ideas of the “folk” in storytellers like Kabebe. This, of course, is not new. Herder once wrote, “Those peculiar national characters, which are so deeply implanted in the oldest people, unmistakably manifest themselves in all their activities on earth” (quoted in Wilson 1976:833). Until recently, folklore as a discipline tended to favor the older, rural story-teller. Age has a certain feel of authenticity.

It is ironic, then, that students are asked to look to their elders for wisdom and the resources upon which to build a future by an institution that physically removes them from their family and community. Other than schools in the major cities, most of the secondary schools in Kenya are boarding schools where students live for most of the year. This is a logistical necessity; nonetheless, it removes children from the base which educational ideology posits as the source of a unified nation-state.¹⁶

Through their anthologies, collections, and school textbooks, Kenya’s scholar-patriots argue that the study of oral literature is important to a nationalistic endeavor. The core values expressed in the oral traditions of Kenya and told by the elders are significant nation-building tools. They contend that if “the content of the oral traditions of a people epitomize the foundations of that group” (Miruka 1994:186), then the content of the oral traditions of all Kenya’s people will serve as the foundation of a nation envisioned as a group of people that imagine themselves as a community working together for the common good.

Conclusion

The study of oral literature in Kenya’s secondary schools is a subject of conflicting and intersecting rhetorics, ideologies, and methodologies. The “renascent energy towards the appreciation of age-old oral traditions” is part of an African “soul-searching” in the aftermath of a “debilitating colonial experience” (Sunkuli and Miruka 1990:vii). Echoing European romantic nationalism, Kenyan scholar-patriots and political leaders promote this rediscovery of a pre-colonial past and propose that this rediscovery will lead to a unified Kenya and a nationalism based on the spirit of the ancestors, not on an imported ideology. Scholar-patriots identified some of the core values fundamental to the construction and maintenance of a nation in the oral literature of Kenya. As part of the mission entrusted to education to mold this national consciousness, the study of oral literature thus became the format through which these common but important values are transmitted to the next generation of citizens. The move to localize education and to promote African and Kenyan literature in all its forms parallels this proposal.

William Wilson explains that, as we reflect on the legacy of Herder, we realize that romantic nationalists turned to a “mythic past” which was the product of their imaginations. By drawing upon this invented past, “they actually created a new nation in the image of what they thought the old one had been” (1976:830). Perhaps, as Kenya’s scholar-patriots imagine and construct their traditional past, they will, in Thomas Sankara’s words, “dare to invent the future” (1988, quoted in Davidson 1992:241).

Notes

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1 This term is borrowed from Wilson 1976 and I use it as a collective name for the collectors, editors, and writers of Kenyan oral literature textbooks who are for the most part teachers and educators.

2 Basil Davidson’s (1992) *Black Man’s Burden* is a very good exploration of nationalism in Africa.

3 Although Richard Handler is discussing Quebec nationalism, this phrase is apt in describing the Kenyan situation.

4 Other attempts at creating a national consciousness included the adoption of Kiswahili as a national language (see Whiteley 1969) and the promotion of national theater and dance troops as well as the promotion of music (see Hanna 1986 and Ogot 1995b).

5 Several researchers have pointed out the problems of Harambee in practice. See Hill 1991; Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977; Ngau 1987; Shiman and Mwira 1987; Widner 1990.

6 For a discussion of Nyayo and its political implications, see Abwunza 1990; Katz 1985.

7 Anne McClintock argues that nationalism is also powerfully gendered, and while advocating “unity,” nationalism has in fact “historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference” (1993:61).

8 The question arises of who gets to decide which values and traditions are to be recontextualized and modernized. An episode that took place in Kenya in 1990 reveals the important and far reaching implications of this question. President Moi was leading a consortium of businessmen and politicians to build a sixty-story office building in Uhuru Park, Nairobi’s largest remaining public park. The woman head

of the Green Belt movement in Kenya, Wangari Maathai, publicly and vociferously opposed the construction. In a public statement, President Moi invoked African tradition, saying that women were not allowed to contradict men and to meddle in men’s affairs; Maathai should content herself with women’s work.

9 This was in an address to the National Assembly of Tanzania on December 19th, 1962 and is quoted in Shiroya 1993:109.

10 In a related discussion, David Court (1977) argues that Kenya’s educational system fosters national unity through social control. Part of Kenya’s colonial legacy is the understanding that education is an opportunity for economic and social success. Students are socialized into accepting the present economic system as all have an equal opportunity to succeed. As Court explains:

inequalities are justifiable because they reflect differences in achievement and in the individual’s contribution to society....The unstated rationale for this meritocratic ideal is the notion that people can accept inequalities and personal relative deprivation if they believe that they have an equal chance to benefit and do not choose to question the criteria by which merit and hence mobility are determined. (1977:33)

Court implies that through education the status quo is reinforced and goes unquestioned—unity through social control.

11 Tribalism is an expression of ethnic identity and loyalty. In Kenya, it has meant the opposite of nationalism. While nationalism has meant unity at the national level, tribalism has meant unity based solely on ethnicity. Tribalism is conflict that has its roots in differing ethnic agendas. Many Kenyan politicians see tribalism as a powerful force that threatens stability and peace.

12 Although Okot p’Bitek is from Uganda, at the time of this debate he was at the University of Nairobi.

13 For an excellent discussion of the issues behind the Africanization of the written literature of the English syllabus, see Lillis 1986.

14 I was an English teacher at Rongai Secondary School from 1990 through 1991 as a volunteer with the De La Salle Christian Brothers. I had the opportunity to visit several schools in Kenya and to speak with many teachers and students.

15 During the recent pro-democracy movement, President Moi referred to his strongest opponents, Kenneth Matiba and Charles Rubia, as hyenas.

16 Another problem arises from this nationalistic rhetoric. For many Kenyans primary school is the terminal stage of their education. But as Thomas Eisemon, Martin Hallet, and John Maundu point out, primary level readers use stories on African subject matters and folktales to promote social values and teach moral lessons such as the importance of communal life. For example, a story in the *Standard II*

(second year of primary school) level reader from Macmillan press, "In the Market," in which a thief is beaten up by people in the marketplace, teaches "that theft is a serious breach of collective trust that requires social action" (Eisemon, Hallett, and Maundu 1986:238). Through these primary level English readers, the same communal values highlighted in the secondary level texts are foregrounded. Other, more subtle messages are also communicated by these texts. For example, stories where crime is a common feature of urban life may deter migration to Kenya's overcrowded cities. Other stories may also promote the use of certain crops over others (1986).

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