

KISWAHILI POETRY AND ITS ROLE IN PRESERVATION OF THE HISTORY OF STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the portrayal of the African politician in Kiswahili poetry. Basically, this research intended to shed light on how different poets have portrayed African politicians creatively with a purpose of revealing how these leaders have changed since colonial times to the multi-party period. The research assumed that political leaders played a great role in the development of their individual countries and Africa as a whole. The attainment of various developmental goals such as Kenya's Vision 2030 and strengthening of the East African Community is to a large extent pegged on political decisions. The objectives of this research were to investigate the role of Kiswahili poetry in preserving the history of the African politician and to examine the traits of the pre-colonial and post-colonial African politician according to Kiswahili poets. The researcher assumed that the poet speaks for the citizen who gets adversely affected by decisions and actions taken by politicians. The study was guided by Romanticism theory developed by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Post-colonial Theory which is associated with the works of Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. The study was carried out in the library where purposive sampling method was used to collect data from selected anthologies. Qualitative analysis of the selected poems was done guided by the research objectives. The findings of this study revealed that Kiswahili poetry is an important tool for preserving the history of Africa's struggle for independence. The study also revealed how the seemingly royal pre-independence African politician changed drastically after independence was attained and became a tormentor of the very people he had sworn to protect. Despite these shortcomings, it is evident that the African continent has a few political role models whom the current and future politicians can emulate. The findings of this research will benefit Kiswahili scholars, writers and all political stakeholders in Africa and beyond.

Key words: African politician, Kiswahili poetry, poetic character.

1.1 Introduction

Before colonialists invaded the continent of Africa, communities were governed under traditional set-ups such as clans, tribes or villages. This status changed during the colonial period when the colonialists started ruling the communities under foreign set-ups. According to Kinyatti (1992) the colonial administration did not intend to benefit the Africans in any way. Instead, it grabbed whatever resources were at its disposal, thus impoverishing the region. The colonialists crafted draconian laws which aimed at killing any efforts that East Africans made to redeem themselves. This irked the aggrieved Africans and provoked them into looking for means of getting rid of this external aggression. This uprising gave birth to a new breed of leaders who became popular, not only in their countries but in the entire East African region.

Kiswahili poets recognized the contribution of freedom fighters and started composing poems in their praise. Some of the famous poets that wrote in praise of African patriots include Mohamed (1967), Kibao (1972) and Khatibu (1975). These poets praised freedom fighters for their zeal in gaining independence and handing back the leadership of Africa to Africans. Their poems also reveal the many challenges these patriots faced in the struggle for freedom and how they overcame them.

Due to the great respect bestowed upon freedom fighters and politicians who landed leadership positions immediately after independence, many citizens failed to criticize the leadership styles of their new leaders. Mrikaria (2010) argues that this attitude towards political leaders made a clique of leaders to digress on the original vision of freedom fighters. Political leaders of the time and their sycophants vehemently opposed any voices of dissent and clamored to maintain the status quo. Those opposed to the ruling class would be incarcerated. Among those who faced the wrath of the post-colonial rulers are Abdalla (1973) whose poems were analyzed in this research. He composed this collection of poems while in Kenya's notorious Shimo la Tewa

prison after being accused of trying to overthrow the Kenyan government.

Grabbing of public property was also among the evils orchestrated by the ruling class as witnessed in Tanzania before the Arusha Declaration (Havnevik and Isinika, 2010). This malpractice made different poets to criticize the rulers of the time through their poems. Kezilahabi (1974) in his anthology titled *Kichomi* criticizes politicians for grabbing and amassing wealth such as large chunks of land, plots, mansions and expensive vehicles.

Historically, poetry is recognized as a literary genre that has served humanity more than any other genre. Senkoro (1988) discusses the role of poetry in the struggle for independence in various African countries. He cites the cases of freedom struggle in Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea where poetry was used as a literary tool through which messages could be easily written, sung and propagated by citizens as compared to works of prose like novels or plays. This makes Kiswahili poetry an ideal tool through which various artists have been able to give their views concerning political issues.

Poetry is also mainly aimed at expressing deep emotional aspects of individuals (Massamba, 1983). This genre provokes emotions, incites action and makes individuals or groups of people to reject any kind of oppression. This is clearly seen in works of political poets such as Abdalla (1973), and Mberia (2007) whereby the poets have expressed the feelings of masses towards all kinds of political, economic and social oppression.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To investigate the role of Kiswahili poetry in preserving the history of the African politician
- ii. To examine the traits of pre-independence and post-independence African politician according to Kiswahili poets.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Kiswahili poetry has for many years been used as an important tool in agitating for political change and emancipation of the masses. This study was based on the premise that Kiswahili poetry has the ability to highlight past, present and future aspects of life. Despite the fact that previous research had been done on Kiswahili poetry, it was necessary to carry out a study that assessed its role in preservation of the continent's struggle for independence. It was also necessary to examine the traits of the pre-colonial and post-colonial African politician according to Kiswahili poets. Our study sought to reveal the special relationship that exists between African politics and Kiswahili poetry.

1.3 Methodology

This study was carried out in the library. Purposive sampling method was used since our study intended to analyze poetic texts depicting the pre-independence and post-independence African politician as a poetic character. It involved descriptive analysis of selected poetic texts from the following anthologies: *Utendi wa Uhuru wa Kenya* (Salim A. Kibao, 1972), *Sauti ya Dhiki* (Abdilatif Abdalla, 1973) and *Chembe cha Moyo* (Alamin Mazrui, 1988). The research was conducted in various university libraries in Kenya namely; Chuka University, Kenya Methodist University, Egerton University, Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi. The researcher reviewed varied literature related to the subject under study, including the selected anthologies, research reports and theses, electronic and print journals, magazines and newspapers.

1.4 Data Analysis

Based on research objectives, data was divided into two categories. The first category comprised of poems that had the pre-independence African politician as a poetic character. The analysis of these poems was done in line with the first objective. The analyzed poem, which gave an epical narrative, revealed the traits and actions of the pre-independence African politician. The politician was depicted not only as a nationalist but an exemplary leader who devoted himself wholly to the emancipation of the citizens of his country and Africa as a continent.

The second category involved poems that highlighted on the portrayal of the post-independence African politician. This category of poems was intended to show how the politician in question changed drastically after independence, in line with the second objective of the study. The study revealed how this politician digressed on the promises made to the masses during the struggle for independence and became a neo-colonialist who tormented his fellow Africans, especially during the period of single party dictatorship.

1.5 Data Presentation

The results of this study were presented in a descriptive manner. The researcher analyzed the selected poems, commenting on the creative construction of the African politician, his traits and actions, as well as the changes he underwent after independence.

1.5.1 The Pre-Independence African Politician

Poems analyzed in this category portrayed the pre-independence African politician as a selfless patriot whose aim was to unite the citizens in order to emancipate them from colonial oppression. The founding president of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, was taken as a case study. An analysis of *Utendi wa Uhuru wa Kenya* (Kibao, 1972) found out that Mzee Jomo Kenyatta was instrumental in uniting Kenyans during the struggle for independence. He toured the entire country, met political leaders in every province and impressed on citizens the need for unity as they forged a common front regardless of their tribe, age or sex. This effort earned Mzee Kenyatta and five others; Kung'u Karumba, Bildad Kaggia, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko and Fred Kubai seven years of incarceration in a colonial jail. The six patriots were greatly tortured by the colonial government while in jail. This however, did not extinguish the fire of patriotism that was burning inside them. Outside prison, the spirit that was started by these patriots was kept alive. When they were eventually released, Kenya attained independence because the jailed leaders were not working alone – they had mentored other leaders who remained steadfast and the cause for justice was maintained during the period of their absence from active politics.

Kibao (1972) also records that the patriotic African politicians were not derailed by efforts aimed at dismembering the united front. The poet cites a case whereby the colonial government sponsored and hastily registered an opposition party (Kenya African Democratic Union) to counter the then strong Kenya African National Union which the patriots were using to unite Kenyans. This development brought about a period of power struggle among political leaders which threatened to compromise the vision for independence. However, Mzee Kenyatta's statesmanship and steadfastness saved the situation as he preached unity; impressing on leaders and citizens the importance of forging a united front rather than sticking to party politics. Mzee Kenyatta's political prowess worked and Kenya attained independence in 1963.

1.5.2 The Post-Independence African Politician

An analysis of poems in this category showed that the African politician in the post-independence period did not meet the expectations of the citizens of this region. Equitable distribution of the national cake, as promised by the politicians during the struggle for independence, turned out to be a pipe dream. Politicians who took over the helms of leadership immediately after independence amassed the available wealth, caring less about the citizens whom they represented. Poems analyzed from Abdalla's *Sauti ya Dhiki* (1973) indicated that these politicians took large chunks of land and other property left behind by colonialists. Their greed led to fragmentation of African citizens into two classes: the rich and the poor.

The study also showed how post-independence leadership resisted any opposition to their oppressive practices. Abdalla (1973) who authored his work from Shimo la Tewa prison had to be careful while criticizing his tormentors. He was forced to creatively construct his poetic characters in order to avoid further friction with the government. Creative construction of characters is emphasized by Romanticism theory which guided this study.

By describing politicians as *jipu* (boil), *mamba* (crocodile) and *misumari* (nails) Abdalla (1973) shows how oppression had taken root in Africa after independence. In his poem titled *Jipu* (pg. 7), the poet equates the pain of political oppression and torture in prison to

that of a painful boil in one's body. In this poem the poet illustrates how difficult it was to directly criticize the political leaders of the day given the machinery they employed to silence the Opposition. He also illustrates how the citizens viewed their leaders and portrayed them negatively owing to their oppressive leadership style.

The poem titled *Mamba* (pg. 10) portrays the post-independence politician as a jealous and selfish individual. The politician is equated to a crocodile that lies in the river, preventing people from fetching water, thinking that it would be there forever. In this poem the poet warns politicians whom, after landing into leadership positions, started behaving as if they would never leave those positions.

Other traits that are associated with the post-independence African politician according to the poem referred to above are pride and arrogance. These leaders are portrayed as characters that did things with impunity, undermining the intelligence of citizens who elected them.

The post-independence African politician is also portrayed as a sadist. A sadist is a person who takes pride in causing pain and suffering to other people. In his poem titled *Naja* (pg. 77), which means I am coming, Abdalla (1973) depicts oppressive leaders as nails that cause constant pain to their subjects and recommends their immediate removal. The poet talks about despotic leaders who are not ready to mend their ways. He warns them that imprisonment was not going to silence him and he is ready to face them once he is released from prison.

It was also evident in this study that bad governance was more evident in Africa during the single-party dictatorship of the 1980's and 90's. Poems analyzed from Kithaka wa Mberia's *Chembe cha Moyo* (1988) indicated that politicians who were in leadership positions during the single-party era were selfish, greedy and corrupt. They were also been portrayed as traitors and hypocrites who never cared for the people who elected them into those positions. These politicians were accused of grabbing public property, promoting social and economic classes and killing democracy. Some politicians are

accused of sponsoring tribal clashes which resulted into rape, displacement of population and massacre among other evils.

1.5.3 Mwalimu Julius Nyerere: The Political Role Model

In a departure from the negative portrayal of the post-independence African politician by Kiswahili poets, the founding president of Tanzania, the late Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere received accolades. Mberia (2007) praises Nyerere for his role in uniting Tanzanians in his poem titled *Mwashi* (pg. 40), meaning the mason. In the poet's opinion, Nyerere was a role model worth to be emulated.

Nyerere is fondly remembered by the poet for championing Kiswahili as a tool for uniting Tanzanians and fighting tribalism. He also set an example to Tanzanians by speaking cautiously and promoting African Socialism, an economic and social system aimed at enabling equitable distribution of resources at a time when his colleagues were busy amassing wealth.

Nyerere is given a fitting description of a distinguished post-independence politician who differed from his colleagues in a number of ways. He was not arrogant or greedy like some of his colleagues. He is portrayed as a humble nationalist and democrat who never oppressed his critics. He was a tolerant democrat who welcomed the ideas of other leaders without feeling threatened. He did not cling to leadership like some of his colleagues did. He earned an accolade for offering to retire honorably without being pushed by his opponents or constitutional requirements. He is praised for gracefully handing over power to younger leaders without ado.

1.6 Conclusion

This study highlighted the traits of the pre-independence and post-independence African politician. The pre-independence African politician was portrayed as a selfless patriot who sacrificed his comfort for this continent to gain independence. This was in contrast with the post-independence politician, who was portrayed as a selfish, greedy and corrupt individual, save for Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, who sticks out as a political

role model. This late Tanzanian leader is praised for his patriotism and self-sacrifice and exemplary leadership. It is evident from this study that the African continent needs more political role models who can be emulated by the current and coming generations.

1.7 Recommendations for Further Research

1. This study focused on works published between 1972 and 2007. Further research can be done on works published later in order to evaluate changes that have taken place after multi-party democracy was achieved in most African states.
2. More research to be conducted based on new and emerging issues of governance such as the devolved government in Kenya and its implication on development.
3. Studies can be carried out on translated works other than those originally written in Kiswahili.

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