

SWAHILI POPULAR LITERATURE IN RECENT YEARS

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The article outlines recent trends in popular writing in Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, the research being mainly based on titles published after the year 2000, by both well-known writers and newcomers. The author also generalises on some basic social and cultural factors accountable for the present state of popular literature in both countries.

Introduction

The first question that inevitably comes: is there popular literature in Swahili at all? Or, in other words, is there any kind of literature in Swahili which can be deemed ‘popular’? Surely it is not possible to label any kind of Swahili fiction as ‘popular’ because of large numbers of copies sold – numerically the reading public in East Africa still remains relatively humble, being concentrated mainly in urban areas. Thus, the only applicable criterion is genre, and so I dare state that popular fiction as such has two basic forms: thriller and love story.

Another question: is there such literature in Swahili? The answer is – yes, or at least there used to be. The last three decades of the 20th century witnessed the birth and development of Swahili popular fiction, *fasihi-pendwa*, where thriller and love story were two predominant genres. Such names as Faraji Katalambulla, John Simbamwene, Eddie Ganzel, Hammie Rajab and others marked the frontline of Swahili popular fiction in that period. Suffice it to say, that from 1980 till the year 2000 the number of titles falling into the category of popular literature comprises nearly a half of the total amount of Swahili fiction titles published in these years. I deliberately do not say anything about the quota of popular fiction in Swahili literature in the 1960s and 1970s, since during these two founding decades the two main strata of Swahili fiction – *fasihi-pendwa* and *fasihi-dhati* (“serious” literature) were still going through the period of formation, thus the distinction between the two seems to be a little more difficult than in subsequent decades.

Then, how does Swahili popular literature of the first decade of the 21st century look like compared to the previous decades – 1990s, 1980s and 1970s? Were there any changes that characterise this new period in the development of Swahili popular fiction? I would say that Swahili popular fiction in the 21st century has changed rather tangibly. To prove that, I will start this brief survey of Swahili popular literature in the first decade of the 21st century with Kenya, for two basic reasons: first, I am more familiar with the situation in Kenyan literature, since I currently

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work in Nairobi, secondly – it seems that recently the centre of Swahili literary activities has generally shifted to Kenya.

Kenya

In Kenya popular fiction in Swahili had never gained such acclaim as in neighbouring Tanzania, again for two basic reasons. First, until recently Swahili had secondary status compared to English; secondly, and consequently, the Kenyan reading public was generally ‘fed’ with popular fiction in English, which is still abundant in the country. Thus, even during the previous years the only author of Swahili thrillers in Kenya was Godfrey Levy, who published three detective novels in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1990s, as well as in the first years of this century, not a single thriller written in Swahili by a Kenyan was published.

On the side of the love story, however, Kenyan Swahili writers seem to demonstrate a more fruitful approach. Quite a few books published within the last seven years exploit the amorous relationship as their main plot. However, there is one feature that is immediately notable while reading these books: all the love stories recently published by Kenyan Swahili writers have a very strong didactic air. In these stories, love relationship serves as a pretext for reasoning, for showing the readers the disadvantages of pre-mature and hastened romances, and the characters in these books mostly suffer because of their romantic involvements.

In *Dunia Mashaka Makuu* (The world is full of doubt) by Lamin Omar (2003), the young girl Yasibu dies as a result of a love affair with her fellow student Pazia. A similar fate befalls Janet in *Uhondo Mchungu* (Bitter plentyhood) by Moses Andere (2005). A young man, Hatibu, in *Nazikumbuka Ndoto* (I remember my dreams) by Ali Hassan Njama (2004) commits suicide when he learns that his girlfriend Shani preferred to marry a rich elder. In *Malimwengu Msumeno* (Life is a crosscut saw) by Edward Monjero (2002) a juvenile love affair ends, more sparingly, in marriage and subsequent divorce – love did not allow Huba and Mkimwa to finish their education, and, unable therefore to find a decent employment, they have to renounce their marriage.

Some other authors are also more merciful to their characters – in *Maisha Kitendawili* (Life is a puzzle) by John Habwe (2000) and in *Fumbo la Hadaa* (Riddle of deceit) by Swaleh Mdoe (2005) the heroines, young and inexperienced girls, rush to the world of romance, become involved in numerous difficulties, but in the end manage to overcome and start a new and, hopefully, better life. In another book by Ali Hassan Njama, *Mkondo wa Maisha* (Current of life, 2000), the main character, the young villager Fadili, abandons his pregnant girlfriend Shida and leaves for the city. There he falls into the hands of the cunning beauty Neema who discards him as soon as he loses his means of livelihood – thus Fadili has to repent and to return to his first and true love.

As I mentioned, all these books principally depict the juvenile romance as immature and irresponsible behaviour, which is punishable and, moreover, the punishment is inevitable. The possi-

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ble explanation why the authors show such an attitude to the topic, which is treated in, say, European popular fiction in quite a different way, may be found in the audience these authors are targeting. Many Swahili writers in Kenya are strongly school-oriented, and thus their task is not to charm the supposed audience with pleasures of 'school love', but to acquaint them thoroughly with all its negative consequences – from undesired pregnancy to even more serious aftermaths. The fact that Kenyan Swahili writers are school-oriented could also account for the absence of Kenyan thrillers in Swahili, since thrillers, as 'morally inferior' books, are unlikely to be accepted for school syllabus.

The orientation of Kenyan Swahili writers towards school students has, in my opinion, another serious consequence, if we look at it from a sociological point of view – Kenya almost completely lacks Swahili fiction aimed at middle class readers. It also seems that this could explain the general low popularity of Swahili literature among Kenyans. Since the majority of them perceive Swahili literature only as a part of school syllabus, – in other words, as a literature imposed upon them and thus unloved –, it is needless to say that after school they cease to read Swahili books completely.

Out of sheer curiosity, I gave questionnaires to about 80 students from my university classes in Nairobi. The basic question was: which books by African authors have you read within the last three years? Swahili books mentioned in the answers among the total of 32 titles were only five – namely, two plays (*Kilio cha Haki* by Alamin Mazrui and *Amezidi* by Said Ahmed Mohammed) and three novels (*Siku Njema* by Ken Walibora, *Kisima cha Giningi* by Muhammed Said Abdulla and *Kusadikika* by Shaaban Robert), all of which are found in the syllabi of Kenyan schools. Still most of the Kenyan Swahili writers prefer to write for schools for reasons, as it could be assumed, of predominantly economic nature. Of course, there is another type of Swahili fiction in Kenya which targets the intellectuals, like the novels of Kyallo Wadi Wamitila and the latest ones by Ken Walibora, but their reading public is different and in any case smaller.

Tanzania

In Tanzania the situation with popular fiction was different almost from the beginning. It was aimed at two main groups of readers, the middle class and lower social groups with much lower level of education. The first, 'middle-class' type of popular fiction is generally marked with higher artistic qualities, such as more sophisticated characterisation and plots, which requires higher number of pages and, as a consequence, higher price; typical representatives of this type of fiction are, for example, Ben Mtobwa or Hammie Rajab. The other, 'lower' type of popular writing features high degree of didacticism, one-dimensional characters and simplified plots; the books are of lower quality and more affordable for the less-well-off readers. Since the early 1970s this literature was represented, for example, by the books of Ndanda Mission Press. In the 1990s the 'middle-class' type popular fiction has decreased drastically, with only around 20 pu-

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blished titles, whereas *Ndanda Press* fiction preserved its position (for the recent developments in *Ndanda Press* literature see Reuster-Jahn 2008: 105-118).

After the year 2000, Ndanda Mission Press almost completely closed down its entertainment programme: if the number of titles published in the 1990s amounted to about a hundred, in the period from 2000 to 2005 only five titles were published (for more details see Reuster-Jahn 2008). Moreover, if the authors of previous decades mostly produced original stories, the authors who wrote during the recent years seem to prefer appropriations of already well-known narratives. The novelette *Bibi toka Marekani* (A lady from America) by Chambua Mmbughu (2000) narrates a love story of Tanzanian youth and African-American girl of semi-Tanzanian origin, and the entire story strongly reminds of *Mwenda Kwao* (Going home) by Cuthbert Omari (1971), one of the first Swahili novels.

Asha Shaaban Kimwana Kunemah, one of the very few female writers, in her two novelettes published in 2003 also uses well-known stories. *Ubinadam Tabia* (Humaneness lies in behaviour) is based on motifs characteristic for oral tradition of many African (as well as non-African) communities – a magician turns animals into young girls, they get married and bear children, and that is why today men’s behaviour includes both animal and human traits. Even more notable is the plot of Asha Kunemah’s second novelette *Farida na Faridi*. Two youngsters, Farida and Faridi, meet at the ball and fall in love. Unfortunately, they belong to two belligerent families. They want to get married secretly, but do not know how to escape. For this, Farida’s nanny and Faridi’s grandfather compose a plan. Farida’s nanny buys from a local medicine man a potion, which, being taken by Farida, sends the girl into profound sleep, which looks exactly like death...

Yes, obviously Asha Kunemah in her book retells the story of Romeo and Juliet, but with a different – and happy – ending: when Faridi sees the body of his sweetheart lying under the tree (and not, of course, in a chapel), he, presuming her dead, decides to commit suicide by hanging himself on the same tree. Fortunately, the branch upon which he puts the rope breaks, Faridi falls down undamaged, and at that very moment Farida wakes from her sleep; the story ends with their wedding. To mention it, this was not the first time when Tanzanian authors use the story of the young lovers of Verona. In 1984, Ande Ngayillo published the novelette *Mwana Aliyelaanika* (The cursed child), in which, however, the story ended with the suicide of the heroes. The question comes: in the case of Asha Kunemah, was the author merely parasitizing on the world-known plot? I believe that was not so. Firstly, she was obviously addressing readers who have a very vague notion of Shakespeare, and secondly, she was seemingly striving to restore the historical justice: Shakespeare killed the young lovers, Asha Kunemah saved them.

Another tendency in Tanzanian popular fiction of this decade is the “come-back” of love stories and thrillers for the middle class readers; these stories are characterised, as it was mentioned, with relatively higher artistic qualities, higher volume and consequently higher price. In this, the

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genre of love story is represented by Benedicta Maganga's *Chozi la Furaha* (A tear of joy, 2004), which portrays an exemplary marriage – the young spouses managed to preserve their love since their schooldays and carry it, unstained, up to the wedding altar.

Heri (Happiness, 2002) by Zefania Kalumuna describes the negative consequences of forced marriage – an old and previously respected villager is arrested, when he tries to forcefully marry his daughter to a rich man's son. Samwel Machangu in *Asali yenye Shubiri* (Bitter sweetness, 2004) tells the sad story of the Rwandan refugee Marieta, during that she herself, her children and relatives after numerous love affairs become demolished by AIDS. James Bwana in *Haramu* (Illicit, 2004) tells the enthralling story of Bahati, the only son of a poor prostitute.

Well-known author Zainab Burhani published in 2004 her new novel *Kipimo cha Mizani* (Measuring scales), where she tells a story of the young woman Halima, who after her husband's death falls victim to the schemes of her malicious brother-in-law. Halima is deprived of all her property and even incarcerated into asylum. However, "with a little help from her friends" Halima regains her possessions, punishes the schemer and eventually gets married to the virtuous friend of her late husband. The language and style of these stories are still generally simple, the plots are straight, the characters 'one-dimensional' – but exactly these devices allow the authors to bring their messages to the audience, which might be seen as not sophisticated enough to contemplate the 'intellectual' Swahili novels, like those of Said Ahmed Mohamed, but whose social and educational background makes most of the *Ndanda Press* novelettes 'too simple' for them.

An interesting example of a love story can be found in *Mama Jeniffer!* ([sic], Proper name) by Baker Mfaume (2003). Here the young engineer George Abbas falls in love with a beautiful girl named Judith. Everything is arranged for the wedding. However, a family friend, a strong-charactered and resourceful woman known as Mama Jeniffer, seems to stop at nothing to destroy the supposed marriage. After a series of ambiguous and hurtful events George makes the last shocking discovery - Mama Jeniffer turns out to be a lesbian, jealous of Judith, whom Mama Jenniffer intends to make her lover (and eventually succeeds – whether by force or seduction is not specified in the book). After the disclosure Judith commits suicide, and Mama Jeniffer flees from the country. It must be noted that the author does not openly condemn Mama Jeniffer, although implicitly she is given the role of the antagonist. She is portrayed as nearly deranged, driven almost to insanity by her lust, and pursuing her fantasy of happiness even at the price of other people's lives. The artistic skills demonstrated by the writer place this novelette (with all the controversial nature of its topic) among the most notable achievements in recent Tanzanian prose.

Thrillers, traditionally the most popular and the most conventionally-shaped 'police novels', full of adventurous episodes, comprised a major part of Tanzanian popular fiction in the 1990s. However, after 2000 their number also seems to be considerably reduced, and the new titles are mainly authored by the veterans of the genre, such as Ben Mtobwa and Elvis Musiba (even

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Mtobwa's earlier novels were all reissued in the 2000s). Mtobwa's new novel *Mtambo wa Mauti* (Device of death, 2004), which describes new adventures of the infallible private detective Joram Kiango, apart from the usual amorous and fighting episodes contains short, but precise and rather vitriolic sketches of Tanzania's social reality of the early 2000s.

Elvis Musiba, who attained his fame as a writer of thrillers already in the 1970s, in his novel *Uchu* (Desire, 2000) is writing about the latest and probably the last series of adventures of "Tanzanian James Bond", the intelligence officer Willy Gamba. He tells about Gamba's trip to Rwanda, during which he discloses the schemes of high-rank political officials both in and outside Africa to start again the ethnic conflicts in the country. The novel, apart from the obligatory adventurous elements of the plot, contains detailed and precise excursions into Rwandan history and the reasons of the conflict. This tendency among the veterans of Tanzanian thriller to turn the thriller genre from a mere instrument of entertainment into a vessel of strong social message inspires some hopes about the general maturing of that genre in Swahili literature.

However, new adventure writers, who entered the Tanzanian literary scene in the discussed period, seem to stick to the genre of thriller as basically a means of entertainment, fascinating the reader mainly with the adventurous episodes and unexpected turns of the plot. An example can be found in *Kikulacho* by Hassan Nkussa (What bites you, 2001), the story of a brave and infallible inspector destroying a gang of criminals.

Development of design and format

Speaking about recent Swahili popular fiction, one more feature must be noted: the design, or the format of the books. Re-editions of Mtobwa's earlier novels, which appeared in 2000s, look much better than their initial versions. Moreover, at least some Tanzanian publishers started to realize, that for many readers the design of the book signals about its quality. How does any reader – and East African reader inclusive – know that a book is a bestseller even before he/she reads it? By the characteristic features of its design: impressive volume (several hundred pages), large gilded or silvery letters on the front cover and on the spine. This attracts the reader immediately, telling him that this book is a bestseller, and therefore is worth buying. And that is why the middle class in Eastern Africa consumes mostly the English-language bestsellers – attracted by the looks and knowing that the looks will provide for the desired content.

However, some changes are here as well. All the characteristic features of the 'bestseller design' are present in the appearance of the book *Machizi na Damu* ('Tears and Blood') by Eric James Shigongo, published in 2005 by Global Publishers. It has an impressive volume (about 500 pages), gilded letters on the cover and even an English subtitle. In spite of this, the book is written entirely in Swahili; even the English fragments of dialogues are provided with Swahili translations. The novel's plot contains all the necessary components of the best-selling thriller: the ac-

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tion alternates between Tanzania, Kenya, Australia, USA, Iran and Pakistan, there is an international beauty contest, happy recovery after six years in coma, at least three intertwined love stories, drug trafficking, numerous murders, adulteries and the inevitable happy end.

To my mind, the question of design is rather important in this case – thus the middle-class reader, attracted by the familiar “bestseller looks”, will buy and read a Swahili bestseller. Shigongo’s book really deserves this name, as it was selling rather promptly. In Dar es Salaam, I saw it being sold even in the streets, priced rather modestly at about 4000 Tanzanian shillings. I believe the reader will like the book, as it has all necessary traits of a best-selling thriller. But, what is more important, its reader will start to learn that Swahili literature could be enjoyable and attractive and not necessarily associated either with the school classroom and/or the university auditorium.

And, who knows, the reader might become inspired to buy next time something more ‘serious’ – a novel by Said Ahmed Mohamed or Kyallo Wadi Wamitila, for example. Middle-class readers, as the most active part of the reading public in Eastern Africa, must be “dragged back” to Swahili literature – and Shigongo’s book helps that in its own way. It should be mentioned that *Machozi na Damu* is not Shigongo’s first attempt. In 2003 he published the novel *Rais Anampenda Mke Wangu* (The president loves my wife); the author is also popular, because some of his writings are serialized in Tanzanian newspapers.

Conclusion

For the conclusion, or, rather, instead of it, I would like to dwell upon a few other factors which, in my opinion, shape the current state of popular fiction in Swahili. The observations made above, hopefully demonstrate more or less obviously that the first few years of the twenty-first century showed a considerable decline in the number of titles of popular novels published in Swahili (it does not apply, however, to *fasihi-dhati* – “serious literature” – and this phenomenon could, to my mind, make a topic for a separate research).

In my opinion, this decline was caused only partly by the factors mentioned above, i.e. the growing orientation of Swahili authors towards the school syllabus in Kenya, and in Tanzania the reduction, if not elimination, of the *Ndanda Press* entertainment programme, which contributed a lot to the bulk of popular fiction in the country. Another factor is the growing rivalry on the part of the popular cinematographic production.

This applies especially to Tanzania, the country which until the late 1990s did not have any tangible popular cinema in Swahili. Imported European and Indian movies, shown in the cinema halls around the country, could not make a feasible rivalry to books, as movies were more expensive and less accessible. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s this gap was, rather suddenly, filled not only by endless Swahili sitcoms shown on Tanzanian TV, but also by the ad-

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venturous movies produced by Tanzanian cinematographers. Many of them are based on books, like, for instance, the recent screening of Ben Mtobwa's *Lazima Ufe Joram* ('You must die, Joram'). With the spread of the culture of home and public videos, these movies seem to comprise a serious rival to the books of the similar kind. Moreover, the entire system of distribution existent in the country works in favour of films, as one can easily watch or even rent an adventure film in the nearest rental-cum-movie theatre, which are abundant in the country.

At the same time, the distribution, and even publishing, of the books of fiction in Tanzania is still quite a problem. The publishing houses printing *fasihi-pendwa* are very few. In fact, after the decline of the Ndanda entertainment programme, only two or three publishers are producing more or less actively popular books in Swahili. The leading position is taken by Heko Publishers, headed by the Tanzanian topmost detective writer Ben Mtobwa. The book-selling network in the country is still to be established and organized – and in the light of all this, the future of *fasihi-pendwa* in Tanzania leaves more questions than answers.

Or does it? From the distant and also recent experiences we know that popular fiction has this unique capacity to survive “no matter what”; moreover, in many African countries it still has another unique and, important facility: to introduce the readers in a light and enjoyable manner to very serious issues of social life, to provoke their thoughts, to provide them with guidelines. In terms of that, I dare express my hope that popular literature in Swahili is “gathering strength” for another stage of its existence, the stage which will not only stress once again its abilities as an instrument of social development, but will reveal its artistic abilities and enable modern Swahili writing to confirm its well-deserved place in the constellation of African language literatures. For the potential is there. Or am I mistaken?

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