

**PHILOSOPHY IN *UTENZI* METRE:
EXPRESSION OF IDEAS AND VALUES IN POST-
INDEPENDENCE SWAHILI HISTORIOGRAPHIC POETRY**

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Makala haya yanachanganua jinsi dhana za kifalsafa zinavyoakisiwa katika ushairi wa Kiswahili yakizingatia hasa tenzi zilizoandikwa kuhusu historia za dola za Kiafrika baada ya kupatikana kwa Uhuru. Tenzi nyingi za kundi hili zilitungwa Tanzania wakati wa ujamaa, ndiyo maana itikadi zinazoelezwa zaidi katika tenzi hizi zinahusiana na falsafa ya ujamaa. Uelekeo huu unaonyeshwa katika uchambuzi wa *Utenzi wa Pambazuko la Afrika* uliotungwa na Mohammed Seif Khatib na kuchapishwa mwaka 1982, ambao unaakisi falsafa ya ujamaa, itikadi za umoja wa Afrika (*Panaf-ricanism*) na upingani wa ukoloni, ukigusana pia na imani ya Afrika kuwa chanzo cha mawazo mengi ya kifalsafa (*Afrocentrism*).

Kwa namna hii, inaonekana kwa uwazi kwamba utungaji wa tenzi ni njia muhimu sana ya kueleza falsafa ya kisiasa na ya kihistoria katika utamaduni wa Kiswahili. Njia hii inalingana na njia nyinginezo: mawazo hayohayo yanaelezwa vilevile katika vitabu vya kitaaluma (kwa mfano, vitabu vya Mwalimu Nyerere kuhusu ujamaa), katika riwaya, au katika ushairi wa aina nyingine (kama vile mashairi, ngonjera, n.k.). Tenzi nyingine za hili kundi la 'tenzi za Uhuru' zinaakisi vilevile falsafa za aina nyingine, ikiwemo falsafa ya kidini inayotokana na dini ya Uislamu au falsafa ya 'utu', ambayo ina mizizi mirefu sana katika tamaduni nyingi za Afrika.

Kwa kumaliza, makala yanasisitiza kwamba, tukipenda kufahamu 'falsafa ya Kiafrika' ni nini, ni lazima tutazame njia zilizoko na vyombo vilivyoko katika tamaduni za Kiafrika vya kuelezea dhana na thamani, bila ya kutarajia kwamba njia hizo na vyombo hivyo vitakuwa vilevile au vita-fanana kimsingi na vyombo vya kawaida vya kuelezea falsafa katika tamaduni za Magharibi (yaani maandishi ya kitaaluma kuhusu falsafa). Ushairi ni njia mojawapo, tena muhimu sana, ya kueleza mawazo ya kifalsafa katika utamaduni wa Kiswahili, lakini ziko na njia nyingine, kama vile maelezo ya taaluma mbalimbali na tanzu nyingi za fasihi na sanaa, ambazo inafaa zitambulikane na zichambuliwe katika fani ya falsafa.

1. Ideas, values and viewpoints in poetry

Traditionally poetry has been a very important, even the predominant medium of the expression of ideas, values and viewpoints in Swahili culture.¹ Jan Knappert saw Swahili poetry, with a particular focus on the *utenzi* genre, as an articulation of the 'Swahili worldview' (Knappert 1967). Adopting a diachronical perspective, Albert Gérard (1976 and 1981) has shown how the development of society and its values is reflected in three *tenzi* composed in

¹ The importance accorded to poetry in Swahili culture is by far not unique in Africa. My study has been largely inspired by Graham Furniss's book, *Ideology in Practice: Hausa Poetry as Exposition of Values and Viewpoints* (1995), where he shows how ideologies are voiced through the medium of poems called *wak'a*. It is also not only in Africa that poetry is an important means of propagation and preservation of knowledge, values and ideas, cf. Horster & Reitz 2005 for a discussion of the mediation of knowledge in poetic form in selected European contexts (periods within Classical Antiquity, Middle Ages etc.).

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different periods: namely the shift from a society praising heroic feats and warrior values to a more introverted Islamic society emphasizing religious values, such as compassion and piety.² Ann Biersteker has studied how poetry was employed in the early 19th-century politics (Biersteker & Shariff 1995), how it was used to communicate ideological standpoints and values in the early 20th-century historiographic *tenzi* (1990, reprinted in Biersteker 1996: 145-216), and she has also highlighted the role of poetry in the spread of the ideology of *ujamaa* (1996: 95-144). Amidu's study focuses on the role of the *utenzi* in electoral politics in Lamu in the 1970s (1990, see also Amidu 1993 and Njogu 2001). Askew (2002) describes the role of music performance (essentially sung poetry) in the construction of abstract concepts such as cultural and national identities. Recently, the role of poetry as the medium of philosophical thought has been investigated by Kai Kresse in his book, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (2007), where he analyzes the concept of *utu* as elaborated in Ahmad Nassir's *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*, among other philosophical concepts in different poems and texts. Kresse has also clarified the theoretical issues involved in identifying and studying intellectual discourses that are the agencies of philosophical thought in African contexts (Kresse 2007: 11ff.).

In this article I would like to investigate the role of Swahili historiographic *tenzi* as a medium of philosophical expression. This group of *tenzi* is a particularly suitable candidate for such an analysis: although linked to the long tradition of composing poems in the *utenzi* metre, historiographic *tenzi* are confronted with topical events and ideas. As we will see, the reaction to these harbours the potential for these *tenzi* to be more progressive and innovative in content and form than contemporaneous *tenzi* written about religious or generally moral issues, which tend to obey more strictly the habitual constraints of the genre of *utenzi* with respect to both form and content.³

I will first define the genre: I will enquire into the forms of historiographic literature in Swahili and in particular the existing ways of recording history in poetic form. The discussion will centre on *utenzi* as a textual pattern used in Swahili culture for certain types of descriptions and I will suggest a typology of historiographic *tenzi* in Swahili literature. I will then introduce my research material, historiographic *tenzi* composed in Tanzania and Kenya after independence, mostly with the aim of celebrating the attainment of independence, seen as a glorious culmination of the perturbed histories of East African peoples after centuries of struggle and hardship in the form of Arab and European domination. I will expose the ideas and values voiced in one of them, *Utenzi wa Pambazuko la Afrika*.

Apart from offering a first survey of post-independence historiographic *tenzi*, the article has a second goal: based on this type of literature as a case study, it strives to suggest the first

² For the controversy concerning the dating of the third *utenzi* and with it the argument of Gérard's paper, cf. Parker 1979. This controversy does not affect the argument presented in my article.

³ However, this is certainly not always the case. We may mention here for illustration Mathias Mnyampala's innovative *Utenzi wa Enjili Takatifu* (1963a), celebrated by Jan Knappert as 'the first Christian *utenzi*' (see Knappert 1964).

steps towards a theoretical approach that will enable to see and analyze literatures in African languages as expressions of philosophical thought. I will conclude the article by a debate about the mediality of philosophy - that is, the forms and conditions of the articulation of philosophical thought - in the African and particularly Swahili context. It will then become clear how important it is to acknowledge the existence of the highly developed tradition of expressing philosophical ideas through the medium of *tenzi* as a practice that runs parallel to elaborations of political philosophy expressed in prose.

2. Swahili historiography

In his seminal article on Swahili historiography, Adriaan H. J. Prins mentions the following sources in reconstructing the history of the Swahili: 1. ethnological documentation; 2. archaeological material (numismatics, inscriptions, sherds and ruined sites of deserted towns, tombs and mansions along the coast); 3. oral traditions and genealogical knowledge of the coastal and inland populations; 4. written records in Swahili and in other languages (such as Portuguese, English, German, Arabic, Persian and Gujarati) (Prins 1958: 26f.).

It is the last category that can properly be called ‘Swahili historiography’ – the writing of history in the Swahili language. According to Prins, it is found in four forms: principally in town chronicles, and then “the (modern) compilation in prose, the genealogical material, including deeds, and the more ancient commentary in (usually epic) poetry” (Prins 1958: 27).

In his detailed overview of the Swahili chronicles, Jack Rollins (1983) interestingly questions the notion of ‘history’ itself. He stresses the closeness of Swahili historiography to imaginative writing. The reason for this is “the singular conception of history as it was developed in Arabic Islamic historiography and as it was to some extent followed in Swahili genealogical writing” (Rollins 1983: 28). According to Rollins, Arabic history writing always included fictive material; the historian’s role was to reproduce what had been handed down to him, as precisely as possible, not to investigate into “what truly happened” in the past or analyze critically his sources.

Geider’s survey (2002) starts where Rollins’ ends: at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Geider classifies historiography under the genre *habari*. This category includes four types of writing: historiography (including chronicles and historiographic poetry), ethnography, (auto-)biography and travelogue (Geider 2002: 256). His account deals in more detail with prose texts of the *habari* genre. However, he also mentions the existence of a parallel poetic tradition of history-writing:

In the 1970-80s the *utenzi* scheme was also employed in an own thematic type of epic poem which tells the histories of the new East African nations up to their independences (Geider 2002: 276)

He mentions that “[a] precedent of these poems seems to have been Shaaban Robert’s *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhuru*” (published partly in *Mambo Leo* between 1942 and 1944 and then

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as a book in 1967) and suggests that there is a relationship between these *tenzi* and earlier strands of the *utenzi* tradition:

These poems can be linked to epic poems on the resistance movements against the Germans (Maji Maji etc.), and going further back, even to the religious epics of the *Maghazi* type which depict Prophet Muhammed's early battles against the unbelievers (...) (Geider 2002: 276)

3. Development of the *utenzi* genre

The *utenzi* has been described by many researchers as a vibrant and adaptable genre.⁴ These descriptions focus on the domain of the content: on the adoption of new themes (Geider 1988, Gérard 1976 & 1981).

Besides innovations in content, the *utenzi* genre has also undergone a far-reaching development in form, possibly as a direct consequence of the Tanzanian 'free-verse revolution' in Swahili poetry. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the then students of literature at the University of Dar es Salaam, the most famous being Euphrase Kezilahabi and Ebrahim Hussein, started experimenting with poetic forms. The traditional Swahili prosodic forms were subjected to modifications ranging from slight adaptations to a complete rejection.⁵

This revolution has deeply affected the production of *tenzi* literature, and it is precisely the post-independence historiographic *tenzi* that appear to be the most progressive and innovative in the domain of prosody. The poets clashed with the habitual stanzas of four lines with eight syllables per line. Among the basic rules it was the syllable count (8 syllables per line) that remained the most stable element; in a sense it became the sole defining feature of these reformed *tenzi*.⁶ The number of lines per stanza has been subjected to variations as has the use of rhyme. The stanzas have 3-9 lines. Some authors do not use rhymes at all, some use them freely for specific purposes (such as emphasis or word play).

The innovative approach applies also to the conventional elements of content, such as the invocation of God, the request made by the poet to be given a pen, paper and ink, the self-introduction by the poet or the poet's apology for any errors and a wish that readers may correct them. While some poets do observe these conventional features, others disregard them, and some even go as far as mocking them.

Henry R. Muhanika, in his *Utenzi wa Vita vya Kagera na Anguko la Idi Amin Dada* (1987), the most recent and also by far the most innovative in form among the post-independence historiographic *tenzi*, attacks with derision the conventional elements of con-

⁴ Typically the genre has been used for epic descriptions, but also for religious themes and moral instruction. It is the genre employed for particularly long depictions, a single composition may contain thousands of stanzas.

⁵ On traditional prosody see Abedi 1979, Knappert 1971, Hichens 1962/63, Allen 1967 & 1971: 3-51, Meeussen 1967, Greenberg 1947, Harries 1962: 9ff., on the developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s see Topan 1974, Mazrui 1992 & 2007: 45ff., Njogu 1995.

⁶ On the rhythmical pattern underlying the syllable count and on its pervasiveness in Swahili poetry, see the insightful article by Allen (1968).

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tent: rather than relying on God, he relies on his own effort. He is also not asking for a pen, ink and paper, as they are lying right in front of him. To ask for them would be as silly as to expect a farmer to go to the fields without a hoe or a machete. And while he knows well the rules of the traditional *utenzi* form, he rejects them, calling them chains and a trap:

2

*Sianzi kuomba dua,
Kwa Mungu au Miungu,
Kitu ninategemea,
Hasa ni juhudi yangu.*

3

*Kuomba eti nilindwe,
Eti busara nipewe,
Njia nisipotee!
Ni kujifanya mnyonge.*

(...)

5

*Siombi mtu kalamu,
Wino pia karatasi,
Vifaa nihitajivyo,
Viko vyote mbele yangu.*

6

*Tangu lini niambie,
Mkulima mwenye nia,
Shambani yeye aende,
Bila jembe au panga?*

7

*Usije kuniambia:
Sheria zake utenzi
Ulio safi utenzi
Yatakiwa mistari
Minne kila ubeti.*

8

*Nacho kina cha mwishoni
Kwa kituo cha utenzi,
Mtunzi kukibadili,
Anaharibu utenzi.*

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9

*Mimi haya nayajua,
Sitaki kuyafuata,
Ukitaka hebu sema: –
Mtunzi huyu ni nanga,
Mwenye mambo kubananga.*

10

*Nitalikubali hili,
Hili ni bora zaidi,
Ninapolilinganisha,
Na minyororo kufungwa,
Au Mtego kutegwa,
Na mimi nikaingia.*

In stanza 9 you can also see an innovative, in this case ironic, use of rhyme, rhyming *nanga* with *kubananga*. The choice of the word *nanga* is peculiar. The word means here ‘weak, inferior’, rhyming playfully with *kubananga*, ‘to spoil, destroy’. At the same time, there is a pun at play here: *nanga* also means ‘anchor’, that is, something that is fixed in the deep of the ocean. The Swahili word for ‘depth’ is *kina*, which also means ‘rhyme’. So the two lines may be interpreted as obliquely saying that rhymes are a poor device, they spoil things, or even that remaining stuck in the depth (of tradition?) is bad.

4. Typology of Swahili historiographic *tenzi*

Geider’s note quoted above (2002: 276) provides a good basis for a working thematic **typology** of Swahili historiographic *tenzi*:

- the first group is *Maghazi* literature: depictions of the fights of the early Muslims with the infidels; it is particularly this group where Rollins’ observation about the half-fictional nature of Swahili historiography becomes relevant
- the second group can be referred to as *Kala shairi*, using the title of the edition of these poems by Mische et al. (2002); these are poems – not exclusively *tenzi* – describing the Swahili encounter with German colonialism
- finally, the third group consists of historiographic *tenzi* written during the Second World War (Shaaban Robert’s *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhuru*) and then after the attainment of independence; it is this post-independence writing that I will focus on in this paper. I would like to call these poems *Tenzi za Uhuru*.

5. *Tenzi za Uhuru*: Overview

My research material consists of eleven *tenzi* written after independence in Tanzania and Kenya. The earliest *utenzi* from this group was publically recited in 1965 and published a year

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later (Himid 1966a), the latest one appeared in 1987. The *tenzi* were published as books; two short *tenzi* were published in the journal *Swahili*. The poems describe the history of countries, political parties, important historical events, or they are praises of political leaders.^{7,8}

***Utenzi* related to Africa**

Khatibu, Mohammed Seif. 1982. *Utenzi wa Pambazuko la Afrika*. Arusha: Eastern Africa Publications Limited.

***Tenzi* related to Tanzania**

Himid, Zainab. 1966. Utenzi wa Muheshimiwa Rais wa Tanzania 28.9.65. *Swahili* 36/1: 2-6.

Himid Mohammed, Zainab. 1966. Utenzi wa Muheshimiwa Abeid Amani Karume. *Swahili* 36/2: 7-12.

Khatib, Muhammed S. 1975. *Utenzi wa Ukombozi wa Zanzibar*. Dar es Salaam et al.: Oxford University Press.

Lesso, Zuberi Hamadi. 1972. *Utenzi wa Zinduko la Ujamaa*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau..

Mahimbi, E. M. 1981. Utenzi wa Chama cha *Mapinduzi*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House.

Mhina, George A. 1979 (1978¹). *Utenzi wa Kumbukumbu za Azimio la Arusha*. Dar es Salaam: Black Star Agencies.

Mwaruka, Ramadhani. 1976. *Utenzi wa Jamhuri ya Tanzania*. Nairobi: East African Literature.

***Utenzi* related to Kenya**

Kibao, Salim A. 1972. *Utenzi wa Uhuru wa Kenya*. Mhariri Abdilahi Nassir. Dar es Salaam et al.: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Parallel to this *utenzi* production there has been abundant production of other poetry about *ujamaa*, especially of the *shairi* type. Some of these poems have been edited as books by Kamenju & Topan (1971) and Abdalla (1977).

⁸ The process of *tenzi* literature becoming praise poetry to the leaders of African nations is noteworthy in the context of literatures in African languages, in view of the prominent role that praise poetry plays in West African and in Southern Bantu cultures. The orally transmitted praise poetry, in these cultures, is a major source of inspiration for modern historiography written in prose (see Rettová 2007a: 77-103 for a study of Ndebele and Bambara historiographic writing), but it also continues until the present day as a vibrant tradition of recording and commenting on history (for references see below, under 7.5.).

***Utenzi* related to Mozambique**

Mayoka, Jumanne M. M. 1981 (1978¹). *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhuru wa Msumbiji*. Arusha: Eastern Africa Publications Limited.

***Utenzi* related to Uganda**

Muhanika, Henry R. 1987. *Utenzi wa Vita vya Kagera na Anguko la Idi Amin Dada*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.

6. *Pambazuko la Afrika*: Exposition of the content with respect to ideas and values

In the limited space of this article I would like to discuss in more detail only one *utenzi* – Mohammed Seif Khatib's *Utenzi wa Pambazuko la Afrika*. In 901 stanzas the poet goes from depictions of an idyllic state of prehistoric times through centuries of slavery, colonialism and the concomitant exploitation of Africa to the turbulent developments towards independence and neo-colonialism after independence.

Predictably, the central idea in the poem is the ideology of *ujamaa*. The whole narration of history is done from a Marxist position, inevitably leading to a victory of *ujamaa* socialism. *Ujamaa* is the cure of all evils (including the corruption and hypocrisy of post-independence politicians, neo-colonialism, or the imperialist propaganda spread by the new media, such as radio, film, and television; due to these forms of manipulation, the independence achieved by African peoples so far is only illusory), true independence and development will only come with the implementation of *ujamaa*:

814

Uhuru huo wa kweli
Na ulio wa halali
Utafika bila hali
Kama tumekusudiya

815

Dawa yake ujamaa
Siasa ya kuivaa
Afrika ikizagaa
Lengo tutalifikiya

816

Ujamaa kisayansi
Huo ndio utopasi
Na kuleta mahilasi
Kwetu unatufaliya

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To reach this true *ujamaa*, it is necessary to observe its *miiko* ('taboos'), which Khatib lists in the following stanzas. The society should be based on a one-party system:

820

Kuwe na chama kimoja
Kinokusanya pamoja
Fanyakazi bila hoja
Wakulima nao pia

The party leading society should be a revolutionary party (823-824) that will involve 'mature youths':

825

Na vijana waloiva
Wanamapinduzi 'viva'
Na kurudi nyuma 'neva'
Wahubiri wenye nia

826

Vijana walopikika
Msimamo waloshika
Ambao wakarambuka
Wa vita kviingiya

827

Watangaze itikadi
Kwa karibu na baidi
Wao ni wetu juhudi
Vita kututangaziya

This party will build up a modern, revolutionary society, where the means of production will be nationalized (831), agriculture will be based on co-operative farming (840), everyone will work and live off his/her sweat (832-833), and there will be no exploitation (831-832). This social order will eradicate poverty (837) and hunger (841) in a society without classes (837). Factories will produce enough clothes, tools (849), and medicines (850) so that there is no need to order these from abroad (849). Development should be led by revolutionary 'intellectuals, recruited from the workers' class:

853

Ni wasomi wapinduzi
Watoleta mageuzi
Makada wafanyakazi
Muhanga lojitoleya

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These policies will ensure social equality and enforce good comportment:

858

*Wote wawe sawasawa
Kama sahani na kawa
Wanaishi kwa muruwa
Hapana linozuiya*

Development should involve farms and villages (859), but also schools and hospitals (860), culture palaces and sports stadiums (861) that will be built for the people.

It is clear how closely these suggestions follow Julius Nyerere's political thought, articulated in the famous policy statement of 1967, Arusha Declaration (*Azimio la Arusha*), and developed in detail in his political essays and speeches (e.g. Nyerere 1968) and also in Nyerere's poetry (see Biersteker 1996). Nyerere advocated equality (*usawa*) and self-reliance (*ku-jitegemea*), nationalization of banks, large industrial companies, and land, the building of socialist villages (*vijiji vya ujamaa*), and combatting the three evils: poverty (*umaskini*), illiteracy (*ujinga*) and disease (*maradhi*).

Apart from this belief in socialism, the *utenzi* expresses **abolitionist and anticolonialist** ideas. These sentiments come to the foreground in the descriptions of the cruelty and exploitation of Africa by both slave-traders and colonialists.

Employing the literary *topos* of *ubi sunt* and dramatically repeating *yuko wapi / yuwapi* at the beginning of 9 stanzas, the poet celebrates the expulsion of the colonial powers:

628

*Yuko wapi Mngereza
Afrika loiweza?
Hayupo ameteleza
Ulaya amerejeya*

629

*Yuwapi Mtaliana?
Lokuwa akijiona
Na akijitapa sana
Afrika kaiachiya*

630

*Yuwapi Mjarumani?
Kwa ukali namba wani
Na viboko mikononi
Watu kimsujudiya*

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631

*Yuwapi na Mfaransa?
Maarufu kwa kutesa
Ameshapigwa msasa
Mate anatumezeya*

632

*Yuwapi naye Mdachi?
Kwa ukali kama kuchi
Ameshapigwa muchi
Naye ametokomeya*

633

*Yuwapi huyo Mmanga?
Ni bingwa kwa zake panga
Ameshindwa kutuvunga
Karejeya Arabiya*

634

*Yuwapi Mbelegiji?
Kwa ulafi ndiye gwiji
Kaihama yetu miji
Karudi liko tokeya*

635

*Yuwapi jimbi Mrenu?
Kuupata tu upenu
Kutoka na usununu
Mtutu kaukimbiya*

636

*Yuwapi Msipania?
Alokuwa kapania
Nchi kujifaidia
Hataki kuturejeya*

The poem also professes **Panafricanist** beliefs:

863

*Afrika iwe ni moja
Isiwe tena kioja
Na watu kutoa hoja
Mapande kujigawia*

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Africa's unity is not an abstract one, but rather one implemented in practice in economy (866) and in the military sphere (868).

A mirror-image of this united Africa of the future is the pure Africa of the origin, an idea expounded in the opening passages of the *utenzi*: Africa was a continent with an ideal climate: the sun, the rain, the cold were all in a perfect balance (1-7). It was in this peaceful African nature, rich in natural resources, animals and vegetation (verses 8-22) that the human being appeared (23) and peopled other continents (25). People invented tools for agriculture (40-42) and weapons for hunting (43). This brought the division of labour (46-47). At this time, people shared equally agricultural products (51) and worked communally (*kwa ujima*, 52). There was no greed, envy or accumulation of riches, as people used up what they produced and only produced what they needed (54-56).

Also this image of an idyllic original state is present in the philosophy of African statesmen, such as Nyerere (cf. Bodunrin 1981: 13-15), whose understanding of African socialism was based on the premise that socialism is 'at home' in Africa, because African traditional society was in principle socialist: based on sharing and communal work. The idea of a pure, original Africa, corrupted in the course of history and still somehow within reach through appropriate political means, links the poem to essentialist philosophies such as **Afrocentrism** (e.g. Asante 2004) and its diverse ramifications.

The *Utenzi wa Pambazuko la Afrika* gives us an idea about what the *tenzi* are like, but it does not exhaust the philosophical content of all the *tenzi*. This specific *utenzi* does not touch on some ideas present in the other *tenzi*, such as **religious philosophy** or the **philosophy of *utu*** (cf. Rettová 2007b).

Predictably, much of the content expressed in these post-independence historiographic *tenzi* is quite simple and consists predominantly of propaganda of *ujamaa*. The existence of this well-established poetic tradition of articulating philosophical ideas and values is perhaps more important than the actual philosophical content of its poetry.

With this type of literature it appears necessary to justify using the word 'philosophy'. While it may be a worthwhile effort to redefine in general terms what philosophy means beyond its Euro-American contexts, for the moment I would like to point to the well-known classification of African philosophy proposed by the Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka in 1978, where the thought of African statesmen, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, or Julius Nyerere, features as one of the four trends in African philosophy. Oruka calls it nationalist-ideological philosophy (Oruka 1981: 4-5).

It is significant to note that these *tenzi* cover the same topics as Nyerere's theoretical writing (e.g. Nyerere 1968), i.e. the texts that are studied by Oruka and other philosophers under the heading of African philosophy. In addition, the very same topics are also dealt with in poems of other genres, such as *shairi* (see Nyerere's own poetry reproduced in Biersteker 1996, see also Kamenju and Topan 1971, Abdalla 1977, or the compilation of poems pre-

viously printed in daily press, Honero et al. 1980) or the theatrical genre of poetry popularized and associated with *ujamaa* by Mathias Mnyampala, *ngonjera* (Mnyampala 1963b, 1970, 1971, see also Riccio 2001, Roy 2007). These are poetic traditions which fall outside the scope of the present article, but which, nonetheless, are noteworthy as parallel channels of the expression of political philosophy in Swahili culture.

7. The medium of *utenzi*

The present discussion of the Swahili historiographic *tenzi* falls within a broader debate on the ways philosophical thought is expressed in Africa. The apparent absence of a discourse similar to Western philosophy has led to the assumption that philosophy in Africa is expressed in different ways than in the West. African philosophy is often seen as embedded in language: language reflects thought and by analyzing language we establish a philosophy (Lenfers 1971, Hallen & Sodipo 1997); in proverbs (e.g. Gyekye 1995, Oluwole 1999, Wanjohi 1997); in oral poetry, such as the Ifá Divination Corpus of the Yorùbá (Oluwole 1999); in the discussions of ‘sages’ (Oruka 1990), diviners and healers (Hallen & Sodipo 1997, Hallen 2000). Specifically for Swahili culture, the domains that have been identified as avenues of philosophical expression are herbalism, poetry, public lectures (Kresse 2007) and prose fiction, in particular the novel (Rettová 2007a). We are thus confronted with a diverse range of vehicles of intellectual expression, many of which are quite distant to the expression of philosophical thought that is seen as ‘standard’ or as the ‘norm’ in the West: the printed theoretical text on a philosophical topic.

I would like to suggest an approach to these ‘other’ ways of expressing philosophical thought employing the concept of mediality: the capacity to transfer (mediate) contents of the conscious mind and the manner and form of this mediation (Bystřický 2006). It is a concept recently developed especially in German-speaking literature and media studies (see Febel et al. 2004, Greber et al. 2002, Jäger & Linz 2004, Krämer 2004, Pruisken 2007) and successfully employed, for example, in the analysis of Old High German and Middle High German epics as literature on the verge between orality and literacy (Haferland 2004, cf. also Wenzel 1995) or early prints in the Middle Ages and the beginnings of the modern times (Kapfhammer et al. 2006).

Mediality refers to how the transmission and representation through media interacts with the object (such as human thought). Medium is a form of transmission (mediation) with characteristic effects (Haferland 2004: 385). It is a more comprehensive concept than that of genre, for it takes into consideration also the aspects of preservation, performance, etc.⁹ Medium has effects that tend to be attributed to genre, such as formulaic expressions, which may be mnemotechnic aids in an orally presented literary work rather than conventions of the genre

⁹ I am operating here with a concept of ‘genre’ as a relatively stable set of textual conventions; on definitions and functions of ‘genre’, see Briggs & Bauman 1992, Barber 2007: 32 ff.

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(cf. Haferland 2004: 23). The concept of mediality helps to take into account these dimensions of literary works that often escape the attention of mainstream literary studies, oriented almost exclusively towards the written medium.

An approach employing the concept of mediality enables analyzing the values and ideas articulated in *tenzi* in a subtle and versatile manner. How does the concept of mediality apply to the *utenzi*? The *utenzi* is a different medium than, for example, a prose text, and needs a different approach, sensitive to its peculiar character. Looking at the *utenzi* as a medium, we have been able to draw into consideration a wide spectrum of aspects relevant to an understanding of the philosophical content of the texts: the context of historiographic writing in Swahili in prose and poetry and the place of the genre of *utenzi* within Swahili poetry; the formal and aesthetic side – as in this case, the prosodic qualities of the new *tenzi*: how they are embedded in the literary matrix of Swahili culture and what message is implied in the revolutionization of the form; the conventions of patronage – in the case of the *tenzi za Uhuru*, the possible affiliation of the poets with persons in power¹⁰ – and what implications these may have on the authorship of ideas¹¹; and others more.

Of these features, perhaps the most important is the fact that the adoption of the *utenzi* form in post-independence historiographic writing for the diffusion of *ujamaa* philosophy as well as the innovative adaptation of this form (its gradual, but not unlimited ‘deconstruction’) contain a message about *ujamaa* that goes beyond the content of the words and one that could not be conveyed in prose: namely, they add to the feel of *ujamaa* philosophy as new, progressive, modern, breaking up with tradition, and yet deeply rooted in it – essentially Swahili and African.

The present article sees itself as a modest beginning of a more comprehensive study of the existing channels of the expression of intellectual contents that can be found in African cultures, including the diverse genres of oral¹² and written¹³ literatures, various forms of perfor-

¹⁰ I have no direct evidence of this for any of the *tenzi* studied in this paper. However, for example, the compilation of poems celebrating the Arusha Declaration, edited by Kamenju and Topan (1971), was instigated by Mwalimu Nyerere himself (Farouk Topan, personal communication).

¹¹ I am thankful to Ridder Samson (discussion following the presentation of this paper at the 21st Swahili Colloquium, Bayreuth, 2nd-4th May 2008) for attracting my attention to this issue. Questions regarding authorship have been in the centre of the study of African oral literatures (cf. the bibliography in footnote 12), but recently the issue has also been revisited in post-structuralist philosophy (see Barthes 1977, Foucault 1980, Burke 2004).

¹² On African oral literatures and general issues concerning them, see Andrzejewski et al. 1985, Bukenya et al. 1994, Finnegan 1970, 1992 and 2001, Furniss and Gunner 1995, Furniss 2004, Görög-Karady 1983, Kaschula 2001, Okpewho 1992, Vail & White 1991. For genre-specific studies in Africa, see Belcher 1999, Johnson, Hale & Belcher 1997 and Okpewho 1979 about the epic, May 2000 and Möhlig & Jungrathmayr 1998 about tales (cf. also Propp 2005). For studies of the specific ethnic groups, see, for example, Furniss 1996 for Hausa, Babalola 1966, Barber 1991, Olatunji 1982 and 1984 for Yorùbá, Cope 1968, Gunner & Gwala 1991 for Zulu, Opland 1989 for Xhosa, Guma 1967 for Sotho, Hodza & Fortune 1979 for Shona. On the relationship between orality and historiography, see Barber & de Moraes Farias 1989, Miller 1980, Tonkin 1992, Vansina 1980 & 1985, Pouwels 1984 & 1992. On orality in general see Goody 1990, Foley 2002, Lord 2000, Ong 1996, Stolz & Shannon 1976, Rubin 1995.

¹³ Overviews of Afrophone written literatures include Gérard 1980, Andrzejewski et al. 1985, Ngandu Nkashama 1992, Furniss 1996 (about Hausa literature), Ricard 2004, Garnier and Ricard 2006, Garnier 2006 (about the Swahili novel).

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mance and theatre¹⁴, film¹⁵, numerous disciplines of specialized learning¹⁶, modern mass media¹⁷, arguably also language itself and its piecemeal expressions, such as idioms and proverbs¹⁸. Such a study must of necessity proceed systematically, from mapping the ‘medial terrain’ of a culture (that is, the existing possibilities of expression of ideas and values in a given culture) to analyzing the individual instances of texts¹⁹. We must also reiterate here the need of an interdisciplinary approach in this procedure: to understand the philosophical impact of texts in African languages, a cooperation of many disciplines (linguistics, literary studies, anthropology, history, and others) is prerequisite.

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¹⁴ General issues concerning performance are discussed in Auslander 2008, Krämer 2004. On performance in Africa and its theoretical premises, see Conquergood 1989, Bauman & Briggs 1990, Drewal 1991. On African theatre, see Kerr 1995, Banham 2004, on theatrical performance in specific geographical areas see Brown 1998, Fabian 1990, Gunner 1994, Barber 2000, on specific trends in theatre (such as ‘theatre for development’), see Esskamp 2006, Salhi 1999.

¹⁵ For an analysis of ‘embodied’ (through mimesis understood as bodily mimicry) and ‘rational’ (typically through commentary in voice-over) ways to express philosophical ideas through the medium of film, see Dovey 2009. See also the contributions in Givanni 2000 and Bickford-Smith & Mendelsohn 2007, on film theory see Mast 1983.

¹⁶ See the contributions in Behrend & Geider 1998 and Barber 2006, further Geider 1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 2002, Kresse 2007, Rettová 2004 & 2007a. A systematic discussion of specialized writing in Africa is still lacking.

¹⁷ For example, Lenoble-Bart & Tudesq 2008, Damome forthcoming, see also Askew and Wilk 2002, Ginsburg et al. 2002.

¹⁸ For example, Lenfers 1971, Gyekye 1995, Hallen and Sodipo 1997, Wanjohi 1997, Oluwole 1999.

¹⁹ For a tentative application of the concepts of mediality and intermediality on proverbs, praise poetry, historiographic prose, and prose fiction, see Rettová 2009.

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