

## “NYOKO-NYOKO”: AN UNPUBLISHED SHORT STORY BY SAAD YAHYA<sup>1</sup>

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Saad Yahya, born in Zanzibar in 1939, studied architecture and town planning in Great Britain and in Canada; since 1968 he has lectured at the University of Nairobi. Besides many scientific titles, in 1973 he published a tiny collection of short stories, *Pepeta* (“Medley” or “Pot-pourri”). He portrays everyday life of typical inhabitants of Zanzibar and Nairobi, displaying a penetrating understanding of their problems and of their state of mind, linked with a remarkable stylistic ability. He is an acute observer who presents his characters with humour and irony, but also with a profound insight. Furthermore, in his stories, under the surface of everyday activities there is always some hidden antagonism or passion, never spelled out, but only alluded to.

Several years ago Yahya sent me the manuscript of two other stories which I hoped to translate and publish in Italy, but ultimately it was not possible. I have included one of them, called *Nyoko-nyoko* and consisting in five typewritten pages, in the syllabus of my literary courses in Naples and in Paris and the students like it very much.

As it is usual with Zanzibari writers, Yahya’s texts are peculiar from the linguistic point of view, with many idiosyncrasies, to begin with the titles. All Yahya’s titles are particular and difficult to translate, and this one perhaps more than the others. *Nyoko* is a nasty abuse (literally it means “your mother”). Dr. K.W. Wamitila reminded me of the proverb *Nyoko nyoko ni shibe ya kuonana*, translated by Scheven as “Abuses are the result of seeing one another too often. Familiarity breeds contempt.”<sup>2</sup> However, the redoubled *nyoko-nyoko* is not so strong; it rather means something like “causing problems” or “making troubles” and was often used by Kenyatta in his speeches<sup>3</sup>. Hence an appropriate title might be “troubles” or “problems”<sup>4</sup>.

It is a rare – if not unique – Swahili story in which the main character is a *Mzungu*, a white man: the British governor of an imaginary East-African country called Nyalia, who has to abandon his post suddenly for unspecified reasons. He regrets to must leave the country he

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<sup>2</sup> Scheven 1981:11. In his *Kamusi ya Methali* (2001:237), Wamitila also quotes another proverb – *Nyoko-nyoko kuonana, kuwa mbali kuliana*, explaining it as follows: *Wanaopendana huanza kukosana wawapo pamoja ilhali wakiwa mbalimbali wanatamani kuwa pamoja*.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Dr Abdilatif Abdalla for this remark.

<sup>4</sup> As suggested to me by Sauda Barwani and Abdilatif Abdalla. In the text *nyoko-nyoko* appears only once: *Tena mnathubutu kudai uhuru, kufanya nyoko-nyoko na kutukana* (cf. example 6)

has learned to know and to like; however, behind the mask of liberality and tolerance is hidden a self-conceited racist. The story describes his last day in Africa after a long stay.

So the main character is Sir Ian, the governor of Nyalia; the other two characters are his European wife and his African mistress.

At the beginning the governor arouses readers' empathy, unlike his wife. It seems that his urgent recall to London after twelve years of loyal service in the colony is unjust and, in fact, he accepts it unwillingly and grudgingly. He not only claims to be a faithful servant of Her Majesty, but also a good and just ruler of the inhabitants of Nyalia and an open-minded master of his African servants to whom he permits to organize their traditional dances in his garden. (We learn all this from the insight into his psyche offered by the omniscient narrator.) His pastimes and hobbies are presented as simple and harmless even though trifling: reading Perry Mason and other thrillers, driving his Bentley and looking after his garden. It means that like other expatriates, he tries to maintain, as far as possible, the British way of life – the five o'clock tea included – combined with the colonial facilities such as a lot of servants.

One of the first scenes is situated in the governor's office, while he is packing his things. The description of his African collection is revealing: in the room are ranged various objects that he has received or purchased during his term of office, gathered together in confusion and without respect for the local traditions. He has no idea of their value, having placed together valuable objects and junk.

(1) *Ofisini mwa Sir Ian kulijaa vitu vya sanaa na vyengine vya upuuzi ambavyo vilijikusanya kwa muda wa miaka mingi. (...) Simba wa pembe alitumbuliana macho na tembo wa udongo. Jambia la fedha lilikicheka kisu cha mkwezi.*

What is worse, Sir Ian has exposed these objects without any criterion, displaying publicly certain of them which are taboo and hence should not be seen. This fact proves his total ignorance of the customs of the country he has governed for many years, and which he claims to know well.

Later in the story we discover the dark side of Sir Ian's character. He seems to be involved in the mysterious death of a Greek settler – apparently a crime of jealousy. The Greek was torn to pieces by a leopard trained – as the rumour has it – by the governor himself. In fact, one of his hobbies is to breed various animals.

(2) *Vitu muhimu katika milki ya Sir Ian ni vinyama, wadudu na viumbe vingine vya kutisha ambavyo alivifuga.*

This episode, even if presented by the narrator as a rumour and in passing, shows us Sir Ian in a new, ominous light, as a sort of sorcerer. Could it be for this reason, we might ask, that he has been recalled so suddenly?

While Sir Ian is apparently open-minded and well-disposed towards the Africans, his wife Anne is overtly hostile and disdainful. She is known for her bad nature and a sharp tongue, and so the servants give her various nicknames.

(3) *Mkewe Sir Ian alikuwa ni mwanamke tu. Si mzuri wala si mbaya. Hata ulimi mzuri alikosa, ukali wake na tabia yake ya kukejeli na kubughudhi vilimpatia sifa mbaya kwa wenyeji wa mji mkuu wa Nyalia. Watumishi wa kike wa nyumbani walimwita kwa majina kama mkaanga sumu, ziraili au samaki aliyeruka mwamba.*

Lady Anne, too, has some troubling secret which remains hidden. When her husband suggests that she should pay her debts in the shops before leaving the country, she replies that her debts are not in the shops. This remark is probably linked with the rumour that Sir Ian organized the Greek's killing because the victim had an affair with Lady Anne.

A counterpart to this negative character is Sir Ian's African mistress, Safia, presented in the next episode which takes a great part of the story. In it Sir Ian, disguised as a poor white settler, is driven to a shantytown in the outskirts of the capital where Safia lives, to take leave from her.

Safia is not only pretty, but generous and caring; she is simple, lacking formal schooling and refinement, but also perspicacious and sensible. Although she has no means, and so is entirely depending on the governor's generosity for her living, she has her pride and declines Sir Ian's offer of a financial help for herself and her son's future.

(4) *Safia alifahamu wazi kwamba maneno yale ni kweli. Ingawa alikuwa ni mwanamke mzuri mno, wa sura na umbo, na mwili wake, ukibishana na umri wake, ulikuwa bado mbichi u kitoja u tomvu wa u jana, b aadhi ya n yakati h umjia wasiwasi kuhusu m aisha yake ya uzeeni. Alikuwa hana haja ya kutupa macho mbali. Mama yake, shangazi yake na jamaa wengine walikuwa katika hali ya umaskini na udhalilifu usio na kifano. Lakini kauli ilimtoka:*

*"Pesa z ako s ina haja n azo. Mimi n a m wanangu t utapata r izki y etu. Nyinyi m nafikiri pesa zinanunuwa kila kitu? Basi fedha zako zifuge, wende zako Ulaya."*

Safia has given Sir Ian a son, Sefu, who is now seven years old and lives with Safia's mother in the country. Although it is the governor's only child, he did not legitimize him; he thinks that money is sufficient to fulfill his obligations towards the boy.

(5) *"Sikiliza," alijibu Sir Ian huku akijidai kukasirika, "usilete mambo ya upuzi. Huyo unaemwita m toto wangu u memzaa wewe, n a m imi kwa h uruma n a j amala y angu n i- memkubali. . ."*

*"Mbona hukumpa jina lako?"*

*"Jina ni kitu chengine. Tena sidhani kama angependa kuitwa Foster-Jones."*

*"Nawe hata jina unaona mali?"*

The farewell conversation with Safia reveals Sir Ian's egoism, racism and contempt of the local people. His discourse is full of prejudiced clichés, such as: the Europeans brought the light into the darkness; before their arrival not only there were no University graduates, but the indigenous people walked naked, while now they wear suit and tie, they drink imported beer and drive cars; and so on.

(6) *Hii nchi yenu najua juu-chini, na nyinyi nimekusomeni. Katika miaka kumi na miwili niliokaa hapa, nimeona na nimetenda mambo mengi. Nilipokuja kwanza palikuwa na shule mbili tu za misheni na hospitali kubwa moja. Hapakuwa na M-nyalia hata mmoja aliyekamata kazi ya uwakili, uganga au uwalimu. Mkienda uchi. Ilikuwa pori, nchi ya kishenzi. Kwa juhudi yangu na Serikali ya Malkia, hii leo mmekuwa watu. Mnavaa suti na tai. Mnaendesha gari na kunywa pombe ya Kizungu. Watoto wenu wanakwenda shule, na wengine wanapata vyeo vya juu serikalini. Penye giza tumeleta mwangaza. Penye pori tumejenga miji na njia. Tena mnathubutu kudai uhuru, kufanya nyoko-nyoko na kutukana. Lakini tuliyataka. Siyo nyinyi mliyosema "Usimwamshe aliyelala, utalala wewe?"*

As we have said, in all his short stories Yahya leaves something unsaid, hinted at. Here it is the suspicion that the governor is involved in the terrifying murder of a Greek settler and perhaps also in other crimes. Even in his relation with Safia he is presented as a selfish opportunist. He uses his mistress to get information about activities of the opposition.

Safia tells him:

(7) *"Mimi mwenyewe nafahamu kwamba unanitemilia. Kwangu unapata habari zote za mji, habari ambazo usingeweza kuzipata kwa majasusi na askari wako."*

Thus ultimately Sir Ian changes from a sympathetic, broad-minded and friendly man, as he appears at the beginning, to a negative character like his wife, deliberately ignoring customs and traditions of the people he governed for twelve years, racist, dishonest and evil.

It is interesting to study the procedures by which this characterisation is achieved. The story is presented by an omniscient narrator, partly from the viewpoint of the characters and partly from an external perspective. There is no straightforward description, but rather a series of seemingly banal episodes which help to build the main character.

The story is structured in a classical way: a short exposition, introducing the hero and the setting, is followed by a series of scenes which represent a normal activity of someone preparing himself to leave a place after a long stay. The whole story takes place on the last Governor's day in Nyalia practically without flashbacks or anticipations, in a classical unity of time. The plot is organized in the following sections: Sir Ian reacts angrily at his recall, then he packs his things, goes to say goodbye to his mistress and finally he gives a farewell speech to the people of Nyalia; this last episode is only reported indirectly, the speech being quoted in the newspaper on the next day, and Sir Ian reads it in the plane bringing him to London. It stresses further the governor's insincerity.

(8) *Ni hotuba aliyoandikiwa na katibu wake na yeye akaisoma kama kasuku.*

The impression of normality, reinforced by the external focalisation privileged by the author, is interrupted only by the ominous "leopard" affair, by the way only shortly mentioned without claiming its veracity.

The choice of the moment in which the story takes place is well-timed: it offers the opportunity of taking stock of the governor's life; it is a symbolic moment, in which a part of hero's life ends while he faces an unknown future.

(9) *Sir Ian a likuwa yumo katika kufunga-funga virago vyake a kijitayarisha na safari yake ndefu. Alikuwa kama mtu anayejitayarisha kutoweka dunia hii akienda dunia nyengine asiyoifahamu.*

The omniscient narrator is apparently neutral, but behind his quiet discourse is hidden a strong criticism, partly direct and partly oblique. The direct criticism is expressed by Safia, who at first blames Sir Ian because he did not want to give his name to their child, and then she criticizes White people in general.

(10) *Hata chini mmefanana na manyani. Vile vile ndio maana mkawa mahodari wa kunyakua na kula matunda ya watu.*

The narrator relinquishes often his omniscience, preferring an external perspective.

(11) *Watumishi wa kike wa nyumbani walimwita kwa majina kama mkaanga sumu, ziraili au samaki aliyeruka mwamba. Kama alistahili majina hayo au la, haijulikani, kwani ni desturi ya wafanya kazi wa nyumbani kuwalinganisha matajiri zao na vitu mbali mbali vinavyohusu mapishi au vinyama vibaya.*

Yahya's writing always contains humour and irony. He achieves it with a few strokes of pen, such as some innocent remarks in the narrator's comment. See for instance the description of the collection in Sir Ian's office:

(12) *Juu ya kabati iliwekwa mbuzi ya kukunia nazi, meno yake makali yakitunga macho ya Malkia ndani ya picha iliyo mkabala.*

The description of Safia's home, even if delivered by the omniscient narrator, gives the impression of kitsch, undoubtedly perceived so from Sir Ian's point of view:

(13) *migongo ya viti na sofa ilifunikwa kwa vitambaa venye mji wa manjano na mauwa makubwa mekundu. Foronya za mito zilivuta macho kwa maneno na ishara za mapenzi - "I LOVE YOU" iliyofumwa kwa uzi wa zambarau, alama ya kopa ya uzi wa manjano yenye michirizi-chirizi meupe, labda ikionyesha mate; "ASALI" iliandikwa kwa uzi muwafaka, huku nyuki wane, mmoja katika kila pembe wakijitutumua kuonyesha mbawa zao nzito za uzi wa pamba. Ingawa Sir Ian alimweka Safia kinyumba, na kumtazama kwa hali na mali, hakumwingilia katika mambo ya kinyumba au mavazi. Maoni yake yalikuwa kwamba Nyalia ni nchi yenye ustaarabu wake na madhehebu, tabia, ada na nyendo zake. Si juu yake, ingawa ni Gavana, kuingilia mambo binafsi na dakhilia, hata nyumbani kwa awara wake. Alipenda kuweka murwa wake, akiwa ni muungwana wa Kiingereza.*

Yahya's criticism of colonialism, though very strong, is not sketchy nor obvious, but quite subtle. His governor is a round character, not lacking positive aspects; he is presented by Ya-

hya with an insight never seen in Swahili fiction before, unlike those improbable flat, schematic shadows of white people, quintessence of evil, often found in African fiction. It is the only successful portrayal of a white man in Swahili literature.

It is a pity that this short story has not yet been published as it would enrich Swahili literary repertoire.

### References

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