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Kiswahili Resistance Publishing at the Kenyan Coast

by
Shiraz Durrani

Publishing, as one aspect of a communication system, reflects current contradictions in a society. It serves the particular class interests of those whose tool it is. This is universally applicable but its particular aspects along the Kenyan coast are what we shall examine.

The Early Kiswahili Epics

Early Kiswahili written material dates from at least A.D.1600. Almost half of these were religious works. Of the rest, approximately 20 percent were written in East Africa while the remainder consisted of material written outside but copied in East Africa.

Early Kiswahili texts, written in Arabic script reflecting the advanced level of technology and culture achieved by the Kiswahili speakers, consisted of manuals of religion, law, medicine, astrology and linguistic works.

As is true of other publications worldwide, Kiswahili literature also reflects contradictions in society. For example, Ruo Kimani Ruo quotes a 'friend' (?), a 'renowned poet and writer' thus:

The study of Kiswahili literature is the study of the cultural and psychological effects brought about by the coming of the Portuguese and the Arabs in East Africa... it is the study of the dehumanization and humiliation caused by the Germans in Tanzania and the British colonialists in Kenya and the subsequent continued struggle for political and economic freedom.¹

Allen confirms this analysis of Kiswahili literature:

Quite apart from details of daily life and historical events which it may contain (and we have, for instance, quite a number of poetic works about the Battle of Shela), Swahili literature is, and must always be, a sort of kaleidoscope of the Swahili world-view, a charter of the values and ideals of the society that produced it. Few parts of tropical Africa wishing to establish the cultural legitimacy of their own pre-colonial past have such a

*This is an extract from the Author's forthcoming book: Imperialism and Publishing in Kenya, VITA BOOKS, Wembley, Middlesex, England. ©Shiraz Durrani/

have been put at over 70 and they cover several stages in the development of the Swahilis over many centuries. (Some of these) reflect the conflict between town and country, between stone-house civilization (Utamaduni or Uungwana) and the life of those who live in mud and thatch.²

Utenzi wa Fumo Liyongo, for example, tells the history of Fumo Liyongo who was a leader of the coastal people and who fought to safeguard the interests of his people. His leadership stood in contradiction to the tyrannical rule of some of the later coastal rulers. Allen explains that the title 'fumo' means 'spearlord', indicating the importance of the weapon used against enemies:

The story of Fumo Liyongo (sic), in many ways the national epic of the Swahili and evidently dating originally from an earlier era, is in large part the tale of a typical African warrior, roaming the countryside with spear, bow and arrow, constantly at odds with his town-dwelling relatives of the Pate Court; fighting, dancing and versifying until he meets with a hero's death... His title, fumo means 'spearlord'... [The spear] is generally identified as a broad spearblade and is also an emblem which appears constantly in the decoration of houses and mosques, even in the center of the stone towns like Gedi and Pate itself. The Fumo Liyongo tradition, as symbolized by this spear, lived on side by side with the urbanizing traditions within Swahili culture.³

Another major Kiswahili work, Al-Inkishafi, written by Sayyid Abdalla Bin Ali Nasir, depicts the decline of the rule of Pate during the second half of the eighteenth century. The rulers of Pate had at one time controlled the wealth of the coast as far as Dar es Salaam. The poem documents the decline of this ruling class "who feared to see their wealth, and with it, their cultural identity, slipping away from them."⁴

Kiswahili Book Production

Kiswahili publications have used antiquarian book production techniques. As was stated earlier, many scholarly works were copied in East Africa, with many others being written there. Some of these were written on loose sheets of paper, while others were compiled in well bound volumes, which survive even today at the Kenya National Archives, University of Nairobi library, in private collections and at national Museums in Kenya. Allen says that there are possibly thousands of these earlier works privately owned today and explains their binding:

Many of the volumes have considerable aesthetic appeal. Digby noted that the illuminations on the London half-quran were distinctive examples of Swahili art. Many others surviving in East Africa have far more elaborate and beautiful illuminations: The craftsmanship in some of the bindings is also well worth conserving and studying. Most of these books were written and put together, bound and decorated in Siyu, a town on Pate Island which still retains some unique and fascinating art forms. It is also possible to trace links with other examples of traditional Swahili art: door carvings, plasterwork, coral carving, etc. And these can in turn be linked up with the art of some non-Swahili peoples.⁵

These early literary achievements were gradually destroyed following the advent of British Colonialism. But, as we shall see in the next section, these forms of social communication were also used to organize people against the new imperialist enemy.

Kiswahili Literary Traditions Reflecting Contradictions in the Society

Kiswahili orature developed further during the Colonial period. The oral forms of the language began to be used by patriotic people to struggle against foreign and local enemies in order to rid the land of exploitation. In this respect, Kiswahili was called upon to serve the concrete needs of its speakers, in common with other languages of the people of Kenya. This reflects the universal aspect of language: helping the communication process of its users so as to solve the particular contradictions of a particular historical period. During the same period, the written Kiswahili continued to develop and the Roman script began to replace the earlier Arabic script.

The language and its publications developed in an environment of sharp contradictions between those who supported colonialism and those who sought to destroy colonialism and exploitation. Each side produced its own forms of language in this struggle. Let us examine these two aspects in brief.

Those who supported colonialism got their ideological support from their colonial masters and their language use reflected the culture and forms of the British capitalist system. The values of the British ruling class had given birth to a new culture reflecting its own world outlook which was in sharp contradiction to the world outlook of those struggling against colonialism and imperialism.

Ruo Kimani Ruo shows how the publications of those who supported colonialism reflected their class interests:

During the colonial rule, [there was] a reign of terror in this part of the world. The writers of this period [included] educated people...who accompanied their explorer masters to the interior. What they wrote shows clearly that they were only one of the many of that time already mentally castrated by the European standards...This group also consisted of puppet Liwalis and Jumbes who were either Africans or Arabs appointed to rule instead of local leaders. Since they could read and write reasonably well, they were expected [by their colonial masters] to write poetries with themes which played the role of drugs, religion or booze, i.e. providing momentary relief from the consciousness of the oppressive environment. Poems with love and beauty themes were, therefore, abundant during this time.⁶

The colonialists thus sought to encourage publications of material which would take people away from all thoughts of resistance to colonialism. This could never succeed as it gave the concrete reality of exploitation and oppression, resulting in hardships in everyday living conditions, which gave birth to a culture and language of resistance. Imperialism sought to enforce a culture of silence and acceptance of exploitation. The people's daily existence ensured that they broke this silence. Within this contradiction, Kiswahili publications advanced to new heights.

Just as with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army freedom songs, so too with Kiswahili literature there developed a form of language with double meanings: one for the oppressors, who could understand only the surface meaning; the other, deeper meaning was for the oppressed who forged a new culture of resistance. Thus Ruo Kimani Ruo talks of "Kiswahili cha ndani"⁷ which is understood only by the people but not by the oppressors. He quotes the following example of an anti-colonial saying: *Mgeni Siku ya Kumi*

The full text is: *Mgeni Siku ya Kumi, mpe jembe akalime akirudi muagane* (On the tenth day, give the guest a hoe to go to the garden and when he comes back he will say good-bye!) This is an obvious reference to getting rid of the colonialists. Not only was the meaning not clear to the oppressors but the form used to pass on this message was also new. Such messages were written on women's khangas and so reached a wide audience right in their homes.

The colonialists, of course, sought to suppress all resistance publications. Ruo Kimani Ruo explains the awareness of this suppression by the people:

The colonialists, of course, sought to suppress all resistance publications. Ruo Kimani Ruo explains the awareness of this suppression by the people:

The writers of this period were politically aware that they were being oppressed. Some writers wrote using symbols....Many other people wrote poems in the Kiswahili papers of their time (*Mambo Leo*, for instance) while others used women's names for fear of repercussions (women did not have "pass-books" or Kimpanes, and so could easily evade colonial justice). We have Saadani Kandor writing under the pseudo name of Mary Binti Rajabu in 1949.⁸

The Kiswahili speaking people of the coast have always used their language in its different forms (oral and written) to express their anti-colonial feelings. Mulokozi traces these feelings to the early history of Kiswahili literature.

Swahili poetry is unique among written literatures in that it has always served a social function. It has always expressed the genuine values and aspirations of the people at a particular time and in a particular place. Muyaka bin Haji, the father of Swahili poetry and inventor of the popular "tarbia" (quatrain) verse-form, used it to further the nationalist cause of the beginning of the 19th century ...

Swahili poets are not and have never been "creative" writers in the Western "art for art's sake" sense, but in the African socialist sense of art for the people.⁹

Mulokozi quotes the "great Mombasa poet", Muyaka's best known poem "Mugogoto wa Zamani" in which the poet becomes a politician and urges the freedom fighters of Mombasa to "struggle against Arab domination in the hectic decade of Seyyid Said's imperialist expansion on the East African soil:"

Jifungetoni masombo mshike msu na ngao,
Zile ndizo sambo zijile zatoka kwao,
Na tuwakalie kombo, tuwapigie, Hario!
Wakija tuteze nao wayawiapo ngomani!

Na waje kwa ungi wao tupate kuwapunguza
Waloata miji yao ili kuja kujisoza!
Na hawano waiyeo wana wa Mwana Aziza,
Sijui watayaweza au ni k'ongeza duni!¹⁰

(English translation):

Gird up thine loins, take up thine swords and shields
Behold, those are their ships arrived from their homeland
Let us await them in readiness, let us hail them on
So that when they come to battle we may shoot at them.

Let them come in their great hoards so we may reduce them
They have forsaken their own towns to seek self-destruction
here,
They and their Zanzibar companions;
Can they succeed or are they merely after more humiliation.

This same spirit of struggle against oppression is also found in the works of "the Mombasan writer and indisputably the greatest Swahili poet alive", as Mulokozi calls Ahmadi Nassir. The message of resistance comes out clearly.

Uwatapo Haki Yako

Simama uitetee, usivikhofu vituko
Aliye nayo mwendee, akupe kilicho chako
Akipinga mlemee, mwandame kulla endako
Uwatapo haki yako, utaingiya motoni
Teteya kwa kulla hali, usiche misukosuko
Siche winge wala mali, sabilisha roho yako
Unyonge usikubali, ukaonewa kwa chako
Uwatapo haki yako, utaingiya motoni

(English translation):

Stand up and fight for your right, fear not the perils!
Tell whoever has it to give it back;
Should he refuse, rise upon him! Pursue him everywhere!
If you forfeit your right you will end in the fire.

Fight for it in every way, care not about the hazards!
Fear not their numbers, their wealth; be ready to sacrifice your
life;
Submit not to oppression; defend that which is your own;
If you forfeit your right you will end in the fire.

It is important to realize that although many such Kiswahili poems were only published later, many became popular through the oral medium. This was a form developed over centuries and served well the

propagation of patriotic message during colonialism when there was strict censorship of progressive ideas. Through this form, the political message circulated among the people undetected by those it sought to uproot. This tradition survives even today. Mary Mukimbo gives the example of the Amu women's political songs which she recorded in 1974/75¹¹. These songs were created by women to defeat the forces of exploitation by exposing the oppression of the people by the rich.

One of the songs compares those politicians who have corrupted and destroyed the town with wild dogs and hyenas; an unwanted, destructive element which had to be removed from the society:

Aloufisidi mui
Mola memrufaisha
Mbwafanya
Mbwai mbwai
Magofu kutobakisha
Akifumiwa na mai
Asipate pa kuesgesha

Other songs show how the people have awakened to the tricks of the rich and how their time of exploitation had come to an end:

- (1) Mwalitukuwa khatuwa
Ya Kututiya tandini
Tukawavika shingoni

(English translation):

You took steps
To trap us
We entangled the trap
We put it round your necks.

- (2) Komeshani udarai
Ubepari umekwishia
Na mapesa hayafai

(English translation):

Stop hypocrisy
Exploitation is finished
And money will not help.

The final song shows the social awareness of the working people about the forces of exploitation in the society, and the steps necessary to end this exploitation:

Tulipokata shauri
 sisi wanyonge
 Hela hawa mabepari
 Natuwapige
 Waateni waipare
 Wana Uwambe

(English translation):

When we the oppressed
 Decide with one mind
 To defeat the capitalists
 The exploiters are left with nothing
 Scratching their dirty bodies.

This brief look at Kiswahili oral and written material shows the achievements at the coast. These achievements, suppressed during the Colonial presence, need to be examined afresh and should be seen in their proper context of the total communication system of the people of Kenya. Similarly, additional studies are needed to bring to a larger audience the achievements of the people of different nationalities of Kenya, each of whom has developed its own communication systems to further its own interests

¹ Ruo Kimani Ruo: Kiswahili Poetry: Its cultural and social values. (1979), p.7.

² Allen, James de Vere, in his translation of Sayyid Abdulla Bin Nasir's AL-INKISHAFI. Nairobi. East African Publishing House. 1977, p.22.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p.21.

⁵ Allen, James de Vere: "Swahili Book Production, Kenya: Past and Present (Nairobi) No.13 (1981); p.20

⁶ Ruo Kimani Ruo, *op. cit.* pp.8-9.

⁷ Ibid, p.4

⁸ Ibid, p.10

⁹ Mulokozi, M.M. " The Revolutionary Tradition in Swahili Poetry.", in Maji Maji. No. 8, (1972), p.16.

¹⁰ Hichens, W. Diwani ya Muyaka bin Haji Al-Ghassaniy. Johannesburg, University of Witwaterstrand Press, (1970), p.10.

¹¹ Mukimbo, Mary. "An appreciation of Amu women's Poetry which was sung in the 1974/75 Political campaign for Parliamentary Elections." University of Nairobi. Institute of African Studies. Paper No.105 (1978).