

KUJIBIZANA

*Questions of Language and Power in
Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Poetry in
Kiswahili*

ANN BIERSTEKER

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Dedication

Kwa Athman Lali Omar, Gĩtahi Gĩtĩĩ, Kĩmani Njogu, na Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o waliojibizana nami nilipoanza kuandika kitabu hiki (1989-1990).

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Permission to reprint poems from the correspondence of W. E. Taylor has been granted by the Church Missionary Society Archives. I am grateful to them for granting permission to include these poems.

Introduction

*Ndoo mbee ujilisi
na wino na qaratasi
moyoni nina hadithi
Nimependa kukwambia*¹

Afro-European poetry, yes; but not to be confused with African poetry which is poetry composed by Africans in African languages. For instance, written poetry in Kiswahili²

*Nisimame wapi ili n'pate kusema?*³

I present in this work a series of arguments for reading poetry in Kiswahili. My central argument is that reading poetry in Kiswahili provides insights into questions of language and power such as those raised within the

¹Mwana Kupona, "*Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*," verse iii, in J.W.T. Allen, ed., *Tendi: Six Examples of A Classical Verse Form with Translation and Notes*. (New York, 1971), 58. The translation that follows is based on J.W.T. Allen's translation, *Tendi*, 59. Unless otherwise noted all translations are mine. Translation:

*Come forward and be seated
Bring with you ink and paper
I have in mind a story
That I have longed to tell you.*

²Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1986), 87.

³From Said Ahmed Mohamed's "Nisimame Wapi?," *Kina cha Maisha*, (Nairobi, 1984), 55. Translation: Where should I stand so that I may speak?

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current debate on language and African literature and within discussions of *ujamaa/socialist* practice in East Africa. I also advocate reading poetry in Kiswahili because this poetry includes primary sources for the study of East African resistance to colonialism and neo-colonialism and provides alternative perspectives on this resistance. In writing of poetry in Kiswahili I emphasize *kujibizana/composing in dialogues* because most poetry composed in Kiswahili is composed explicitly as a response to another poem and/or to elicit a poetic response. Consideration of *kujibizana* locates broader questions of language and power within dialogues between poets and within poetic texts that are concerned with specific issues and that were composed at particular times.

I have begun this discussion of *kujibizana/composing in dialogues* and questions of language and power with three chronologically ordered epigraphs on writing in Kiswahili. These epigraphs were composed by Mwana Kuona, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Said Ahmed Mohamed, three writers who have been read and studied by many who write in Kiswahili; three writers for whom reading poetry in Kiswahili would seem to have been a reading experience significant to their writing on questions of language, audience and writing. I have ordered the epigraphs chronologically because this work, as well as presenting a series of arguments, is a history of nineteenth and twentieth century political poetry in Kiswahili that focuses on the reading and writing of poetry within resistance movements.

The contexts in which poetry in Kiswahili was read changed greatly between the time of Mwana Kuona, the nineteenth century composer of "Utendi wa Mwana Kuona," perhaps the most canonical of poems written in

Kiswahili, and that of Said Ahmed Mohamed, an innovative contemporary novelist and poet who writes in Kiswahili. Reading poetry in Kiswahili in Lamu in the 1840's was not the same as reading poetry in Kiswahili in Kenya in the middle decades of this century nor were either of these reading contexts like that of reading poetry in Kiswahili in Dar es Salaam in the 1970's and 1980's. Mwana Kupona read manuscript poetry written in Northern Dialects of Kiswahili, primarily *Kiamu*, the *Lamu dialect*. While there is reason to believe that poetic manuscripts circulated throughout the region where Kiswahili was spoken at the time (the East African littoral from Mogadishu, Somalia to Mozambique, off-shore islands, the Comoro Islands, and in a few areas of Madagascar), it is unlikely that poetic manuscripts were read by more than a small percentage of the most highly educated and wealthy of the elite in these societies. Poetry was, of course, performed and exchanged by, a much larger segment of the population, but literacy was limited and access to manuscripts was even more restricted.

By the 1950's, when novelist and critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o first read poems in Kiswahili, poetry in Kiswahili was taught in schools throughout East Africa and had been published in newspapers for over thirty years. The poetry taught and published was written in a standard dialect based on *Kiunguja* (the dialect of Zanzibar - a Southern dialect) and literacy was still limited. Yet there were at this time hundreds of thousands of readers of poetry in Kiswahili, as opposed to thousands, at best, a century earlier. Few books of poetry in Kiswahili were available in East Africa, but those that were accessible were widely taught and read. There were also at this time millions of speakers of Kiswahili who lived in all parts of Kenya and

Tanzania, many areas of Uganda and what is now Zaire, and in various regions of Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, and Mozambique.

When Said A. Mohamed studied poetry in Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970's, poetry in Kiswahili was a subject of university study, both at the University of Dar es Salaam and at the University of Nairobi. Hundreds of poetry books had been published and a manuscript collection of poetry had been established at the University of Dar es Salaam. Kiswahili was the national language in Kenya and Tanzania and was taught at universities around the world. In addition to poetry, a large number of novels and plays in Kiswahili had been published. Today nearly all East African university educated writers chose to write creatively in Kiswahili, there is a substantive body of literary criticism in Kiswahili, and academic debate on literary topics often takes place in Kiswahili.

I have begun this introduction with a brief narrative in which I have contrasted the contexts in which Mwana Kupona, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Said Ahmed Mohamed read poetry in Kiswahili. This work is intended to be a history, but it also presents a series of arguments about dialogue; specifically, poetic dialogue, and attempts to challenge those arguments. Each chapter discusses poetic exchanges that inform the interchanges discussed in earlier chapters. In writing a history I have chosen to "work backwards" so as to emphasize dialogues between texts and to draw attention to contexts of intellectual and creative production. I begin in the first chapter with contemporary discussions of issues of language and value in an attempt to avoid the construction of false genealogies for texts; to move away from what A. Kwame Appiah terms, "the careful filtering of the rough torrent of

historical events into the fine stream of official narrative; the creation of a homogeneous legacy of values and experience."⁴ As Fredric Jameson has said, it is often the case that, "the textual universe is merely the victorious side of a discursive struggle," and "texts cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogic system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed."⁵ My methods of restoration (or re-construction) of opposing texts within "a dialogic system" are various and include symbolic readings and the presentation of unpublished written and spoken texts, but my primary method is to present later texts that challenge the predecessor texts that they explicitly credit. My approach is intertextual in that it looks at the ways in which "a text is constructed - directly or indirectly - by means of another text."⁶

Chapter one addresses current issues of the value and language of texts as addressed by contemporary essayists V. Y. Mudimbe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Alamin Mazrui in response to the arguments of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The questions raised by the writers concerning the epistemological, pedagogical, and revolutionary possibilities of reading and writing African language texts are considered in terms of works by Shaaban

⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2,i (1988), 161.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), 85.

⁶ Michael Palencia-Roth, "Intertextualities: Three Metamorphoses of Myth in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*," in Julio Ortega ed., *Poetics of Change*, (Austin, Texas, 1984), 34.

Robert and Saadan Kandoro -- two poets/political activists -- who had a major role in defining East African nationalism as well as current senses of what it is to write in Kiswahili and what it is to write in an African language. Questions of resistance and nationalism are central to current debates on writing in African languages. In this chapter I argue that these questions should be reconsidered in terms of the role that writing in an African language had in a particular (and in a specifically relevant) nationalist struggle. I discuss the poetry of Shaaban Robert and Saadan Kandoro because Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who initiated the current debate with the publication of *Decolonising the Mind*, began his discussion in this work by citing a poem composed by Shaaban Robert on writing in Kiswahili. "Kiswahili," Shaaban Robert's poem on composing in Kiswahili, is canonical within contemporary study of literature in Kiswahili. To "re-store" a sense of dialogue I also consider a poem on writing in Kiswahili by Saadan Kandoro, a poet better known to English readers of Tanzanian history as a political activist than as a poet. In this 1947 poem Kandoro outlined much of what would become Tanzania's language policy after independence.

In the next chapter current and 1950's questions of resistance that are discussed in the previous chapter are reconsidered as questions of textual and political praxis. This chapter discusses a 1960's poetic debate on the implementation of *ujamaa/socialism* between Julius Nyerere (then, President of Tanzania) and Saadan Kandoro (who after independence remained within the top party leadership and became a regional Tanzanian government official). Issues of texts and praxis raised by Mudimbe, Appiah, Mazrui, and Ngũgĩ in prose texts, and by Shaaban Robert and Saadan Kandoro in pre-

independence poetic texts are considered in light of Kandoro's and Nyerere's post-independence grappling in poetry with the problems of creating texts that respect and critique their sources, while encouraging responses, and enabling a sense of participation in a shared intellectual community and in the building of a viable socialist polity. I present Kandoro's poem as answer, critique, and analysis of Nyerere's poem, as well as that which makes two individual intellectual and poetic productions a dialogue of solidarity. My arguments in this chapter are presented pedagogically out of respect for the poet-teachers who composed the poems and because as a novice poet I am struggling to understand how to compose appropriate responses. One of the strategies that helps me to understand how one poem is written on the basis of another is to note the linguistic and argument structures and the metaphors that are used.

The third chapter considers two *tenzi/narrative poems* about armed resistance movements. These poems were written by poets who were actively involved in an Islamic resistance movement that continued opposition to colonial rule after the defeat of armed resistance movements. The two poets whose works are discussed are Hemedi Abdallah el-Buhry, whose son was Shaaban Robert's teacher, and Abdul Karim Jamaliddini, an Islamic teacher who died while held in a German colonial prison. This chapter looks at the suppression of poetry that was composed within the early twentieth century Islamic resistance movement in East Africa, poetry written about the Maji Maji struggle and the resistance movement led by Abushiri. The contemporary issues addressed in this chapter are the problems of translating and interpreting texts that are simultaneously narratives about one set of resistance movements, testimonies

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to another movement, and witnesses to processes of colonial and neo-colonial distortion.

The fourth chapter considers examples of *nyimbo/sung poetry* of the same period. The poems considered were composed by unknown authors in Mombasa and Lamu in the early 1890's and were collected by W. E. Taylor, a Church Missionary Society missionary who was based in Mombasa, Kenya. The poems in this chapter are discussed as parodies of missionary discourse. The argument of this chapter, and of the poems considered, is, in Jonathan Culler's terms that, "a political criticism ought to promote the critique of religion, not through systematic theory but through diverse challenges, including satire and mockery, in its dealings with literature and with cultural issues."⁷

The fifth chapter discusses women's poetic discourse as trope within *ujamaa/socialist* discourse in Kiswahili by means of reference to three poems composed and/or sung by women. From a feminist and socialist perspective the chapter considers the trope of women's poetic discourse as resistance discourse of the oppressed, a trope discussed briefly in three previous chapters. The argument made is that consideration of the trope is informed by discussion of a particular text, "Utendi wa Mwana Kupona," a poem created and transmitted in specific historical and cultural circumstances. I indicate how the trope has since been re-figured dynamically by a wide range of poets and critics. Some of the poets and critics have explored critically the

⁷Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*, (Norman, Oklahoma, 1988), 71.

limitations and possibilities of the trope; others have adopted it without comment. I argue that among the more radical critiques are those made in parodic poems sung by contemporary women and those provided in the contemporary written works of progressive writers.

The presentation of my arguments in this work is explicitly more pedagogical than poetic. One alternative approach would have been to have written poems in Kiswahili in response to the dialogues. Another would have been to have written my comments in Kiswahili. My rationale for writing in another language and another genre at this point is to attempt to present my arguments and these poetic exchanges in Kiswahili to audiences who might have an interest in these exchanges of poetry as exchanges of ideas, but have not yet had an opportunity to consider these dialogues. Some readers may have lacked this opportunity because they did not expect to find debate of political strategy and philosophy in poetic exchanges. Others may not have had access to unpublished works or to works not widely available. Some who may want to read these exchanges may be unable to read Kiswahili.

The approaches I have adopted in this work maintain the attention to language and symbolism characteristic of poetic dialogues in Kiswahili and also continue the political orientation found in both the poetic dialogues discussed and much of the best recent criticism on Kiswahili poetry.⁸ The

⁸See, for example, Abdilatif Abdalla ["Wajibu wa Mshairi wa Kiswahili katika Jamii," *Lugha Yetu: Tuisome Tuijue*, 34 (Dar es Salaam: Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa, 1980), 32-36]; Chacha Nyaigotti Chacha, "The Theme of Protest in Swahili Poetry," *Ba Shiru*, 13, i (1988), 50-60; Chacha Nyaigotti Chacha, "The Teaching of Kiswahili Poetry: A Thematic