

Trend Parameters of the History of Kiswahili Short Stories

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Largely due to the efficiency of the language in which it is expressed, Kiswahili literature has become a cultural fact.¹ Indeed, Kiswahili has grown from a language of mere broad communication to a means of broad expression. It is no longer only a secondary language, but a primary one. Since the community that uses Kiswahili has taken on a multiethnic, and even a supra-ethnic and supra-national character, the literature expressed in it has, in turn, developed a generic complexity. This complexity can be seen in the trend parameters of the history of every Kiswahili literary genre. The present paper, however, is limited to those parameters regarding Kiswahili prose fiction, with specific reference to written short stories.

Compared to Kiswahili written poetry dating back to the tenth century, written Kiswahili prose fiction was late in arriving. Indeed, this seems to be the major reason for the shortage of critical materials on the latter compared to the former type. Notwithstanding the lack of such critical works, the last thirty years have witnessed the emergence of a bulk of written Kiswahili prose fiction and plays that calls for more in-depth analyses than we have had to date.

This paper examines the genre of the written Kiswahili short story in its social, political, and aesthetic dimensions—illustrating that this genre has dominated the literary scene, especially from the seventies to the present. As a necessary background, the paper begins with an examination of oral literature.

The Oral Literary Parameter

Like most other literary genres, the written Kiswahili short story owes its roots to oral literature, in this case, the Kiswahili *ngano* (folktale). Very little analysis of the Kiswahili *ngano* has actually been made; what we have had up to very recent times were the early collections of

¹ See F.E.M.K. Senkoro, "Mediocrity and Creativity in Swahili Literature," in Jeanette Hartman, ed., *Rethinking the Arusha Declaration* (Copenhagen: Centre for Development and Research, 1991): 277-284.

this genre by Steere, Baker, Buttner and Velten.² After these early collectors, the trend of just collecting the tales and writing micro-introductions/prefaces to such tales has continued up to very recent times. Such collections include the ones by P. Mbughuni, L. Honero and T.S.Y. Sengo.³

There are, however, some encouraging developments in this area when one looks at the lengthy unpublished Ph.D. dissertations of Mbughuni, Sengo and F.E.M.K. Senkoro.⁴ While Mbughuni and Senkoro have taken a narrative motif approach to the analysis of Kiswahili folktales, Sengo has approached the subject from the viewpoint of the intricacies of performance.

Since our main concern in the present paper is not oral literary genres, we will only talk briefly about the three dissertations that should interest the scholar of the Kiswahili *ngano*. Among the major themes that have emerged in the Kiswahili *ngano* are the cruelties of the stepmother, the unjust king, the jealousies of the co-wife, and the journey motif. Mbughuni examines two of the themes: the journey motif and the unjust ruler. She shows how the first is a quest in which the hero has to accomplish certain feats before he can gain required knowledge and experience before his return. Discussing the aims of the theme, Mbughuni says:

² See Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales as Told by Natives of Zanzibar* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1906); E. C. Baker, ed. *Mwarabu na Binti Wake na Hadithi Nyingine* (Nairobi: Eagle Press, 1950); C.G. Buttner, *Anthologie aus der Suaheli Litteratur*. (Berlin: Emil Felber, 1894); and The Velten Collections of folktales are available in the East Africana Section of the Library of the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

³ See P. Mbughuni's Tanga Collections available in the archives of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. See L. Honero, *Fasihi Simulizi ya Mtanзания: Methali* (Dar es Salaam: Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, 1981) and S. R. Ngole and T.S.Y. Sengo, eds., *Fasihi Simulizi ya Mtanзания: Hadithi* (Dar es Salaam: Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, 1977).

⁴ See P. Mbughuni, *From Oral to Written: The Politicization of Kiswahili Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), especially chapter two, "Oral Literature: Ngano;" also T.S.Y. Sengo, "The Indian Ocean Complex and the Kiswahili Folklore: The Case of Zanzibarian Tale Performance" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Folklore, University of Khartoum, Sudan, 1985); and F.E.M.K. Senkoro, "The Significance of the Journey in Folktales from Zanzibar" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Kiswahili, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1997).

In general, the focus of the safari itself is a learning experience. The main character is tested or tried, gains new experience and knowledge, which upon his return, is incorporated into the society to make it better or more harmonious.⁵

Mbughuni observes that, generally, the tales that dealt with the safari motif and the learning experience emanating from it served a didactic social function. Through them the concepts of good or bad moral conduct and society's concept of the virtuous qualities of man were expressed. The tales advocated the qualities of perseverance and endurance in times of hardships. They, together with the other oral genres, fought evils such as greed, laziness, jealousy, selfishness, and so on.

The second narrative motif that Mbughuni deals with, that of the unjust ruler, is equally interesting. Mbughuni shows how this theme combines the social and political qualities encouraged by society. It does so by first presenting the audience with the model of the unjust ruler, then gives us the other side of the coin with the *ngano*, where the ruler is taught proper justice or may even be overthrown by the people. Mbughuni has emphasized this issue by showing how these stories function to sensitize the listener's perception of morality, while also aiming to sharpen his political consciousness by depicting the ideal relationship of ruler and ruled.⁶ Thus, the society depicted in these stories is that which is undergoing changes through either reform or outright revolution. These, in turn, ultimately lead to a better and more just society.

Sengo's work, "The Indian Ocean Complex and the Kiswahili Folklore: The Case of Zanzibarian Tale Performance," which deals at length with folk tales from Zanzibar, has focused mostly on tale performance as a social institution. The author gives a comprehensive treatment of tale performance, while analyzing mostly the art world of individual performers. It is only toward the end of the work that Sengo examines the folk tales as aesthetic works with a social context.

⁵ Mbughuni, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

Senkoro's research revisits in greater detail the old literary truism that insists that the soul of every great work of literature is a journey. Showing how this motif is as old as literature itself, the work indicates how, with the acquisition of speech, man's journey toward the world of fantasy started, and with the ability to walk began man's spatial movement within time.

In Senkoro's dissertation, the journey motif that was introduced by Mbughuni as part of a single chapter only, is dealt with in greater and more detailed analysis. Senkoro identifies and examines four major overlapping planes evident in the folktales from Zanzibar that utilize the journey motif: the external journey, the journey as a symbol of the process of growing up, the journey as an exemplification of a world-view, and the journey as a metaphor of conflict management and resolution. The four planes frequently overlap, and the fact that there is no clear dividing line between them in the folk tales from Zanzibar makes the journey motif a complex yet very interesting literary phenomenon in relation to Zanzibaris and the world around them.

Senkoro's research has used Zanzibari culture and setting as the contextual basis of the journey folk tales from Zanzibar. While a possible initial and almost immediate hypothesis could be that living on an island and being surrounded by a big mass of water must have prompted the regular and constant appearance of the journey motif in the Zanzibari people's folk tales, the study indicates that there are extremely few tales in folktale collections from Zanzibar which use sailing as the mode of the heroes' or heroines' journeys. Instead of the Indian Ocean context, which Sengo's dissertation seems to propound, it is the hinterland environment that is evident in the folktales. It is argued that most narrators still carry with them their hinterland background in which they were not seafarers, but rather farmers and herders. This explains why the journeys are usually through "*msitu na nyika, msitu na nyika*" and not through sailing in the ocean.

This work also mentions that, curiously enough, except in a very few tales, even Islam does not appear much in the Zanzibari journey tales that were randomly collected by the researcher. If anything, most of what would appear to be of religious background

reflects "traditional" beliefs, most of which would, again, be of hinterland origins.

The works of Mbughuni, Sengo, and Senkoro provide deeper and fuller analyses of Kiswahili folk narratives, especially *ngano*.

Influence on Written Kiswahili Literature: A Note

The Kiswahili *ngano* has had its influence on the written Kiswahili prose fiction and even on the other genres that followed. For example, in Shaaban Robert's *Adili na Nduguze* (lit. "Adili and His Brothers"),⁷ J.K. Kiimbila's *Lila na Fila* (lit. "Lila and Fila"),⁸ and some of the short stories edited by G. Ruhumbika, *Parapanda: Wali wa Ndevu na Hadithi Zingine* (lit. Doomsday Trumpet: Rice from the Beard and Other Stories),⁹ and numerous others, one discovers an obvious influence of the oral tradition in terms of themes, characterization and approach to social issues.

Generally speaking, written Kiswahili literature has fed on the oral literatures of the different ethnic groups in East Africa. Further analysis of this issue could, indeed, enrich our discourses on written Kiswahili literature. As we stated earlier, multi-ethnicity is an undeniable characteristic of contemporary Kiswahili language and literature. It has produced authors from "upcountry" whose different ethnic backgrounds have affected their literary work. Of course, the influence of oral tradition on written Kiswahili literature is gradually modified and subjected to each author's own style and interpretations, which in turn indicate the changing society, ideals, and values that have taken a national rather than ethnic character.

The Contemporary Written Kiswahili Short Story

Three major stylistic parameters can be identified within the field of contemporary written Kiswahili short story. Each of the parameters, in

⁷ Shaaban Robert, *Adili na Nduguze* (London: Macmillan, 1952).

⁸ J.K. Kiimbila, *Lila na Fila* (Dar es Salaam: Longman Tanzania, 1972).

⁹ G. Ruhumbika, *Parapanda: Wali wa Ndevu na Hadithi Zingine* (Arusha: East African Literature Bureau, 1976).

turn, determines the socio-political outlook of its authors. We shall examine these levels, one by one. This, we hope, will be a fair representation of the anatomy of the genre of the contemporary written Kiswahili short story.

The Popular Parameter

The most attractive of the three parameters is the "popular trend." This is in the form of potboilers that are, in a way, reminiscent of the Onitsha Market chapbooks: the booklets donning the streets of various towns and cities of East Africa. Since East African society has been transformed from a semi-illiterate ethnic agglomeration of people into a literate people with reading habits, the literary audience has expanded.¹⁰ Its needs, therefore, had to be catered to. The potboiler found its outlet here, temporary though it has proved to be.

But what is "popular literature"? It becomes important for us to raise and attempt to answer this question for several reasons. The subject of popular culture, of which popular literature is a part, has emerged as one of the important sub-fields in several academic disciplines. The topic involves the complex mixture of the socio-political and the aesthetic phenomena. At the same time, the loose way in which some critics' pens have rushed to use the label "*popular literature*", failing to distinguish trash from what people need, prompts us to attempt first to give the subject its proper theoretical perspective.

Rajmund Ohly views popular literature purely from a point of view that measures aesthetics and sophistication. He therefore compares ingredients forming popular literature and those forming what he calls "standard" literature. He concludes that popular literature deals with emotions while standard literature concerns itself with the intellect.¹¹

¹⁰ See F.E.M.K. Senkoro, "Swahili Pop Literature: The Case of Mbunda Msokile," in F.E.M.K. Senkoro, ed. (forthcoming), *Leading Issues in Kiswahili Literature* (London: James Carrey Publishers).

¹¹ R. Ohly, *Aggressive Prose: A Case Study in Kiswahili Prose of the Seventies* (Dar es Salaam: The Institute of Kiswahili Research, 1981).

Steven H. Arnold, in his article on S.K. Msuya's novellette, *Mazungumzo ya Mchana*, views popular literature rather differently. His is basically an anti-elitist, pro-masses line. The term "popular literature" at this level becomes an *ideological* tool rather than a mere *theoretical* concept. Popular literature, according to Arnold must, of necessity, be viewed from the crucial point of view of what the masses desire as opposed to "what they read because nothing else is available, or what they read because forces opposed to their true prosperity claim they want it."¹²

The two views on the question of what popular literature really is, and the state of that trend in Kiswahili literature, stir quite a number of issues to be considered. Popular literature, if not all popular culture, is part and parcel of historical conditions which gave birth to what has come to be known as mass communication. This goes hand-in-hand with "mass production" blessed by the economy that turns everything into a commodity for sale in the capitalist market. Such kinds of commodities are really available in "popular" variants of magazines in Tanzania such as *Fahari*, *Bongo*, *Sani*, *Tabasamu* and a host of others. The stories appearing in these magazines are similar to short stories which were published by Longman Kenya under the general title, *Hekaya za Kuburudisha* (lit. "Titillating stories").¹³

Ahmed Mgeni has written an interesting article on the titillating series in which he shows an overwhelming fascination with the stories. Fascination and excitement are components which lean more on the sentimental and the sensational rather than the intellect. When one reads these stories and others by such popular authors such as John Rutayisingwa, Mbunda Msokile, Eddie Ganzel, G. Twarindwa, and others, one can't help but feel fascinated and, at times, held by a lecherous kind of suspense and tension.¹⁴

¹² This article entitled "Popular Literature in Tanzania: Its Background and Relation to East African Literature," appears in several journals and books and is scheduled to appear in the forthcoming book mentioned in note 16 above.

¹³ We are using the title of Ahmed Mgeni's article on the series, called "Appointments with Cupid." It is scheduled to appear in the same forthcoming book mentioned above.

¹⁴ Senkoro has examined this trend with regards to the Kiswahili detective novel in his paper, "Some Ideological Trends in the Kiswahili Novel", paper read first at the African Studies Association Meeting, Baltimore, Maryland, 1978. The revised version of the paper is to be

While it can be argued that most love thrillers like J. Simbamwene's novelettes, *Kwa Sababu ya Pesa* (lit. "Because of Money")¹⁵ and *Mwisho wa Mapenzi* (lit. "The end of love"),¹⁶ concentrate on refreshing and entertaining an audience, other works by popular writers such as Hammie Rajab, Ben Mtobwa, Kajubi Mukajanga, A. E. Musiba, and others, reflect the realities of city life (although one can easily notice that that fact is treated in a secondary manner by the authors). The idea is to arouse and thrill the animal instincts of the audience with the hope of entertaining them. At the same time, the social message we get from popular short stories (especially the ones dealing with crime) is that all evils in society, such as armed robbery, stealing and general banditry, can be eliminated by the use of state power: the police, army, courts of law and the prisons. The authors of these stories bring out such a message by keeping the reader's mind on the thread of empty anxiety, hollow adventure, and nerve-killing tension.

Our discussion so far should trigger one important question on the subject of the popular Kiswahili short story, if not popular literature in general. How fair is it to take love thrillers, such as the ones coming out of the dailies and magazines in East Africa (or even the short story collections like the series published by Longman Kenya) as being "popular" works of literature when, by all standards, they are just cheap potboilers? Popular literature should suggest the contemporary literary tastes and needs of the masses in terms of improving their standards of living and making them better understand their environment so that they may change it. This, then, should put to task the modern elitist belief in the superiority of "pure" or "high" culture, or in the "trash" filled with violence, sex exploitation and cheap love affairs. These types of Kiswahili short stories are ultimately geared toward the socio-political enslavement of the new literates in East Africa. It leaves the lumpen proletariat and the other city dwellers (who are supposed to be its consumers) in the web of their own predicaments.

published in "Leading Issues."

¹⁵ J. Simbamwene, *Kwa Sababu ya Pesa* (Dar es Salaam: Longman Tanzania, 1982).

The Standard Parameter

Bracketed between the popular trend and the satirical level, which we will examine next, is a miscellaneous group of Kiswahili short stories that does not have a specific stylistic tendency. For lack of better terminology, for now we will borrow Ohly's classification and call it the "standard parameter".

In this group perhaps the most prominent representative is Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed from the Isles of Tanzania. Mohamed is one of the leading East African Kiswahili authors. Born and brought up in Zanzibar, Mohamed could not escape portraying in his works the fact of feudalism and its implications in the lives of indigenous peoples. The setting of most of his writings is, therefore, in the Isles.

Mohamed began his writing career by submitting some short stories for the Kiswahili programs on the BBC, London. The reception they got from the listeners was tremendous and encouraging to him. His short stories were later published under the collective title of *Kicheko cha Ushindi* (lit. "The Laughter of Victory").¹⁷ These short stories deal with various day-to-day lives of the Islanders. They are a social commentary on such issues as infidelity in marriage, petty quarrels between husband and wife, and so on.

The stories entertain with their narrative style, accomplished by a colorful, sophisticated, at times exotic, use of language surrounded by constant utilization of imagery and symbolism. Yet, most of the stories here seem to be rather transient, for they hardly leave a lasting message in the reader's mind. Still, these have to be differentiated from the "popular" level (examined above) because they don't have the contagiousness of the former, nor do they contain the seriousness of social and political messages delivered in the next group of stories in our discussion.

The Satirico-Political Parameter

¹⁷ Mohamed A. Mohamed, *Kicheko cha Ushindi* (Nairobi: Shungwaya Publishers, 1978).

The contemporary Kiswahili literary scene is full of the biting satiric voice of novelists, playwrights and short-story writers. These authors have set for themselves certain yardsticks through which they criticize those in power, certain institutions and individuals, and society in general. One discovers indignation, ridicule, derision and malicious mockery and laughter aimed at whatever has gone wrong after flag-independence and accompanying declarations and charters in Africa.

For example, after independence in 1961, Tanganyika (later Tanzania) decided to follow its own version of socialism, *Ujamaa*. Under this political, social and economic system, all people were assumed to be equal. Tanzania vowed to become an egalitarian and classless society. However, few years later, it became evident that the implementation of this system was difficult if not impossible, and Tanzania was far from being an egalitarian and classless society. In fact, classes were flourishing following the emergence, on the one hand, of the "*wabenzi*" (lit. Mercedes Benz owners) class, which consisted of high level political leaders, government executives and national parastatal officials, and "*makabwela*" (i.e. common people) on the other. This was one of the factors that led to the formulation of the Arusha Declaration in 1967 by the then ruling party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU).

The Arusha Declaration was probably the most significant milestone in Tanzania's efforts to become a truly socialist society. Apart from putting all means of production under the control of the masses through massive nationalization, it laid down, among other things, the leadership code of conduct.¹⁸ Generally, under this code, leaders were required to live an exemplary socialist life. Some of the basic "commandments" of the code included the following:

1. Every TANU and Government leader must be either a Peasant or a Worker, and should in no way be associated with the practices of Capitalism or Feudalism.

¹⁸ The term "leader" as defined in the code included members of the TANU National Executive Committee, ministers, members of Parliament, senior officials of organizations affiliated to TANU, senior officials of parastatal organizations, all those appointed or elected under any clause of the TANU constitution, councilors, and civil servants in high and middle cadres.

2. No TANU or Government leader should hold shares in any company.
3. No TANU or Government leader should hold Directorship in any privately-owned enterprises.
4. No TANU or Government leader should receive two or more salaries.
5. No TANU or Government leader should own houses that he rents to others.¹⁹

Although the leaders claimed to be committed "socialists," most of them found the code to be too demanding, and its "commandments" very easy to violate. Therefore, the code proved to be nothing but an archive document, and Tanzania never became an egalitarian and classless society. Those on the higher rungs of the economic and socio-political ladder (the committed "socialist" leaders) continued to live luxurious and extravagant lives, leaving the masses of peasants and workers below, toiling in poverty. It became evident that (to use Orwell's contention), "All animals were equal but some animals were more equal than others."²⁰ Since then, the leaders' hypocrisy is usually mentioned as one of the major factors for the failure of Tanzanian *Ujamaa*.

These events had a great impact on Kiswahili literature. They provided good breeding grounds for satirists who, using wit as their shield, dared to come out and "bell the cat."²¹ For example, one finds the satirical voice in such novels as H. Mwakyembe's *Pepo ya Mabwege* (lit. "Fool's Paradise"),²² C.G. Mung'ong'o's *Njozi*

¹⁹ Taken from the original TANU manuscript, *The Arusha Declaration and TANU'S Policy on Socialism and Self-reliance* (Dar es Salaam: Publicity section, 1967).

²⁰ See George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (London: Penguin Books, 1951).

This situation has never changed. In fact, today, following the introduction of free market economy and the demise of *ujamaa*, "the more equal animals are becoming even more equal than others."

²¹ This supports one school of thought that maintains that satire flourishes when a society is witnessing a decay of institutions and death of meaningful values. Great works of satire, according to this school of thought, are written when "things are so bad, vice so arrant, the world so overwhelmingly wicked..." and the society has lost direction. See for example A. Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

²² H. Mwakyembe, *Pepo ya Mabwege* (Dar es Salaam: Longman Tanzania, 1982).

Iliyopotea (lit. "A Lost Dream"),²³ Isack Mruma's *Nguzo ya Uhondo* (lit. "A Pillar of Luxury"),²⁴ in such plays like Penina Muhando's *Lina Ubani* (lit. "There is a Panacea"),²⁵ the Paukwa Theatre Group's masterpiece *Ayubu* (lit. "Job"),²⁶ and E. Kezilahabi's *Kaputula la Marx* (lit. "The Shorts of Marx"),²⁷ as well as in the short stories of E. Kezilahabi, such as "Cha Mnyonge Utakitapika Hadharani" (lit. "You will be forced to vomit in public what you stole from the poor man"),²⁸ "Utapiamlo" ("Kwashikor"), "Majira, later on re-titled "Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi" (lit. "The Times" and "Mr. Eggs, The Minister for Diseases")²⁹ and Gabriel Ruhumbika's short stories in his collection titled *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha* (lit. "Whether you crow or not, it will dawn"),³⁰ and *Parapanda: Wali wa Ndevu na Hadithi Zingine* (lit. "The Trumpet: Rice Leftovers from the Beards"),³¹ among numerous others.

In most of these works, especially in *Pepo ya Mabwege* and *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha*, one finds a piercing irony and euphemism which makes a mockery at the fools' paradise, and laughs at the out-moded bourgeois culture. One also discovers an optimistic tone in which, contrary to Ayi Kwei Armah's contention, the beautiful ones are already born. The works portray the fate of the national political

²³ C.G. Mung'ong'o, *Njozi Iliyopotea* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1982).

²⁴ Isack Mruma, *Nguzo ya Uhondo* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1980).

²⁵ Penina Muhando, *Lina Ubani* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1984).

²⁶ Paukwa Theatre Group, *Ayubu* (Kampala: Documentation and Publication Centre, 1974).

²⁷ E. Kezilahabi, *Kaputula la Marx* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, forthcoming).

²⁸ This hilarious short story which portrays the greedy appetite of one Principal Secretary, Malyangu, and the subsequent events in a bar in which he ends up getting a broken leg, appears in Mbunda Msokile, *Misingi ya Hadithi Fupi* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1992).

²⁹ These stories are yet to be published. The latter, however, appeared in two installments in Tanzania's Government weekly, *Mzalendo*. The second installment was the most crucial one since it dealt with the realities of the luxurious lives of the majority of Tanzania's political leaders and even insisted on the role of the new generation (youths) in bringing about the desired changes. This installment was, however, horribly printed with misplaced paragraphs so that the final product was utterly unintelligible to the readers. A case of censorship?

³⁰ Gabriel Ruhumbika, *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha* (Arusha: Eastern African Publications, 1981).

³¹ Gabriel Ruhumbika, *Parapanda: Wali wa Ndevu na Hadithi Zingine* (Arusha: Eastern African Publications, 1982).

rulers who have hijacked the independence of African nations. Such leaders are portrayed in works as gluttonous parasites that take advantage of the national economic hardships to quench their private interests and satisfy their lusts at the expense of the sweat of the toiling masses.

We consider the best satirist in the field of the Kiswahili short story to be Gabriel Ruhumbika. His first literary work, a novel in English called *A Village in Uhuru*²² was a pseudo-royal, pseudo-feudal piece. This work, together with Peter Pallangyo's "introverting bourgeois" novel, *Dying in the Sun*,²³ reflects the "expressive theory," which implies that these works are expressive of the writers, a typical trend observed in the psychological novels of the Western tradition, whose authors are introverts. However, in his latter works, Ruhumbika has cast aside the "expressive theory"; he has pushed to the periphery his individualistic character and has instead moved society to the center. He has indeed taken up the duty of instruction—of *utile et dulce*. This comes out clearly in the author's collections of short stories.

The author's newest and, perhaps, best work is *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha*, a collection of four short stories: "Bunge la Wachawi" (lit. "A Parliament of Sorcerers"), "Kisa cha Mlevi wa Gongo na Mchwa" (lit. "The tale of the Gongo drunkard and termites"), "Mizimu Kushtakiwa Mahakamani" (lit. Spirits on the Dock), and "Dua la Kuku Lilivyompata Mwewe" (lit. "The Day the chicken's curse came to visit the hawk"). Here, we examine three of these stories.

Similar to hilarious jokes told by a storyteller, the stories are very lively, which makes them memorable. They communicate very effectively without preaching. Reminiscent of parables, the tales have a vibrant surface under which throb a number of allusions to very important social and political questions.

In "Bunge la Wachawi," for example, Ruhumbika slices with a surgeon's precision through the villainy and hypocrisy of many of Africa's politicians. In the story, the author exposes the empty slogans

²² Gabriel Ruhumbika, *A Village in Uhuru* (London: Longman, 1969; repr. 1970).

²³ Peter Pallangyo, *Dying in the Sun* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1976).

and rhetoric of several politicians as mere pronouncements hurled out from shiny pedestals. The story, amusingly set in the mythical island of Tai-king, scoffs at political leaders who depend on a "sorcerer's Aladdin lamp" to bring, without sweat, meaningful development. On top of it all, these people and their kith and kin celebrate without end the false expectations of the imagined development.

For its cutting edge, *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha* relies primarily on satire, with humor and irony utilized to build and carry its effects. In "Bunge la Wachawi," Ruhumbika parodies the way in which the national motto, "Bega kwa Bega" (lit. "shoulder to shoulder" in common effort) can be abused in a society where the rift between the people and their political "representatives" is so pronounced. Through a Tai-king radio report of a political rally to the citizens of this island, we see a cogent example of irony and satire:

Countrymen, already I can see the Honourable President at the very top. He is already well-seated on the shoulders of the honourable Ministers, and then the Prime Minister is at the top too. Now the Ministers are preparing themselves to get on the shoulders of the people.³⁴

Such is Ruhumbika's notion of the motto of the "shoulder to shoulder" as practiced in African nations today.

He makes a follow-up of the problem of bad leadership in his other story, "Dua la Kuku Lilivyompata Mwewe." In this story, the author recounts how the age-old brotherhood bond between the chickens and the hawks was brought to a bloody end through the actions of Mzee Upanga, an acclaimed patriarch of all the chickens. Mzee Upanga has long been obsessed with the vision of being the first cock ever to father, with a carefully selected female hawk, a half-caste bird. He thus asks one female hawk to become his tenth wife. The hawk accepts the proposition, but on one condition: Mzee Upanga must perform all the rites of love in a tree-hawk style. Afraid to admit

³⁴ Ruhumbika, 27.

the one weakness he has in common with his fellow chickens, the inability to fly, Mzee Upanga accepts the challenge to join the young thing waiting up a tree. He fails, in spite of the seductive jeers of the hawk-bride. Bloody and humiliated after having tried several times to do the impossible, Mzee Upanga uses his position as a leader to pass a resolution that leads to the outbreak of a bloody feud between the chickens and the erstwhile friends, the hawks. The discovery of the truth about the greedy and lustful ambitions of Mzee Upanga much later only helps to fuel the war, bringing untold destruction on both sides, but by then Mzee Upanga has already escaped and become a fugitive deep in the jungle.

The story is entertaining. It preoccupies itself with several social and political questions: leadership, survival of the community, social conflict between the mighty and the weak, and so on. Unlike the other stories in this collection, "Dua la Kuku" is a folktale adapted into written form of a contemporary Kiswahili short story. As it is with the majority of "folktales," this story relies on non-human characters to represent the human reality metaphorically. Quite often, this metaphoric approach to storytelling can be more communicative than the literal approach. Audiences have been known to respond better to a familiar situation when it is removed from an everyday milieu and presented as strange, thus exciting, curious—raising the capacity to learn and be moved.

In "Kisa cha Mlevi wa Gongo na Mchwa," the final disintegration of a medical doctor into a gory death is satirized along with the vice of drunkenness that does not even spare a learned leader. Through this vice, the disintegration of Doctor Mazula, a brilliant and popular local leader, is portrayed. After getting into the practice of using phony drugs on patients so that he may be able to purchase his *gongo*, a local deadly brew, Mazula's total disintegration is signed when he takes to the jungle with his illegally-brewed gin. He is a stray beast hiding from fellow drunkards, who he fears might attempt to steal away his *gongo*. Dead drunk in the dark depths of the jungle, he is eaten to death by termites. Mazula's end, though pathetic, is not without a touch of humor as the author relates how his corpse became a part of an anthill. He goes on to pick out, for a satirical image,

Mazula's stethoscope, formerly a life-saving symbol, now good only as a means of establishing the identity of a body ravaged beyond recognition.³⁵

To create something of value is never an easy task for a writer. It is more so for the short story author who, some may think, seems to have an easier task than, say, a novelist. A short story writer must be concise, for compression is a very essential ingredient of the short story. The short story produces a singleness of effect denied to the novel. Due to its limited space dictated by its artistic forum, the short story has to express succinctly the variety of themes and ideas latent in any situation picked up by its author. Similar to the short story writer is the joke-teller whose jokes reach a climactic punch-line. Such jokes must be delivered economically to retain the audience's attention which is his only for a fleeting moment.

In Ruhumbika's collection of stories, *Uwike Usiwike Kutakucha*, just like in the other works in this trend mentioned earlier, we discover a social and political comment given through satire, humor, parody and irony. The audience laughs, sometimes to tears, as such comment is given which, at times, enables individuals to identify themselves with the characters and their actions. Thus, one may laugh at oneself in these stories. What, one may ask, is the social purpose of such laughter? Is it not similar to the opium-like anxiety, tension, and suspense typically found at the "popular" level? Maybe the difference is that laughter here is a panacea; it has a cleansing effect. It must stop at a certain point as its given audience begins to re-examine the social and political situation satirized in the stories. Laughing at oneself acts in a manner similar to the crying of a bereaved person that enables him/her to pour out the steam and let him/her bury the deceased with less grief. The stories make their audiences laugh at themselves, which in turn enables them to start tracing where the rain started beating them. Herein lies the social and political significance of the most

³⁵ The foregoing examination of Gabriel Ruhumbika's collection is largely based upon Senkoro's review article co-authored with Jesse Mollé, "Gabriel Ruhumbika's *Uwike siwike utakucha*," in *Kiswahili: Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research*, 49.1 (March 1982): 107-111.

important contemporary forum of the Kiswahili short story: the satirical voice.