

SWAHILI SONGS OF DEFIANCE AND MOCKERY

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SUMMARY

The aim of this publication is mainly to make known to fellow students of African oral traditions the literary achievements of the Swahili people. Songs of mockery and defiance are known in many languages, but so far none to my knowledge had been published from East Africa. The present article will, it is hoped, fill that lacune. It demonstrates that there are, and always have been, numerous songs of mockery and defiance in Swahili, while new ones are still being composed and sung. These songs form today a part of the healthy democratic process in East Africa.

KEYWORDS : Oral literature, Swahili, East Africa

INTRODUCTION

The collection of Swahili songs which is herewith offered to the students of folklore, oral traditions, the art of song composition and in particular, Swahili oral literature, forms just one chapter in a string of publications most of which have appeared in 'Afrika und Uebersee' (see the list at the end). A dozen more chapters are awaiting publication, each one on a different type of Swahili song. Altogether, twenty five distinct categories of Swahili songs have been isolated, and collected.

Swahili songs are sung in all districts of East Africa where Swahili is spoken, and in many other regions where it is a second language, especially in Tanzania, 'up-country'. The songs in this collection were heard in various parts of the Swahili coast, e.g. The first song, mocking the men of Pemba, is made in Mombassa; the second song was dictated to me by Hafidh Kassim, the well-known scholar from Zanzibar; the third song comes from Siu, etc.

My chief informants have been Mw Yahya Ali omar, another well-known scholar, Imam Islam Khiyar Islam, of Mombasa, Aisha Binti Abdallah and her aunt Hadija Nabahani, of Malindi, Ahmad Nassir Juna, also of Mombasa, and Hamisi Juma in Dar es Salaam. Numerous other people gave me songs but did not stop to give their names. See my comments in 'Afrika und Uebersee' 69, 1986, p.134, note 2.

The people who know songs and are ready to dictate them to a researcher come from very different backgrounds. Some are scholars such as Muallim Islam who collects songs as a hobby, or Ahmad Nassir who writes songs as a poet. At the other hand of the scale there are illiterate people such as Mwana Machia of Lamu who sang lustily with her tambourine, but could not explain the meaning of her songs.

The present writer knows that songs should be heard rather than read. The tapes are available at the school of Oriental and African Studies.

SWAHILI SONGS OF MOCKERY AND DEFIANCE

Songs of mockery and defiance, fighting songs and competition songs all belong to the same category which we might call Songs of Daring. In some parts of Africa and south Asia, formulaic singing was used as a means of bewitching one's enemy. The game in the wilderness is approached while the hunters sing softly to it in order to soothe it, put a spell on it so that it does not run. Women use this 'soft singing' to entrance a man; a woman who wishes a man to fall in love with her, may sing softly to him, even in his absence, and he will become powerless, like the game when the hunter sings. Someone walking by himself in the wilderness will sing to himself not so much for his own pleasure as rather to keep evil spirits at bay. Predatory animals too, can be persuaded to stay away from expert singers.

In the epic poetry of many nations we read how the heroes challenge one another, praising themselves in a loud voice, describing their opponents in mocking terms, so that they had no option but to appear in the lists and defend their honour with the sword. In Europe, Africa and Asia, songs survive or have been preserved in manuscripts, in which self-praise and derision of the adversaries are expressed in no uncertain terms. Interestingly, these challenges and subsequent battles took place usually between men who spoke dialects of the same language. The ancient Greeks, the Celts of the Irish Epic, the Aryan princes of the Sanskrit epic, the Arabs of the pre-Mohammedan period, the German warriors of the Old High German epoch, defied one another in their common language, each one speaking his own dialect which he found better than his opponents', even though in several cases, the opponents were kinsmen. Along the Swahili Coast, the loyalty of men is commanded by their home town, and so their aggression is concentrated against rival towns. They often have relatives-in-law or other kinsmen in those towns but the rivalry is there, and, like the rivalry between the local football clubs in the western world, they may sometimes break out in fistfights, seldom in armed combat. The commonest charge is dishonesty, e.g.

Kwa Pemba peremba
Kija na kilemba
Hutoka na winda

Oh Pemba, be careful!
If one comes there with a nice
turban, one will get out with (only)
a loincloth.

Though the present writer has never been on Pemba, he is convinced that these charges are totally fictitious and bear no relation to reality. All the towns of the Coast are derided in some song or other, for some supposed feature of their character, from Lamu, Pate and Siu in the North, to Bagamoyo, Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam in present day Tanzania. Most of these songs are very old, and some relate to historical events, such as the following :

Bwana nipe + nikazime moto	Sir, give me a waterpump with hose, that I may extinguish the fire:
Hoko kidutani + hawa viroboto	Here in the village these fleas (1)
watumwa watoto + wake sulutani.	are the young servants of the sultan.

This song betrays feelings of real hatred rather than light-hearted mockery.

The sultans of Zanzibar used to employ askaris, ruffians who were nicknamed 'the fleas' which is the Swahili equivalent of 'a pain in the neck'! The sultan would send them to a town which he deemed 'rebellious', which meant that the townspeople were in arrears with their taxes, and had to be forced to pay. When the askaris arrived they would burn the town, so they are here compared to a sudden fire.

Apart from personal banter there is a great deal of inter-city squibbing. And for this purpose a political satire is frequently composed and sung. To show that it is an old tradition, here is a song made by the Siu people to mock the sultan of Zanzibar, even though they feared him. Said Bin Sultan sent no fewer than five expeditions to conquer Siu, all of them failed. (1825-45. See Freeman Grenville in History of East Africa, ed. Oliver & Matthew, p. 221.) Why the song calls him Muhammad Bin Suleiman is not clear, unless it is fear!

Muhamadi Sulemani	Muhammad Suleiman
rejea koko	come back to the same place (if you can)
Kaṭawali mayi pwani	and rule the water of the beach,

na mikoko
Siu unaitamani
kama nyoko-

and the mangrove trees!
You desire Siu,
like your mother.

Three quarters of a century later, the Germans ruled the Tanganyika Coast as well as part of the Kenya Coast. A famous rebel was at last caught by them and condemned to the gallows, together with an accomplice. The latter screamed with the fear of death when he saw the rope, so his fellow, unperturbed by the prospect of death, sang:

Siku ya Wajerumani
ruji kwako kiwandani
na kufa chuja-chujani
watuharibia kwani?

On the day of the Germans (2)
go back to your own compound,
and die there drop by drop!
Why do you spoil it for me?

The verse expresses the strong old sentiments of manliness we find so beautifully worded in the epic poetry of the Swahili. The event must have taken place in the 1890 or thereabouts in or near Witu which was then a German enclave in the interminable struggles over the possession of Africa's lands. The effects of these wars on the people - who were always the ones who suffered - are vividly remembered by the old man. To die "drop by drop" is the Swahili equivalent of the 'straw-death' of the ancient Nordic heroes, to which any violent death was preferable. Seeing one's life ooze away in old age is the fate of the old. Heroes prefer fame, on the gallows if necessary. But let it be a worthy death, even on the rope. Let there be no undignified screaming. A man of character has a right to die admired. And not to be disturbed by those who shriek like chickens!

After the occupation of the city of Mombassa in 1838 by the wily sultan of Oman, Sayid Sa'id, the small party that had welcomed him and helped him, dwindled rapidly as a result of his beastly methods. He had the leaders of the city deported in chains, after inviting them politely to the Fort. It was whispered that they were simply thrown overboard in mid-ocean. In chains to be sure. To Mombasa he sent his Baluchi mercenaries, who made themselves so thoroughly unpopular by their extortions that the citizens refused even to pray with them in the same mosque. The sultan agreed to

build a separate mosque for them, which is still there, near Makadara Road, called the Msikiti wa Baluchi. These askaris were called viroboto 'fleas', by the people who sang about them :

Kiroboto, tia moto	Flea, set fire
Kiroboto, vunja ndoto	Flea, break dreams.

The meaning of the song is completely ambiguous, and that is the beauty of it. Anyone heard singing it could claim that the song was about fleas, the insects that interrupt people's sweet dreams by causing an itching pain that burns like fire. True enough! However, if kiroboto is translated as the sultan's troops, the song accuses them of arson, while in the second line mocking the pro-sultan party for having had the illusion that his rule would be better than that of the Mazrui party.

In the late eighties of the last century, an Englishman of unusual ability settled in Mombasa to study Swahili and preach the Gospel. He was William E. Taylor, of the Church Missionary Society. He certainly succeeded in his first aim for he learned Swahili better than any other English missionary. As for his second aim, it appears that the Mombasans thought they might succeed in converting him to Islam instead of vice versa. Some remember this song :

Tumsilimize	Let us islamize
Tela na mkee	Taylor and his wife!
nguo za mafuze	They must wear (3)
lazima wavae	shoulder-length clothes.

The long robes kanzu and joho were characteristic of the Mohammedan population. They were also much cooler than European clothes. Every nation and religious community has strong views on the way in which a person ought to be dressed to be a proper citizen.

Not only manners of dressing, but other habits too, were criticised in song, such as being seen too often in the coffee house gossiping carelessly :

Ikifika Ramadhani
ukenda migahawani
ni pazia milangoni
watu wajilia ndani.

When the month of fasting has come,
and you go to the coffee houses,
the curtains have to be on the doors,
customers are eating by themselves
inside.

Normally, the coffee houses are open, anyone can enter to greet friends. Not so during Ramazan, when every Mohamedan ought to keep the fast during the day and neither eat nor drink. There is such a strong pressure on individuals to keep these rules that many are more persistent in fasting during Ramazan than in prayer during all the rest of the year. So, those who are brazen enough to break the rules, have to do so in secret. Discreet restaurant owners will hang a curtain in the doorway, behind which the men who flout Mohammed's laws have their meals. The last line reads literally : "The men (women are not supposed to visit coffee houses by themselves) eat inside for themselves". Eating inside is a habit of misers who refuse to invite their friends. Normally Africans, if they have enough money for a meal, are supposed to invite any friend who comes in sight, to share it with them. When breaking the fast on the night after Ramazan, all Muslims invite each other.

In the old days, when the fishermen came ashore with their catch, a number of gentlemen, usually the scholars and scribes, would await them, and expect to receive a portion of the catch for themselves, as homage to their religious leadership. One day the fishermen refused, and the scribes composed a song :

Usifanye pūpa
na kujitutiza
mwenzio kumpa
sambe wapoteza
ṭahadhari hapa
iswi wataoza.

Do not be greedy
loading up for yourselves,
Giving to your friend
is not wasting!
Be careful for the fish here
will rot!

To which the fishermen replied, properly using the same metre :

Msizitembeze
ndimi zenu fupi
mwataka mujaze
'kapu na vishupi
ni heri waoze
bure hatuwapi

Do not exercise overly
your short tongues,
you want just to fill
big baskets and small baskets!
it's better to let them rot!
We will not give you any for
nothing.

The real problem was an economic one : as the number of fishing ships in the Indian Ocean increases, the fish becomes harder to catch and so, more expensive. At the same time, the secularising influence of the Western world causes the traditional respect for the scholars of Islam to fade.

This declining respect for learning is also expressed by the following school boys' song :

Alifu na bee
Kombo ni mzee!
tutandike jamvi
na tule mtee
Mualimu wetu
tusimuwekee!

A and B!
Kombo is old!
Let us lay the table (4)
and eat rice!
And for our teacher
we will not keep any!

The songs of mockery clearly are a safety valve in society : if you can't say it, sing it! This boys' song may be the reply to the harsh teacher's rule :

Nikikila, heri
ukikila, shari

When I eat the food, it is for the good,
when you eat it, it is bad!

This refers to the food which parents bring in to the school from time to time. The teacher may take it all if he likes, and quote this proverb to justify his act.

The next song is not, as one might expect, a mockery of the guest as a sponger, but rather of the inhospitable people of modern times.

MGENI

THE GUEST

Mgeni, siku ya kwanza,
Mpe mtele na panza

Na mwana wa kumtunza,
Kama mwana wa nyumbani.

Mgeni, siku ya pili,
Mahaba yamziḍili
Mpe ziwa na samuli,
Mkaribishe mgeni!

Mgeni siku ya tatu,
Nyumbani hamuna kitu
Mna zihaba zitutu,
Litawazwalo mgeni.

Mgeni, siku ya inne,
Mpe jembe akalime
Akirudi umzome,
Safiri kwenu, mgeni!

Mgeni, siku ya tano,
Mwembamba kama sindano
Kwa hali ya manongono,
Anongonwao mgeni.

Mgeni siku ya sita,
Mkila mkajisita
Asije tia ukata,
Mwingieni vipembeni.

Mgeni, siku ya sabaa,
Huileta kula baa
Haḥa moto wa mapaa
Ameutia mgeni!

A guest on the day of his arrival
Give him rice with fresh coconut
flesh!

And a boy to look after him
As if he were a son of the house.

The guest on the second day
The love for him is even greater.
Give him milk and butter,
Welcome the guest!

The guest on the third day
There is nothing in the house
There are only a few handfuls
It will be thought fit for the
guest.

The guest on the fourth day
Give him a hoe, make him work!
When he comes back, jeer him!
"Go home, stranger!"

The guest on the fifth day,
Lean like a needle;
While there are whisperings,
It is the guest who is being whis-
pered about.

The guest on the sixth day
When you are eating hide yourselves!
Lest he bring poverty,
Go into your hiding places!

The guest on the seventh day
He brings every disaster!
Even the fire in the roof,
The guest has started it!

Mgeni, siku ya nane,
Ndoo ndani tuonane
Aṭapotoka sinene

Tumpe rusa mgeni.

The guest on the eight day
Come inside, let us see each other!
When he goes out, do not say any-
thing,

Let us give him his leave.

Mgeni, siku ya kenda,
Mbwa kusafiri na kwenda
Asikipande kitanda,
Akavitia kunguni!

The guest on the ninth day,
Is ready to travel and go. (5)
Let him not go to bed any more!
Lest he infest it with bed-bugs.

Mgeni, siku ya kumi!
Kwa mateke na magumi!
Yualia, "Yomi! Yomi!"
Akafukuzwa mgeni.

The guest on the tenth day
Is greeted with kicks and fists!
He cries : "My day of doom!" (6)
Then the guest is expelled.

The above poem is a rare example of an extended proverb. It is very well known and often quoted. It reflects typically the Swahili character which is a combination of good humour and realism. Whether a guest is actually treated in this manner is a matter for his host to decide, but I have found this attitude generally on the Swahili Coast : many guests come and overstay their welcome, so the best thing is to give them to understand that they have to work for their welcome.

The following is a war song in which one champion challenges others :

Si kati wala si kando
ni baidi na madhara
wala sikuhofu kondo
mizinga wala bendera
niṭawafunda mafundo
nimo mbele kama shera!

I am not in the middle (of the army)
nor on the side
I am far away from damage
I have never feared a battle,
I fear guns no more than banners!
I will teach you some lessons!
I am in the frontline, like a tiger!

To which the other group replies in kind with scathing words and two lines more :

Leo mṭakonda
mtujue kwalo

Today you will grow lean
and you will know us as a result of
it (i.e. the battle)

Kwani twawashinda
killa tuṭakalo
Wenyewe twatenda
hilo tufanyalo
ndio kuwaponda
udhiko mlalo
tuṭawagugunda
kama msemalo
Leo mtafunda
kwa yetu mabalo.

For we shall vanquish you
in every way we wish!
We ourselves will act,
this is what we will do :
Yes, battering you
pain is what you will undergo!
We will crush you!
As you have said:
Today you will learn
from our spears.

Many war songs were composed neither for nor before a physical battle but at a poetic contest, at which the leading poets of a city vie with one another for the title of shaha 'king', i.e. poet laureate.

One poet, who had at last got what he wanted so much (we do not learn what it was), sang :

Uliza mwenda matiti apetecho	Ask the one who walks proudly what he has got;
mimi fahali wa nyati	I am a buffalo bull,
sina kicho	I have no fear!
walinena sikipati	They said I could not get it,-
hiki ndicho!	this is it!

Mbega is a monkey with a white patch on its shoulder; in the following song it is the image of the rival who steals not one's maize but one's girlfriend :

Mbega amengia shamba -
ndimi simba!
Tukutane na kukumba -
ewe simba!
Sina la kwako kulomba -
ee simba
Twende mahala kugomba -
ee simba
nyama zangu wazilamba -
ndimi simba

A monkey has got in my field-
I am the lion!
Let us meet and fight -
you lion!
I have nothing to ask of you,
oh lion!
Let us go somewhere and fight,
oh lion!
You are licking my meat,
I the lion!

During the first half of the nineteenth century the town of Siu was repeatedly at war with Zanzibar, i. e. the sultans of Oman. One day the sheikh of Siu was challenged by his councillors who accused him of secrecy :

Shehe, tia wendi wako faraghani	Take your friends into your confidence, Sheikh!
Wa kushona akashona kiwandani	The taylor, let him sew in his workshop!
na wewe urudi kwako nsitani.	And you, go back to your own garden!

A man should either be a leader and go to war with his men, or he should make peace and go back to his garden (where cowards belong), so that the taylor could go back to his work, and need no longer be on the alert. For in those days every able-bodied man in Siu had to be prepared to fight a pitched battle against the Arabs.

At one time, when there was war with the Giriama, the following song was sung :

Jifungeni + nduza	Gird yourselves, my brothers,
tujipinde	let us make an effort!
Giriama + tuipondeponde	Let us crush the Giriama!
Washindeni+ na tutakalo	May we vanquish them, and then do
tutende	what we like!

It should be pointed out that there is no hereditary enmity between the Swahili and the Giriama, and that occasional fights were often between complex alliances where men belonging to one clan might fight each other as allies of other clans. We know, for instance, that the Wakilindini, a clan in Mombasa, was at one time allied with the Segeju, a tribe who lived south of the city, and they together fought other factions of the Swahili who would, of course, find their best allies among the same Segeju clans, where one could be sure of some resentment of the past that cried for revenge. Hence the song :

Kulipa kisasi + si jambo sahali	Taking revenge is not an easy matter!
yataka risasi + na bunduki kali	One needs bullets and fierce guns
hayo ndetu sisi + wake marijali	we can do it, for amongst us the women are men!

The poet means that in his town the women are as strong and gallant as the men are in the enemy camp, a remark that is meant as a vicious insult!

Hijaa is the word for this type of poetry, often translated as satire, but embracing also insulting songs, diatribes, invectives and curses; the original meaning is 'murmuring', which confirms the relationship postulated above between mocking and singing softly. It is often accompanied by acting, by a dance-like movement intended to insult the other party. In one case cited to me, the singers had made themselves wooden guns and paraded with them on their shoulders within sight of the enemy camp, singing this lampoon :

Bunduki zenu za busha	Your guns are made of worm-eaten wood,
muloziweka begani.	you put them on your shoulders (as if they were terribly heavy).
Mbona mātatūkesha?	Why do you want to make us laugh?
mwatutia furahani.	you give us great mirth.
Ng'ombe wenu wawatisha	You certainly succeed in frightening your cows!
Mwenda inda nyama gani?	Which game are you going to hunt?

When the great city of Pate had fallen into ruin during the second decade of the nineteenth century, a song was composed to mock its expansionism :

Asili ya Pate Yunga + kuvundika	The ancient glory of royal Pate is broken,
Mliziondoa hađi + na mipaka	You expanded the limits and the frontiers!
Yeo imekuwa pepe + peperuka.	Today it has become an empty husk, blown by the wind!

Of course, the people of Pate, being well versed in poetry, composed a repartee :

Asili ya Pate Yunga + kusimama	The ancient glory of royal Pate stands!
karia zetu na miji + zilikwima	Our villages and towns have gone up!
Yeo imekuwa ġubu + ġubu wama.	Today it has become a bear, a heavy bear.

Songs of praise for one's native city are frequently composed by proud sons :

Kongowea + nġi yetu ya fahari	Mombasa, our famous land!
yapotea + kwa utovu wa nadhari	It is lost, owing to lack of foresight,
mbovu nia + na kukosa mashauri	through wicked intentions and shortage of good advice.

This song dates, of course, from the historic moment in 1838, when the sultan of Zanzibar finally occupied Mombasa and disposed of its leaders. Kongowea proper is only part of the city, near the Fort, but is often used for Mombasa, witness the long poem by Muyaka, of which I quote only five stanzas :

Kongowea ja mvumo	Mombasa is like a storm,
Mvita mji wa kale	the old city!
Isokoma mititimo	The trembling never ends,
na mayowe na kelele	nor the cries.
Ni ya ngao na mafumo	It is the noise of shields and spears,
na mata na panga kule	of bows and home-made swords.
Afileo alifile	Who has died, has died;
mwoleza mfu ni nani?	who can help a dead man?

Gongwa la Mwanza Mkisi
Mviṭa mji wa ole
Ina waume watesi
kondo hawaiketele
Wenyi ghamidha na kasi
na hasiḍa za milele

The capital of Queen Mukisi,
Mombasa, city of destiny!
It has good fighting men,
they will not refuse her a war!
They have dark passions,
fierceness and lasting hatred!

Afileo alifile
mwoleza mfu ni nani?

Who has died has died;
who can help a dead man?

Kwamba mujile na kondo
kuteta na simba wale
Vumiliani vishindo

If you have come for war,
to fight those lions,
You will have to tolerate their
noise
and not run away from it.
The lions have claws
they have exposed their nails.

vyao msivikimbile
Simba wanayo magando
makucha wayatamile

Afileo alifile
mwoleza mfu ni nani?

Who has died, has died;
who can help a dead man?

Ndiswi Nyali-kuu ndiswi
ndiswi msambe tufile
Naswi wapigana naswi
naswi musituṭawale
Ni swiswi nguli ni swiswi
tuvunḡao miji mile

We are the great city of Nyali,
Do not think we are dead!
We are fighters,
do not try to rule us!
We are ghouls,
we break distant towns!

Afileo alifile
mwoleza mfu ni nani?

Who has died, has died;
who can help a dead man?

Kivumi cha Kongowea
kivumapo ni ja ndwele
Walo mbali husikia
kingurumo chenda kule
Watambaji hutambia
kwa mwendo wa polepole

The noise in Mombasa,
it sounds like a disease!
Even those far away can hear,
the thunderous roar reaches there!
The travellers go by
with very careful step.

Afileo alifile
mwoleza mfu ni nani?

Who has died, has died;
Who can help a dead man?

Many poets are proud of Mombasa's long history : the city is mentioned by Al Mas'udi in the tenth century. Before the Portuguese arrived, it was ruled by a queen, Mwana Mukisi,

and Gongwa 'walled-in city', was her capital, probably near Nyali bridge. At that time, Mombasa was preparing for war and defying its adversaries, the "forging of swords can be heard far and beyond". It is not dead. Why does Muyaka say that? Does it have to be said? Is it perhaps already practically useless? We know how Muyaka can say two things in one poem. Still, Mombasa would not be the only city state that fell in spite of its pride. Think of Troy, Byzance or Rome. So, the noisy pride may be a disease, an incurable disaster...

Not only groups, and clans, but individuals too, boast of their own glories :

Siku yangu mi muwani	This is my day, I am the fighter
angiao utamboni	whoever enters the lists, for him
nda simazi na huzuni	it will be a day of sadness and grief
kavi buji angamia	he will doubtless perish!
Ndimi mwana wa shururi	I am a child of evil,
Ndimi ulimi wa nari	I am a flame of hellfire
ungiao wahasiri	you who enter will lose!
kabali kuteketea.	Face the burning!

The poet-warrior compares himself to a devil ("child of evil", "flame of hellfire") to symbolize his ferocity.

In the recent war against the Somali (1964) the Swahili suffered badly, and some of their men were killed, and the earlier attacks (1909) are also remembered. It is probably in that Somali attack on the Tana river, that this song was composed:

Waungwana wa asili	Noblemen (i.e. pure Swahili) forward!
mbeleni twende awali	let us sally forth!
Waoga huja wa pili	Cowards come second,
mafumo ni mabatali	chiefs are heroes.
hawachi kufa kitali	They do not fear dying in battle.
tufukuze Wasomali	Let us chase the Somali away.

It should be noted that Wasomali means not only 'the Somali' but also, and perhaps originally, "the penniless", from mali 'money'.

Not all these songs are sanguinary, in fact there are few of them. The following hunting song breathes a very different spirit, one of nature :

Ondoka, twenende
jimbi limeweka
Usiche mmande
kumepambazuka
Twende tukawinde
wasiyepuruka

Arise, let us go!
The cock has crowed.
Do not fear the wet, cold dew.
It has dawned!
Let us go and hunt,
lest they escape!

Not only men armed with weapons, also men armed with pens compose songs :

Wambao ndiswi malenga
wakizinga na fahari
wenye ndao ya kutunga
kujifanya washairi
Kazi yao ni kuronga
hawatungi ya uzuri
Awaadhibu Kahari
akawatie kwa nari.

Those who say "We are poets"
walking round with haughty step,
having the pretention of composing
and parading as poets,
Their work is lying,
they compose no verses of beauty.
May the Almighty punish them
and place them in the fire!

The following is an invitation, or rather a challenge, to a competition :

Kesho kuna vita
vya kondo kuteta
ukicha kutota
usende mwamboni.

Tomorrow there is war!
a war of spears to be fought.
If you fear to get wet (or: to sink)
don;t go to the battlefield.

The answer to this challenge is traditionally a sneer on the competition:

Vita nda kunewe
na mtu kichewe
mwana kana mwewe
vitantonani?

Fighting is for jigger-fleas,
and cripples
I am a noble son like a hawk,
how can it involve me?

In 1812, when the Mombasa ruler Hemedi Muhamadi was planning his attack on Lamu which he hoped to add to his empire, the people of Lamu sang a song of defiance to the warriors of Mombasa, as follows:

Waṭumba mji wa kale
Mwākalia kandokando
Jivuteni muye mbele
Tuoneshane zitendo
Muwaone waṭaule
Nguo wafungenye pindo
Siku ya kutinda fundo
Tuṭaonana fundoni

Young bachelors of the old City,
You are lingering on the side?
Hurry, come forward,
So we can show each other deeds!
You will see picked men
Who have girded their loins.
The day to cut the knot (is near)
We see each other on the beach.

Wallahi twaapa kwa Mungu
Na Mtumi Muhamadi
Nḡooni munwe maṭungu
Mubaḡilike jisaḡi
Muwe karamu ya ṭ'ungu
Na ṭai kuwafisiḡi
Na ṭamaa ya kuruḡi
Kwenu siifikirini.

By God, we swear
And the Prophet Muhammad,
Come and drink bitterness
Have your body changed (i.e. maimed)
Be a feast for the ants
Let the vultures sully you
As for the hope to go home,
Forget it.

Nakwambia mwenye kuya
Na pasiwe mshawasha
Kwanḡa waṭani wasiya
Na wana kuwarithisha

I warn whoever is coming
Let there be no doubt about it :
Firstly, leave your will
Bequeathe your estate to your children
Provide for your wives enough to
live on.
To help them over the idda period
If you come, we will cut you down,
Like the defeat of long ago.

Wake muwape zifaya

Maeḡa yao kweusha
Mukiya tuṭawashusha
Mashukio ya zamani

Ayao napije hoḡi

Milango tumeifunga
Tumeikomea midī
Na magogo ya kupinga
Msipite zetu hadi
Waḡubirini malenga
Kwetu haramu kutanga
Kwevuza kilicho ndani

Whoever comes will have to ask admittance
We have shut the gates
We have levered the bolts in place,
And logs to block the way.
Do not cross our frontiers.
Do inform your poets
It is forbidden to walk in our town
To inspect what is inside.

The expression *kufunganya pindo* is the exact equivalent of the Biblical 'gird one's loins'. It means tucking in one's *kanzu* or long robe into the belt *mshipa*, so that it does not impede free movements during work. Fishermen can be seen so dressed while wading in shallow water, and boatmen can do repairs in this way to the hulk.

Wataule, past passive participle from *-taua* 'to choose'.

Fundoni, the poet is punning on *fundo* in the previous line.

Matungu, 'to drink bitterness' is a common expression for to suffer.

T'ungu, 'Black ants' puns with this; in the epic there is frequent reference to the ants feasting on the bodies of the slain.

Kuwafisidi, Vultures are impure, being carrion eating birds, so they will render anything they touch impure. The dead whose bodies are thus soiled cannot go to Paradise; in any case, attacking fellow Muslims is a sin which God will punish.

Zifaya, pl. of *kifaya*, from Ar. *kafā*, 'suffice', a sufficient quantity.

Kweusha 'to clear' from *-euka* 'be light, white, open'.

Eda or 'idda is the Koranic period of 100 days after which a widow may remarry. See Koran 2,234 : four months and ten days.

This poem is one of the classical songs of defiance in Swahili. It turned out to be prophetic. The battle of Shela near Lamu cost the Mombasans their fleet and many hundreds of their best men, whose skeletons, I was told, still litter the hillslope near the old mosque. The poet *Muyaka* survived it to compose more songs, see *Jan Knappert, Four Centuries of Swahili Verse 1979, p. 189.*

In the Hichens papers there is a typescript of a poem which William Taylor obtained from Ahmad Al-Mambasi, for whom see *Jan Knappert, Four Centuries of Swahili Verse, 1979, p. 241.* The poem was composed by Ahmad's father Muhammad to criticize the people of Vanga because they followed the Mazrui in a rebellion against Sayid Barghash, the ruler of Zanzibar. See for this rebellion *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse, p. 168* Muhammad, like *Muyaka*, was a scholar of cautious character who foresaw trouble sooner than his hot-headed fellow-townsmen.

Shekhe tendani upesi
Wađi Akiđa mneni
Mwakusanye wagosi
Wa Vanga na Kisiwani
Msipoweza kukisi

Kitāvunda mlindani

Mngalegeza demani
Chombo ki juu ya mwamba

Sheikh! Act swiftly
You talkative son of Akida,
Assemble your warriors
Of Vanga and the island (Wasini)
If you cannot estimate (the dis-
tance)
(Your vessel) will break on the
breakwater
Even though you slack the sheet
The vessel is on the rock.

Kama mtu abiria
Hukamataje sukani?
Nyote mkamuafia
Tena mkařumaini
Yu řayari kwogelea
Hana chakwe ni mgeni
Mngalegeza...

Vijibunđuki vya Naya
Na baruři za pembeni
Havitoshi kuwania
Hao guu li njiani
Kwetu kuna za Ulaya
Zijele mabořarini

How can a passenger
Seize the rudder
You all left it to him,
Then you just hoped
He is ready to swim,
He owns nothing, he is a stranger,

The little rifles of Naya
And the gunpowder for the horns,
Are not enough to fight with,
These men's leg is on the road!
Ours come from Europe!
Our stores are full!

In 1967, the Mombasa poet Ahmad Nassir Juma wrote a long poem to satirize the sheikhs, the religious leaders of the Swahili people, who made and make a living out of the people's ignorance of Islamic law. They persuade the people to let them perform a large number of ceremonies for which there is no basis in the Koran. The poem, here slightly abridged, is composed in the traditional form of a poetic contest, against Ahmad's opponent, Muhamadi, whose family name has been omitted here for reasons of decency.

Shekhe ni shekhe?

Muhamadi alinena
Mashekhe tuwaamini
Tuwařukuze majina

Is a scholar a scholar?

Muhammad has said :
We must believe the sheikhs
We must extol their names

Japo wawe majinuni
Lakini mimi naona
Kwa hili halimkini
Ndipo haṭaka wendani
Tuzinduane akili

Even if they are mad,
But I think,
That that is impossible.
Therefore, my friends, I want
Us to wake each other up.

Mashekhe wengi wa leo
wenda kinyume cha ḡini
Huyafanya tukanywayo
Kwa aya za Kuruani
Mbona kisa mambo hayo
Hutenda wao kwa nini?
Ndipo...

Many scholars today
Go against our religion,
They do what is forbidden to us
In the verses of the Koran
Why do they do these things?

Maskekhe nimewapima
Wengine siwaamini
Hudanganya wasosoma
Ili wapate mapeni
Ndipo zao ṭaadhima
Kwa watu zikawa ḡini

I measured up those sheikhs
I do not believe some of them,
They deceive illiterate people
To get a few pennies
That is why the people
Hold them in very low esteem.

Mashekhe wengi husema
Wagonjwa wazungueni
Na maiṭi ni khiṭima
Afae msomeeni
Na haya tukiyapima
Hakuna katika ḡini
Sasa vipi tuamini
Wendao nyendo baṭili

Many sheikhs will say :
You must kuzungua the sick
And for the dead there is khitima,
Read it that they may benefit,
But when we examine this,
It is not part of Islam.
Now what can we believe?
Those who walk the path of vanity?

Mashekhe wana haṭari
Wengi kweli hawaneni
Na hino halibaḡiri
Kushika mwivi jamani
Ni urongo wa dhahiri
Siyoo mafunzo ya ḡini

The scholars are dangerous
Many do not speak the truth,
And this Al-Badr
To catch a thief, my friends,
Is evidently a lie,
It is not the teaching of Islam.

Na faida kubwa sana
Uliwazapo bongoni
Ni mashekhe kuwaona
Wakiwapo mazishini
Si lazima shekhe bwana
Kuosha na kukafini
Sijitie ujingani
Tumia vyema akili

But the biggest profit,
When you think in your brain,
Is to observe the sheiks
At a funeral;
It is not necessary my Lord sheikh,
To wash the corpse, and to shroud it
Do not pretend ignorance,
Use your head properly!

Ushekhe si wa kusoma
Khitima na ṭalikini
Wala siyo kwandamana
Jeneza na kukafini
Ushekhe ni sera njema
Ndio sheria ya dini

Scholarship has nothing to do with
Reciting the khitima and the talkin;
Nor is it in the procession
With the hearse and the shroud;
Scholarship is a virtuous life
That is the law of Islam

Mashekhe ungawagamba
'Takweleza ubaini
Visikughuri vilemba
Na kashinḡa mabegani
Hilo ni pambo la chumba
Nyumba iole chooni

Sheiks, even though you will dis-
agree
I will explain it clearly :
Let the turbans not mislead you
Nor a shouldercloth :
That is only an ornament of the room
If you want to know the house, in-
spect the lavatory!

Nasema ilo yakini
Tuzinduane akili

I am saying something certain,
Let us wake up each other's brains!

The sheikhs or ulema have always had tremendous prestige in the world of Islam, and here for the first time they are challenged by a honest man, whose knowledge of the law is not inferior to theirs :

Mi sichi kusema kweli
Tuitime akili

I am not afraid of speaking the
truth
Let us use our common sense!

notes: Kuzungua= kumsomea mgonjwa, to read prayers for a sick person. While incense (ubani) is burnt, the sheikh will read from the Koran: Yāsīn (36), Tabāraka (67), Al-An'ām (6) and al-Kursiyyu (7,54).

Khitima are the Godspeed prayers for the deceased, recited on the day after the funeral, forty days later, and one year later. It is said to be "the food of the dead" who will come and haunt the living if they do not receive them. Ahmad called it itikadi 'superstition' when I discussed this poem with him in 1969. The khitima prayers are all in Arabic and can be bought in the bookshop in booklet form. Halibadiri. This word should be so spelled in Swahili. It has been misheard by most authors on Swahili customs. Its origin is the Ar. Asmā' Ahl al-Badr, the names of the heroes who fought in the battle of Badr (March 624, see the Encyclopaedia of Islam, s.v.); these can also be bought in the form of small

printed booklets in the shops. The mere recital of these names has such a powerful magic effect, it is believed, that one can kill a thief or rapist at a distance. Kukafini, to put a shroud (kafani, sanda) on a deceased body is perhaps the most widely accepted custom in Islam, see Edward Lane, Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) 1963, p.518; Ja'far Sharif, Islam in India, tr. G.A. Herklots, (1921) 1972, p. 93; A.Huisman in the Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, s.v. djināza; in Swahili there is a separate booklet on Mambo Anayofanyiwa Maiti "What one has to do with a dead Person", by the famous scholar Abdullah Saleh Farsy, of Zanzibar, printed in 1375/ 1956. On p.9-11 details are given of the single, white, clean cotton cloth that must be used to wrap the dead person (kumgubika, kumkafini, kumvisha sanda). It is rather bold for Ahmad to state categorically that shrouding the dead is not wajibu or sunna, as it has been categorized by Farsy. Talikini is glossed by Farsy (p.18) as : kulakiniwa, kukumbushwa jawabu ya kuwajibu hao malaika : to remind the dead person of the answer he has to give the angels, i.e. Munkar and Nakir, see Traditional Swahili Poetry, 1967, p.21. Ar.talkīn means literally "to make (the dying person) repeat (the words of the shahada of Islam)". See Panjasūra, publ. Sulayman Mar'ī, Singapore n.d., p. 106.

The following song is a composition by Mohamedi Sulemani in Dar es Salaam, and should be an object of study for the linguist as well as the student of literature, since it contains a maximum number of words adapted from modern English technological jargon, and this borrowing is used by the poet in a two-pronged assault : He is lashing out at his fellow Africans parading their knowledge of fashion terms, at the same time ridiculing the authorities that are spending billions on armaments while neglecting the people.

Ukaguzi wa Vifaa

The Inspection of Utensils

Jemadari Mtu-kitu
Twakukaribu kijana
Kuzuru viwanda wetu
Silaha ujeziona
Uone silaha zetu
Nyingi zilivyo jazana.
Tembelea zetu zana
Jemadari Mtu-kitu.

General Wealthy,
We welcome you, little man,
To visit our workshops.
Come and see our weaponry,
See our weapons
Many of them, stacked together.
Visit our tools
General Wealthy.

Mno tumefurahiwa
Sisi nawe kuungana
Kwa hiyo imebidika
Pamoja kufuatana
Uone tunapoweka
Silaha zetu mwanana
Tembelea...

Tutembeze magalani
Uzishufu zetu zana
Vifaa vya Jerumani
Vya Japani na Uchina
Vingine petu nchini
Wenyewe tumevisana
Tembelea...

Tuna zana za Urusi
Uarabuni na Ghana
Nyingi kupita kiasi
Mizinga kila aina
Adui tutawafosi
Wawe wanatafutana
Tembelea...

Pia tunazo roketi
Na madege ya Sabena
Makombora na majeti
Na mabomu mengi sana
Adui juu hapiti
Na chini njia hakuna
Tembelea...

Tuna wengi asikari
Watemi kwa kupigana
Baharini manowari
Wala idadi hazina
Wakija watu jeuri
Cha moto watakiona
Tembelea...

Tunao majemadari
Watu wanaosifikana
Majenerali hodari
Wala mashaka hawana

We are very pleased
To meet you
Because it is our duty
To go along with you
See where we have placed
Our software.
Visit...

Let us walk through the stores
Have a look at our equipment
Utensils from Germany
From Japan and China
Others from our own country
We manufactured them ourselves.

We have equipment from Russia
Arabia and Ghana
Exceedingly many
Canon of every kind
We will force the enemy out
They will be chewing one another...

We also have rockets
And jumbo planes from Sabena
Shells and jet-planes
And very many bombs
The enemy will not pass overhead
Nor is there a passage below

We have many soldiers
Slashers when fighting
In the ocean men of war
Without number
If the oppressors arrive
They will see some fire!

We have commanders,
Famous men,
Smart generals,
Who feel no pain,

Vita inapodhihiri
Tayari kwa kupambana
Tembelea.

When war appears
They are ready to fight

Twailinda Mzizima
kila pembe penye kona
Twahifadhi usalama
Madhara yasiwe tena
Wakija wenye husama
Petu watatulizana.
Tembelea...

We are guarding Dar es Salaam
Every corner and hiding place,
We preserve security
So there can be no more damage,
When men with evil intentions come
They will be quiet at our place.

Tazama yetu magala
Silaha zimeshonana
Yamejaa na vyakula
Kwa hiyo njia hatuna
Twapinga ukabaila
Na umwinyi na fitina
Tembelea...

See our stores,
The weapons wired together,
And full of foodstuffs,
So there is no path open,
We oppose elitism
And acquisitiveness and divisiveness

Watu wameshika tama
Kuona tumeungana
Hawana wanalosema
Wamebakia kununa
Wabaki kuvama-vama
Kama walio na lana
Tembelea...

(Hostile) people are despairing
Upon seeing us united,
They have nothing to say,
They are left to mope,
They are left to sink down
Like people under a curse.

Tama tuishie hapa
Yatosha uliyoona
Kundi lile kuliepa
Umefanya kiungwana
Wamekuwa kama papa
Kukicha ni kumezana
Tembelea...

The end. Let us finish here,
What you have seen is enough
That crowd is to be avoided,
You have behaved like a gentleman,
They have become like sharks,
When it dawns they will devour each
other.

This long song can only partly be interpreted, like most songs of mockery, not only because the circumstances are now a few years ago, but also because political songs are always deliberately obscure, lest the allusions be too obvious and the author incur the wrath of the authorities.

We can reconstruct the circumstances to some extent : A certain top government official, here referred to as General

Wealthy (Mtu-kitu, 'Man of Means') was sent on his way to inspect an arms factory or arsenal. This, of course, creates the Gogolesque situation of the Revisor, the powerful state-inspector. However, the poet cuts him down to size ('Little man') because of his vanity, and his naiveté. For although Tanzania is a militaristic country (it has been on a war-footing with four of its neighbours, it occupied Zanzibar and Pemba in 1964, and it attacked Uganda where it imposed its ruler), it does not have a big arsenal since it is too poor to buy sophisticated weapons, and not advanced enough to make them. The poet knows all this, and mocks the general for coming to inspect out-dated supplies. In all these years, Tanzania has not been threatened from abroad, so the poet goes on talking about hypothetical enemies for whom the armaments are intended. Are the weapons perhaps intended for the aggrandizement of the great general himself? The "people under a curse" in the last line of the last stanza but one, refer to a well-known tale in which the evil-doers whom God had condemned, began to disappear into the earth.

The following lines form part of a much longer mocking song composed originally by Azizi Kiwillo in Mombasa, on the character Kalulu, famous from a well-known comic strip in the Kenya press. Kalulu is the word for hare in some of the Bantu languages spoken further south, in Zambia. The hare is a rogue in the local folk tales but here Kalulu is more comparable to the English Andy Cap who is lazy, unemployable and parasytic, even on his good wife. This type of husband seems to be as common in East Africa as it is in England. Here, Kalulu has disappeared when the song begins.

Bibi Sera yuwalia	Mrs Sarah is crying
kwa kuwa pweke nyumbani	because she is alone at home
Kalulu kamkimbia	Kalulu ran away from her
Leo siku ya tisia	today is the ninth day
Kalulu haonekani	that Kalulu is invisible
Mkarara	Refrain :
Kalulu Sarah akwita	Kalulu, Sarah is calling you
ili urudi nyumbani	to come home.

Kalulu fanya urudi	Kalulu, do come back !
Sera hali taabani	Sarah is in trouble
Masiku yanapozidi	as the days increase
Unamtia huzuni	you make her sad

Utaiwunda ahadi
Ya kutoka kanisani

you will break your promise
of going out to church!

Kalulu sihadaike
Kwa wake wa danguroni
Sera ndiye wako mke
Kwako awe naimani
Regea apumzike
Kukuzuza mitaani

Kalulu, do not be deceived
by the women of the brothel,
Sarah is your wife,
to be with you in conjugal bliss,
Come back that she may relax,
to show you around the neighbourhood

Kalulu umezeeka
Akili huna kichwani
Mshahara ukishika
Mama Sera wamuhuni
Pesa zikimalizika
Ndipo warudi nyumbani

Kalulu you have aged,
you have no brain in your head,
when you get your wages
you cheat Mrs Sarah.
When your money is all spent
then you come back home.

Kalulu hufanyi kazi
Hutembea bandarini
Kazi yo yote huwezi
Kujihadi hutamani
Mambo yako ya kipuzi
Wala hayalingamani

Kalulu, you are not working
you wander about the port
Ypou are incapable of any work
You do not wish to make an effort
What you are doing is stupid
And of no use.

Kalulu pesa hupati
Huna kazi ofisini
Huna shati wala koti
Ambalo ni la thamani
Siku uvaapo suti
Huwa niya arusini

Kalulu, you are not getting money
You have no job in an office
You have neither a shirt nor a coat
Of any value whatsoever
And the day you put a suit on
It is to go to a wedding (i.e. to
eat).

Kalulu huambiliki
Wajifanya hayawani
Tembo hunywa na wisiki
Asubuhi na jioni
Kuoga pia hutaki
Na kufua hutamani

Kalulu, no one can talk to you
You behave like a beast
You drink gin and whiskey (7)
Morning and evening
You do not wish to bathe either
Nor do you want to wash your
clothes.

Mimi nakujua sana
Kalulu tangu zamani
Nyele hutaki kuchana
Madimudimu kichwani
Vinyozi ukiwaona
Wawatukana ndiani

I know you very well
Kalulu, since a long time
You do not want to comb your hair
It sits dishevelled on your head
When you see hairdressers
You abuse them on the road.

Maisha yako daima	Your life is always
Kalulu ni ya kihuni	Kalulu, that of a tramp
Hujala chakula chema	You have not yet had good food
Chenye rutuba tumboni	Beneficial for the stomach
Kwa kula wali na nyama	To eat rice and meat
Shati wende karamuni	You have to go to a feast.

Kalulu Sera akwita	Kalulu, Sarah is calling you
Ili kurudi nyumbani	To come home.

This is certainly a song that shows a vivid picture of a less pleasant type of life in the cities of East Africa.

NOTES TO THE TRANSLATION.

- (1) Hoko kidutani These words and the translation were given to me by Sh. Kassim at SOAS in 1968. Hoko is normal in Kiamu.
- (2) Siku ya Wajerumani, though originating from Tanganyika, this song was given to me by Mw. Yahya Ali, hence the mixed dialect. The singer addresses his comrade in arms and fellow convict : " If you are afraid to die a hero's death, go home and die slowly (drop by drop). Do not spoil the dying at this solemn moment for both of us, by your silly screaming!"
- (3) They must wear... It is necessary to reverse the order of the last two lines in the English translation.
- (4) In the song Alifu na bee, the line tutandike jamvi literally means 'let us spread the mat', i.e. the special mat around which the Swahili people sit down for dinner.
- (5) Mbwa is contracted from ni wa : it has only one syllable prosodically, so it is not the word mbwa 'dog'.
- (6) Yomi from Arabic yaumi 'my day', referring to one's death.
- (7) Tembo traditionally means the sap which is tapped from the top of the coconut palm and then left to ferment (it is not made from the juice of the coconut, tui). In modern times tembo has come to mean any stronger liquor that is home-distilled and so, cheap. 'Gin' is the nearest one word for it in English.

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