

R.M. Wafu

Culture, Performance & Identity

Paths of Communication in Kenya

Edited by Kimani Njogu



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the women and children burnt to death at the Kenya Assemblies of God Church, Kiambaa, near Eldoret Town on 1st January, 2008 in the post-election violence in Kenya.

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a chart with our names printed at the bottom in indelible ink. We became too preoccupied with satisfying the most primal of humanity's deficiency needs to worry about our status in society or to think about what we were to ourselves or to those that sat at the top of the food chain. While the world beyond us rolled on with its aspirations of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, we resigned ourselves to fate. We grovelled, fought and killed each other just to stay alive.

And the truth of the matter is that if the national psyche were a democracy, then we—the dispossessed youth—by being the largest demographic group are the true epitome of Kenyan-ness. But then again this was Kenya and our version of democracy meant the tyranny of the minority—a minority who occasionally yielded power to its sons, brothers and wives every couple of years. And so the experience of we—the majority—went on unnoticed. We could never be contributors to the socio-economic or political landscape of this country, forget about defining its national character. So we shrank into our cocoons that remained undefined by us but only paid homage to by others in the crime pages: 'Public Alarmed by Rise in Violent Crime'; the token annual 'exclusive' newspaper report: 'The Child Sex Slaves of Malindi' or the faceless statistics of grant proposals: 'Two Million Youths Disenfranchised'.

Whatever others branded us, we couldn't stop long enough to discourse on identities; we had our pitiful existences to get through. So we spent all our lives chasing bread and butter and the occasional shot of alcohol to escape the pain of living a life *sans* a sense of self. We kept on with our futile striving, our furtive sex in disused phone booths, our dinners of stale bread and sugarless strong tea and every single day our hope sunk deeper and deeper into the stygian depths of the Nairobi River. Life is short and brutish as Thomas Hobbes would say but we have to keep it fed and clothed while it lasts.

Notes

¹ Follow the footsteps.

² Geography, History, Civics.

CHAPTER SIX

Performing Identity in Kiswahili Literature

Richard Makhanu Wafula

Introduction

Kiswahili Literature and Identity

This chapter intends to examine Kiswahili Literature within the broad rubric of identity politics. In the scholarly publications of Al-Amin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff Noor (1993) and Ali Mazrui and Al-Amin Mazrui (1995), there is an acknowledgement of the fluidity of Kiswahili literature, language and culture. Yet these scholars, perhaps constrained by the fact that they have not been fearless and articulate apologists of the community with which they sympathize, have also sometimes and in some curious way rather shyly attempted to cultivate a sense of the autonomy of the Swahili people and by extension, of their culture and literature.

In this chapter, I restate the fact that Kiswahili literature is thoroughly hybrid and even the most rigorous defender of a distinct Kiswahili literary identity often finds it impossible to deny or avoid this fluidity. In arguing this case, I agree with Stuart Hall (1996), Webner and Ranger (1996) and Michel Foucault (1999) when they point out that identity is neither essentialist nor reductionist; to the contrary it is in a constant process of movement, interaction and intertextuality. Kiswahili literature, language and culture best exemplifies this cultural and textual mix, reworking and reconstitution. Swahili identity has an intercultural heritage which continues to be multicultural. The entire gamut of Kiswahili studies is too broad for our purposes at the moment. I shall therefore, concentrate on three elements of Kiswahili literary identity to make the case for the hybridity of Kiswahili literature. First, I examine the fluid nature of Kiswahili identity, the various defining characteristics of Kiswahili literature and finally focus on several genres of Kiswahili literature with a view to demonstrating that that literature is inherently hybrid and essentially multicultural.

The fluid Nature of Swahili Identity

From the writing of Ali Mazrui (1964) Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff (1996) and Al- Amin Mazrui (2007), Swahili identity is fluid. But it appears that the specific ways Mazrui and Shariff redefine this fluidity in their book *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* is in terms of a pyramid tending towards an ethnic Swahili essentialism. This, as this analysis shows, is misleading. Long before Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff wrote *The Swahili: Idiom and the Identity of an African people*, Ali Mazrui spoke about the Swahili ethnic identity. Ali Mazrui (1964) asserted:

If the white citizens of the United States had been Arab, most of the coloured citizens would have become Arab too. It has been estimated that over seventy per cent of the Negro population in the United States has some "white" blood. And the "white" blood was much more often than not derived from a white father. Now given the principle that if the father is Arab the child is Arab, most Negroes of the United States would have been Arab had the white people of the United States been Arab too. White Americans are Caucasian and the dominant culture is Germanic. And so if either of the parents is non-Germanic, the offspring cannot be Germanic either (22).

Although Ali Mazrui is speaking about Arabs in this text, his argument is applicable to the ethnic Swahili as well. When Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff speak about Swahili identity, they bear this out clearly. They see the overriding characteristics of Arabocentrism and Afrocentrism to be identical. Ali Mazrui's view quoted above is a patriarchal but basically liberal attitude of racial and ethnic identity. In essence, Mazrui is saying that anyone can be a Swahili by ethnic description if they meet the patriarchal criterion. Ali Mazrui does not, however, define this identity economically and politically. That seems to account for his liberal stance with regards to who a Mswahili can be. Almost thirty years after Ali Mazrui's statement on the racial liberalism of the Swahili, Alamin Mazrui (1992) had this to say:

European languages may be acquired by all and sundry; but when it comes to linguistic definitions of European ethnicity, European languages have failed to neutralize genetic boundaries. African languages on the other hand, defy genetic boundaries in their contribution of ethnic identities...had the American *lingua franca* been Swahili, for example, instead of English, the entire African American population that for generations has been speaking English as a first and often only language, would have been ethnically Swahili (76).

The above is a very liberal approach to ethnic identity based on linguistics. In Alamin Mazrui's words, linguistic homogeneity can lead to racial, ethnic and other forms of homogeneity among Africans. By the same token and conversely, Al-Amin Mazrui attests to the unyielding, hybrid and multicultural character of the Swahili identity.

Towards defining the Literature

The definition of Kiswahili literature like the definition of African literature in general is problematic to any researcher whose aim is to pigeon-hole it within a narrow and fixed conceptual framework. Owing to the various sources of culture from which the literature has come and been created, different stakeholders in this literary confluence take what serves their interests. And these interests are so passionate that they cannot be wished away without jeopardizing some constituting elements of the stakeholders.

Among the definitions that have been advanced by scholars (Wamitila, 2003) the following appear to recur:

1. Kiswahili literature are the narratives and writings of people who refer to themselves as Waswahili ethnically.
2. The literature of inhabitants of East and central Africa who use Kiswahili as their medium of expression.
3. The literature created by a person of any nation or race who uses Kiswahili and is able to articulate significant issues that affect the lives of East Africans.
4. Any work of art that has been translated into Kiswahili.

All the definitions listed above are valid depending on the institutional and social contexts with which the literature is associated. Of the four, the fourth would appear to most readers to be most objectionable especially by essentialist or reductionist standards because of its accommodation of translated works into the corpus of Kiswahili literature. A rudimentary examination of the literary history of Kiswahili literature, however, leads to the revelation that the first canonized literary works in Kiswahili are actually translated. *Utenzi wa Hamziya* perhaps represents the most interesting dialectic in Kiswahili literature. On the one hand, it uses Kingozi, the oldest variety of Kiswahili. It is also the first known translation into Kiswahili.

This is makes it original in a direct and immediate way due to the fact that whoever would like to access the oldest Kiswahili dialect cannot avoid reading *Utenzi wa Hamziya*. On the other hand, the work is a translation of an Arabic poem entitled *Kasidatul Hamziya* composed by Muhammed bin Said al-Busiry from Egypt (Kezilahabi, 1983). It is not surprising then that over the years, artists both indigenous and non-indigenous Swahili, have often borrowed and freely appropriated motifs of their literary works from elsewhere. This applies to all the major literary genres of the literature.

The Novel

Shaaban Robert is probably the most famous Swahili poet. He was also a prolific author of several prose works most of which were composed in an allegorical mode. In *Adili na Nduguze*, *Kufikirika*, *Kusadikika* and *Siku ya Watenzi Wote*, Shaaban Robert is obviously in dialogue with adjacent cultures and spaces both thematically and stylistically. Apart from his African background which refurbishes his work with proverbs, idioms and axioms found in his home environment, Shaaban Robert is well conversant with and appropriates the oriental folk traditions to his local purpose. It is true that the motifs of jealousy, of the younger brother who is hated and harassed by the two older brothers and of the redeeming quality of the virtue of love have a universal touch. This notwithstanding, the motif of the two older jealousy brothers in *Adili na Nduguze* and the controlling motif of 'Kisa cha Mzee wa Pili na Mbwa Wawili Weusi' found in the *Arabian Knights* have striking resemblances. Shaaban Robert clearly takes the storyline of the Arabian Knight narrative the way it is and renders it into Kiswahili. At any rate, the East Coast of Africa has had such a long contact with the oriental world that a cultural intertextuality would be expected and only remotely be regarded as foreign.

Kusadikika has perhaps more parallels with some stories in the *Alfu Lela Ulela* series than *Adili na Nduguze*. Just as there are seven messengers of *Kusadikika* (including Karama), Sindbad the sailor makes seven voyages to various parts of the cosmos. The journeys that the messengers of *Kusadikika* and Sindbad make are cumulative in the sense that the experiences that the protagonists go through enable them to make holistic moral statements with regard to their lives. By the time Shaaban Robert was composing his romances, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* had been already translated into Kiswahili. The travels that Gulliver undertakes are fundamentally similar

with what the various messengers of *Kusadikika* undergo. They also have similar cumulative consequences.

That Shaaban Robert's multiculturalism is not an isolated case but a central element of the Kiswahili literary tradition is shown in the novels of Muhammad Said Abdullah. Like his slightly older compatriot, Abdullah attended the Islamic *madrassa* and the Christian missionary school. This blend of a secular Islamic life with Western values is shown in the life of Abdullah's principal character, Msa. The most pervasive influence in Abdullah's work is from the American writer of mystery and crime narratives, Conan A. Doyle. Abdullah's novels such as *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* (1957), *Kisima cha Giningi* (1968), *Duniani Kuna Watu* (1973), *Siri ya Sifuri* (1974) and *Mwana wa Yungi Hulewa* (1976) adopt Doyle's characters and place them in a Zanzibar setting. Msa and Najum are to Abdullah what Sherlock Holmes and Watson are to Conan Doyle. Besides adopting Conan's archetypal characters, Abdullah takes Conan's narrative plots including the attempt to describe the mystery tale in a simple and straightforward way for the faster and easier comprehension of characters whose capacity for connecting complicated episodes is limited.

Abdullah had been criticized for unabashedly transferring narrative plots of an American writer to an African environment. However, the rich Kiswahili linguistic facility with which he is endowed makes the reading of his works irresistibly appealing. Moreover, the themes that Abdullah explores such as murders associated with inheritance of property and attempts to debunk superstitious beliefs through the use of sound logical practices is in harmony with an African setting.

Much later in the literary history of Kiswahili prose, there emerge artists who use the realistic method to weave their stories as if this method evolved and developed naturally in their home environments. *Rosa Mistika*, *Utengano*, *Ukiwa*, *Tumaini*, *Kufa Kuzikana*, *Haini* and *Maisha Kitendawili* are some of the readings in Kiswahili prose that do not make apologies as to their realism. In the midst of this array of realistic novels, some writers have begun composing what has come to be called magical or marvelous realism. Magical realism was originally associated with writers from Latin America like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Vargas Llosa. One of the defining characteristics of magical realism is that what is sometimes regarded as fantastic, unreal and unlikely to happen is in fact realistic and

occurs frequently in the lives of ordinary mortals. Contemporary Kiswahili authors namely, Said Ahmed Mohamed and Wadi Kyalo Wamitila have blended their local sense of magical realism with the Latin American version to create *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Bin-Adamu!* respectively.

The foregoing observation shows that there are multivalent artistic currents underlying Kiswahili culture in general and the Kiswahili novel in particular. By multivalent currents in a literature, I mean the capacity of that literature to be of use at various institutional levels in a specific community. In most communities all over the world, oral and written literatures exist concurrently and perform dissimilar or similar functions depending on whether their focus is eye-bound or ear-bound. Similarly, Kiswahili artists, whether ethnically defined or not, use various literary modes to communicate their experiences in view of the pressures imposed upon them both as members of their local communities and as members of the wider international community that uses Kiswahili as a *lingua franca*.

Drama

Ebrahim Hussein does not specifically describe what a Swahili person by ethnic description would conceive of a play. In his essay 'Hatua Mbalimbali za Kubuni na Kutunga Tamthiliya Kufuatana na Misingi ya Ki-Aristotle' (1983) published in *Makala Za Semina ya Kimataifa ya Waandishi wa Kiswahili III* (194–202), he describes the Swahili play according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Finally he writes:

Kuandika tamthiliya kwa kufuata misingi aliyoweka Aristotle ni njia moja kuu ya kuandika tamthiliya. Lakini si njia pekee. Na kwa kweli mila ya Kiafrika haiowani uzuri na usanifu huu... Ikiwa mwandishi atatumia misingi ya Aristotle au baadhi ya misingi hiyo jambo muhimu ni kuweka akilini kwamba misingi hii si sheria. Ila ni vipengele vya tamthiliya. Sheria kama ipo ni moja tu: kujua nini watu wanapenda kuona jukwaani na nini hawapendi kuona na kusikia jukwaani (202).

Translation: Writing a play by following the rules laid down by Aristotle is one major way of composing plays. But it is not by any measure the only way of doing so. In practice, African traditions do not blend very well with this (Aristotelian) format. If a writer will use this format, or part of it, the important point to keep in mind is that the Aristotelian foundations are not immutable laws. They are just aspects of the play. If there is any rule about composing drama, it is just one: to know what people want to see and hear on the stage.

Hussein uses a liberal approach in defining the play, an approach that is not tied to any specific African ethnic identity. Underlying Hussein's critique of Aristotle's *Poetics*, there is an assumption that a fairly relative homogeneity in the production of indigenous African theatrical forms exists. By the time Hussein gave this guideline for play construction, western schooling and other currents of theatrical practice had already influenced his idea of theatre and drama. Hussein's idea is not based on any specific "Uswahili" or Africanness. It is based on indigenous African dramatic forms in general. Furthermore, his is not an isolated case. Benedict Syambo and Alamin Mazrui (1992) have said the following on Swahili drama before and after the colonial period:

Kwa uchache tunaweza kusema kwamba muhula huu (wa ukoloni) ulituletea mbegu mpya ya fasihi, ambayo kwa kuingiliana na zile zilizokuwepo za fasihi-simulizi, ilikuja kuipa tamthilia ya Kiswahili sura yake maalum. Wazo hili la tamthilia lililotokana na mchanganyiko wa mbegu za kienyeji na mbegu za kigeni baadaye lilichukuliwa na wenyeji likawekwa jukwaani (91).

Translation: In brief, we can say that the colonial period brought us new traits of literature. By blending these traits with the indigenous ones that emanated from oral literature, the Swahili play was given a new special form. The product of this mix was taken by indigenous people and put on the stage.

There is no direct reference to a marginalised Swahili identity in this passage. In fact, Syambo and Mazrui are likely referring to the entire literary ethos that grew out of the meeting of Western theatrical genres and African ones. If the question of the identity of a specific literary form had been at the back of their mind, they would have shown the indigenous components of modern Swahili drama. They would, for instance, have attempted to demonstrate how a particular and distinct indigenous theatre has contributed in a large measure to the emergence of modern Swahili drama or drama written in Swahili.

Some ethnic Swahili scholars have not seen the need to seek definitions of modern Swahili drama based on the Swahili indigenous theatrical types. A case in point is Said Ahmed Mohamed (1995). Mohamed has a 'universal' notion of a play rather than a narrow, ethnically based one. In his description of the meaning of drama (59) he quotes A.J. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, adopts its meaning, and applies it as the

standard definition of drama throughout. Mohamed's identification and description of the elements of drama in Swahili is not any different from elements of the realistic or well-made European play.

Whatever his reasons for doing this, it seems to me that Mohamed is more concerned with the fact that Kiswahili is able to communicate complex concepts including those that are found in standard dictionaries of literary terms. Moreover, it appears to me that Mohamed is concerned with drama in Swahili rather than drama that is composed by people who are ethnically defined as Swahili. Like Mazrui and Syambo referred to earlier, Mohamed is not bothered by the way Swahili traditions or other African traditions have modified the present structure of the Swahili play. The fact is that most critics of Kiswahili drama take for granted the meaning and practice of Kiswahili drama as an art form. In so doing, they concur with Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff Noor (1996) when they assert with regard to Kiswahili literature in general:

This literature is heterogenous ethnically, nationally, religiously and ideologically. It is transethnic and transnational literature whose only binding force is a Swahili language that although differentiated, tends to revolve around the standard norm. Swahili as well as non Swahili, Tanzanian as well as non-Tanzanian, Muslim as well as non-Muslim authors have all participated in, and contributed to the creation of this literature (91).

The above quote clearly demonstrates that Kiswahili literature is heterogenous but can also be used as an agent of homogenizing distinct groups of people.

Poetry

The fact that East Africa's coastal strip is renowned for having had a longer period than any other part of East Africa in the composition of prosodic verse does not mean that it is its (the Coast's) exclusive preserve or that it originated there. Neither has it kept a single immutable format since its creation. The following statement is erroneously meant to illustrate to some degree the essentialism of Kiswahili identity when it comes to poetic genres:

Between 1981 and 1982, one of the present authors, Alamin Mazrui, had the opportunity to teach courses in Swahili literature at Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi in Kenya. In the field of poetry, studied were written

verse composed both in prosodic and free verse. And, indeed invariably, the students found the diction of prosodic verse less penetrable than that of free verse...For second or third speakers, "*the unassimilated Arabism*" seemed to be at the top of the hierarchy of linguistic impenetrability, followed by "*archaisms*" that were in turn followed by lexical contractions. In general, however, once students had the opportunity to fathom the meaning of specific lexical items they found problematic, the poem became immediately accessible. They seemed to experience no problem in appreciating and dealing with the metaphor used in many a prosodic verse (128)

Mazrui misses the actual reason that led to this situation. The language that was taught in schools in both Kenya and Tanzania was the Standard variety based on the Unguja dialect. Had the standard dialect been Kimvita and Kiamu, the problem that Mazrui sees may not have existed, or may have been very minimal. Up-country students did not have a natural ease with free verse either. Much of it was written in the Standard dialect with which they were familiar. This does not mean that they were naturally predisposed to know, understand and appreciate free verse. Neither were they naturally predisposed to communicate in Standard Swahili. The students (of whom I was one¹) had successfully sat difficult Swahili exams in High School. They therefore had a mastery of Standard Swahili, the variety of Swahili that was used to compose much of the free verse. As Mazrui and Shariff themselves point out, free verse was almost an exclusive preserve of upcountry poets, who were also users of the Standard variety of Swahili. The Standard variety is also the language which up-country poets learned at school.

This is unlike most ethnic Swahili people, who may learn the Standard in addition to their local variety of Swahili. Ethnic Waamu speak Kiamu. They have to go to school to master the conventionally acceptable nuances of Standard Swahili, which is based on the Unguja dialect. To ignore the institutional domains in which the various varieties of Swahili are used in East Africa is to fall back on a needless and false essentialism, namely, that most up-country poets knew the Standard Swahili as if it was their first language or mother tongue.

In saying that his Swahili students from up-country could not, at least at the outset, grasp the archaisms and arabisms of Swahili prosodic verse, Mazrui also fails to recognise the entire socio-linguistic situation and institutional structure that helped to nurture a greater appreciation of free verse over conventional Swahili poetry. Therefore, as pointed out earlier, just as the scripted play is a hybrid product, the Swahili poem is similarly

• hybrid. In their description of the historical development of Swahili poetry, Syambo and Mazrui (44) point out that Swahili verse has influences of Arabic and Persian poetry. On the Swahili play Mazrui and Shariff write:

The British colonial influence also prompted the extension of the Swahili *ngano* (story) to the novel, the Swahili *tungo / mashairi ya kujibizana* (dramatized performances of dialogue poetry) perhaps to the play, and the Swahili *tungo / mashairi* to free verse. Having so grown, Swahili language literature became increasingly trans-Swahili in terms of the ethnic background of its authors, the nature of its themes, the multiplicity of its genres as well as its Swahili dialects of composition (94).

In the same way as Mazrui and Shariff view Swahili as a language that traverses many spaces, they may have to think about an identity that goes beyond or that includes ethnicity. Researches such as *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger) and *Imagined Communities* (Benedict Anderson) enrich the Swahili literary scholar's appreciation of the multiculturalism of Kiswahili literary identity. In my view, the fear that the extension of Swahili genres dilutes or endangers the survival of Swahili identity as is sometimes alluded to is misplaced. Ethnic Swahili people can continue practicing their more "authentic" culture and art in juxtaposition with the emerging Swahili communities that are appropriating various elements of older versions of Swahili culture. They could also exploit emerging identities based on the wider Swahili linguistic ethos to their advantage. There are probably more modern novels in Swahili by ethnic Swahili writers than non-ethnic Swahili writers.

Examples from Kiswahili Drama

Ethnic Swahili dramatists do not take a narrow view of the creative works they engage in. They have used motifs from the Swahili culture and elsewhere without raising the ethnic issues in a reductionist way. The motif of exorcism in *Mashetani*, *Pungwa*, and the narrative motifs in *Kivuli Kinaishi* and *Jogoo Kijijini* are typically Swahili in character but do not explore specifically Swahili ethnic themes. Ethnic Swahili dramatists have also written plays within other traditions. *Kwenye Ukingo wa Thim* (Hussein), *Amezidi* (Mohamed), and Mazrui's *Shadows of the Moon* have trans-local resonances.

Shadows of the Moon by Alamin Mazrui is a typical example of plays written by ethnic Swahili dramatists. The play is set in the state of Lindi

which has just attained its independence. Initially, independence is received with enthusiasm, hope and high expectations. Citizens of the new state hope for great prosperity as they usher in a new government. However, the head of state (a founding father) forces the citizens to deify him. As the action of the play rises to a crescendo, underpaid workers begin to threaten industrial action. The playwright makes it clear that workers are exploited because the factories in which they work are owned by former colonial masters. Consequently, workers have resolved to depose the government and end exploitation despite the obstacles that stand in their way.

Mazrui's play is an exemplary example of post-independence African literature. This literature is born of anger directed at post-colonial African governments for failing to economically empower their citizens. *Shadows of the Moon* depicts the disparity between pre-independence hopes and post-uhuru frustrations. Although the play is written in English and uses motifs from European and American cultural experiences to develop its themes, it borrows heavily from African cultures as well.² In other words, the play borrows sayings of the wise from wherever it can to develop its themes.

Apart from employing epigraphs from western literature, Mazrui couches the main conflict of the play in Marxist terms. He pits capital against labour and develops his characters as members of distinctive economic classes in Marxist terms. While I am not suggesting that it is wrong for an ethnic Swahili dramatist to use ideas that originate elsewhere to empower and liberate his people, it is clear in this instance that Mazrui does not use the Swahili ethnic community as a microcosm to highlight the broader economic conflicts that exist in East African societies and beyond. Were the ethnic Swahili question foregrounded or even alluded to in the play, one would make a link between the arguments raised in *The Swahili* and the performance of *Shadows of the Moon*. These works were published almost at the same time and one is thus bound to seek connections between them.

If there is any specific Swahili ethnic identity, it is not clearly expressed in *Shadows of the Moon*, let alone other dramatic works by ethnic Swahili dramatists. The latter part of *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* by Mazrui and Shariff expresses the baffling view that Swahili ethnicity is constructing and mobilizing itself around a radicalized brand of Islam. This does not find expression in any dramatic work. All along,

the reader of *The Swahili* is given to understand that Swahili identity is fluid and heterogeneous. Then, towards the end of the book, we are shown a homogeneity coalescing around religious identity. Perhaps in time, works by ethnic Swahili artists that mobilize the ethnic Swahili people's resources around religious fervour may begin to appear. However, the current situation is that ethnic Swahili dramatists are working in Swahili language just as any other East African dramatist, who is not a Mswahili by ethnicity.

Conclusion

Ethnic Swahili intellectuals are ambivalent as far as the question of a Swahili ethnic identity is concerned. On some occasions, they embrace a broader view of ethnic identity. This is exemplified in some scholars' use of Swahili linguistic identity as the base for determining other types of identity. This is evident when one considers similar types of identity formations, especially with regard to black Americans. On the other hand, there is a tendency on the part of the same scholars to define Swahili identity in restrictive terms when they contextualize that identity within East Africa. This use of double standards is problematic. But it also shows how complex an issue the definition of Swahili identity is. Ethnic Swahili artists are not particularly enthusiastic about exploring specifically Swahili ethnic themes in their literary works, the foregoing observation notwithstanding. They practice various literary genres, just as any other artist from East Africa and beyond would, taking from elsewhere what serves them best. This makes the performance of identity in Kiswahili literature quintessentially multicultural and hybrid.

Notes

¹ Mazrui taught me Swahili literature at Kenyatta University in the academic year 1981/1982. This was just before the Moi government detained him in July 1982. At this time, debates about Swahili prosodic verse and free verse were raging in Swahili studies in Kenya and Tanzania. E. Kezilahabi had published an anthology of free verse, *Kichomi* (1974) whose contents could not be analyzed using the criteria of prosodic verse.

² The epigraphs of the play are quoted from Byron, Herbert Marcuse, a Swahili saying and Thomas Jefferson. They all relate to the empowerment of the weak.

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