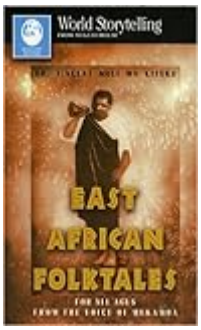
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Vincent Muli wa Kituku. *East African Folktales for all Ages from the Voice of Mukamba.* Little Rock, Ark.: August House Publishers, 1997. viii + 93 pp. $9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87483-489-5.

Reviewed by J. Roger Kurtz (SUNY College at Brockport)

Published on H-AfrLitCine (January, 1998)

Dr. Muli's book is not a scholarly work, nor does it pose as such. It is rather his rendition of eighteen short tales that he remembers his mother telling him while growing up in what is now Kenya's Eastern Province. The author, currently based in Idaho, has also published a collection of Kamba proverbs (*Sukulu Ite Nguta: The School with no Walls: Where Lifelong Lessons Begin.* Boise, Ida: V. Kituku, 1997; ISBN 0-96507-807-8), and the title under review was previously self-published as *The Voice of Mukamba: African Motivational Folktales for all Ages* (1996; ISBN 0-96507-800-0).

This small book is attractively packaged and will make a pleasant introduction for anyone unfamiliar with the African oral tradition. Each of the tales is presented in Kamba as well as English, along with an explanation of its moral. Some general observations preface the collection.

Readers should know that *East African Folktales* is by no means comprehensive or analytical. The tales are brief and of a single type. The preface does not explore grand themes of social identity or Kamba cultural distinctiveness. Muli's degree is in range management (his University of Wyoming dissertation studies whether bitter brush makes good eating for cattle and large game), and he apparently is skilled in offering motivational workshops. This book is by a lover of literature, therefore, rather than a trained student of it.

Those interested in approaching East African oral literature in any depth would do much better to consult works coming from Kenyan publishers these days. East African Educational Publishers, for instance, has a nice collection, featuring titles such as Okumba Miruka's *Encounter with Oral Literature* (ISBN 9966-46-691-6) or K. Adagala and Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira's *Kenyan Oral Narratives* (ISBN 9966-46-229-5).

As for Dr. Muli's collection, I like very much the fact that it includes both Kamba and English (a technique reminiscent of some of David Maillu's popular works), and I like the simple but useful preface, which for the most part does a decent job of introducing Africa to non-Africans and of explaining the role of the oral tradition in a general but positive manner.

There a few minor annoyances. Some of the interpretive material (in the preface and in the morals) is couched in the language of U.S.-style motivational speeches. Since the jacket blurb decribes the author as "an award-winning speaker who informs, inspires, motivates, and entertains audiences in workshops and keynote speeches," this is perhaps not surprising. At a few points, the discourse is dated. The cover material refers to "this unique collection of folktales from

a place known as Kambaland." Like "Lake Rudolph" (which is how the map identifies what we now call Lake Turkana), "Kambaland" has strongly colonial overtones–even though it is merely a translation of "Ukambani," which is more neutral. Further, the pronunciation guide in the preface is not entirely accurate, and the translation of "Kikoyo" as "Tiger" (rather than "Leopard") struck me as odd.

In short, *East African Folktales* is an attractively put together collection of tales by a generalist and for a general audience. Students of literature and linguistics will find more useful scholarly information elsewhere.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlitcine

Citation: J. Roger Kurtz. Review of wa Kituku, Vincent Muli, *East African Folktales for all Ages from the Voice of Mukamba.* H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1595

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.