



Enduring relevance

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SAMPLES OF ORAL POETRY ON THE SWAHILI COAST

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Kresse

On the Swahili coast, oral poetry is still very much alive. This does not mean that all kinds of people from different social, ethnic and educational backgrounds spend much of their time in poetry recitation, nor that the majority of the younger generation is knowledgeable about (or actively engaged with) the major examples of classic Swahili poetry. But for the trained eyes and ears of an observer who is familiar with urban coastal settings in Kenya and Tanzania, the ongoing cultivation of spoken or recited texts that follow certain rules of genre and form is easily noticeable in social life. Especially when thinking of ‘oral poetry’ in a wider sense, including forms of song and musical recitation, this rings true. This is unsurprisingly so, as popular *taarab* music frequently emanates from private houses, cafés and social gatherings, while the ‘rougher’ musical forms of rap and hip-hop may often be heard at the meeting-points of local youths or, more prominently, blasting from the passing *matatu*-buses carrying their loads of passengers across town. But even when narrowing down our understanding of ‘oral poetry’ and trying to separate it from ‘song’ (which is not always easily possible), we can still find a number of pieces of poetry composed in the region and recorded locally under very simple conditions, being circulated and admired, bought, listened to and discussed among diverse sub-groups of the Swahili-speaking coastal population. They are concerned with the memorisation of particular events (accidents, deaths or particular achievements), with the rhetorical praise or critique of political figures or, spinning on the historical thread of didactic poetry in Swahili, with the teaching of moral standards and proper behaviour to members of the younger generation. Such poems constitute the main concern of this essay.

To complete the picture, we should also note the ongoing relevance of Islamic religious poetry, which is recited (in different forms) as part of ritual commemorations (eg of the Prophet’s birth, during *maulidi* celebrations; or differently, during the month of Ramadhan) or which is circulated in recorded form (cassette or CD) along the coast. These too are

part of a continuous living tradition of oral poetry. Note that, according to some common interpretations of Islam in the region, one is not supposed to use the verb ‘sing’ to characterise the activity of recitation. ‘Singing’ includes connotations of temptation and, thus, improper moral behaviour which is associated with popular music and, particularly, dance movements and the mixing of gender groups in public. But to Western ears ‘singing’ best describes the art employed here, of giving voice, in an impressive and pleasurable manner and following a particular melody, to a meaningful text. Indeed, just along these lines ‘*kutia sauti*’, to give voice, is the proper expression commonly used for such recitation (without musical accompaniment) in Swahili.

So, then, different kinds of classical forms of Swahili poetry – like the didactic *utenzi* – continue to be used, performed and appreciated, alongside popular songs and rap, by a significant number of people across the generations. Thus Swahili verbal artistry, in live and recorded performances and in older and newer genres, continues to be a rich and important sub-field of the overall dynamics of social life for the coastal urban and rural population. Historically, this was largely Muslim, but has changed over the twentieth century when many labour migrants moved from predominantly Christian upcountry regions to the coast, seeking, but not always securing, a better life for themselves and their children.

Looking at ‘poetry’ in the more narrow sense of excluding the commercial musical branches of popular *taarab* songs and rap, I here pick up on a few examples from my own research and fieldwork experience which was largely conducted in Kenya. Poems selected to be recorded, or re-recorded, for sale and circulation by the local producers include old classics as well as new pieces. All of these are sold and distributed largely by a range of small stalls or local shops that sell regionally recorded Swahili poetry and popular music (and often also Islamic music, recitations and sermons), commonly next to a variety of other items. Depending on the kind of store, these may include electronics, carvings and handicraft products, or Islamic medicine, books and newspapers. Here I examine

some of the ways in which listening to, and engaging with, a piece of oral poetry is part of what people do in their everyday lives, and I hope to get across an idea of how such contemporary senses of relevance of oral performances of poetry are constituted and negotiated.

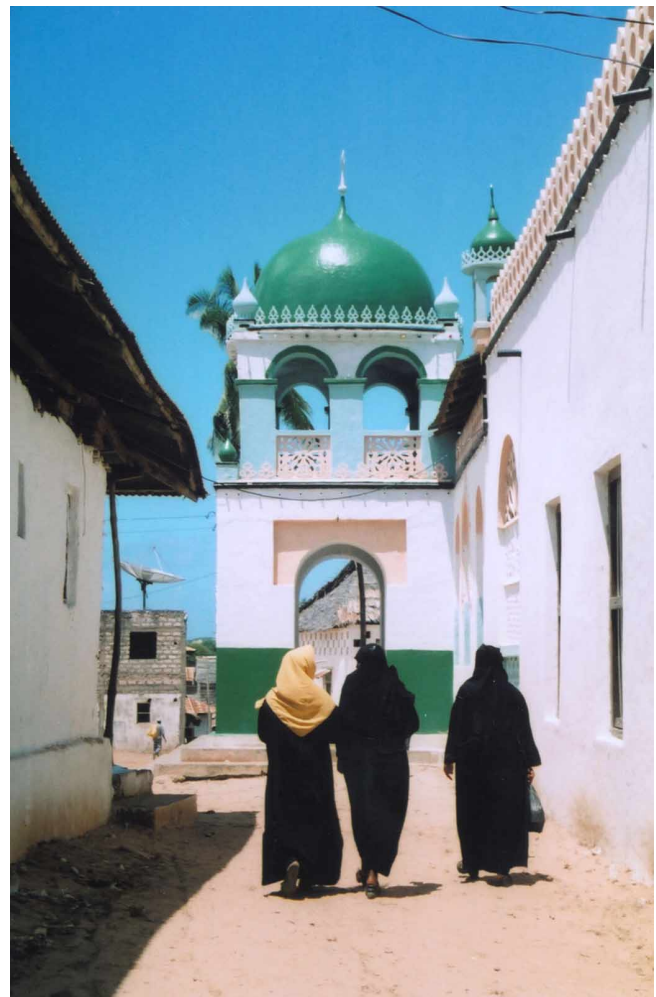
Meaningful orality: ‘Wasiya wa Mabanati’ by Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir

There is one beautifully recited Swahili poem of the *utenzi* genre that caught my attention — repeatedly, and in different ways. This is a recording of the poem ‘Wasiya wa Mabanati’ [‘Advice to the Girls’], composed in 1974 by Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir, also known as Mahmoud Mau, from Lamu. It was recorded and intoned by the popular recitor Muhammad Abdallah Shatry in 1996. Here, a man’s voice ‘sings’ (or so it seemed to me) in a captivating, gentle and sombre manner about the temptations, challenges and sufferings that lay in wait for young girls growing up on the coast. The poem itself was inspired by a short Islamic pamphlet of admonition to young girls by the Islamic scholar Sheikh Ali al-Tantawi (d. 1999), then based in Saudi Arabia.

I had heard this recording first, in passing, when walking through the narrow streets of Mombasa’s Old Town, as it was emanating from one of the houses on the side; its memorable sound struck a profound if passing impression. I was to hear it again and get to know more about it when visiting the house of a Swahili friend for dinner. He asked me to join in to listen to the poem and to participate in the conversation about it in which some family members and friends in his living room were just engaged. The sound came from an old cassette recorder in the corner, placed on a small table. A small group of women and children and, next to them, two men, were sitting on the floor around it, listening. Trying to listen in as well, I had some difficulty understanding all the words, partly because of the sound quality of the recording but also because I lacked some vocabulary; in any case, I could not concentrate very well as the day had been very hot and I felt I had nearly exhausted my energies. Yet what was clearly apparent to me was how captivating indeed this poem was for the listeners here, and this seemed to confirm my own initial reaction to its sound, as I was drawn in by the sad, yet dignified and measured voice of the recitor. This conveyed a tragic story about the evils of temptation, addressing itself to young girls and (as the title says) admonishing them to beware. In the poem, a young girl recounts her story of losing her honour after being seduced by a male companion who befriended her but turned out not to care about her as a person. Having lost all hope of parental and social support and belonging after giving birth to a little baby – her parents die of shock upon the news – her attempt at suicide (and infanticide) fails as an alert fisherman saves her and the baby after she throws herself into the sea.

As it turned out, this recording of ‘Wasiya wa Mabanati’ was very popular among the Swahili-speaking coastal community at the time. The theme and the way it was narrated

and recited had obviously struck a chord here — in fact, almost everyone I talked to said how well this story addressed the current state of affairs, where the norms of proper social behaviour and the safety and unity of the community were seen to be under threat. And so, audio-cassettes of the poem were circulating up and down the coast amongst relatives and friends, who made copies and passed them on. Copies were also for sale in some of the same local shops and stalls that were known to sell recordings of popular Swahili *taarab* music which developed, over the last century or so, into a variety of sophisticated sub-strands bearing features of diverse and yet often complementary musical traditions from across the Indian Ocean. To be sure, some aspects of popular musical traditions of Egyptian, Hadrami and Indian origin of the early twentieth century came to feature strongly. In fact, one form of supposedly ‘classical’ Swahili *taarab* in Zanzibar, where dramatic love songs are usually performed by (male or female) soloist singers and supported by a medium-sized orchestra including a substantial string component, resembles popular Hindi music, early Bollywood style. Others sound like Egyptian popular music of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the most famous Swahili *taarab* singer during



the colonial period, Siti binti Saad from Zanzibar, has often been compared to Egypt's legendary Umm-Khulthum.

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the Omani-ruled Sultanate of Zanzibar (which included the port towns of the Swahili coast) cultivated and developed further the existing social links and alliances to other Indian Ocean littorals. People came and joined, or were obliged to integrate, for specific tasks and purposes. Baluchi soldiers, Gujarati traders and businessmen, Kutchi merchants as well as sailors and simple labourers, slaves from the African mainland and adjacent islands, and a number of European colonials and Arab traders contributed to the shaping of a cosmopolitan urban society that was meant to join Western and Oriental standards of 'modernity' on the East African coast. The Zanzibari sultans, determined to be seen as role models in bridging Oriental and Western civilisations, used their economic power to pursue this goal, investing in material fashion and popular culture. Big money was spent on new and splendid architecture, for instance, and icons of 'progress', such as clock towers, cinemas and telephones, were part of a particular kind of 'modern' and 'cosmopolitan' urban life from quite early on (see Prestholdt).

To link this back to music and oral poetry, I am tempted to say that the sound of richly orchestrated *taarab* music, for example (as I experienced in person in Zanzibar and heard on tape on many occasions), captures a confluence of the multivocality of contributing littoral traditions to Swahili culture. This presents us with a kind of 'aural image' of the kind of cosmopolitan character shaped through the contributing presence of the various groups involved (see Eisenberg). In parallel, the aural image of the recitation of the poem I mentioned above, from the *utenzi* genre of Swahili poetry, invokes qualities of human propriety and humility towards God, drawing from Muslim traditions of Quranic recitation or that of *maulidi* (praise-poems on the Prophet Muhammad). In doing this, it follows (and expresses) the standards of *utenzi* poetry in terms of social use and context, for these are usually didactic in nature, providing lengthy elaborations about what to do, how to behave and the like, in different kinds of life situations. In normative terms, Islamic references provide a guideline and the goal is, commonly, to pass on knowledge to the audience which may help them to become better people, with stronger moral character. Bearing this in mind, let us have a second look at the *utenzi* 'Wasiya wa Mabanati' by Mahmoud Mau, the poem introduced above, to see what was at stake and what was to be learned here, in order to consider how this may have been related to the astounding popular success of this poem.

From my conversations with various coastal interlocutors (both male and female) about this poem in 1999, I gathered that the significant amount of appreciation people showed for the poem was due to two main factors: firstly, the beauty of the reciter's voice helping to shape an impressive and thus lasting aural image; and secondly, the perceived 'fit' of the topic addressed here, in terms of timeliness and appropriateness, style and narrative form. The first aspect is

straightforward and easy to cover — a beautiful voice attracting many listeners, after all. But it still does not fully explain the remarkable fact that a serious educational and, moreover, openly moralising poem, suitably presented, could become popular in a similar way to a song. People were talking about it, gathering to listen to it again, exchanging and reconsidering their opinions. This was an impact that — as Mahmoud Mau, the author, told me — an earlier recording of this otherwise unpublished poem did not have; even though a similarly renowned reciter had given his voice then, the recording lacked the extra touch that made this later version so special. The second aspect, about the choice and perceived 'fit' of the topic, is also easy to understand but worth commenting on a little further. In this regard, the moral agenda of the poem was understood in several overlapping ways, as I gathered from conversations with people of diverse backgrounds. Most of them understood it as a warning against the dangerous and undermining effect that outside forces and especially 'Western culture' and its (supposed lack of) values posed to the coastal, mainly Muslim community. There was a sense of an increasing lack of religious faith and proper moral conduct, as well as of honour and mutual respect among people, which some coastal Muslims linked to the ways in which 'tourism' and 'education' were supposedly used by outsiders as platforms to infiltrate and undermine coastal society, aiming to cause further social and moral decay. In response, the perceived strength of the poem lay in its moral critique and the appreciation of the beauty in which this was presented; in combination, these two aspects matched up perfectly and led to the poem's remarkably popular public reception and dissemination.

Even though this is just one example, and a notably pronounced one at that, other examples along the same lines can be noted too. I have collected and encountered a number of recordings of Swahili didactic poetry, usually in *utenzi* style, which are locally circulated and appreciated as an expression of similar educational and critical efforts. It is noteworthy that well-known 'classics' among them (such as 'Utenzi wa Mwanakupona' or 'Utenzi wa ngamia na paa') may be seen to represent an effective longer-term normative poetic reserve that is still tapped into, reiterated and regularly listened to. No less noteworthy is the fact that, bit by bit, new poems are added on, due to their qualities of pinpointing certain particular problems (like 'Wasiya wa Mabanati'), of documenting recent social events and thus archiving them (a serious fatal shipping accident with many innocent deaths, for example) or of engaging head-on and critically in a political debate — whether taking sides in party politics or evaluating political issues at a general level. In all of these respects, there is a living (and in some ways still growing) store of poetry that continues to have an enduring social relevance, particularly in its oral form. This applies even though this genre of Swahili poetry (like most others) was never purely 'oral' as such, but has been composed and conserved in writing for centuries.

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Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir

(MAHMOUD MAU)

Wasiya wa Mabanati (1974)

These are the first ten stanzas of a Swahili didactic poem of the utendi genre (also: utenzi). The overall length of the poem is 143 stanzas.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1) Sikiza mwanangu
Mimi ulimwengu
Mingi miyaka yangu
Nawe haya yangu | nikupe wasiya
ninauweleya
katika duniya
hela zingatiya |
| 2) Nawata ujana
Mengi nimeona
Atekao sana
Ukitaka ona | sitourudiya
na kuyasikiya
Mwisowe huliya
nawe angaliya |

Advice to the girls

Translated from the Swahili by Jasmin Mahazi and Kai Kresse

- | |
|---|
| 1) Listen my child, to the advice I shall give you
I understand the ways of the world
I have spent many years on this earth
And what I tell you now, you should bear in mind |
| 2) I have left my youth behind me, I will not return to it
A lot I have seen, and much I have heard
The one who laughs most, will cry in the end
If you want to understand this, listen well |