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HISTORICAL AND FOLKLORIC ELEMENTS IN FUMO LIYONGO'S EPIC

Kitula King'ei

INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement among the leading critics of classical Kiswahili poetry that "The earliest known Swahili poet of note is Fumo Liyongo, who is dated by various writers anywhere from the 14th to the 17th century" (Allen 1971: 6). The Kiswahili epic *Utenzi wa Liyongo* was first popularised by Liyongo through lyrics for *gungu* dance (Knappert 1979: 64–66).

The early scholars (Edward Steere, Freeman Geenville, James Kirkman, Alice Werner, William Hichens, etc.; see Knappert 1979: 64–66) who researched Liyongo's poetry and life have presented fairly different accounts concerning the work and life of this Swahili bard. Liyongo's epic is said to have been recorded first in the Arabic script in around 1880 by Muhammad Bin Bakari Kijumwa (his full name being Muhammad Bin Abubakar Bin Umar al-Bakari) from Malindi who died around 1913. This is also the version of the epic that is commonly known, and that was published in 1964 by Ali Jahadhmy. According to Harries (1962), the manuscript contains the famous *Song of Saada* found also in other manuscripts as well as *gungu* songs known in many Swahili communities in North-Kenya.

The current paper is an attempt to understand and describe both the historical and folkloric aspects of this famous Kiswahili epic with the aim of highlighting the similarities and differences between Liyongo the historical figure and Liyongo the figure of creative art with legendary, mythical abilities attributed to heroes of oral tradition.

SUMMARY OF THE STORY

The variation of detail in the main story notwithstanding, the gist of the story is an account of how Fumo Liyongo struggled with Daudi Mringwari, the Sultan of Pate who was Liyongo's maternal cousin. Mringwari viewed the poet as a potential usurper to his throne while Liyongo was convinced that he was the rightful heir to the kingdom. Thus the succession of the throne of Pate Sultanate forms the core of the story.

Mringwari makes several attempts to get rid of Liyongo. First Mringwari arranges a marriage between Liyongo and a beautiful Galla woman hoping to keep the bard in Galla county far from the city of Pate. After his adversary settles down, the ruler offers a reward to the Sanye (or Boni) and Dahalo tribesmen for Liyongo's head. However, Liyongo outwits them in their plan to shoot him.

Next the Sultan asks his henchmen to persuade Liyongo to return to Pate city where he is captured and imprisoned. But the prisoner manages to obtain a file with which he cuts the chains and walks out to freedom. The Sultan is too scared to re-arrest him and almost at loss what action to take to solve the Liyongo problem which had now turned into a complete nightmare.

Then Mringwari plots to kill Liyongo by the hand of none other than Liyongo's beloved son whose mother is his Galla wife. He buys the would-be assassin's loyalty and cooperation with the promise of royal treatment and his daughter. The son cunningly extracts the secret of the weapon that could kill Liyongo. Liyongo becomes convinced that his son has been bought by his enemies, he rebukes and curses him but the lad goes on with his devilish mission.

With the secret weapon, a copper dagger, the son stabs his sleeping father. Liyongo manages to arm himself and chases his attacker to a village well where he remains in a kneeling position with his bow and arrows aimed at his fleeing attacker for three days. The whole village goes into mourning when, on the third day, the poet's mother discovers that Liyongo was actually dead.

THE PROBLEM

The task of differentiating the legendary from the historical in a folklore composition is not an easy one as the two are intrinsically intertwined and inseparably bound. Yet, in such forms as epic poetry, the reader and the critic must apply some rules or formulas in order to delineate the two levels to some extent in order to explain the application of formal rules and attributes of a folk narrative in the development of the genre. The current article attempts to achieve this by looking at the literary tools used in the composition of the Liyongo epic to create the character of the hero on the one hand, and the fusion of the historical account in the narrative, on the other.

According to Cohen (see Dundes 1965), reconstructing historical reality in an oral text such as *Utenzi wa Liyongo* may be viewed as a process constituting three levels of analysis, namely:

(a) the ethnological level treating literature as a direct representation of the human society with its cultural values, attitudes and practices. From this aspect, human literary characters such as Fumo Liyongo are creations of culture and represent typical members of the Waswahili of Kenya's northern coast. In line with this view, Fumo Liyongo may be regarded as a folk hero who portrays such desirable virtues as courage, humility and a drive for justice and fairness;

(b) the cognitive level regards literature as the thought process of human beings individually and collectively. This level concerns philosophical and abstracted ideology and ignores empirical dimensions of literary representation. A close reading of Liyongo's epic reveals the fact that the Swahili community this epic originates from cherish the notion of the dignity of struggle for the ideals that one believes in and holds dear even to the point of making the ultimate sacrifice;

(c) the taxonomic level concentrates on observable units of reality (or motifs) and relationship between these units. In the Liyongo epic, for instance, these include the royalty, the aspiring ruler (Liyongo), the subjects, parents and their children (Okpewho 1983: 1).

ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL AND FOLKLORIC ELEMENTS

The Historical Dimension

It is a fact that no mention of Liyongo is found in Swahili historical chronicles (Harries 1962: 49). However, Liyongo is alive in the oral tradition which repeatedly mentions the hero's association with the citadel of Shagga. About the place of his birth, the epic states:

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Ya Liyongo hutwambia</i> | About Liyongo they tell us |
| <i>Siu alikizaliwa</i> | In Siu he was born |
| <i>Pate alikitembea</i> | Pate he visited |
| <i>Kwa Mwana akafilia</i> | And he died at Kwa Mwana |

(Knappert 1979: 67)

Shagga (or Shaka) appears in a number of old Arab charts as a richly populated area east or south-east of Faza island. Oral tradition places Shagga city on Pate island before the 13th century. Most probably, Shagga is identical to Shungwaya, a Bantu settlement founded around the 7th century (c. 689). This is the traditional habitation area of the Swahili and other coastal and highland Bantus according to many historians (see Were 1971).

The physical attributes of Liyongo are also described in detail with the aim of depicting his masculinity and exceptional physique.

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Kimo kawa mtukufu</i> | He was of glorious stature |
| <i>Mpana sana mrefu</i> | Very broad and tall |
| <i>Majimbo kawa maarufu</i> | He became famous in the countryside |
| <i>Watu huja kwangaliya</i> | And people came to look at him |
| <i>Ni mwanamume sahihi</i> | He was a real man |
| <i>Kama simba una zihi</i> | Strong as a lion |
| <i>Usiku na asubuhi</i> | Be it night or day |
| <i>Kutembea ni mamoja</i> | He freely moved about |
| <i>Ghaffla kikutokeya</i> | If he suddenly appeared to you |
| <i>Mkojo hukupoteya</i> | You would wet yourself with fright |
| <i>Tapo likauiliya</i> | You would start trembling |
| <i>Ukatapa na kuliya</i> | You would tremble as you cry out |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Mato kikukondoleya</i> | If he focused his eyes on you |
| <i>Ghafla utazimiya</i> | You would faint from fear |
| <i>Kufa kutakurubiya</i> | You would stare death in the face |
| <i>Kwa khaufu kukungiya</i> | As fear would grip you |

(Harries 1962: 52–55)

To further amplify Liyongo's unmatched physical strength, the epic states how Liyongo would complete in giant strides a journey that would have taken ordinary people several days. For instance, the poet traveled from Shaka to Pate city, a journey of four days, in exactly two days. In addition, he could shoot and bring down a whole fruit-bearing branch of the *mkoma*-tree without having to climb to the top of the massive tree, which also serves to emphasize the enormous size of the poet.

Perhaps the most telling quality of the personality of Liyongo is his skill and great talent in composing and singing the poetic song-form *gungu*. For example, in jail Liyongo used this skill to send a message to his mother asking for the file that he eventually used to cut the chains to free himself. Liyongo sang thus:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Ewe kijakazi nakutuma</i> | You maid, I sent you |
| <i>Hujatumika kamwambie</i> | You still don't understand |
| <i>mama</i> | |
| <i>Ni muinga hajalimuka</i> | Tell my mother who still is ignorant |
| | |
| <i>Afanye mkate pale kati</i> | Let her make me a loaf and put a |
| | file inside it |
| <i>Tupa kaweka nikezee pingu</i> | So that I can cut these handcuffs |
| <i>Na minyoo ikinyemuka</i> | And free myself of these chains |
| | |
| <i>Nitatage kuta na madari</i> | So that I can cross walls and roofs |
| | and break them |
| <i>Yakiyepuka niue rijali</i> | Let me kill men |
| <i>Nao wakiwana hiteka</i> | And laugh at them as they fight back |
| | |
| <i>Ningie ondoni ninyeppee</i> | Let me go into the reeds |
| <i>Ja mwana nyoka niingie</i> | And creep like a fierce snake |
| <i>mwituni</i> | |

Ningurume ja simba buka Let me enter the forest and roar like
a fierce lion

(Harries 1962: 52–55)

The epic of Liyongo establishes not just the human characteristics of the legendary figure but also the fact of his real existence among his people, the Waswahili of Pate whose neighbours were the Pokomo (Boni) and the Wagalla. These communities still live in the same geographical area as they did many centuries ago before the composition of the epic. Liyongo was a popular hero for championing the cause of his people and defending them at times of danger as the epic states. It is also easy to confirm that these people were already islamised at the time of the composition of the epic: when Liyongo remained by the side of the village well, the villagers did not get water that they needed for the mandatory cleansing before prayers.

The Folkloric Dimension

According to Dundes (1965) epic compositions such as *Utenzi wa Liyongo* exhibit some formal and thematic attributes including the above-mentioned mythological aspects as well as some others.

(a) In the Kiswahili tradition most if not all classical poetic compositions have a fixed formulaic beginning and ending. The beginning is invariably a form of self-introduction of the poet, his family and social background and often a statement of his or her artistic qualification. A good example is the opening of the famous classical poem, *Inkishafi*, composed by Ali Bin Nassir (1720–1820). It starts thus:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Bismillahi naikadimu</i> | I begin in the name of Allah |
| <i>Hali ya kutunga hino nudhumu</i> | To compose this poem |
| <i>Na ar-Rahmani kiirasimu</i> | And arrange His attributes, God the merciful |
| <i>Bas ar-Rahimu nyuma ikaye</i> | God the generous, I will mention, too |

(Nassir 1972: 104–105)

The ending formula details the composer's gratitude to God for the ability to complete the composition and also serves as a way of signing off by praying for blessings upon the reader as well as calling on

the latter to kindly effect any necessary corrections on the work. The *Inkishafi* ends in these words:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Sasa takhitimu tatia tama</i> | I will now end here and put a stop |
| <i>atakofuata na kuyandama</i> | Whoever shall heed these words and stick to them |
| <i>tapata khatima na mwisho mwema</i> | Will be blessed till his or her life's end |
| <i>Rabbi hukuomba, tujaaliye</i> | May God Almighty grant us this prayer |
| <i>Rabbi mrahimu mwenye kutunga</i> | May the Lord shower blessings upon the composer |
| <i>na mezokhitimu, mja malenga</i> | And the poet who has brought the work to an end |
| <i>Sala na salamu ni zao kinga</i> | May God's blessings and peace be their shield |
| <i>Rabbi takabali ziwashukiye</i> | May your Divine care be upon them |

(Nassir 1972: 104–105)

(b) Stylistically, epic poems make use of repetition which is a deliberate device for stressing and achieving certain desired linguistic and literary effects. The lines and stanzas of *Utenzi wa Liyongo* are full of examples of the use of this skill. Perhaps the aim of the use of repetition in oral poetry was to serve as a mnemonic aid in recalling the line of the story. For instance, when Liyongo escapes from jail, the poet aptly captures the panicky mood at the palace as the attendants and other functionaries busy themselves with the task of attracting the prisoner to join the dance so that they may trap him. We are told that,

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Ngoma na nyingi kusi</i> | With drums and hand-claps |
| <i>kusisalie unasi</i> | All at once |
| <i>ikawa kama harusi</i> | Celebration like at a wedding |
| <i>watu wakiangaliya</i> | And people watched |
| <i>Wote wakakutanika</i> | They all gathered |
| <i>mahala pakatandika</i> | They prepared the ground |
| <i>na uzuri wakaweka</i> | The ground was spread |
| <i>deuli na subahiya</i> | With silken wraps |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Wakatandika na zari</i> | They spread golden linen |
| <i>na nzuri za hariri</i> | And also silken cloth |
| <i>wakaimba mashairi</i> | They sang poetry |
| <i>ngoma kusi kwa umoya</i> | As they clapped and drummed |

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Na mashairi ni haya</i> | These are the poems |
| <i>Walokwimba kwa umoya</i> | They sang in unison |
| <i>na watu walipokeya</i> | The people sang in chorus |
| <i>na Liyongo yu pamoya</i> | And behold! Liyongo was with them |

(Harries 1962)

The use of *wote*, *pamoya* as well as the successive tense marker *-ka*, is deliberate to emphasize the spontaneous reaction and the state of mind of the sentries and the royal. The excitement at the prospect of re-capturing the haunted poet is pitch-high.

(c) The rest of the epic principles outlined by Dundes are also clearly represented in *Utenzi wa Liyongo*: concentration of the entire story on a single hero character; the existence of an antithetical to the protagonist; the principle of direct contrast and opposition between the hero and the adversary; the death of the hero through betrayal by a villain. In the case of *Utenzi wa Liyongo*, Liyongo is the folk hero who meets opposition from the ruling Sultan Daudi Mringwari but manages to survive only to die at the hands of his beloved son who betrays him to the Sultan.

CONCLUSION

The most important question is, what relevance, if any, does this famous Swahili classical epic have for the society today? “One of the most important functions of folklore is its service as a vehicle for social protest. Whenever there is injustice and social oppression, one can be sure that the victims will find some solace in folklore” (cited in Dundes 1965: 308). It is clear that Fumo Liyongo was largely treated as a hero by his kinsfolk because his struggle to the throne of the Pate sultanate symbolised their collective urge to rid themselves of an evil and dictatorial leadership. This is the light in which the poem must be read and interpreted. Today, the epic of Liyongo can be described as a “dramatic account of heroism, wit and strength” (Makokha 2000). Although related in the past tense and referring

to events that happened long ago and are surrounded by archaism and mystery, the story is “believable and identifiable with contemporary socio-political set-up. This is a story of heroism, patriotism and humanness” (*Ibid.*). Liyongo’s epic is therefore a rich blend of folkloric and historical elements whose theme and story can not be wholly constrained by time or space.

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