

## NEW TENDENCES IN SWAHILI DRAMA\*

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One of the most striking characteristics of contemporary drama is its denial of illusion. Modern playwrights do their best to convince the audience that what is presented on the stage is not a *tranche de vie* (as was the aspiration of naturalist writers), but a performance.

In order to go beyond the stage of illusion, Brecht proposes the way of theatricality. He constructs a series of signs which should remind the spectator of indeed being in the theatre. These signs appear especially in all textual contradictions and absurdities, such as the presence in the same place of opposite categories, or the non-coherence of a character with himself, shortly in what the classical critique calls "implausibility". The shift of an object from one purpose to another, the shift of an actor from one role to another, or any textual or stage subversion of current logic of the "good sense", is theatricality (Ubersfeld 1982:47-49)

A considerable part of Brecht's innovation is linked with time fragmentation. His dramaturgy in *tableau* (instead of acts) interrupts the continuity of a natural and logical progression. Any rupture, in fact, breaks what Brecht calls the identification, and forces the spectator to leave not only the action and the continuation of the story, but the whole world of theatre and to return to his world (Ubersfeld 1982:210).

Modern stagings manipulate the character's identity, splitting him in two or blending several characters into one. Besides, a character (or rather actant, but I do not want to go into the distinction between the two here) may be absent from the stage, his textual presence being only recorded in other characters' utterances.

A recent innovation in Swahili drama has been an incorporation into the play of local art-forms: songs, stories, mime, etc. For instance, the latest Penina Muhando's plays (as *Nguzo-mama*, 1982 or *Lina ubani*, 1984), reflect these features.

Ebrahim Hussein, who gained his PhD degree at the Humboldt University in Berlin, goes even farther in modernizing Swahili drama: right at the beginning of the rise of Swahili drama in *Mashetani* (1971) he introduces "the theatre in the theatre" and blends dreams, fantasy and reality<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, however, I do not wish to discuss these well-known Swahili playwrights, but to introduce some other plays that present signs of theatricality.

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<sup>1</sup> The first full-length play was staged in Dar es Salaam in 1970/71, cf. Topan 1993:22.

Thus the play *Mama ee* (1987) by the Kenyan writer Ari Katini Mwachofi, is on the whole rather realistic and convincing, in presenting the sufferings of Mwamvita, a modern woman tormented by her tyrannical husband Kinaya. After his brutal beating caused her to miscarry and produced permanent bodily damage, she finally abandons him and starts a new life, but at the cost of losing her little son who, according to the local customs, remains with his father.

Mwamvita, her husband and her sister Tenge are "round" characters and the spectators become emotionally involved by their story, but the author breaks this "illusion of reality" when a character (mainly Mwamvita) addresses the audience.

This happens right from the beginning of the play which opens in the middle of night, with Mwamvita's complaining of her husband's absence since the morning. At that moment Kinaya knocks at the door. Instead of opening, Mwamvita continues groaning

[1] MWAMVITA: (*Akisema na watazamaji*) Mwamsikia? Sikizeni vizuri enyi wasichana muone tofauti ya ile (*akinong'oneza*) "I love you — Nakupenda" na hii "fungua" ili mkitaka kuolewa ...

KINAYA: We Mwamvita fungua mlango. Najua uko macho. Wasema na nani huko hata usifungue. Fungua haraka ama huu mlango utavunjika sasa hivi. (p.2)

Another example of theatricality appears at the end of the first act when, after another violent quarrel with her husband, Mwamvita decides to leave him once and for all and, while she repeats her decision, the lights grow fainter, she falls as it were into a trance, and her speech changes into a poem.

At the end of the play, after the judge has entrusted Mwamvita's little son to his father, she and her sister Tenge bitterly comment on the difficult situation and lack of unity amongst women and they slowly involve the audience and even the author.

[2] MWAMVITA: Leo tutunge ubeti mwingine juu ya kina mama kijijini. Unaona hata mwendishi wa mchezo huu pia amewasahau wao na taabu zao!

TENGE: Kweli. Labda ni mmoja wa wale wanachama Ha - ha - ha! (*Mwamvita awasogelea watazamaji na kuwanyoshea mkono ili waache kucheka wasikize*)

MWAMVITA: (*Kwa nguvu*) Umoja wa wanawake Hoyee!

TENGE: Hoyee! (*labda watazamaji pia wajibu Hoyee!*)

MWAMVITA. Umoja wa kina mama Hoyee!

TENGE: Hoyee! (*akinyosha mkono kuwataka watazamaji wamsikize*)

Tulieni msikize kisa

Kisa cha utumwa wa kisasa

Sasa kuna tele mikasa

Mikasa imsibuyo mama (p.95)

And the two women go on reciting their poem

Other instances of theatricality are taken from the play *Giza limeingia* (1980) by Emmanuel Mbogo (b.1947), who also obtained his degree at the Humboldt University in Berlin. The play presents the difficulties of two young unemployed men in Dar es Salaam in the Seventies, when the municipality tried to "clean the town" of thieves, prostitutes, beggars and others without conventional employment, sending them to be re-educated in an Ujamaa village. Mashaka, a

secondary-school leaver, looks in vain for a job. In the meantime he is maintained by his friend Kopa who survives with various legal and illegal jobs. Mashaka's girlfriend Salome, newly re-educated, wants him to return with her to their native village, while Kopa urges him to flee to Zambia. Before Mashaka decides, Kopa is shot dead by the police during a robbery attempt.

This important theme is presented skillfully and with an evident influence of contemporary European drama (Brecht) in its form. There is little action, the incidents being related rather than dramatized. The characters enact various episodes, e.g. Kopa takes the role of Mashaka's girlfriend approaching a boss (represented by Mashaka) in order to ask for a job. The audience is also involved in this performance.

- [3] KOPA (*anawageukia watazamaji*): Mnasikia wananchi, haya mambo yapo. Mtu asikudanganye . . . Mimi nawafahamu wasichana kadhaa ambao walipata kazi kwa njia hii. (p 12)

The end of this excerpt contains what may be called "metatext", i.e., the characters discuss their performance

- [4] KOPA: Napendeza ee? (*Anajaribu kurembua macho.*) (...) Aa! Kun.... (*Anakwenda kupekua ndani ya boksi.*) Nadhani kuna kioo humu. (...) (*Anakichukua, anajitazama halafu anacheka sana.*) Hata umbile sina! Ningekuwa msichana, nadhani wavulana wangenikimbia. (...) Loo! Sina matiti! Hapana, lazima nirekebishe (...) (*Anakwenda kwenye boksi tena na kuchukua magazeti, anacheka.*) Lazima nitengeneze matiti. Nikiweka makaratasi nitakuwa kisura; toto la sheria yake! (...) Bado kitu kimoja tu. (*Anapekuwa katika boksi na kutoa kitambaa ambacho anajifungia nacho kichwani. Anaigiza utembeaji wa kisichana, anamtazama mtazamaji mmoja, anatabasamu, anamkonyeza jicho na kumsalimu kwa sauti ya kike.*) Kaka habari za siku tele?  
 MTAZAMAJI: Nzuri dadaangu. Salama?  
 KOPA: Usalama utoke wapi Dasalama hii? Vipi, mbona umeadimika siku hizi: huonekani?  
 MTAZAMAJI: Nipo tu.  
 KOPA: Lakini mbona jana si . . .  
 MASHAKA (*kwa hasira, anamshika mkono kwa nguvu*): Kopa!  
 KOPA (*katika sauti ya kawaida*): Nini bwana!  
 MASHAKA: Umekuja kuwapotezea watu muda wao kwa upuuzi wako?  
 KOPA (*anacheka*): Basi bwana, basi. Sasa tuendelee na mchezo wetu, tuwaache wananchi.  
 MASHAKA: Mchezo gani?  
 KOPA: Si wa huyu msichana aliyekwenda kuomba kazi.  
 MASHAKA: Mimi nilidhani ni hadithi. Umekuwa mchezo tena?  
 KOPA: Yote ni sawa tu. Tuchanganye vyote viwili, matendo na maneno. (p 14)

There is also a long monologue in which Kopa explains to the audience the wickedness and corruption of rich people.

- [5] MASHAKA (*kwa hasira kidogo*): Mimi usinieze hizo ndoto zako za kijinga. (*Anakwenda na kujilaza kitandani*)  
 (*Kimya*)  
 KOPA (*anacheka kidogo na kuanza kuzungumza na watazamaji*): Jamani, mimi nimemweleza huyu kijana tangu awali kwamba mambo ya vitabu mbali na maisha nayo mbali; lakini anaelekea haelewi kabisa! . . . (p 27)

Then, while narrating, he also mimes an action of robbery.

- [6] Mnakumbuka niliwambieni kwamba Meneja Muki ana mlinzi nyumbani kwake ... Sawa. . . Sasa tazama tutakavyomfanya: tutamkata kareti na kumtia kabali.<sup>2</sup> Hata sauti hawezi kuitoa. Tazama: (*anajifanya kama anawaambia wenzake watulie ... Anaonyesha kwa kidole 'pale alipo mlinzi' mbele yake ... Anasimaa ... Ghafla, kwa nguvu, anaruka, anatupa teke! Mkonono! Teke! Mkonono! Kabali! Anatulia*) Mpaka hapo mlinzi tumeisha mweka sawa! (*Anajifanya kumwangusha mlinzi*.)  
 Baadaye tunavunja dirisha na kuingia chumba anacholala meneja Muki na mkewe. Tutasongea kitandani pole pole. (*Anaelekea kitandani, Mashaka ameisha lala usingizi*.) Tunamkuta meneja Muki kalala kama huyu kijana. Mkewe, yule mnene kama maboga ya masika, labda atakuwa kalala pembeni anakoroma. Sisi hatutajali! Tutanyemelea taratibu. (*Anafika karibu na kitandani. Anajifanya kumuua Mashaka kwa ule upanga wa mti, kisha anawageukia watazamaji, anatabasamu*.) Hapana! Masikini hastahili kugombana na masikini. Maskini anatakiwa kuungana na masikini ili kupambana na unyonyaji. (*Anamtazama Mashaka kidogo kisha kwa kutumia mikono yake miwili anamkaba kooni. . .*) Amka! Lete fedha!!  
 MASHAKA (*anapiga kelele*): Nini?  
 KOPA: Fedha nakwambia! Lete fedha!  
 MASHAKA (*kwa hasira*): Ulinipa fedha mimi?  
 KOPA (*anacheka kisha anawageukia watazamaji*): Usingizi ni kitu kibaya jamani  
 MASHAKA: Kopa! Mchezo gani huu? (pp 29-30)

At the end of this excerpt the two levels of the play interweave: Instead of robbing an imaginary manager, Kopa assaults the sleeping Mashaka who, however, refuses to take part in the *mchezo*.

Usually it is Kopa who tries to involve his friend, while Mashaka only joins him reluctantly.

- [7] MASHAKA: Mimi sielewi unalotaka kulifanya.  
 KOPA: Wewe kaa kwanza bwana.  
 MASHAKA: Sikai bwana. Huu mchezo ni wa kijinga Kopa.  
 KOPA: Tucheze mara moja tu. Wewe utakuwa yule Meneja; na mimi nitakuwa ndiye yule msichana. (*Anamsukuma taratibu kwa kumbembeleza hadi anakaa kwenye kiti karibu na meza*)  
 MASHAKA: (...) Kopa, huyo Meneja alivyoongea na huyu msichana na mambo aliyofanya mimi sina habari.  
 KOPA: Hilo si jambo la lazima. Kitu kikubwa cha kufahamu ni kwamba: huyu Meneja alikuwa anamtaka huyu msichana kabla hajamwajiri kazi.  
 MASHAKA: Haya ... Naona na mimi bado siku chache nitakuwa chizi kama wewe! (*Anacheka*.) Sasa nifanyeje? (pp 14-15)

Another story is enacted by Salome: that of a young mother, abandoned by her rich seducer; a baby's crying is heard while she is throwing it into a dustbin. Here the author uses also another modern feature — collage. At the end of the scene Abdilatif Abdalla's poem *Usiniuwe* resounds from a tape recorder.

While the two plays we have discussed blend realism with theatricality, the other two we shall present go still further in preventing the spectators' involvement with what is going on on the stage.

<sup>2</sup> "throttle"

The first of them is *Amezidi* by the Zanzibari novelist Said A. Mohamed (born in 1947). After two allegorical plays, *Pungwa* (1988) and *Kivuli kinaishi* (1990), S. A. Mohamed produced his third drama *Amezidi*, while teaching at the University of Osaka. The play was staged by his students and published in a student literary magazine in 1992 with a Japanese translation, before being recently published by the East African Educational Publishers.

There are only two characters, Ame and Zidi, but in the course of the play they take other roles, for instance those of Mari, Zidi's girlfriend, or of inefficient managers and corrupt government officials. The two men are staying in an empty cave and starving, while they imagine they are living in a magnificent house and eating delicious food. Only at the end do they realize their situation, but it is too late: they are already dying.

The author criticizes the attitude, widespread among the Africans, of pinning all the blame for their present problems on the colonialism and neocolonialism, while actually much of the responsibility rests with themselves.

- [8] MSAIDIZI: (*Ingia msaidizi (Zidi) na kuketi kitini; kiti kisichokuwepo...*) Naam Boss ...  
 nipo kwa ajili yako! (...)  
 BOSI: Mashine ya kuchemsha maji ya moto imeshatengenezwa?  
 MSAIDIZI: Bado.  
 BOSI: Friji je?  
 MSAIDIZI: Bado pia.  
 BOSI: Na simu nazo, naona hazitoki nje.  
 MSAIDIZI: Bado mzee!  
 BOSI: Na birika la maji ya moto?  
 MSAIDIZI: Bado kabisa!  
 BOSI: Wanafanya nini basi wale vijana wetu tuliowaajiri juzi, wale wahandisi wetu waliomaliza chuo kikuu juzi?  
 MSAIDIZI: Wanababaisha.  
 BOSI: Maana yake nini?  
 MSAIDIZI: Wanasema walifundishwa nadharia tu ...  
 BOSI: Kutengeneza hawawezi ...  
 MSAIDIZI: Ipi bora basi?  
 BOSI: Bila ya shaka nadharia ...  
 MSAIDIZI: Nadharia haitengenezi lakini ...  
 BOSI: Ndiyo, lakini akija fundi kutoka nje unaweza kushirikiana naye ... Andika barua uagizie wahandisi kutoka Ulaya au Japan waje watengeneze ... sasa tuna vitu vingi vilivyoharibika ofisini ... andika leo kabla ya kesho ... waje na vipuri lakini.

The two lazy and stupid characters of this play represent contemporary Africa, "*Afrika ina(yo)zidi kudidimia na kuzama katika dimbwi la maafa na misiba wakati watu wake wanacheka kama vile hapatokei kitu cha namna hiyo*," as the author says in the introduction. Like Pambo, the hero of Penina Muhando's play, Ame and Zidi turn to illusion in order to "obtain" all those things they miss in reality. However, while Muhando's play is realistic, *Amezidi* is surrealistic. In surrealism the opposition between the dream and the "real" story is abolished.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult, even impossible, to distinguish between the two. Thus, at the end both characters die, probably from starvation, but with the symptoms of food

poisoning, for they have eaten rotten meat, received from the European Community in one of their day-dreams.

There is no plot in the classical sense of the word, spatial and temporal reference points have disappeared. We are told almost nothing about the past of the characters. They have no precise social identity (except the fact they live in present times, in utmost poverty), their age and appearance are unspecified and they have also lost their personal identity. Even their names are only two halves of the word "Amezidi" (though Ame is a Zanzibari proper name). The name no longer grants an identity, it is only a label. The two men are individualized to such a little extent that they become interchangeable; their dialogues may be often ascribed to either one of them. In fact, the change of roles is another means of rupture with realistic drama.

The characters hardly leave their cave. When not sleeping, they pass their time day-dreaming. The closed, almost empty space of the cave is then filled with imaginary objects, while Ame and Zidi perform scenes situated in various Tanzanian settings.

Many stage indications punctuate the text, but the stage directions regarding the characters' attitude and the setting constantly belie the dialogue.

- [9] ZIDI: Aaaaa ... (*Anakamata tumbo*)  
 AME: Nini?  
 ZIDI: Tumbo.  
 AME: Limefanyeje?  
 ZIDI: Linauma ...  
 AME: Kwa nini?  
 ZIDI: Linadai haki yake.  
 AME: Lipe ...  
 ZIDI: Haipo haki yenyewe.  
 AME: Umesahau. (*Anamwita mtumishi asiye kuwepo*) Mtumishi ... mtumishi ...  
 mtumishi ...  
 MTUMISHI: Naam ... (*Haonekani lakini ...*)  
 AME: Njoo ... kuja haraka ...  
 ZIDI: Biriani?  
 MTUMISHI: Tayari ...  
 AME: Lete basi ... mbona matumbo yanaumwa kwa njaa!  
 MTUMISHI: Sawa mzee ...  
 MUDA  
 AME: Aha ... sawa mambo si hayo — juu ya meza letu la kulia pana miujiza ya mpishi maarufu ... twende Bwana Zidi ... chakula kinatusubiri ...  
*Wote wanakwenda upande uliodhaniwa kuna meza ya kulia. Wanakaa kwenye viti visivyoonekana ... Wanaanza kula chakula kisichokuwepo.*

The characters' speech is often concise, even laconic, consisting of a single word; there are many exclamations and questions, followed by minimal replies. And even when they are more talkative, the characters use only simple syntactic constructions.

The language also is plain, without identity, almost without Zanzibari features and lacking in the lexical and stylistical richness which characterizes S.A. Mohamed's novels.

Amandina Lihamba's play *Mkutano wa pili wa ndege* (DSM 1992) was discussed in the last issue of *Swahili Language and Society Notes and News* (nr. 10, 1993) by Farouk Topan.

The author, a talented Tanzanian playwright (born in 1944), interweaves two different plots, one involving humans and the other featuring birds. Both, however, represent a clear allegory of the sad predicament of present-day Africa, oppressed by local dictators and by foreign exploiters.

The central character of the human story who, however, never appears on the stage, is Mtua. In the past he was a wealthy and powerful man, tyrannical and corrupted, in short, the prototype of a bad chief. The people's curse has caused him to suffer from a disgusting and incurable illness and now he lies dying, giving out an unbearable stench, amid the indifference of everybody except his sister. His sister and wife are awaiting the return of Mtua's daughter Maisa whom he had so mistreated that she fled to the town and became a prostitute. Now she is supposed to bring the money for her father's cure, while Mtua's beloved son Msheri only cares for the inheritance. Instead of the expected money Maisa returns with a matchbox and sets her father's hut on fire. The fire, besides consuming the dictator, his sister and son, symbolically burns the corruption of the society in order that a new society might be rebuilt.

The second plot presents a world conference of the birds to overcome the problem of famine. In fact, the birds of the South are dying of hunger, but the representatives of the West and of the North are uncooperative because what they really want is to exploit their poor brothers. Before agreeing to help them they impose heavy and humiliating conditions such as the family planning (only one egg per bird to be hatched in the South) or sending the Western 'experts' to the South. These are conditions that the birds of the South cannot accept and hence the conference does not resolve anything.

The author links skilfully Western dramaturgy with the spontaneity of African theatre, incorporating into the play songs, dances and mime.

Together with S. A. Mohamed's *Amezidi*, it is one of the most modern and innovative Swahili plays. Lihamba, like contemporary Western playwrights, no longer wishes to seek the unity of the structure, but the variety of the points of view. The scenes are not linked one with another in a logical manner and the acts, the unifying factor, have disappeared.

The structure is dominated by the principle of the alternation of the two plots that build up the play — one about a fallen dictator, once rich and influential and now dying in agony and loneliness, the other one, even more allegorical, about the birds who try in vain to solve the problem of hunger in the world. The setting is rather simple, almost nonexistent, thus allowing a simultaneous transformation of the scenery.

[10] *Sehemu ya kuchezea: Uwanja wowote ambao utawawezesha wachezaji wasiwe mbali na hadhira. Upande wa katikati lakini nyuma ya uwanja kuwe na mfano wa nyumba. Hii ni nyumba ya mtu lakini isijengwe kama nyumba kweli, hata hivyo itambulike kama makazi ya watu.* (p.1)

The author links, in the play, individual and collective destinies. The storyteller Mtani, who comments on the actions and unite the two plots, also takes part in the human story: he is an

illegitimate son of the dying man. Hence he is a character who takes the role of the narrator. Lihamba forbids any identification of the actor with the character, insisting on the fact that the same actors have to take several roles:

[11] *Ni muhimu mchezo uchezwe kwa mfululizo na wachezaji waweze kubadilisha wahusika upesi upesi katika sehemu zile zinazotakiwa. Idadi ya wachezaji inategemea na matakwa ya watayarishaji lakini ni muhimu kuwa nafasi za wahusika kadhaa zichezwe na mtu huyohuyo. Kwa mfano wale wahusika ndege wawe ni wale wale wanaocheza nafasi za binadamu katika sehemu nyingine za mchezo (p.1)*

In fact, the first step in destroying the theatrical illusion is the distancing of the actor from his character.

Another break-up is represented by the songs: on the formal level they detach themselves from the surrounding text, and on the content level they interrupt the action. The link between the action and the song is based on the effect of contrast. The discontinuity of the speech and the interruption of the action by the means of this "dramatic break" aims to avoid the total involvement of the audience, introducing pauses in the development of the action.

So we have seen that, although drama as a literary genre is of recent introduction to East Africa, it tries to keep up the pace with the development of this genre in the world.

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