LANGUAGE AND SWAHILI FREE VERSE: Disparities, implications and the way forward

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Abstract
This paper examines language as a tool for development of Swahili poetry. It also highlights the disparities between the conservatists (wanamapokeo) and reformists (wanamabadiliko) in general, showing their implications and suggesting the way forward. It argues that the aspect of language use in Swahili poetry is one of the factors, which contributed to the Swahili debate from the late 1960s. The dynamism of language and culture is addressed. The paper states that poems use fewer words and are written in verse form, which may or may not rhyme. The poet selects carefully the most suitable words to effectively communicate. Further, both types (traditional and free verse) employ imagery, symbolism and figures of speech. Therefore, in a rapidly developing world, it is necessary to take every poem within its socio-historical context. Hence, the contradiction is due to the fact that some critical comments do not take the great historic and social changes into consideration. The object of theoretical inquiry should no longer function in its traditional context unselfconsciously, or treat any of its details in an untheorized way. Works of art reflect the biases of age and culture in which they are written. To this end, history is viewed in terms of a dominating reality.

Introduction
Swahili poetry is that poetry, written or oral, which has been or is being produced in the Swahili language by East and some Central Africans. It is therefore wide and varied both in its formal and thematic aspects. It has a long history whereby poets have articulated many issues at different times in different ways using this genre. The diversity cannot be absolute, for in East and Central African diversity, there is also unity (Mulokozi 1974:46). To each work of poetry or art, one always identifies a common denominator, which characterizes that work as being of a particular region. It is this aspect which makes it possible to talk of Swahili poetry.

The notion of conventional Swahili poetry that has been popularized by both scholarship and popular opinion is being overtaken by events. Swahili poetry has been expanding and in the process acquiring new forms and types in its artistic expression. These new literary products cannot be ignored because a critic must consider the expressed intentions of the author since these intentions have also modified the developing history of the work. Hence they must be duly included in the domain and fabric of Swahili poetry. Their acceptance as part of Swahili poetry depends on the acceptance and internalisation of the types of disparities, challenges and way forward. Further, there is need for acceptance of the new role which Swahili language is playing not just in East Africa, but also in international affairs.

To-date, conservatists (wanamapokeo) like Jumanne Mayoka, Sheikh Ahmed Nabhany and the like minded still claim that Swahili “free-verse” is insipid and not in consonant with Swahili poetic language. Hence, it should not be called Swahili poetry. Therefore, it is the contention of this paper that there is need to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity in the development of Swahili poetry since poetry and language are part of culture which is dynamic.

Types of Disparities
Several factors have contributed to the disparities that exist between wanajadi and wanamabadiliko. They include differences in historical epochs, varying viewpoints concerning meaning and form of Swahili poetry, differences in epistemes and environmental influences, levels of education and exposure, age differences and levels of conscious-
ness, their aims and aesthetic values, etc. Before 1974 when *Kichomi* was first published, Swahili poetry was basically a product of the classical and colonial literary age of the 17th to 19th century. The exceptions rather than the rule were the few works of poets like Shaaban Robert among others. Ripples of change began to be felt when young university trained poets like Jared Angira, Ebrahim Hussein, Euphrase Kezilahabi and others began to write "free-verse" (*Mulokozi* 1992:113). Their argument went beyond the issue of language.

An afrocentric stand on the definition, essence and scope of Swahili literature and most specifically poetry had been established. However, this new position was polarized between the old traditionalists and the youthful reformists. They did not agree on the aspects and elements of prosody that defines it. For instance, traditionalists advance the view that rhyme and regular meter are the backbone of Swahili poetry and cannot change. The reformists believed that such yardsticks are not the central cores of Swahili prosody. They also still argue that regular rhyme schemes and meter are accommodations and inventions the Swahili made during their conversion to literacy. They further argue that the rigid traditional poetic conventions are too restrictive and cannot adequately cater for all the needs of a modern poet. Therefore, they suggest that the content and purpose of a given poem should dictate form.

Essentially, the two camps do not agree on the meaning and form of Swahili poetry. That is one reason why to date, Sheikh. Nabhany and the like minded still claim that "free-verse" does not use poetic language. Further, their perceptions seem to be rooted in different historical epochs with different environmental conditions and different dominant epistemes. This situation is further compounded by the fact that there is hardly any accolade and harmony in terms of consciousness, aesthetic value, perception, meanings and aims concerning their "different" works.

### Language and the Poetry of Social, Economic and Political Criticism

The poetry of social, economic and political criticism using "free-verse" became widespread after 1970 when Swahili poetry became largely a reaction and response to the Arusha Declaration of 1967 (Tanzania) and the notion of African Socialism (Kenya and Africa); and their practical implementation. The main issues concerned freedom and equality, justice, self-reliance, integrity, development, etc.

In apparent reference to bad leadership, poor implementation and bad policies, Kezilahabi says (1988:27):

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*Azimio ni Mabaki ya chakula*  
*Kwenye sharubu za bepari*  
*Kilichosalia sasa*  

*Ni punje za ulezi*  
*Zilizosambazwa jangwani*  
*Na mpandaji kipofu*

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*Mpandaji Kipofu* alludes to poor management, non-accountability and misplaced resources. This is exemplified by the fact that the planter plants in the desert. He lacks foresight and direction. This is a mockery and ridicule to African independent leaders.

The leaders are compared to gods that stand in thickets. They only know how to make «empty noises» and misuse power. He says (988:31):

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*Hao miungu waliosimama vichaka*  
*Wambieni wakae chini warefu*  
*Hatutaki vyenu vichafu visogo kuona.*

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... *Acheni kelele. Kelele za jaza tumbo*  
*Mlipewa uongozi ukawapaka rangi*  
*Na madaraka yakawalevya...*
This poem shows that African leaders are selfish, individualistic and a stumbling block to those they lead. They have isolated themselves and power has made them devils. As a remedy to this, Kezilahabi proposes the building of a new society. A new society will enable people to be self-supporting, responsible and reliable. He says (1974:19):

...Lakini kuitoa miiba hii
Tunahitaji macho makali...
Na kuona miiba ilipoingilia.

Miiba alludes to bad influences and habits. Macho makali refers to steadfastness, and kuona ilipoingilia refers to the act of re-examining ourselves.

Some of the ways for doing this is by having new economic strategies and policies, sincere and honest leadership, hard work, equitable distribution of resources, fairness in legal processes, sound education policies among others.

In the poem «Hadithi ya Mzee» (1974:69), the poet draws the analogy of nzige na vimatu (locusts) to illustrate how greedy our leaders are. He also shows absolute powers of the president who wants to «score» with the help of chief Judge and Prime Minister without any challenge from anyone. This alludes to dictatorial and hypocritical regimes, which find solace in compromised legal systems. Thus, justice is never done. He says (1988:41):

...Hapa sasa mpira anao Raisi
Na nguvu zote za kiserikali
Akisaidiwa na waziri wake Mkuu
Hataki ubishi na mtu
Ataka yapite matatu
Usawa Uhuru na Haki
Hodari wa kusema
Anatongia Jaji Mkuu
Ataki neno la Haki
Iwe kauli ya mwisho.

In «Mchumba Wangu» (1995:81), Kahigi and Mulokozi show that we should be wary of the kind of visitors that we associate with. They say:

Na nilipotaka kumpa talaka,
Alita majitu yakanitandika,
Nikapigwa kweli hatu nikanyoka,
Sasa siwezi kuwika.

This stanza illustrates the prowess of neo-colonialism. «Losing the power to crow» is a sign of inability to decide your own things the way you wish. Therefore, you remain in the state of enslavement, exploitation, servitude and dependency. In «Wimbo wa Kunguni» (1974:20) Kezilahabi demonstrates that social life has greatly changed. Few marriages survive because of modernity and interference. He says that most of these controversies, complaints and problems were not evident in the days past. He says:

...Maswali mengi kama hayo
Manung’uniko mengi kama hayo
Mataatizo mengi kama hayo
Sasa yaonekana ingawa zamani hayakuwepo.

Some of these problems are illustrated in the poem «Hadija» (1974:22) whereby a wife has no respect for humanity. She poisons her husband because of her greed. She believes that such an act will bring freedom. However, the poet shows that it was like «allowing floods to invade her house». Every step she took thereafter was not only dangerous but also terminal. He says:

...Nyumba yako sasa mafurikoni
Na utahama...
Mbuzi kunkimbia chui.
Alijigeuza panya
Akaliwa na paka.

Jongoo kutaka sana kukimbia
Aliomba miguu elfu
Akaachwa na nyoka
Mchawi kutaka sana kutisha
Alijigeuza simba
Akalia na risasi kichwani.

Hadija umemshika nyoka kwa mkia
Umeptita nyuma ya pandu.

Implications and the Way Forward

Artists use language in literary production. Hence, Swahili poetry, like any other in the world, should be looked at and studied as a literature of a given people at a given place and time; with own history, cultural values, feelings and emotions. This means that there should be dialogue between the two camps to create unity in diversity concerning aspects of Swahili poetry in a developing society. Consensus will remove mere triviality, parochialism, suspicion, chauvinism and emotions. It will result in substantial work that has good grounding and base.

Poems on social, economic and social criticism did not begin after independence of the Swahili African states. In the 19th century, poets like Muyaka voiced radical criticism. During colonialism, poets like Amri Abedi, Saadan Kandoro and Shaaban Robert wrote scathing satires on the colonial set up.

Their criticisms were usually veiled in parables, allegory, imagery and symbolism. In «free-verse», poets like E. Kezilahabi, A. Mazrui, S.A. Mohamed among others use the same approach. Both types use the same approach by employing allusions, well thought and selected words for specific purposes. Such words are also purposely arranged to bring about rhythm when a poem is read, recited or sung. Due to the special diction, words in a poem are used creatively. These attributes attest to what J. Mayoka (1984) described as tenets of a good Swahili poem.

The analysis above implies that the question of whether a given communication has a poetic function or not is undecidable unless one is able to examine its situational context, the peculiar actions it is involved in, and the cultural background of the society in which it has taken place. Hence, the controversy implies that actions carried out for the «first» time require great caution and presuppose a thorough examination of all perceptions accompanying the action, including those, which at first might seem insignificant.

It is also evident as Bloom and Ottong (1987:236) put it that there are few cultures where the elders do not register disapproval of the departures of the young from the traditions of an earlier generation, or where the young people do not voice their resentment at the restraints imposed upon them, as they deviate in some respect from certain forms of behaviour approved by the older people.

The position taken by traditionalists shows that actions which one is accustomed to determine the structure of perception right from the start by dictating which details one has or has not to pay attention to. Therefore, the specific features of aesthetic communication cannot be explained without the assumption that during the reception of the aesthetic message, a special code is developed in the recipient, in addition to the lingual and socio-cultural codes. Hence, it is this code which enables the recipient to interpret as information vehicles the non-precoded features on the sign matter and on the level of specific information in a poem. Therefore, for the recipient who does not have sufficient knowledge of the appropriate socio-cultural systems, the aesthetic code of the text is inaccessible, and the aesthetic information of the text remains un-revealed. The reformists postulate that the aesthetic code operates with various factors of the communication situation, thereby defining a superstructure, which determines the aesthetic value of the communication and work of art.

The controversy also implies that the development of Swahili poetry proceeds according to principles, which exclude «continuity». Hence, if all texts considered to be poetically alive at some time are to be regarded as literature,
there can be no such a thing as unified literary language. There should be room for development, change and new approaches. According to wanajadi, poetic language concerns fixed codes. This is quite oblivious of living cultures, which are not static.

In making sense of a period of transformation or transition within Swahili poetry, and of the contradictory interpretations of the process from within the period itself, we might have recourse to Raymond William's distinction between residual, dominant and emergent aspects of culture (*Marxism and Literature* (1977: 121-7)). Thus, there is cultural diversity where there are cultural forms described as subordinate, repressed and marginal. Non-dominant elements interact with dominant forms, sometimes co-existing with, or being absorbed and destroyed, or also challenging, modifying or even displacing them. Therefore, culture is not even by literary imagination a unity.

The controversy in Swahili poetry also implies that there are several ways of deploying the concept of ideology and history. It is analogous with concerns of materialist criticism, which traces the cultural connections between signification and legitimation. Thus, the way that beliefs, practices and institutions legitimate the dominant social order or status quo and the existing relations of domination and subordination. Such legitimation is found in the representation of sectional interests as universal ones. Hence, the existing social order is "naturalised". However, in a time of rapid changes like now, Swahili poetry should no longer function in its traditional context. The relationship of past significance and present meaning must be reconsidered because literary history could in fact be paradigmatic for history.

It is therefore necessary to discuss poetic works with reference to their historical context because they have ideological backgrounds of the compositions, historical introductions and descriptions (Harries, 1966). For instance, feudal thinking and behaviour which greatly influenced the East African Coastal society is reflected in Swahili poetry of Wanajadi. Further, it is worthy-noting here that even the colonialists were able to transform the traditional feudal obedience towards the ruler and the state into the new relationship between colonial master and the exploited African (Arnold, 1973). Therefore, it is essential to stress that a certain author is every time a spokesman of viewpoints connected with a certain society culturally constituted. Therefore, the problem here is methodological. There should be suitable interpretations of literary facts, which connect clearly and scientifically the development of Swahili literature with the society itself. Emphasis should be on creative richness, humanity, the beauty of it, etc. Hence, the issue of criterion, which can properly explain the historical and ideological context of the compositions, is important.

Legitimation works to efface the fact of social contradiction, dissent and struggle. Where these things present themselves unavoidably as with Swahili «free-verse», they are demonised by conservatists as attempts to subvert the social order of the art of Swahili poetry. Such a development tends to justify the conventional verse by demonising dissent and otherness as was the case during Shakespeare. It may ascribe such dissent to foreign influence as has been the case with Swahili «free-verse».

The development of Swahili «free-verse» implies that both conservatism and change must be traced back to the relationships between environmental, historical and psychological situations. Hence, social change does not only affect the arts, but also the way of life, attitudes, and beliefs of a whole community, or a major part of it. The level of education of the reformists implies that educational change can also lead to development, social change and perception. Knowledge is supreme (*Oruka 1991: 6*) and understanding oneself an enable one to live a better life since it is a virtue. Hence, the way forward is to adopt Helgel's notion of the «identity of opposites» in human society. Thus, conceived as unity of contradictory historical forces.

In every historical epoch, there is freedom that is superior to that of the previous and inferior to that of the next. Therefore in Swahili poetry, there is no logic or science, which would enable us to assert or believe that the struggle for freedom would end at a particular time in history. Historical development has no end given the nature of human life. Issues of continuity and change have always intrigued humankind. Hence, the relationship between movement and harmony is basic.

The controversy also implies that freedom in Swahili poetry is existential. Thus, each camp has its own brand of what reality is and some information is just as true as any other. Hence, truth is subjective and existentialists base their proposition on phenomenology. This is a method that is aimed at revealing the most indisputable truth. This
appli es to one's knowledge of oneself and his immediate perception of things. Intellectual freedom involves freedom of education (Oruka 1991:72). In a society where majority of the people are uneducated, most people will be indifferent and will lack the means to understand or enjoy intellectual works. The controversy implies that it will be a problem for the intellectual in such a society to find people with whom to exercise their knowledge. Hence, free verse implies freedom to challenge or criticize the established cultural norms concerning Swahili poetry.

However, there is conflict between intellectual freedom and the previous political dogma. Therefore, the two should co-exist. Cultural freedom entails seeking means to live according to the requirements of the established culture or to live a different way of life from the established one. Controversies between conservatists and reformists in works of art can be avoided (Kezilahabi 1983:144). New Styles are tried and new philosophies come up according to new currents, new thoughts and human needs. It is important to know where we are coming from, but it is wrong to rely on traditional approaches to solve our current problems without recourse to new approaches. Literature is alive. Hence, those who write now do so at different theoretical levels of poetry. So, the art should be developed albeit differences.

The controversy can also imply a historical necessity whereby natural reason or process guides historical development. This way, natural forces independent of natural will bring about occurrences of historical events. Hence, for a social change to occur, there is need for historical consciousness and a will to disapprove the prevailing historical reality and the desire to surpass it. When talking about poetry, the traditionalists have a narrow perspective, while reformists have a wider view. This is because most of the poets have not come in big contact with the poetry of other nations (c.f. Abedi, 1965). Hence most of them think that Swahili poetry has a unique form in the world. When we talk of Swahili poetry, we need to embrace the whole concept of poetry, its history, its evolution up to the state of rhymes and meter, and the new approach. The traditionalists think their forms are the end of poetry. This is the level of decay and enslavement (Kezilahabi 1983:146). They insist on rhymes as beauty even without meaning.

The traditionalists view poetry in terms of «Coastal people». They don’t want to look beyond their ethnic borders. Swahili poetry should be given new impetus by bridging the gap and having unity in diversity. Poets should adjust according to the historical wave. The way poets write is a result of the impact of their environment and reflects the level of development. There is need for collection of all Swahili poetry devices used by all languages involved in order to produce a new thing that will be agreeable by many as true Swahili poetry. This means Swahili poetry has to relax and relent some of its laws. Hence, a good poem to be judged by its art, especially the standpoint and direction/inclination of the concerned society.

Further, neither culture nor social structures today are particularly societal in character (Hoogvelt 1976:3). They are global in character because of cultural diffusion and technological sophistication of communication. This has accompanied economic expansion. Hence, the position of Swahili poetry elites economically and socially is commensurate with the degree to which they participate in the global systems. This therefore implies that narrow cultural values and perceptions have no space.

They also derive from cultural definitions originating outside the societies in which they have symbolic and inspirational value. This paper therefore postulates that the study of Swahili poetry as a unique and separate entity with its own unique and own culture is now meaningless. Admittedly, the social structures and cultures of societies in different continents do differ in important and different aspects, but their dominant and characteristic features are similar, deriving as they do from their similar position - both historical and contemporary in a global relational context. While African countries are making every effort to move from traditional society to modern ones, there is need for collective identification and transformation (Mathooko 2003:210). Language interfaces people as social entities with reality and serves as a cross-referencing area in human interactions with reality (Prah 1995a:49). Knowledge is therefore modified and grows in language, in the service of a given speech community. In as far as knowledge itself in historically constructed, its growth enriches language. Knowledge empowers people through the development and use of language. It also improves the ability of people to react intelligently in their everyday lives. A literate and informed society is more likely to make greater success of democratic practice than an illiterate one. Thus, free verse is a development of traditional conventional verse.
Culture is a dynamic phenomenon, subject to continuous change under the influence of both externally engendered and internally derived stimuli and social factors (Prah 1995b:12). It is historically and societally adapted, and dialectically it is an instrument for the adaptation of human beings to society. With the dialectics of culture, language and development, cultures, as systems are not homogenized entities. Though they may provide a reference point to which members of a historically formed community relate, they may reflect differences of class, status and power. Hence cultural attributes in a given society often serve as emblems for the differentiation of members into low and high. They serve as cultural pacemakers and claim supremacy in the hierarchy of sub-cultures as reflected in the Swahili debate.

Both literature and orature serve to maintain cultural continuity of societies. In pre-literature Africa, orature was a principal means for transferring cultural love to succeeding generations. The linguistic and poetical sophistication invariably expressed tradition in terms of linguistic refinement and texture. Therefore, language is a function of social reality situated within cultural and historical boundaries (Prah 1995: 17). Thus, while reality is universal, the language in which such phenomenon is perceived, and the structure of what are perceived, is historically and culturally bound. Each language has its own audience, the ultimate population base of the culture, which that language defines. Hence, development must be reflected in all areas of human activity. Its manifestations in other institutions must be in parallel reflected in the other facets of social life, art and language included.

References: