

An African and Modern Vehicle

JAN KNAPPERT

IS POETRY NOT the most delicate form of art, the most meaningful form of expression? One still finds Africanists who maintain that Swahili poetry owes all its lustre to Arabian poetry, but it can be shown, as Dammann has done¹ that Swahili poetry is essentially African in its metaphors, in its figurative language. I will give some examples from my own edition of the *Utenzi wa Tambuka* (*Het Epos Van Heraklios*, Leiden 1958). The original manuscript was compiled in 1728.

*Wákawándama adúí
káma yá chuí na páa . . .*

"They persecuted the enemy
like leopards after gazelles".

*Pákangía bánu Tái
wákangá nyatí mbuái
watesi kuta mabáa . . .*

"There appeared the tribe of the sons of Tai,
they were like warlike buffaloes,
combative and pugnacious. . ."

*Kísa kúkutána káti
símba ná chuí na nyáti*

"Finally there was the clash (as) between
lions, leopards and wild buffaloes . . ."

A description of the enemy army:

*Wáli wángi ásilimbi
hápa ná hapa zitúmbi
wáli káma khúmbikhúmbi
wákichúrunia mvúa.*

"They were innumerable, the proletarians,
here and there and everywhere in clusters
like winged white ants, rustling like rain".

The gallant Knights almost disappear in these hostile masses:

*Kúwa kwá nyingi jifiri
wákíngá kama bahári
kútua mwana tuyúri
úziwáni úkyoéa . . .*

"So uncountable were the troops, that
they seemed an ocean where a bird
alights, swimming on the water surface . . ."

¹ Die Überlieferung der Islamischen Suahelidichtung, Zeitschr. d. D. Morgenländischen Ges., Wiesbaden 108, 1, 1958. p. 49.

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The heroes in battle are:

*Wáwunja mikúu myámba
wimbi kúu likitwéya . . .*

"Breakers of huge rocks, like
surf when it comes down . . ."

The battle is described just as it should be in a medieval epic:

*Phánga zikiténda kázi
zikitisha mángi mázi
yákinga maji majázi
masika, myezi ya mvúa . . .*

"The swords did their work, they spilled
so much blood that it was like the
floods in the wet season, in the
months of heavy rains . . ."

*Pándushile muangáza
múchi ukaténdwa kiza,
mawimbi yakishishiza
káma máji yá kujáa . . .*

"The light disappeared and daytime
became darkness, (The battle raged like)
hissing waves when the tide is rising . . ."

*Wákawakata mafúngu
hápa ná hapa vichúngu
ili fúraha ya nyúngu
pisi wakiwalíla . . .*

"They cut their enemies in parts,
there were piles (of bodies) lying around,
a joy for the worms, the hyenas
howled over them . . ."

POETRY AND RELIGION

The Muslims are a pious congregation and the Swahili people are prone to religion. After the battle when Alii Haidari has swayed a conclusive victory at the end of the epic, Alii praises himself, as is customary among heroes. But even here he is modest, for he is only a servant of God, he just follows his destiny: (*Herekali*, verse 1082):

*Alii akánashidi
ndimi mwanangwa asádi
mbéé kóndo kushitádi
nipélékamí Rasúa.*

*Ndimi simba yá Muúngu
munisha wawí machúngu
muwínga khui kipúngu
mwélevu wa kuwakóa.*

*Mbéle zá Thumwa akámba
ndimi njóvu, ndimi simba
muwéka wake wachúmba
ná maida wakakáa.*

*Múungu uníumbile
ná mukóno únidéle
ná uáanga úteúle
kánoléami kutwáa . . .*

"Alii recited (one of his own poems)
I am a nobleman, a lion (*Haidari* means
also a lion). In the face of war I am
violent, send me out, O Prophet.

I am a lion of God, preparing bitterness for the
wicked, like a fish-eagle hunting for fish,
clever in catching them.

And before the Prophet he spoke:
'I am an elephant, I am a lion
I make women into widows,
they will remain on the battlefield weeping'.

God has created me,
and given me a strong arm,
He has chosen my sword for me,
He has determined that I should handle it".

If the reader thinks that it is not an expression of poetic elegance to refer to the widows of one's enemies, then he should also read Shakespeare:

"... for many a thousand widows
shall this his mock, mock out of their dear husbands
Mock Mothers from their sons, mock castles down..."
HENRY V

PROSE

Needless to say, Swahili is an adult language. In this language can be expressed what cannot be expressed in most African tribal languages. This Swahili language has all the potential wealth and resources needed for the representation of human ideas. That is why Swahili first became the intertribal language as far as the Sudan border and the Lomami River, later the language used in contact with Europeans and Asians (the Indians in East Africa have an admirable command of Swahili), then the language of education. As such it was abolished last year in Kenya but is now reintroduced by the new Government. Finally, Swahili became the national language of Tanganyika, Katanga and Zanzibar and it may well acquire national status in Kenya. It is the undisputed intertribal language of Kivu and Stanleyville Provinces.

No other African language is so intensely studied by Europeans. More books have been printed in Swahili than in any other African language.

There are more authors writing in Swahili than in any other African language. Most of them, as we have pointed out, are poets, but there are some prose writers and they are of growing interest.

There is now one playwright, Henry Kuria, whose *Nakupenda lakini* ("I love you, but...") was a success in Nairobi.

As short story writers we should mention especially David E. Diva, M. Saleh Farsy, A. Sharifu Omar, Akida Waziri, Yusufu Ulenge, C. S. Majaliwa.

Nearly all the short stories are still completely in the style of the Arabian Nights, the type of stories one still sees in Indian films and in the Indonesian *Wayang* performances. African type fables are also found about Sungura, the shrewd hare.

The writing of novels in Swahili has only just started, but it is promising. I can give only three names of novel writers: M. Saidi Abdulla, P.O. Ugula, and Mohammed H. Elkindy.

Why is there not more literature in Swahili? Well, there is, but I have not yet found it. Writing Swahili has been discouraged in favour of English and it only recently came back on the scene. Especially in poetry there seems to be no limit to the number of writers. Every month I am introduced to new Swahili poets. I have no doubt that it will now rise quickly to the place it deserves: of being the foremost language in East Africa and the first genuine African language to become a vehicle of a modern culture. ●

REVIEWS

One Way from Tribalism

Anthony Barker

Zulu Transformations by A. Vilakazi (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg)

THOSE WHO ORDAIN from on high where their fellow men are to live, and decree for city Africans a return to the collective obedience of tribal life, might read Dr. Vilakazi's book, mark it, learn it and inwardly digest it, to their immense profit. Nobody—except the most bigoted racist—would in any event have imagined that by returning a whole people to a certain geographical situation, they would also re-align that people's thinking and make them once more the contented inheritors of a tribal way of life. Here, documented for us in the most express detail by a skilled and sympathetic observer, is an analysis of the changes that have taken place in Zulu society. It will reveal any such attempt as the wild dreams of the politically obsessed.

The writer treads the anthropologist's narrow path between cold observation and affectionate involvement with ability and tenderness. Far from staring through the bars of a fascinating tribal zoo, he walks with the men and women of the Nyuswa reserve and shares with us their bewilderments and their adjustments. A Zulu himself, he has known both the tug of the tribe and the urge in a man's heart to live in a new dimension of learning and self-realisation; he has herded cattle as a boy and, as a man, occupied a professor's chair in a great American university. And on this journey he leads us in a way that puts us lastingly in his debt. There are, it is true, a number of tiresome lapses into the argot of the anthropologist which make of the first chapter rather sticky reading, and latterly a few repetitions which might better have been omitted, yet as we read ourselves further into the book we are rewarded by almost lyrical sections on courtship and marriage which do away with our irritations over patrikins and affines and set us wondering whether to take to ourselves a new wife under the marvellously courteous and well-regulated customs of the Zulu people.

BUT THIS IS NO STATIC STUDY of almost extinct Zulu tribalism. It is a dynamic tale of men and women in transformation. To our astonishment we find ourselves witnesses to the importance of missionary enterprise in the changes that are moving over the face of society.