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

*Kitula King'ei*

## 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 confronts 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 action 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 authorship 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 Islamic religion and education to the East African coast, Swahili poets have been able to write. This expanded their view of their language and tradition (Ryan 1981: 524). Thus the Swahili oral traditional folklore hitherto derived from the verbal word in songs, idioms 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 literary 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.

<i>Liyongo kitamakali</i>	Liyongo grew up
<i>Akabalighi rijali</i>	Into a strong young man
<i>Akawa mlu wa kweli</i>	He became a real man
<i>Na haiba kaongeya.</i>	He became more beautiful

<i>Kimo kawa mrefu</i>	He grew tall
<i>Mpana sana mrefu</i>	Huge and tall
<i>Majimboni yu maarufu</i>	Famous throughout the land
<i>Watu huya kwangaliya</i>	People came to know him
(Mulokozi 1999: 23–24)	

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.

<i>Na Liyongo akajibu</i>	And Liyongo answered
<i>Kwa hishima na adabu</i>	Respectfully
<i>Nitakuja kwa karibu</i>	And with honour
<i>Nitwiiye maulana</i>	I swear this to God
( <i>Ibid.</i> : 26)	

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.

<i>Liyongo silaha yetu</i>	Liyongo is our weapon
<i>Kwa wuste khasimu zetu</i>	Against all our enemies
<i>Alikuwa ngao yetu</i>	He was our shield
<i>Wute wakinena haya</i>	All people said this
<i>Mui walisikitika</i>	The entire city was in mourning
<i>Hakuna wa kutosheka</i>	There was no exception
<i>Kwa Liyongo kutoweka</i>	They mourned the loss of Liyongo
<i>Imeanguka paziya</i>	The curtain had fallen.
<i>(Ibid.: 57)</i>	

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')

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

God even unto death we pray oh God that you  
*Rabbi, hukuomba, tujaaliye.*

may bring this to pass for us.

*Rabbi, mrahamu,, mwenye 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 heavily 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 qualification 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 kukwambia.*

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

<i>Kashukuru kafawidhi</i>	He thankfully and peacefully died
<i>Moyo wangu katoshea</i>	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.

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

<i>Ina lake mufahamu</i>	Her name, take note
<i>Ni mtaraji karimu</i>	She is
<i>Mwana kupona mshamu</i>	Mwana Kupona Mshamu
<i>Pate alikoaliwa</i>	Born at Pate

<i>Tarikhiye kwa yakini</i>	The date
<i>Ni alifu wa miyateni</i>	of the poem
<i>Hamsa wa sabini</i>	is 1275
<i>Hizi zote hirijia</i>	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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