



Ben Mtobwa reading from his work
during the 9th International Janheinz Jahn Symposium
on African crime fiction, University of Mainz, January 9, 2008
(photo by Vanessa Diaz).

IN MEMORIAM

BEN RASHID MTOBWA

The international community of Swahili scholars mourns for Bernard Rashid Mtobwa, who passed away on 9th November 2008. He was born on 28th August 1958 in Kigoma Region in Western Tanzania. His life and work went inseparably with the development of writing and publishing in Swahili, and he remains one of the most outstanding figures in both fields. He was married with four children.

Ben Mtobwa began writing while still at secondary school; later he published short stories in the magazines *Nchi Yetu*, *Bara Afrika* and *Kiongozi*, and articles in the newspapers *Uhuru* and *Mfanyakazi*. As a writer, he became known in the early 1980s, and holds the leading position among the founders of crime and adventure fiction in Swahili. His best known books are the series of adventure novels featuring the investigator Joram Kiango: *Lazima Ufe Joram* (1983), *Dimbwi la Damu* (1984), *Tutarudi na Roho Zetu?* (1984, published in English translation as *Zero Hour*), *Najisikia Kuua Tena* (1985), *Joram Kiango Mikononi mwa Nunda* (1986), *Salamu Toka Kuzimu* (1987), *Malaika wa Shetani* (1988), *Nyuma ya Mapazia* (1996), *Roho ya Paka* (1996), and *Mtambo wa Mauti* (2004).

In these books, Mtobwa made a pioneering effort of using a detective story as a vehicle of serious social criticism, turning “popular literature” into an instrument to increase the social awareness of his readers. As it was written by a reader soon after Ben’s death, “*taifa limepoteza kinara mwingine wa kutumia fasihi andishi kufichua masuala mazito yaliyoigubika jamii yetu*”. Ben Mtobwa also wrote the novelette *Zawadi ya Ushindi* (1992), children’s book *Nitakusubiri* and short stories under the title *Mwanaharamu*. His last novel in Joram Kiango series, *Mikataba ya Kishetani*, was completed shortly before the author’s death, and is yet unpublished.

However, Mtobwa’s most important works are considered to be the novels *Pesa Zako Zinanuka* (1986, published in English translation as *Give Me Money*), and *Dar es Salaam Usiku* (1990, published in English translation as *Dar es Salaam by Night*). In these novels, Mtobwa showed one of the loftiest achievements of realistic social novel in Swahili, which puts him on the level with the topmost Swahili novelists. Several of his books were translated into English by the author himself and published in the prestigious international series *Pacesetters* and by other publishing houses, several books were made into films.

Soon after he started to gain fame as a writer, in the late 1980s Ben Mtobwa became the Managing Director of *Heko Publishers* in Dar es Salaam, which post he held until his last days. Under his management, *Heko* very soon became one of the most prominent publishing houses in Tanzania, supplying the people’s needs in educational literature, publishing a

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weekly newspaper, a magazine and also developing a program for the support of young writers – *Heko* is one of the leading publishers in the field of Swahili fiction. Through its publications, the readers became acquainted with some names which now comprise the upper level of modern Swahili literature, such as Thomas Kamugisha, Baker Mfaume and others.

Ben Mtobwa left us unexpectedly, himself being full of new plans, projects and hopes. He is not here any longer, but his creative legacy, his contribution into the development of literature and life of the society, and the memories of his amazingly attractive personality – his honesty, his friendliness, his hospitality – will remain with us forever.

May he rest in peace. *Mungu amlaze mahali pema peponi.*

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Postscript

I would like to offer my condolences to Ben Mtobwa's family and friends. I had the privilege of getting to know Ben Mtobwa as a very critical and unpretentious person with a unique sense of irony for the first time at the National Book Week in Dar es Salaam a couple of years ago. Then, last year, only a few weeks before he left us, we had met in Dar es Salaam together with his son discussing his works and projects. May his outstanding achievements in questioning simplistic divisions between 'popular' and 'serious' literature be followed by similar efforts.

Lutz Diegner
(for the editors)