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ASPECTS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE CLASSICAL SWAHILI POETRY: PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY OF AUTHORSHIP

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IDENTITY AND AUTHORSHIP

Folklore studies have fairly often put the study of performance techniques and topics before that of the individual artist and his or her relationship with audience, and the least researched area seems to be that of authorship. This tendency has resulted in the development of the mistaken belief that folklore is either communally produced or of anonymous authorship (Dégh 1969: vii-viii). The current article seeks to dispel this erroneous notion by using textual evidence to construct the identity of authorship in a sample of classical Swahili epics.

Apart from common culture, religion, geographical territory and history, the Waswahili people of the East African coast also share the rich language Kiswahili (Alien 1993: 1). This is also the language that bards have used to create one of the oldest and best established oral and written literary traditions in Africa. However, information on the leading authors of the classical Swahili poetry and texts is at best scant. As Knappert (1979: 1) notes:

learned treatises on Swahili society in centuries and a series of erudite essays critically assessing the works of the authors [...] is lacking. More research is called for in order to discover new materials or make more headway in shedding new light on the authors and their contemporaries.

The Arabic medium in which these texts were composed prior to the 19th century and their Islamic background and inspiration were further obstacles that made it rather difficult for the Western critics to understand and analyse this literature. Their work appears even more difficult because of the archaic form of Kiswahili (Kingozi)

used in the majority of older epics. The biggest problem that con-
fronts anyone translating or interpreting the epics is the great
number of dialects employed and lack of glossaries for poetry (cf,
e.g. Knappert 1971: xv). The above-mentioned linguistic, doctrinal
and cultural difficulties often force critics of classical Swahili epic
poetry to take recourse in other Swahili epics as well as neighboring
Bantu languages and traditions, with the alternative course of ac-
tion being trying to infer the meaning of archaic Swahili words from
their contexts of use.

Needless to state, overt reliance on oral tradition for biographical
data about authors often yields varied and unreliable results. Yet
more than seldom this is the only source available. This article
attempts to show that even though details of the identity and au-
thorship are almost non-existent in classical Swahili poetry, it is
nevertheless possible to derive such information from the text. There
are biographical and autobiographical pointers, albeit weak, to the
identity of the poet or poetess as well as target audience and the
social circumstances of composition. In the current paper I want to
discuss this on the example of the famous Swahili classical poets
Fumo Liyongo, Seyyid bin Ali bin Nassir (1720–1820), Muyaka Haji
bin (1776–1840) and Mwana Kupona (d. 1860). Epics discussed here
have also been written down; since the 17th century advent of Is-
lamic religion and education to the East African coast, Swahili po-
ets have been able to write. This expanded their view of their lan-
guage and tradition (Ryan 1981: 524). Thus the Swahili oral tradi-
tional folklore hitherto derived from the verbal word in songs, idi-
oms and poetry was now transformed into the literary medium
(Liyongo 1972: x).

**DEFINITION OF BIOGRAPHY IN FOLKLORE**

A biography is traditionally regarded as a form of non-fictional lit-
erary study of an individual’s life. Such a work may be either a
personal account of one’s own life (autobiography) or a historical
account narrated by someone else (biography). In the latter sense,
historical details become central in the work as we are dealing with
primarily a selective ordering and reinterpretation of materials both
from written and oral sources. This process is based on research
and since it seeks to convey a sense of individuality and significance of the subject through sympathetic inclination of details it can also be regarded as an aspect of creative and imaginative literature rooted in the folklore tradition (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1993: 222). This paper considers both views on biographical detail in the Swahili classical epic poetry.

**FUMO LIYONGO**

This ancient Swahili hero Liyongo is perhaps the most famous character in Swahili classical poetry. His songs are recorded in many manuscripts including Alien (1971) and Kijumwa (1913). About Liyongo’s physique we are told that he was an unusually huge man, even so that he could not be compared to any other human.

*Liyongo kitamakali*  
Akabalighi rijali  
Akawa mlu wa kweli  
Na haiba kaongeya.  

Liyongo grew up  
Into a strong young man  
He became a real man  
He became more beautiful

*Kimo kawa mrefu*  
*Mpana sana mrefu*  
*Majimboni yu maarufu*  
*Watu huya kwangaliya*  
(Mulokozi 1999: 23–24)

He grew tall  
Huge and tall  
Famous throughout the land  
People came to know him

Apart from the exaggerated physical features, Liyongo is also described as humble, respectful and obedient. Although the ruling Sultan was oppressing him, Liyongo responds positively and urgently when the ruler invites him to visit Pate City. He obeyed both man and God.

*Na Liyongo akajibu*  
*Kwa hishima na adabu*  
*Nitakuja kwa karibu*  
*Nitwiiye maulana*  
(*Ibid.*: 26)

And Liyongo answered  
Respectfully  
And with honour  
I swear this to God

The mystical powers and supernatural abilities of the hero Liyongo are outlined in many episodes in the epic. For instance, he is able to outsmart Wagulla warriors who trick him into climbing a Mukoma
tree intending to shoot him. Likewise, he tricks jail guards and escapes from prison by cleverly using his gift to sing and dance. Finally, the popularity of Liyongo as a protector of his community is widely highlighted.

-Liyongo silaha yetu  Liyongo is our weapon
-Kwa wuste khasimu zetu  Against all our enemies
-Alikuwa ngao yetu  He was our shield
-Wute wakinena haya  All people said this

-Mui walisikitika  The entire city was in mourning
-Hakuna wa kutosheka  There was no exception
-Kwa Liyongo kutoweka  They mourned the loss of Liyongo
-Imeanguka paziya  The curtain had fallen.

(Ibid.: 57)

In the last three stanzas, the poet reveals the particulars of Liyongo, the subject of his biographical epic, Utendi wa Liyongo (‘The epic of Liyongo’)

-Ya Liyongo hukwambiya  This is the story of Liyongo
-Sin alikozaliwa  Who was born at Siu
-Pate akitembeleya  When he visited his son at Pate
-Kwa mwana akafiliya  There he met his death
-Na kwa mwana ni Rasini  And his son lived at Rasini
-Ya shaka iyuweni  A village in Shaka, get it clearly
-Ni mui hapo zamani  An ancient city
-Ni mkuu hukwambia  One of the greatest towns of the time

SEYYID ALI BIN NASSIR (1720 –1820)

The most famous work by this Lamu poet is Inkishafi (Hichens 1939) and Takhmis ya Liyongo. Using an extremely impersonal style and language, the poet concludes the epic of Inkishafi by giving thanks to God and interceding for the blessing of his audience; the text contains no mention of the poet’s identity:

-Sasa takhtimu-, tatia tama
   I will now stop and put an end to the poem
-Atakaofuata na kuyandama
   Whoever reads and follows it will be blessed by
Tapata khatima na nwisho mwema
  God even unto death we pray oh God that you
Rabbi, hukuomba, tujaaliye.
  may bring this to pass for us.
Rabbi, mrahamu,, mwenuye kutunga
  Oh Lord, bless the post who composed
Na mezokhitimu, mja malenga
  Up to the end here, a humble being
Sala na salamu, nizao kinga
  May peace and mercy attend to them
(Hichens 1939: 104)

However, in Takhmis ya Liyongo Nassir seems to have relied heav-
ily on oral songs about the popular hero Fumo Liyongo: he uses the
archaic Kiswahili dialect Kiongozi and words from his native Kiamu
dialect. There are no hints of authorship until at the very end of the
poem where the poet signs off by revealing his name and qualifica-
tion as a poet.

MUYALA BIN HAJI (1776–1840)

As is the case with other classical Swahili poets, information on the
life of Muyakan bin Haji (also called Muyakan bin Ghassany – see
Hichens 1940) is both scanty and disjointed. He is traced to have
lived between 1776 and 1840.

According to Hichens (1940), Muyaka came from a poor family. This
can be concluded also from a poem in which the poet bids farewell
to his wife as he heads south to Pemba island on a trading trip (see
Kwa heri mwana kwa heri in Hichens 1940: 108, 264). The poet says
he will travel on a small canoe made of a hollowed-out log and a sail
of cloth and ropes – an indicator of poverty. He persuades the wife
to be brave because even though their condition is humble, nothing
is impossible if only they have faith and hope for a better future.
This theme of hope in the power of God the Provider runs through
all Muyaka’s poetry. For example in the poem Wa mbili havai moja
‘He who has two can not use only one’ (Hichens 1940: 256) states
that a rich person cannot live like a poor one and vice versa; Licha
Kifupa kifupi ‘Let alone a lean piece of bony meat’ (Hichens 1940: 4)
carries the meaning that one should stick to a lean and bony piece
of meat even if fatty meat could be obtained with the cost of bearing an insult (Muyaka was obviously insulted by a butcher from whom he asked for credit). The majority of Muyaka’s poetry is dedicated to the moral values of the religious and social attitudes and practices of his time; very little of the poet’s work concerns his personal life.

The socio-political situation of Mombasa in Muyaka’s time is captured in the works of the poet. For example, the traditional Swahili royal cities are referred to by their historical names: Gongwa la Mkisi, or Gongwa la Mwana Sururu (Royal city of the queen of Mombasa), and Zinj ya Mwana Aziza (Zanzibar, the city of Queen Susuru). Similarly, the expression *Kiwa Ndeo* ‘island of pride’ is used to refer to Lamu whose rulers, artists and fighters thought themselves invincible.

Muyaka also depicts the historical battles between the Swahili towns of Lamu, Pate, Zanzibar and Mombasa as well as battles against invaders – the Oman Arabs and the Portuguese. For instance, the poem *Ngome* elaborates on the relationship between the local Swahili community of Mombasa and the ruling Mazrui administration whose main military, residential and official seat was Fort Jesus, built by the Portuguese in the 1490s. Inter-city wars are commented on in many poems, e.g.:

(a) *Kongowea Ja Mvumo* (Also called *Mwina wa chiza* ‘A dark hole’)
(b) *Ndiswi Nyali kuu* ‘We are the residents of Nyali Kuu’
(c) *Gongwa* ‘Fort’
(d) *Vikija mtavimeza* ‘Will you fight the war?’

The cultural set-up of Mombasa, including dress code and food is also alluded to. Muyaka has composed many memorable poems outlining the popular dishes of the time and even where some of the food was imported from. One of the best examples of such poems is *Itakapokukutana*:

*Ai ngano na samli, viliwa vyema khiyari*
Oh, wheat and *ghee*! Delicious selected food

*Vitu viawavyo mbali, Renu na Baunagari*
Things imported from far lands, Portugal and India
Apao mwende akari, mola humjazi kheri
He who shares a little with fellow beings, God blesses him with bounty
Ai ziwa na sukari, itakapo kukutana
Oh milk and sugar! When the two are used together.

MWANA KUPONA

Perhaps the only known classical Swahili epic composed by a woman is *Uandi wa Mwana kupona*, a popular and one of the most widely studied epics of the Swahili epic tradition (Alien 1971: 55). The text of the poem provides some details about the author. From the first stanza we learn the author has a daughter to whom the poem is addressed:

Negema wangu binti 
Come near me, my daughter
Mchachefu wa sanati 
I am unworthy of God’s award
Upulike wasiati 
Listen to my advice
Asa ukazingatia 
May be you will follow it

We also gather that the author wrote the poem when she was still ill, having fallen sick more than a year ago:

Maradhi yamenishika 
I have fallen ill
Hata yametimu mwaka 
It is a year now since I became sick
Sikupata kutamka 
I have not taken time
Neno lema kukuwambia. 
To offer you advice
(Sheikh & Nabahany 1972: 1)

It is in the fifty-second stanza where the reader discovers the author of the epic is a woman.

Alinioa babako 
Your father married me
Kwa furaha na kicheko 
In a joyous ceremony
Tusondoleane mbeko 
We respected each other
Siku zote twalokaa 
All the days we lived together

And in the fifty-fourth verse, it is revealed that the husband of the poetess has since died:

Yalipokuya faradhi 
When his fate came
Kanikariria radhi 
He blessed me repeatedly
Kashukuru kafavidhi  He thankfully and peacefully died  
Moyo wangu katoshea  And I was contented in my heart  
(Sheikh & Nabahany 1972)

However, the reader of this epic has to wait till the very end to learn the name of the poetess and date of the epic’s composition.

Mwenye kutungu nudhumu  The composer of this work  
Ni gharibu mwenye hamu  Is a sorrowful widow  
Na ubora wa ithimu  The worst of her sins.  
Rabbi tamghufiria  The lord will forgive

Ina lake mufahamu  Her name, take note  
Ni mtaraji karimu  She is  
Mwana kupona mshamu  Mwana Kupona Mshamu  
Pate alikozaliwa  Born at Pate

Tarikhiye kwa yakini  The date  
Ni alifu wa miyateni  of the poem  
Hamsa wa sabini  is 1275  
Hizi zote hirijia  A.H. (ca 1858)

CONCLUSION

In this article I have treated poetic epics composed by Liyongo, Muyaka, Nassir and Mwana Kupona, using them as representatives of their time and creators and disseminators of the popular Swahili epic tradition. Considering the circumstances in which these epics emerged, developed and spread as well as their target audience, one must acknowledge that a deeper understanding and appreciation of this material can only be gained through exploration of their socio-linguistic and historical context.

The scarcity of biographical literature in Kiswahili tradition has already been stressed. Obvious difficulties in placing the personality or character of an individual poet is obvious. However, the purpose of this paper was not to indicate this imminent gap, or to discuss the life and work of any particular classical Swahili poet. The aim was rather to call attention to existing textual evidence in these early poetic compositions that may be used to denounce or debunk
the claim often made by critics of oral Swahili (and other African) literature that the authorship of these texts was either collective or anonymous (cf Knappert 1970, 1971, 1979; Alien 1972, 1993; Hichens 1972).

There are extra-textual reasons accounting for this incorrect claim. First, the source of these texts was not clear to the first generation of Western scholars and missionaries. As Knappert (1970: v) notes, the critics failed to notice that “the majority of these texts had been culled from manuscripts written originally in Arabic script by native Swahili scholars before and after the 18th century.”

Secondly, epic form was not very popular in the traditional poetry of the Waswahili. It was only used to highlight religious and quasi-religious topics after Islamic religion was adopted. Traditionally the Shairi or quatrain form was preferred for discussing topics related to everyday life.

Thirdly, composing in verse is a popular form of art among the Waswahili. The few talented poets were and still are contracted or requested to compose for their “clients”. The identity of the author was not stressed since the main objective has always been the content of the poem or epic.

Additionally, we have to consider the fact that classical Swahili epics were handed down over the generations and in the course of time were often reinterpreted and re-transliterated from one script to another. It is possible to imagine some loss of detail including that of the original author, and that a degree of originality has been sacrificed in the process, too (Harries 1962).

Thus, as Alien (1977: 26) has acknowledged, given the fluidity and frailty of the Swahili community in the pre-20th century era, it is near impossible to draw a comprehensive or coherent commentary on the nature of oral and written folkloric forms of the time, especially with respect to their authorship. Though as shown in the current article, in some cases there exists little hope.
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