



*Review*

**Nico Nassenstein, *Swahili Proverbs from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2022, 136 pp. ISBN 9783896457448**

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Nico Nassenstein's collection of sayings and proverbs presents four varieties of Congolese Swahili (DRC): Kivu, Bunia/Ituri Kingwana, Kisangani and Lubumbashi/Katanga. Besides the bibliography and a useful index of proverbs (classified for concepts), the book is divided into five parts, the first consists of the introduction and the collection of proverbs and the other four consist of the collection itself in the four Congolese regiolects. This volume follows logically Nassenstein's work on Congolese Swahili such as the 2015 monograph *Kisangani Swahili: Choices and Variation in a Multilingual Urban Space* or the 2016 monograph written with Paulin Baraka Bose *Kivu Swahili Texts and Grammar Notes*.

The book opens with an introduction divided into four paragraphs. In the first paragraph, the Author introduces us to the subject matter of his collection, namely proverbs as a genre and the linguistic focus of this collection. The first few pages are devoted to a discussion of the state of the art of both proverbs as a genre and classification (the Author also offers a brief discussion of Swahili terminology in this regard) and proverb collections in Swahili. In this section, the Author introduces one of the most interesting aspects of the book, namely the linguistic situation of Congolese Swahili varieties and, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the relationship of these varieties to each other (an aspect discussed in more detail below) and to coastal Swahili.



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The second paragraph is devoted to variations and classifications of Congolese Swahili. The Author offers a concise, but well-detailed and discussed, bibliography around the classification of Congolese Swahili, then goes on to describe the four regiolects of Congolese Swahili. In this section, the Author also elaborates the relationship between the varieties of Congolese Swahili, i.e. how and why one variety is felt to be more prestigious than another or how one variety has influenced another, as, for example, the case of the influence of Kivu Swahili on Bunia Swahili.

Kivu Swahili comprises two varieties, that of Bukavu and that of Goma — spoken by about 8-10 million speakers, mostly as a second language. Native speakers of Kivu Swahili live mostly in urban areas. Bunia Swahili or Ituri Kingwana is a variety of Swahili spoken in the northwest, in the province of Ituri, by almost two million speakers. This variety is mostly unintelligible to speakers of other varieties of Congolese Swahili, which is why speakers of Bunia Swahili tend to use Kivu Swahili in public conversation. The situation of Kisangani Swahili is very complex because this variety is mostly spoken in urban areas and in addition, it shares its prestige with Lingala. While Lingala<sup>1</sup> is mostly spoken in the neighbourhoods of Tshopo, Makiso and Magombo, Swahili is spoken in Kabondo, Lubunga and Kisangani. Kisangani Swahili is spoken by about three million people and unlike Kivu Swahili and Lubumbashi Swahili is more limited to the urban area. Lubumbashi Swahili, from the Katanga region, is also called Shaba or Copperbelt,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The prestige of Lingala dates back to Mobutu's time, not only because of where the president came from, but because a significant part of his political action had profound cultural influences, not only indirectly, but also directly. He promoted Congolese music, for instance, which spread throughout much of Africa (see SALTER 2007) and this increased Lingala's prestige within the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nassenstein, however, rightly reminds us that the linguistic complexity of this area is also due to less recent historical reasons, such as Henry Morton Stanley's explorations, the slave trade and colonisation. The use and spread of Swahili in this area is intertwined with the slave trade and originated with the settlement of the first governor, Tippu Tip, in 1888. The place, in fact, was an important stopover in the slave trade before Belgian colonialism and marked the western periphery of the spread of Swahili, where it came into contact with the more widely spoken Bangala and Lingala languages.

<sup>2</sup> The Copperbelt is a region from central Zambia to the southeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo known for its rich copper deposits. From the discovery of copper ingots in Zimbabwe, it is hypothesised that in pre-colonial times (around the 16th century) there was trade contact between the Copperbelt region (possibly with the Luba empire) and the Mwene Mutapa empire. In 1906, the Union Minière du Haut Katanga was created to exploit the mines of Katanga. Thanks to the wealth generated by the mines, the situation between 1960 and 1963 led to the unilateral

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respectively because of its copper (*shaba*) wealth and the area (belt) rich in copper. It is the best-documented variety of Congolese Swahili. The Author here gives us an account of the vast production on this regiolect; it is a well-documented bibliography that includes as yet unpublished volumes and may be useful for anyone approaching this regiolect.

The description of these four regiolects also includes the state of the art on Swahili varieties in DRC, the bibliography considered is particularly rich. Less rich appears to be that of Bunia Swahili, not because of the Author's carelessness but because there are few studies on this regiolect. For this reason, Nassenstein's work in collecting sayings and proverbs in Bunia Swahili is even more important.

The description of DRC Swahili varieties continues with varieties of Congolese Swahili not strictly included in the four regiolects discussed above. For example, the Uvira-Fizi-Kalemie corridor, which has more similarities with standard Swahili than the Lubumbashi (south) and Kivu (north) varieties, or the varieties spoken in Kindu and Butembo, which lie on the border between the spheres of influence of two different regiolects. In this section, the Author describes several theories that account for these spheres of influence and how these can explain the rich variety and diversity of Congolese Swahili. This is done through two maps (p.25) that aid in understanding the spheres of influence of the four regiolects (m2) (it is a pity, however, that the other areas mentioned by the Author (such as Kindu, Uvira, Fizi, Kalemie) are not placed on the map, which would have helped the reader to position them more easily). This section is replete with sociolinguistic and historical considerations that explain the relationships of influence of the Congolese Swahili varieties on each other and concerning standard Swahili. In addition, the Author makes annotations regarding youth language in continuity with the Author's studies on youth language (see NASSENSTEIN and HOLLINGTON 2015, 2016 and 2017, NASSENSTEIN 2016).

The third and fourth paragraphs are considerably shorter. The third is a brief description of the genres present in the oral production of the four regiolects discussed in the previous paragraph and the other languages present in their area, thus also talking about other languages (such as the presence of Lingala and French in the Kisangani area) or their presence in other areas (such as the presence of Swahili in Lubumbashi in Kinshasa). The paragraph that closes the introduction is dedicated to the genesis and objectives of the book. It also discusses an important aspect: that of the proverbs index. Compared to collections

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declaration of independence of the State of Katanga, only two weeks after the proclamation of Congo's independence.

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of proverbs in standard Swahili, which are only collected in alphabetical order, Nassenstein's collection of proverbs in Congolese Swahili, although much more concise, offers a thematic index at the end of the book. The proverbs are classified into sixteen categories: age/respect, body/wellbeing, difficulty/problem, emotion, failure/loss/mistake, food/drink, life/death, love/sexuality, money/economy/success, nature/animals, power/deity, progress/change/learning, social relationships, time, words/knowledge, work. This index is a fundamental tool for working on a corpus of proverbs and sayings. In other publications, some collections also have an analytical index, such as the collection of Shona proverbs by HAMUTYINEI and PLANGGER (1987), which is another extremely useful tool for finding one's way around richer corpora.

The other four sections of this book are dedicated to the collection of proverbs in the four varieties of Congolese Swahili: Kivu, Bunia, Kisangani and Lubumbashi respectively. One of the key aspects of this collection is that the Swahili proverbs of these four varieties contain not only proverbs from the textual tradition of coastal Swahili such as

**Kinywa ya muzee inanuka, alakini akiseme bongo** (Kivu)

'The old man's mouth smells, but it never lies'

**Kinya ya muzee nazinuka, mais inakalaka sema aki** (Bunia)

'The old man's mouth smells, but it always tells the truth'

**Kinywa ya bazee inanuka alakini inasemeka kweli** (Kisangani)

'The elder's mouth smells but always tells the truth'

**Mu kinywa ya muzee muko arufu lakini munasemaka ukweli** (Lubumbashi)

'It smells like an old man's mouth but it tells the truth'<sup>3</sup>

but they show a great richness that comes both from the creativity and local reworking of proverbs from standard Swahili, and from textual traditions to which these Congolese varieties are exposed (I refer here to other Bantu languages or French, whose genesis the Author traces).

By way of example, the proverbs below come from the Lingala *Kozelazela makomboso azángá mokila* and illustrates how some Congolese Swahili regiolects incorporate Lingala proverbs:

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<sup>3</sup> The translations of the proverbs are by Nassenstein. As for the Lubumbashi version of the proverb, I would have translated it differently: 'In the mouth of the old man there is a smell but the truth is told'.

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**Kungoyangoya liacha sokomoto yentakosa mokila/mukila** (Bunia)

'The fact of waiting caused the gorilla to lack a tail'

**Kungoyangoya liacha sokomoto yentakosa mokila/mukila** (Bunia)

'The fact of waiting caused the gorilla to lack a tail'

**Kwa kuchunga zaidi sokomuntu alikosa mukila** (Lubumbashi)

'Waiting for too long, the chimp has missed out [on getting] a tail'

A further key aspect of the book is that this collection offers a very important insight into the popular thought and verbal art of this area, and on the process of negotiation among different languages and cultures with different varieties of Swahili, local languages, Lingala and French. Also very interesting are the annotations that trace a transmission and communication between the verbal arts, such as the conveyance of proverbs and sayings through music (including modern music), especially in Lingala. This demonstrates the vitality of the verbal arts and their ability to act across genres, beyond traditional/modern categorisations. All these aspects are described in these four sections through footnotes.

Although the Author should be credited for having collected such important material, the book is not without flaws. One of these consists of these important footnotes, which deserves a more extensive and systematic study; a comparative study between the different varieties of Congolese Swahili. I am sure that these studies will enrich the Author's detailed production and in the future, such material will be analysed in further publications by Nassenstein. Moreover, even if not fundamental in this book, it would be useful to maintain a distinction between proverbs and sayings. This is not to say that one should separate genres and categories, which, as stated above, are always crossed by the practice of speakers, but one should take into account that a particular stylistic construction could have an effect on the language and words used.

These few points in no way detract from the merit of Nico Nassenstein's collection. The book is a fundamental resource for those who wish to approach the verbal arts of the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and for those who wish to deal with Swahili varieties.

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