

**MAYAI – WAZIRI WA MARADHI:
MAGIC REALISM IN EUPHRASE KEZILAHABI'S
LONG TIME UNPUBLISHED SHORT STORY¹**

ELENA BERTONCINI-ZÚBKOVÁ

This article will present a short story which appeared in the newspaper *Mzalendo* on the 15th January 1978, but it took twenty-six years before it was published in a book.² Presumably it was written in the same period as both the play *Kaputula la Marx* and probably also as some of Kezilahabi's poems from the second collection *Karibu ndani* (1988). It is a period of his most critical works.³

In *Mayai – Waziri wa Maradhi* the author blames, in a highly symbolic manner, the leading classes of his country who became rich at the expense of common citizens during ten years of Independence, symbolized by ten emaciated ghostly children.

The story occurs over a period of less than two days. It opens one afternoon with the main character Mayai alone in his large house because his wife had left him and his children study far from home. He is looking at a photo album and through these pictures we are informed about his past and his career. We see him as a poor village boy, then a modest teacher and finally occupying more and more important posts in the government. The situation changes when Mayai comes to the picture of his deceased son Ukombozi, who died in a car accident four years earlier at the age of six. In the meantime night has fallen and he suddenly notices that the weather outside has turned windy and rainy. Unfriendly noises like cats' miaowing and owls' hooting frighten him. His fear increases when strange events start to occur: windows and doors open by themselves, a noise of steps, then the voice of his dead son. At last, at the dead of night, he sees Ukombozi with nine other shabby and hungry children in the kitchen eating all the food they find in the fridge, then putting everything in order and going away as silently as they arrived.

The following morning a big celebration of ten years of Independence begins and the minister attends the opening ceremony, together with all the members of the government and other important personalities. After the ceremony he calls on a doctor, who is his friend, and borrows

¹ Paper presented at the 16th Swahili Kolloquium, Bayreuth, 30 May - 1 June 2003.

² *Note by the Editors*: In the meantime the short story has been published in *Wamitila* 2004: 63-77. For ease of reference we have added the page numbers to the quotations cited here.

³ At the end of the Seventies Kezilahabi wrote another short story, *Cha mnyonge utakitapika hadharani*, also denouncing politicians, but more openly; it was published at first in *Mzalendo* (7 April 1985) and later in Mbunda Msokile's anthology of short stories *Misingi ya hadithi fupi* (1992).

from him two books on ghosts. After an afternoon nap he starts to read them, but he does not find them helpful. At nightfall the weather changes to become like that of the previous night and he again begins to be afraid. In fact, at the dead of night the phantom children return; this time each one carries a pile of books (Nyerere's works) that they heap in Mayai's bedroom and then they go to bed. The minister calls the police. In a few minutes four armed policemen arrive and Mayai shows them into the bedroom. It is dark and quiet both outside and inside.

The story takes place on three levels (in three space-time units):

1. in the 'real' world (reality) – while Mayai is awake
2. in a magic world (unreality) – also while he is awake
3. in dreams – while he is sleeping.

However, the so called real world is mostly presented satirically. To start with there is Mayai's own position – the Minister of Illness – of which he is very proud.

Mwishowe aliufikia ule ukurasa alioupenda kuliko zote. Picha nyingi kati ya hizi alikuwa akizindua majengo ya kuendeleza maradhi mbali mbali. Alijiona akikata utepe. Alikumbuka hotuba zake. Alikumbuka jinsi alivyosifia maradhi makali kama kipindupindu na kifua kikuu kwa kuwa yanasaidia kupunguza idadi ya watu duniani. (Kezilahabi 2004 [1978]: 65)

At last he reached the page he liked most. In many of these photos he was inaugurating buildings for increasing various illnesses. He saw himself cutting the ribbon. He remembered the speeches he had given. He remembered how he praised fatal diseases like cholera and tuberculosis because they help diminish the number of people in the world.

Consider also the other two ministries over which Mayai had presided before becoming Minister of Illness: the Ministry of Education and Jogging (*Wizara ya Elimu na Mchakamchaka*), and the Ministry of Commerce and Bribes (*Wizara ya Biashara na Milungura*). Other ministers mentioned in the text are the Minister of Wild Animals (*Waziri wa Wanyama wa porini*) and Minister of Ruins and Teasing (*Waziri wa Magofu na Utani*).

The real and the magic world are not separated as his waking and his sleeping, but instead they intermingle. The transition from reality to unreality is marked by darkness and the nasty weather which frightens the minister.

The first level covers both daytime and night, the second occurs only by night and the third one only by day. So Mayai dreams only in broad daylight; by night he is hardly able to sleep, let alone to dream.

In fact, among the few things he is mentioned as doing in the story is his sleeping, or his impossibility to sleep. For the rest, he performs very few activities; indeed, he is more active in his dreams. The allegories and the symbols introduced in the dreams are clear and presented in

MAGIC REALISM IN KEZILAHABI'S MAYAI – WAZIRI WA MARADHI

realistic scenes, such as drunken ministers urinating in the river, while a short distance downstream a group of peasants is bathing and watering their cattle, or, during a demonstration of teachers and doctors, Mayai is showering them with promises. His dreams by day (not day-dreams!) do not frighten him as they reflect his 'normal' activities but without embellishment, i.e. they are presented for what they really mean.

Interestingly, the contact with the world of the dead does not occur in dreams, but on the second level, in unreality.

The most obvious reading of the story is as criticism of the first decade of *Uhuru*. The failure of Nyerere's policy appears in all three levels:

On the first, realistic, level, there is a hint of Mayai being involved in shady business.

Picha za ukurasa uliofuata alizitoa zote akazichana vipande vipande. Hizi zilikuwa picha za rafiki zake, kama yeye alivyowaita. Picha hizi zilikuwa picha za Wasomali na Wamanga wenye maduka. Kulikuwa pia na picha kadhaa za Waafrika walioonyesha sura za kushiba na macho majanja. Baadhi ya picha hizi zilikuwa picha za watu ambao walikuwa wamekwisha shtakiwa kwa makosa ya ujangili na hujuma. Wengine walikuwa wamekwisha kufa. Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi aliogopa mkono mrefu wa Serikali akazichana haraka haraka na kisha akazitupa ndani ya kasha la taka. (Op. cit.: 66)

As for the photos on the following pages, he took off all of them and tore them into pieces. These were pictures of his friends, as he used to call them. They were pictures of Somali and Arab shopkeepers. There were also several photos of Africans with a satisfied and well fed look and sly eyes. Some of these pictures were photos of people who had been sentenced for crimes, like poaching and sabotage. Some of them were already dead. Mayai the Minister of Illness was afraid of the long arm of the government; he immediately tore them up and threw them into the wastepaper basket.

Besides, the criticism is expressed symbolically, e.g., by the fact that at the celebration of the Independence Day the famous musician Mzee Morris who plays ten drums is blind.

On the second level, the criticism is most evident: ten small child ghosts, tattered, famished and carrying Nyerere's works, of course represent the first meagre period of Independence. They are a bitter counterpart to the ten children who were born on the *Uhuru* day, proudly exhibited at the celebration.

Finally, on the third level, we see the dissolute ministers despising peasants.

Akiwa kitandani ndoto za mchana zilianza kumsumbua. Katika ndoto ya kwanza aliota yeye na mawaziri wengine pamoja na wabunge kadhaa wakiwa ndani ya bar, wakinywa pombe. Chupa zilikuwa zimejaa mezani na kesi zingine nyingi zilikuwa zimepangwa pembeni zikiwasubiri. Nyama za kuku na mbuzi zilikuwa nyingi.

ELENA BERTONCINI-ZÚBKOVÁ

Halafu akaona yeye na wenzake wanakojoa mtoni sehemu ya juu, lakini chini bondeni wakulima waliokuwa wameweka majembe yao pembeni mwa mto walikuwa wanakoga na kusugua miili yao kwa mawe. Wao, wakiwa katika hali ya ulevi, walikuwa wakionyeshana wale wakulima kwa vidole na kuwacheka. Ndoto hii ilimstua, akafumbua macho haraka. (op. cit.: 73)

When he was in bed, afternoon dreams started to trouble him. In the first dream he was in a bar drinking beer with other ministers and members of Parliament. The tables were full of bottles and many other crates were waiting for them in a corner. There was plenty of chicken and goat meat.

Then he saw himself and his friends urinating in the upper part of the river while downstream peasants who had put their hoes on the bank, were bathing and scrubbing their bodies with stones. Completely drunk, they were pointing at the peasants, laughing. This dream startled him, so he quickly opened his eyes.

Now we will go beyond this political reading of the story to analyze more closely the main character as a representative of the leading class.

The whole story is centred on Mayai and narrated from his perspective.

At the beginning the minister, while viewing his photos, confronts his own past, which he denies; he does not recognize himself in the pictures as a small naked boy – he rejects his village origins. Instead he regards with satisfaction the photo of himself, a secondary school student, wearing a shirt, shorts and, for the first time, a pair of shoes. Another photo he likes was taken on the day when he received an award of a copy of Shakespeare's Complete Works. (Both photos are sign of his assimilation of European culture.) But he prefers the pictures of his recent past showing him in important roles and positions, such as driving a car or opening new official buildings.

Mayai is presented right from the beginning as being alone and lonely.

Usiku. Ndugu Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi alikuwa amekaa peke yake nyumbani akitamama buku kubwa la picha alizopigwa, za zamani na sasa. Mkeve ambaye aligombana naye alikuwa ametoroka siku chache zilizopita kwenda nyumbani kwao. Watoto wake walikuwa wakisoma mashuleni mikoani. Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi alikuwa katika hali ya upweke ndani ya jumba kubwa lililotazamana na Ikulu. (op. cit.: 63)

At night. Comrade Mayai, the Minister of Illness, was sitting alone at home looking at a large album of his photos, old and recent. His wife had left him a few days earlier after a quarrel and had gone back to her home. Their children were studying in other parts of the country. Mayai the Minister of Illness was lonely in his mansion in front of State House.

He remains alone most of the time. He does not communicate very much with his servant, with his colleagues during the ceremony, or with his friend, who lends him the books about the supernatural. He is alone with his fears and nightmares. And when at last he decides to ask for help from the person in charge of his neighbourhood, this person lets him down:

MAGIC REALISM IN KEZILAHABI'S MAYAI – WAZIRI WA MARADHI

Alipofika sebuleni alikoroga simu kwa balozi wa nyumba kumi ili aje ajionee mwe-nyewe na amsaidie kuwashika wale watoto. Balozi wa nyumba kumi alikuwa Waziri wa Wanyama wa porini. “Bwana e e!” sauti ya balozi ilisema, “mimi nashughulika na wanyama wa porini, mambo yanayohusu binadamu mimi simo! Labda Waziri wa Magofu na Utani anaweza kukusaidia!” akakata simu. (op. cit.: 76)

He went into the sitting room and dialled the number of the ten-cell leader so that he might see for himself and help him to catch those children. The ten-cell leader was the Minister of Wild animals. “My friend!” said the minister’s voice, “I occupy myself with wild animals, things regarding human beings do not concern me! Perhaps the Minister of Ruins and Teasing can help you!” and he cut off the conversation.

So Mayai tells everything to the police – and here the narration interrupts itself. In fact, the police are helpless to confront ghosts: the real world cannot meddle with the magic world, and indeed, Mayai himself cannot do anything more than observe the ghosts in his house.

Alikoroga simu polisi, akaeleza hadithi yote. “Tutakuja sasa hivi mzee!” walimjibu. Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi alikaa sebuleni kuwasubiri. Mara polisi wakafika. Wali-pogonga mlango aliwafungulia. Walikuwa wanne. Mmoja kati yao alikuwa na bunduki kubwa na wengine bastola. Waziri aliwaongoza chumbani walimokuwa wamelala watoto, akafungua mlango wa chumbani. Polisi wakaingia. Taa zikazima. Giza. Nje, majira ya mvua; ndani, majira ya giza. (op. cit.: 77)

He dialled the police number and explained the whole story. “We are coming at once, sir!” they replied. Mayai the Minister of Illness sat down in the sitting room waiting for them. Suddenly, the police arrived. When they knocked at the door, he opened. There were four of them. One of them had a large gun and the others pistols. The minister led them into the bedroom where the children were sleeping and opened the door. The policemen entered. The lights went out. Darkness. Outside, the time of raining; inside, the time of darkness.

Thus the second feature characterizing Mayai is fear. For him the outside space is menacing by night with its darkness, rain, wind and fearful noises, and tiresome by day – with oppressive heat and the boredom of the opening ceremony.

Inside, Mayai’s luxurious house is reassuring only until nightfall, when it is invaded by the phantom children, against whom neither a lock nor a gun can provide protection.

Together with his fear and his loneliness, another characteristic of Mayai is his weariness. He is presented mostly as tired and sleepy, but his attempts to sleep at night are frustrated by the little ghosts, so he dozes during the afternoon.

Mayai’s servant, who appears occasionally carrying food or newspapers, brings a moment of normality to the tense atmosphere that envelops his master. He does not notice anything fearsome in the dark outside, and as for the celebrations, he enjoys them together with his own family.

However, the only character whom Mayai has to confront is his dead son Ukombozi, who haunts him with the other nine little phantoms. Mayai loves him, but he also fears him, and at last

the fear prevails; he calls the police who, of course, do not find anything except darkness: darkness outside and inside, as the author specifies.

We might ask what Ukombozi does represent in the story. The minister is not guilty of his son's death; this, together with the fact that Ukombozi arrives always accompanied by nine other children, might mean that Mayai is being rather confronted by his own past; indeed, the children are as thin and tattered as he himself appeared on his old photographs. He is guilty because he has betrayed his origins and has enriched himself at the expense of the common people.

In conclusion, this short story represents a small gem among Kezilahabi's works. It is more critical than his novels, but the criticism is wrapped in allegories and symbols. Kezilahabi has always been a pioneer writer, both in his novels and in his poetry. *Mayai – Waziri wa Maradhi* proves that he has also been a pioneer in short story writing.

Reference

Kezilahabi, Euphrase 2004. *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi*, in *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi na Hadithi Nyingine*, ed. by Kyallo Wadi Wamitila (ed.). Nairobi: Focus Publishers Ltd. Pp. 63-77.