"TIME IS A WALL": A SPECTRUM REPRESENTATION OF TRADITIONS AND MODERNITIES

CHARLOTTE E.S. ELVIDGE

This paper looks at traditions and modernities in terms of a spectrum representation and thus challenges the previously accepted notion of tradition and modernity as an either/or matter where tradition is seen to hold obstacles assumed to block progression towards modernity. With this in mind, it considers Ebrahim Hussein's title for his play *Wakati Ukuta* (Time is a Wall) and Euphrase Kezilahabi's novel *Gamba la Nyoka* (The snake's skin) to illustrate the idea of multiple modernities where the relationship between tradition and modernity is seen in terms of tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation where various 'scapes' containing traditions are inflected by historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different actors. Key themes are discussed in this paper displaying the indigenised ethnoscape of East Africa with various modernities and the different tensions this can produce in view of long-standing traditions. Individualism is the prevailing theme in the emergence of modernity. With this in mind, extra-marital relationships, foreign behaviours, education and age/generational differences are discussed with reference to the two literary texts. These themes exemplify the thematic trajectory of the spectrum representation of traditions and modernities in Swahili literature, showing belonging to the present but also awareness of the past. This paper concludes that modernities should no longer be seen as a foreign invasion aiming to eradicate tradition but as metropolises that can be indigenised and incorporated into existing traditions. The observations in this paper demonstrate that the link between traditions and modernities is not a direct transition from one to the other but one of more complex affiliation. This paper lays foundations for broader research into this relationship and gives new insight into the illustration and critique of various texts.

Introduction: traditions and modernities

Social, political and economic features of the East African community have undergone extensive transformation in the past decades, stemming from the colonial period and events following independence. Literary representations of time, as a natural dimension of human life, crystallize in depictions of the transition from tradition to modernity as a process which cannot be stopped. The title "Time is a wall" furthers this idea to imply that if you decide to attempt to fight with time (a wall), you will only hurt yourself, so you may as well accept it. Zimbabwean literary critic George Kahari (Kahari & Chidzero 1990) recognises, through a popular Shona proverb *kare haagari ari kare* (The past does not [always] remain the past), that life evolves and changes, which is symbolised in the two juxtaposed concepts of time - the past and the present.

Of course, the notions of "tradition" and "modernity" are inherently ambiguous and require closer examination. British philosopher H. B. Acton defines tradition as a "belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative, or deferred to, without argument" (1952-53: 96). American sociologist Edward Shils defines it as "anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (1981: 41). These defi-

nitions derive from the etymology of the Latin word *traditum*: that which is handed down from the past.

Contrary to traditional communalism, modernity is associated with the notion of individualism, which posits a society governed by the idea of every individual's intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from tradition. Modernity in Africa is largely defined in Euro-centric terms whereby its essence is derived from the West's values and ideals: Western societies are seen as the quintessence of modernity, the *mecca* to which peoples from non-Western societies go for inspiration and knowledge as to models of thought and action in pursuit of the development of their societies of transition to modernity (Gyekye 1997). These notions of modernity are problematic in that they confuse modernity with westernisation and development. Chabal and Daloz (1999) point out that the understanding of African modernity has been hampered by the tendency of social scientists to view Africa as backward and over-attached to tradition. They argue that because Western countries were the first to become technologically and managerially efficient, westernisation and development are often seen as synonyms of modernity.

Modernities indigenised, not eradicating traditions

Arce and Long have suggested that, whilst modernity is a tendency that populates all spheres of the globe, it is not received passively. Rather, local actors appropriate various aspects associated with modernity in order to construct their own social worlds:

> People […] do not experience the "arrival" of modernity as the disintegration of their "old" worlds, marked by the establishment of an unproblematic new and "pure" code of communication and rationality. Rather, they visualise reality as made up of "living" ensembles of imagined and felt experiences that juxtapose and interrelate different materialities and types of agency embracing notions associated with aspects of both modernity and tradition. (1999: 14)

Arce and Long also argue that the term "modern" connotes a sense of belonging to the present and an awareness of the past to which people can link and at the same time distance themselves (1999: 3).

These recent approaches question Rostow's influential earlier thesis (1971) which suggested the need to eradicate those "traditional" cultural and institutional obstacles which were assumed to block progress towards modernity and development. They also suggest that some of the results from this previous modernisation thesis such as the production of a series of dichotomies (for example tradition versus modernity) are in fact untenable. Endorsing this idea, Comaroff and Comaroff (1993) say it is perhaps preferable to speak of "multiple modernities" rather than modernity *tout court*. He points out that there is no simple linear movement from tradition to modernity. Chabal and Daloz (1999) support this, stating that one can be both traditional and modern at the same time, suggesting more of a spectrum representation of the relationship between tradition and modernity in which they exist together.

In light of this, this paper will thus discuss "multiple modernities", as the Comaroffs (1993) suggest, and not necessarily modernity in a singular sense, where modernity can be seen to eradicate tradition and where tradition is presented as that which holds obstacles assumed to block progression towards modernity. It does not consider tradition and modernity as a dichotomy or as an either/ or matter but instead as a relationship in terms of a tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation, as theorised by Appadurai (1990: 195). Appadurai states that as soon as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenised in one way or another. He thus suggests that one way of conceptualising a globalising world with its accompanying localising tendencies is to think in terms of a series of "scapes" which are not objectively given relations but "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (1990: 197). Modernity thus no longer emulates a foreign invasion aiming to eradicate tradition but as various modernities which can be indigenised and incorporated into existing traditions. The East Coast of Africa is such an ethnoscape which will be discussed in this paper.

Conflict between the individual and society: the indigenisation of various modernities and its tensions

This paper uses the novel *Gamba la Nyoka* (The snake's skin) by Euphrase Kezilahabi (1979) and the play *Wakati Ukuta* (Time is a Wall) by Ebrahim Hussein (1971) to exemplify the idea that you cannot fight with time but instead have to embrace what comes with it. The process of time brings a number of changes associated with modernities which, although situated under the same umbrella, can be received in different ways according to their context. This paper considers the Swahili ethnoscape and how the tensions between traditions and modernities are played out in the literature mentioned. Swahili literature, as any literature, is influenced by the authors' surroundings and the representation of current matters, observed in their particular choices of plot, setting and characters. Khamis expresses this through the change that can be seen in terms of a correlation between the intratextual and extratextual, with transformation in the inner textual structure being triggered by a "totalising" societal vicissitude as a result of a profound shift across a number of different spheres (2005: 92).

The emergence of an educated class in African societies, influenced by the western liberal ethos and political ideologies has brought increased attention to the conflict between the individual and society. Individual desires are, at times, in conflict with societal interests, and in traditional societies, the societal interests have priority over individual ones (cf. Mbiti 1969). But as Mazrui indicates, also in modern Africa, collective welfare is valued over individual rights and freedom. The "self" in African societies has always been very closely tied to the "other" and in many cases to the ancestors and the tribal chief. This means that the individual's actions and activities tend to reflect his or her position and role in society and participation based on the expectations and reaction of the "other" (2007: 39). There is,

however, a growing sense of change that comes with these modernities whereby individual desires have started to take precedence over collective ones. This thus creates a greater indigenisation of modernities in Swahili society which has affected local tendencies and behaviours.

Individualism is an inherent aspect of "the novel" in general terms (Watt 1957: 13). As shown by Philipson (1992), the novel in Swahili literature marks a transition from a collective society to a society of individuals with individual experience as the ultimate evidence of reality. Whereas previous literature reflected the general tendency of their cultures to conform to traditional practice, in the emergence of realism, the novel fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation.

Key themes are discussed in this paper displaying the indigenised ethnoscape of East Africa with various modernities and the different tensions this can produce in view of long-standing traditions. Individualism is the prevailing theme in the emergence of modernity. With this in mind, extra-marital relationships, foreign behaviours, education, and age/ generational differences will subsequently be discussed with reference to the two literary texts. Kezilahabi, a Tanzanian novelist, poet and scholar in his novel *Gamba la Nyoka* interrogates the validity of *Ujamaa* ideology and promotes the idea of the need of the society to forward with modernity. Hussein, a Tanzanian playwright, shows in the play *Wakati Ukuta* how the main character Tatu wishes to embrace Western values in a number of different ways, yet her mother wants differently for her. The play is an illustration of conflicting relations between traditions and modernities in Swahili society.

Extra-marital relationships

The adulterous relationship between Mama Tinda and Padre Madevu in *Gamba la Nyoka* is one example in which individual desires conflict with collective interests. Mama Tinda endeavours to keep her relationship with Padre Madevu a secret in effort to protect their names: to maintain their good reputation in their community. Tinda's disapproval of her mother's actions parallels this since she is extremely conscious of the shame that these actions will bring to their family. "*Naona nyayo za pikipiki ya Padri Madevu...Mama, Padri Madevu simpendi!..watu wanatusema vibaya*" (I see the tracks of Padre Madevu's motorbike...Mother, I don't like Padre Madevu...people are speaking badly about us) (Kezilahabi 1979: 11).

Mama Tinda's relationship with Padre Madevu draws attention to a number of aspects that have distorted the traditional view of relationships and also religion. Both individuals' actions are carried out in view of a more individualised way of life, whereby the freedom to choose prevails. Mama Tinda engages in sexual relations when unmarried, however, in addition to this, Padre Madevu, a priest supposed to live in celibacy, is corrupt in his rapport with religion and goes against his alleged vocation from God. Despite the fact that Mama Tinda and Padre Madevu are both going against their communities' expectations regarding their

personal identities, they decide to go ahead in jeopardy of judgement and bad words being spoken about them. Individual desires, under the umbrella of the influx of modernities, have taken precedent in these examples given. They do not present a dichotomous matter showing modernity eradicating the tradition of collective interests but a tensional relationship of traditions and modernities, collective interests and individual desires where certain modernities are embraced and indigenised into the ethnoscape.

Tatu's behaviour - Uzungu

Likewise, in *Wakati Ukuta*, Tatu's mother is cautious of the shame that Tatu's actions will bring to the reputation of their family: "Unalofanya wewe sio aibu yako tu, bali ya wote, mimi, baba yako, ukoo mzima" (Whatever you do is not only your shame, but everyone's, me, your father, the whole family) (Hussein 1971: 12). Conversely, Tatu has, undeniably, less concern for the reputation of her family. Tatu says "Sijali wanavyo fikiri watu" (I do not care what people think) (Hussein 1971: 12). Despite Tatu's mother being strongly against Tatu's actions, Baba Tatu seems to be more understanding of the situation. Baba Tatu's reaction to the conflict between Tatu and her mother emphasises the ongoing tension between traditions and modernities. He states that times have moved on, highlighting the importance of under-standing and accepting societal change rather than fighting to oppose it. Tatu is adamant to embrace this social transformation inherent of the influx of modernities whilst her mother attempts to adjourn it. Hussein uses Baba Tatu to argue that modernities are inevitable. Furthermore, he attributes these changes, observed in Tatu's actions, to the kind of education that Tatu and her peers are exposed to:

> We were not like our parents. And, in the same way, these are our children. [*id est* our children are different from us just as we were different from our parents]. They study Western things, we buy them Western clothes, they go to school to learn about Western lifestyles-and they will copy the Western way in speaking, in dressing, in traditions, and even character. We see it as bad; they see it as good and admirable. There is no-one who is able to fight time. Time is a wall, if you fight with it you will hurt yourself.[1] (Translation of the author)

Additionally, terming Tatu's characters as *tabia za kizungu* (foreign behaviours) associates the modernities with what is foreign. *Uzungu* is an expression of a lifestyle which is un-African – foreign and presented as being amoral and asocial, full of glitter and wealth but also one full of deception and lost moral values (Blommaert 1997). Western education, it is argued, not only alienates the educated from his/her social and traditional circles but also brings with it undesirable foreign values – one being individualism. At the same time, the issue is not a simple opposition between African and Western: the assessment of Tatu's

---

[1] *Sisi hatukuwa kama wazee wetu. Basi na hawa sasa watoto wetu vile vile.Wanasoma kizungu, tunawavalisha kizungu, wanakwenda shuleni kusoma kizungu-na wataiga kizungu katika kusema, mavazi mila hata na tabia. Sisi tunaona mabaya, wao wanaona mazuri.Hakuna mtu anaweza kushindana na wakati.Wakati ukuta ukipigana nao utaumia mwenyewe.* (Hussein 1971: 17)

character comes from an Islamic perspective, which, although over time has fused itself with "Africanness", is still "foreign" just as *Uzungu* is.

Education

It is also important to understand education in the context of socialism, as depicted in *Gamba la Nyoka*. Nyerere asserts that education should prepare young people for the work they will be called to do in Tanzanian society - a rural society where improvement will depend largely upon the efforts of the people in agriculture and in village development (Nyerere 1967). Amongst few other privileged people in society to attend university, Mambosasa and Mamboleo (two university graduates in respective villages in the novel *Gamba la Nyoka*) were educated with fundamental knowledge and experience and were expected to be key, influential actors in the implementation of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania. This expectation was initially fulfilled, when Mamboleo and Mambosasa brought positive changes in their community of Bucho. The elders of Bucho village derived tremendous joy from their individual educational success but also from their encouraging participation in Bucho. They contributed considerably to the digging of new wells, better cotton and rice prices and starting a community shop with more affordable costs. Thus, to some extent, Mamboleo and Mambosasa were both involved in their societies, using their education for the development of their village.

However, what Kezilahabi is particularly critical of, is the over-reliance of the educated elites on books for knowledge and problem solving. This is exemplified when Mambosasa asks Mamboleo: "Umesoma vitabu vingapi mwenzangu?" (How many books have you read my brother) (Kezilahabi 1979: 57). The notion of deriving intelligence and ability from scholarly expertise emanates from the perceived Western tendency to study for the sake of knowledge as such or of one's personal education, not necessarily with the intention to employ knowledge for a specific practical objective. Although Nyerere envisioned *Ujamaa* as a continuation of traditional African lifestyle, the influx of various modernities and Western styled education made it only inevitable that people became engrossed in themselves and their own achievements, with their actions directed solely towards personal gain or happiness. These "metropolises", as Appadurai (1990) describes, are indigenised into society regarding the issue of education and show the relationship between existing traditions and modernities in terms of a tension of the integration of modernities where individualism floods into a society with long-standing traditions and roots in traditional communalism. Many people no longer perceive education as something to grasp in view of the greater good of their community but for personal achievement and success thus highlighting the height of individualism in the influx of modernities, but also the way in which scapes are inflected by the relevant situatedness of different actors on a scale, thus allowing traditions and modernities to live and be seen alongside each other not as an either/ or matter.

Age/ generational differences

Education has also contributed to generational differences. Whilst age in itself used to play a prominent role in assigning and exercising leadership in "traditional" Swahili societies, change can be observed whereby the elites (those with formal education) assumed roles that were previously always occupied by elders. Mamboleo and Mambosasa exemplify this in that when they graduate from university, they are entrusted with helping Bucho adopt *Ujamaa*. This contrasts with the way in which Nyerere envisioned *Ujamaa*: as a continuation of traditional African lifestyle in which education would build upon the existing social relations – not disrupt them (Nyerere 1967). The educated youth claim to anticipate the bleak future for the uneducated (including the elders) suggesting that education is "everything", unlike traditional norms where seniority is given preference.

This emphasises the need to move on as time progresses, otherwise you will be left behind. However, it also shows the understanding of the struggle experienced in attempt to keep up with the rapidly transforming society: "*Unafikiri Jumatano inaweza kufika kabla ya kuona asubuhi na jioni ya Jumanne?...Wewe umeiona hiyo Jumatano, wao wanaishi Jumatatu; na sasa unawataka wairuke hiyo Jumanne*" (Do you think Wednesday can arrive before seeing the morning and evening of Tuesday?...You have seen Wednesday, they still live in Monday; and now you want them to jump over that Tuesday [*id est* straight from Monday to Wednesday]*)* (Kezilahabi 1979: 23).

Education, as part of the indigenisation of various modernities in East Africa, is seen to be a disruption to the way in which roles are assumed in traditional Swahili society due to the new tensions between existing traditions and the influx of modernities. Both the elders and the youth stand firm in their views, representing the tension in the indigenised ethnoscape however, it is argued that although these tensions arise, they should be regarded in terms of a spectrum representation, being able to exist together, not as separate entities, according to Acre and Long (1999), belonging to the present but having an awareness of the past. This is clearly shown in Kezilahabi's depiction of societal transformation in the simple description of the sequence of days of the week where he describes different groups of people living in certain days of the week, showing their development on the scale of traditions/ modernities.

Modernities are harmless

Despite the influx of modernities being portrayed as particularly conflicting with traditions, it is often more harmful to fight it than accept it as shown in both Kezilahabi's and Hussein's texts. The title of Hussein's play in itself shows his position on modernity – it is inevitable and "ukipigana nao utaumia mwenyewe" (if you fight with it you will hurt yourself) (Hussein 1971: 17) by knocking yourself against the wall.

Gamba la Nyoka provides us with perhaps the most notable and powerful articulation of this when Mzee Chilongo refuses to subject to the changing times, preferring instead to

continue with what he is used to. He refuses to shower at his home place "like a sick person" and instead goes to the river to bathe. At the river, he sees what, at first, appears to be a very harmful animal – a snake. So he runs back to gather means to fight it and to destroy the harmful creature with stones. After throwing a few stones, he realises that it is just a harmless snake's skin.

> Mzee Chilongo recognised - it was a snake's skin. He started to laugh at himself before starting to wash himself. This was the way it was for Mzee Chilongo and others of his kind. Society had left him behind. Society had stretched itself and now it was no longer there where he was. The past has its time. The past is worth being studied; but it does not last forever.[2] (Translation of the author)

The initial reaction of Mzee Chilongo to the snake parallels the response of Swahili society to various modernities. The snake is employed as a metaphor to represent modernity. The verb *kujinyumbua*, used to mean "to extend, to stretch itself/ oneself", undergoes an extension of its first meaning to the figural one "to leave old things behind, to progress" in the illustration of societal transformation (Diegner 2002: 65). In this sense, despite the snake shedding its skin, it does not lose its life but instead unmasks a new skin underneath. Hence Kezilahabi argues that modernities, change and laying aside the past is deemed necessary to make way for a transformation of societal life. He endorses the view that the issue of tradition and modernity is not an either/or matter but in fact needs to be viewed as a spectrum representation where they can both co-exist and where modernities are indigenised or incorporated into existing traditions according to the society. Mzee Chilongo is depicted positively in the fight against *Ujamaa,* but he is ridiculed in his undiscriminating resentment of change.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the tension between traditions and modernities in *Gamba la Nyoka* and *Wakati Ukuta* and the prevailing idea that "wakati ukuta" (time is a wall). The influx of various modernities is inevitable and must be embraced, not necessarily as an eradication of tradition, but as a process whereby "scapes" (Appadurai 1990), which comprise various traditions, are inflected by actors introducing various modernities as an indigenisation process and not as a course of replacement. The futility of the attempt to fight against time is prominently featured in both texts considered in this paper. In these literary depictions, individualism is a central theme which traverses a number of key aspects of these different modernities, namely extra-marital relationships, foreign behaviours, education, and age/ generational differences. These themes exemplify the thematic trajectory of the spectrum representation of traditions and modernities in Swahili literature, showing belonging to the present but also awareness of the past. These observations have challenged the previously

---

[2] *Mzee Chilongo alitambua - lililikuwa gamba la nyoka. Alianza kujicheka mwenyewe kabla ya kuanza kukoga. Hivyo ndivyo ilivyokuwa kwa Mzee Chilongo na wengine wa aina yake. Jamii ilikuwa imemwacha nyuma. Jamii ilikuwa imejinyumbua na sasa haikuwa pale alipokuwa. Ukale una wakati wake. Ukale unastahili kuchunguzwa; lakini haudumu milele.* (Kezilahabi 1979: 150)

accepted notion that tradition and modernity are two separate entities where the latter replaces the former. Various modernities and traditions as part of a spectrum relationship have been demonstrated clearly throughout this article. Modernities are inherently associated with individualism which clearly penetrate and stir up the different scapes holding existing traditions as seen in the two literary depictions given. It is, however, the inter-relational link highlighted in this paper between modernities and traditions which creates the idea that modernities should no longer be seen as an evil foreign invasion aiming to eradicate all traditions in society but should rather be embraced and indigenised in an appropriate way to that society and series of scapes. This observation and evaluation calls for a closer look into the relationship and linkage of tradition(s) and modernity/ modernities which can no longer be seen as a direct transition from one to the other, but as a much more intricate and complex affiliation which requires greater examination. This article lays foundations for a broader view of research into this relatively new perspective on the relationship between tradition and modernity and particularly the way in which it is displayed and critiqued in various texts.

References

Acton, Harry B. 1952-53. Tradition and Some Other Forms of Order: The Presidential Address. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 53: 1-28.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology. *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. by R. G. Fox. Santa Fe: School of American Research Monographs. Pp. 191-210.

Arce, Alberto & Norman Long. 1999. *Anthropology, Development and Modernities.* London and New York: Routledge.

Blommaert, Jan. 1997. The Impact of State Ideology on Language: Ujamaa and Swahili Literature in Tanzania. *Human Contact through Language and Linguistics*, ed. by Smieja, Birgit & Meike Tasch. Frankfurt: Peter Lang. Pp. 253-270.

Chabal, Patrick & Jean-Paul Daloz. 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument.* Bloomington: Indiana University.

Comaroff, Jean & John Comaroff. 1993. *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Diegner, Lutz. 2002. Allegories in Euphrase Kezilahabi's Early Novels. *Swahili Forum* 9: 43-74.

Gyekye, Kwame. 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: philosophical reflections on the African experience.* New York: Oxford University.

Hussein, Ebrahim N. 1971. *Wakati Ukuta.* Dar es Salaam: East African Publishing House.

Kahari, George P. & Bernard T. Chidzero. 1990. *The Rise of the Shona Novel: A Study in*

Development, 1980-1984. Gweru: Mambo.

Kezilahabi, Euphrase. 1979. *Gamba la Nyoka.* Arusha: Eastern Africa Publications Limited.

Khamis, Said A. 2005. Signs of New Features in the Swahili Novel. *Research in African Literatures* 36, 1: 91-108.

Mazrui, Alamin. 2007. *Swahili beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language, and Identity.* Ohio: University.

Mbiti, John S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy.* Oxford: Heinemann Educational.

Nyerere, Julius K. 1967. *Education for Self-Reliance.* Dar es Salaam: The Government.

Philipson, Robert. 1992. Balzac in Zanzibar: The Swahili Novel as Disseminator of Bourgeois Individualism. *Research in African Literatures* 23, 3: 85-98.

Rostow, Walt W. 1971. *Politics and the Stages of Growth.* Cambridge: University.

Shils, Edward. 1981. *Tradition.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Watt, Ian. 1957. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.* Berkeley: University of California.