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**EARLY 20TH CENTURY SWAHILI PROSE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND SOME ASPECTS
OF SWAHILI ETHNICITY**

While it remains a difficulty of some moment for every literary historian to assess the particular relationships seen to exist between certain types of literary expression and a culture's ethnicity, or put in another way, to define the relationship between interpretation and creation in a given culture, that such relationships exist, is no longer in much dispute. All genres, it may be argued safely, are culturally bound and determined, localized, as it were, in a temporal plane demarcated by time and space as well as by linguistic phenomena.

Even a cursory reading of Swahili prose narratives during the early part of the 20th century will reveal to the casual reader a curious mixture of ideas and techniques realized in various prose genres that would, at the outset, appear to present a confusing picture of Swahili culture. Indeed the political history of the East African Coast during this period shows a great many tensions, pressures that were either borne in anew on Swahili culture, or older ones that, having been simmering for some years, were very near to the boiling point; thus given such a fluid and volatile milieu, it is no wonder that Swahili literary expression should too present itself in such a variable state, the relationship itself being a manifest example of what Goldman referred to as a "homology of structures," where social and artistic structure mirror one another. The very political and cultural threats that the Swahili community were being forced to confront in

some very important ways thus may be seen to have been mirrored in certain forms of such artistic expression.

It too may be noted that the process of literary creation itself is an "unceasing dialectic between the necessity to use established forms in order to be able to communicate coherently and the necessity to break and remake these forms" simply because they have become arbitrary restrictions.¹ Thus in the case of the Swahili it may be seen that certain older prose traditions from the 19th century were no longer able to embrace new ideas of community value and definition, and therefore underwent change. Since, likewise, structure always fulfils a particular function in a particular context, it may also be assumed that because there were structural changes evident in Swahili prose narratives, there must have been attendant functional changes as well.

These changes are not difficult to surmise given the permutation in community value and definition, especially in regard to language, that were evident at this time. For it will be remembered that from the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the Second World War, East Africa fell under several spheres of European colonial influence that manifested themselves at virtually every level of indigenous enterprise. And of these, it may be further argued, that perhaps none was more insidious than the linguistic. European attempts to "standardize" Swahili, to impose a particular dialect, Kiunguja, the dialect of Zanzibar, as the standard throughout East Africa, were of course realized in the East African Swahili Committee's formation and subsequent decisions which in effect, and a very practical effect it was, limited the fund of language speakers in the Swahili community

had freely available to them through a common form of institutional censorship: the publication of communications of all sorts, including official communiqués in this dialect; the European preparation of Swahili dictionaries which unabashedly set out Swahili words as having inherently right or wrong uses, and the formation of a literature bureau to encourage writers in the use of particular forms and idioms.² All such practices, while I describe them as insidious since they are all attempts, ultimately, of one culture trying, however well-intentioned, to force its views on another *ex cathedra*, deny that language is a praxis that cannot be fixed unmovably in any plane, much less by a community of foreign speakers. Thus a language policy was put in place that sought to "de-ethnicize" Swahili by erasing, so to speak, specific cultural referents in the language which many more local pockets of Swahili ethnic communities embraced.

In terms of literary influence, one set of figures alone will explain more than several paragraphs. Between the years 1900-1950, there were approximately 359 works of prose published in Swahili; 346 of these were written by Europeans and published mainly in England and Germany. Many of these were translations: Swift, Bunyan, Moliere, Shakespeare, but none more pervasive, in more abundance, and having more effect than the Bible. The British and Foreign Bible Society Archives in London show that thousands of copies of either books from the Bible, or the entire Bible itself, had been distributed in East Africa by the turn of the century.³ A common yearly run was between 5-10,000 copies. This is not to mention the many editions of individual hymn books, catechisms, prayer books, lives of saints and so on that also quickly found their way into Swahili by the beginning of the 20th century.

Suddenly, and that is not an exaggeration, one found enormously more books in print written in Swahili in new, non-indigenous prose forms by Europeans than by anyone who identified himself as a Swahili. And this remarkable fact would be true for the next 50 years as well. While a few narratives remain in line with what I would describe as traditional Swahili prose narratives, most of these, I think, show striking changes in their structure which seemed to have been influenced by various Swahili biblical narratives, narrative structures that I see as the precursors to the Swahili novel for reasons I hope to develop in this essay.

Briefly put, what I see in this latter corpus of prose narratives is a marked change in the conception of the sequence of narration as an expression of causality, as opposed to that found in more traditional narratives. Where earlier prose writers like Tippu Tip had been content to report facts and events - often, to the Western reader, it seemed at random with little or no connection between the events - now great emphasis was placed on conceiving of a narrative as a unified, connected structure of some design in which every part belonged in a particular place to secure some unity of thesis easily recognizable to the Western reader. Indeed its parts' inclusion and placement in the narrative were effected for no more important reason than to illuminate some predesigned aspect of the writer's thesis. In short, there was a clear manipulation of material to illustrate the writer's central idea, an idea which was clearly set out and referred to at least once in each chapter. Now one will find in this conception of the ordering of experience, in the arrangement of these materials for presentation and in the technique of expression, the beginnings of a

new prose tradition in Swahili which exhibit some rather striking parallels with biblical narratives. The specific changes that I think took place cannot all be set out in this brief essay. Rather I would only like to illustrate a few of the more salient features I see by examining one Swahili prose narrative which was published in 1921 as an example of a text which is characterized by many of these features.

This is Samuel Sehoza's Mwaka katika Minyororo (A Year in Chains), published by the U.M.C.A. in London. In fact, because of the nature of this narrative, it, and not James Mbotela's Uhuru wa Watumwa (The Freeing of the Slaves) which was published 15 years later, may be seen as the progenitor of the Swahili novel. What is so remarkable about this narrative and how it illustrates in form both this new concept of narrative structure and various cultural changes in the perception of Uswahili manifested in it, from a more specifically referenced ethnicity to a broader based, more national perception of community value, may be summarized under three general headings: the conception of the narrative, the arrangement of the materials in the narrative structure, and the technique of expression. Elements of each of these, I think, in just this one narrative, illustrate substantial differences between its narrative structure and previous, older prose narratives. And now, as a practical demonstration of these claims, I would like to turn to a brief look at each of these three areas in Sehoza's narrative.

To see these remarkable differences in the conception of Sehoza's narrative as opposed to an older, more traditional narrative like Tippu Tip's Maisha, is really, in the most theoretical way, to grasp the most pervasive and meaningful changes that occurred between the late

19th century and the early 20th century in the developmet of Swahili prose genres. For it is on this level that one can most appreciate the depth of change that was taking place amongst the Swahili community. It is not difficult to see, as I have claimed, a new manner of conceiving of causality presented here in continuous prose. The narrator of *A Year in Chains* sets out to explain what effects the First World War had on a small African Christian community in Tanzania; this is his central idea, his thesis. It is announced at the beginning of the narrative, skillfully reintroduced at critical points along the way in the narrative's development and then summarized at the end. It would be very difficult indeed for a Western reader to miss the narrator's point, it being so familiar and logical a structure and one so culturally bound by a Western system of reference. The narrative's structure is thus so conceived: by design, to illustrate specific relevant events that were seen as the effects of the First World War on this specific community principally between the years 1914-15. What must also be mentioned here is the fact that these events are not like Tippu Tip's cataloguing in his *Maisha*, which was inspired chiefly by faithfulness and accuracy rather than by any narrative strategy, but are all connected, one to the other in a clear system of causes and effects, for the most part all in the same temporal plane.

This is a point that I want to emphasize for I think that it is a remarkable shift in the ordering of experience among Swahili prose writers. There is in this narrative of Sehoza's a representation of experience that shows many artistic sign of a culture trying to impose an order on apparent disorder, to rearrange "true" experience by some

artistic design for another purpose. Again to use Tippu Tip as a foil, compare his narrative presentation of different events, but which appear sequentially, with Sehoza's. The former appears to the Western reader as an unconnected, loosely tied-up bundle of events without a unified, coherent narrative structure. His narrative begins when he is 12 years old, undertaking a few safaris with his brother and ends with the dispute between him and Muhammed bin Khalfan resulting in the loss of his property. During the course of the narrative we are treated to descriptions of that safari, this village, that battle, these porters, those negotiations and so on. The reader may very well feel at sea in the narrative because the narrative has not been realized, or more importantly I would argue, has not been conceived of in a sense of causality familiar to the Western reader. The world of Tippu Tip's narrator appears to be full of unpredictable, unconnected and unknowable events; all of these events happen and one simply learns to react to them while in Sehoza's narrative, it is clear at the outset, that the narrator has already made sense out of everything and will present in his narrative the causes and effects that illustrate his thesis. Thus in the latter narrative there is an important narrative thread of unity which runs through all the events, binding them up in a tightly drawn bundle and giving a marked coherence to the narrator's experience, a Western-referenced coherence that is lacking in Tippu Tip. Let me give you a brief example of each to illustrate this.

In Tippu Tip's narrative one typically finds events told off singly in the following fashion: after mentioning whom he had conversations with that morning, detailing what everyone was carrying, he casually mentions things of much more moment, but without any more connection.

For example, when he decides, against all the advice of his family, to take Stanley to a place he has never heard of and to subsequently place himself, his men, and a certain amount of his wealth in danger, he simply writes:

I slept and in the morning I told him, fine.
I have decided to take you.⁴

What the reader may attribute this unusual decision to is nowhere even hinted at in the narrative. Having shown himself to be a practical man with a keen eye for business, one would have expected him to have turned Stanley down flat.

Now compare this with Sehoza's narrative strategy of making clear the relationships between all the events and character motivation in his narrative. When Sehoza's narrator explains, in some detail, how the teachers, who had been imprisoned along with the clergy, planned their escape, he sets out the entire plan explaining why the teachers had done things previous to their escape that now obviously may be seen as part of their escape plan, but which at the time, of course, could not have been known to him in these terms, since he had not been privy to their escape plans. The files, the stolen key, the charting of the heavy weather, with the help of the narrator, all falls into a tidy narrative structure. And then, after the teachers have escaped, the narrator writes:

And now evil things began to befall us because of the escape of our teachers.⁵

It is a clear presentation of cause and effect, dictated, I argue by Sehoza's choice of language - a de-ethnicized Swahili - and his apprehension and performance of a genre, the novel, that was Western referenced. Sehoza's narrator does not write that God punished them, nor for that matter is He called upon to explain any of these temporal matters. God is rather called upon to provide the strength to endure the punishment, not to explain the reasons for it. And this I think also suggests another point: the meaning, the significance, that which has been seen as the coherent thread that binds up all the narrative events into a unified structure, is presented here as a process, as something that is ongoing, not fully realized at this point. I do not mean to suggest that Sehoza's narrator ties each event up into a neat little package and stacks them all up in piles at the end of the narrative. Rather, the difference of his approach, a meaningful, designed narrative structure carefully realized, as opposed to Tippu Tip's apparently unconnected narrative structure, in comparison, shows that each part of the narrative can only be understood in terms of the totality of its relations with its other components.⁶ While Tippu Tip's ordering in his narrative remains illusive to the Western reader.

That this, and many other features found here, are also prominent features of biblical narratives is not without some significance. One may also note the striking parallels between the U-shaped narratives of the Bible and early 20th century Swahili prose narratives that follow Sehoza. In *A Year in Chains* one finds this marked structure of the ordering of experience which may be described as an almost formulaic quest a character undertakes: moving from a position of

original prosperity to a descent which ends in some form of humiliation and then a return, a deliverance, a resurrection if you will, to the original state, but now with knowledge in its broadest sense, completing the shape of the letter U. Sehoza's narrator begins happily enough administering to the needs of his community, but then when tensions increase with the war, he is harassed first by local authorities and then by the colonial powers themselves; his movements become more and more restricted, his freedoms curtailed; he is imprisoned; his rations are reduced; finally, his descent is completed, having suffered a fall from leader of the community to slave of the oppressors, his ultimate humiliation being realized in his role in a chain gang.

His deliverance from this state, his return to his community and to the position which he was forced to leave, occurs when he himself escapes and completes the dangerous journey back to his village. Shortly after this the occupying soldiers are captured and the original milieu in which the narrative began is recreated.⁷

In this second area, the arrangement of materials, again the reader cannot help but take note of the obvious design of the narrative structure which once more underscores this new approach to the ordering of experience. The materials are pointedly manipulated to illuminate aspects of the narrator's central idea: certain, specific effects which the First World War had on this specific Christian community in Tanzania. This arrangement of the narrative may be summarized as follows: first, there is an announcement of a theme, cast in a paradoxical manner yet in a familiar context; next, this theme is developed through common experience and illustrated by

anecdote; finally, deductions and a summary of the theme follow.⁸ Anyone at all familiar with the structure of the genre of the essay will recognize this narrative arrangement instantly. It occurs in Swahili prose in 1921, I think, because of this sudden and massive influence of biblical narratives on Swahili prose traditions and because this arrangement secures a conception of causality that is at once Western and Judeo-Christian and a way of thinking that characterizes the creation of continuous prose. This is not to argue that this form has simply been expropriated from the West, although it will have to be admitted that the genre of the novel is not indigenous to any African tradition that I know of. As I have already noted, literary forms are culturally bound; otherwise, one might argue, there would be no distinctions at all between something termed a German novel, an American novel, a French novel, or a Swahili novel. And further, that any literary form - new or old - must fulfil a certain function in a particular context and therefore have a localized, in both time and context, significance to a community of speakers. Such doubtless was the case with Sehoza's narrative. There must have been some need, some "slot" that this structure fell into that was already there in the culture. It was therefore "Swahili" as soon as it was recognized and accepted as a form of the literary expression of some aspect of Uswahili, however generalized the form may have been.

A second point I would like to make concerning the arrangement of materials, that again may remind one of biblical narratives, is the presentation of events by the narrator to suggest ambiguities or uncertainties, regarding the outcome of the narrative. Thus, while the narrator knows the outcome of all the events he is describing, in a

sense omniscient like the narrators in biblical narratives, he is also human and limited in his knowledge. We know that Sehoza's narrator lived through his imprisonment because he is telling us the story of it, but this does not seem to diminish the suspense of his narrative. He cannot tell us what is in the mind of another character because he cannot know this; he can however, make sense out of the consequences of another's actions as they affect him and thus understand where these actions belong in the ordering of his experience, a characteristic notably more abstruse in earlier Swahili prose narratives.

In the narrator's technique of expression, the third area I want to touch on, the reader will once again be struck by innovative techniques in which this new conception of causality is realized which may be seen as a concomitant shift in Swahili cultural identity or *Uswahili*, again reminding one of certain features from biblical narratives. In brief, these characteristics may be seen in the use of direct speech in dialogue to emphasize the narrator's central idea, in the use of inward speech to heighten credibility, in the realization of the narrator's characterization, in the introduction of the subconscious in the form of dreams, and in the use of other narrative techniques such as situational and verbatim repetition.

The use of dialogue to reveal character may not seem so innovative a technique in any tradition, it being so much of a mainstay of so many modern traditions; yet, it should be remembered, that as a deliberate technique of character exposition and development in Swahili letters, it was a fairly recent technique. In a first person narrative, like Tippu Tip's, where a narrator may narrate his feelings, his thoughts -

if given to - naturally direct speech of the narrator could be used very subtly to reveal aspects of his character that are not simply narrated to the reader in a straightforward manner. Yet instead, Tippu Tip uses his direct speech in an almost gratuitous manner. For example, when a group of Arabs arrive to consult with him about some slaves, and after a paragraph of narration describing them and their situation, when they become apprehensive about entering his tent, he writes so and so stayed behind, next came his cousin, then his brother who was wearing a sword, and then he writes "Enter" (*ingieni*)⁹ in direct speech. What this single word reveals about his character is difficult to say. Why this could not have been expressed in indirect speech like the rest of the exchange gives one pause.

Compare this, however, with Sehoza's narrative. It is, like Tippu Tip's, a first person narrative, but in the following typical example one will note that direct speech has been used to other advantages in the narrative: it is used as character revelation, as a device to heighten credibility, and as a means to increase suspense. Early in the account, after what I would describe as an introduction to both the situation and the narrator's character, the latter being presented as very passive, the reader is told of the new practice of soldiers standing outside of the church to catch people after worship. The narrator, incensed at this practice, immediately goes to the Akida and switches to direct speech:

"This is an evil custom; the church is not a government trap; you are disturbing us at our prayers."¹⁰

This reveals a side to his character not previously seen; it would not have been nearly as effective had he, as the narrator, told us indirectly what he had said that might have suggested this aspect of his character.

As a means to establish credibility, direct speech, by any character, is effective if used to reinforce or substantiate something capable of question in the narrative. This, next to inward speech and narrator commentary, is probably the most effective technique a narrator has at his disposal for establishing credibility and it is used often by Sehoza's narrator. As a means of increasing the suspense in the narrative, one may note the incident when the narrator learns of the war. It is reported through indirect speech that the narrator has learned in a letter whether or not war has been declared, but what this is, is not revealed until someone asks him what the news was. The answer is then reported in direct speech.

But what is even more remarkable in the techniques used to reveal character in *A Year in Chains* is the use of the subconscious in the form of dreams. The narrator has three dreams, each of which he tries to interpret as a foreshadowing of some temporal event in the narrative. His dream of a black snake wrapping itself around his legs is in its symbolic content and situational parallels to subsequent action not unlike Raskolnikov's dreams in *Crime and Punishment*. It cannot be seen as anything but another striking example of this ordering of experience, of imposing some design on apparent disorder. And in his first dream, which actually is two separate dreams which he recognizes as being connected, here one cannot help but see the parallels between this incident and Pharaoh's dreams which Joseph

interprets as the same dream.¹¹ This surely is one of the earliest examples in Swahili of such a technique, however elementary, of using the subconscious as a technique of character revelation. Yet the fact remains that the narrator has invited the reader in, so to speak, to reveal to him his interior, his subconscious thoughts; which incidentally contain direct speech. Presented here in this narrative, it may be argued, is the birth of *Homo Fictus* in Swahili: a character who has both an inside and an outside.

Two other narrative techniques bear noting, for I think that they are borne in on the reader as distinguishing: the use of verbatim repetition and the preoccupation with mechanical time as an arbitrary system of order. Of the first feature, verbatim repetition, again common in biblical narratives in the form of "leitwortstil",¹² one may point to the most pronounced example in Sehoza's narrative. This occurs when he is forced to carry loads that are too heavy for him and he repeats "I am dying" five times in the short space of 13 lines. The verbatim repetition of these words in these circumstances obviously has biblical parallels and this is the point: The verbatim repetition of these words constitutes not just the repetition of key words, but, more importantly, of thematic ideas suggesting, as Kavin and Alter have pointed out about this technique in biblical narratives, that they carry meanings they acquired "in earlier contexts" into the present and future contexts, "immensely complicating and interrelating the concerns and actions"¹³ in the narrative. The symbolic significance suggested here, as may be surmised, is the U-shaped form

of the narrative. It is both a physical and a spiritual death that these "Leitwörter" suggest; it is the Christian rite of passage, if you will.

Sehoza's narrative is lastly characterized by its preoccupation with mechanical time as a means of establishing arbitrary order upon events. One must keep reminding oneself that this is a narrative related by a prisoner in 1919 in the bush of Tanzania for at every turn we are presented with precise times of night and day as though the narrator had a watch before him at all times which he noted against each event that he narrates. We are constantly reminded, usually to the quarter hour, of the time at which events occurred, their duration, and their relationship to other events, a feature not insignificant given the innovative conception of this narrative structure. And these times are not the usual 'kasa robo asubuhi' used to mean a little before the start of day (6:45); rather, these are all times precisely set to fix some action in the narrative structure: "We arrived at 2:30 am; we left there at 4:00 am. He told me this at 10:30 pm. At 10:00 am I asked the soldier if I could step outside," and so on. Isolated, the times themselves have no significance and are indeed questionable - but seen in a different perspective, they may be noted as another Western-referenced technique used to impose specificity, design, order, on the narrative structure and hence experience. Everything, every event, every conversation, is then given a specific order, a definite sequence, is localized in a particular frame. Causal relationships are then further highlighted, made more clear and all of this again, I think, shows a new conception of viewing and presenting causality more in terms of a Western system of reference which brings

me back to my thesis: that these narrative prose features mirror deeper social shifts in the cultural identity of the Swahili; indeed, they may signal the beginnings of a new generalized less ethnic notion of *Uswahili* in addition to or perhaps in competition with previous, older, more regionalized notions of *Uswahili*.

Finally, let me close by admitting that the whole matter of identity in such linguistically complex areas as Africa is a complex problem to sort out, especially for a literary historian. To see literary form, however, as an expression of identity, of a culture's ethnicity, to see literary form as a mirror of ethnic heterogeneity, I think is a viable approach to reaching some understanding of a culture's identity. I have no doubt that many of the structural features that I have identified as innovative aspects of form in Swahili prose narratives and which have suggested themselves as symbols of shifts in cultural identification at various times, individually, may be found in other Swahili works in different periods and in other traditions. I do not think that it is possible to completely isolate features or works, one from another; this corpus of literature, like all corpora, is too manifold to be tidily placed in symmetrical frames. I do however think, that it may be claimed with the preceding qualifications, that the Swahili prose narrative tradition, from which the novel comes, may be traced to the choice and development of a de-ethnicized Swahili language and the subsequent literary framework these experiences were expressed in, which were seen, it may be argued, very much of an integral part of the system of reference which produced them. Many similar features of genre may be seen in narrative structures like the many biblical narratives which were translated into Swahili in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries and those found in Sehoza's *A Year in Chains*, a work which I think demonstrates a new Swahili concept of ordering experience, an idea that is realized and perhaps to a certain extent born in a new narrative form which presents itself as a significant expression of another view of Swahili cultural identity and thus illuminates the prominent relationship which exists between literary form and cultural identity.

NOTES

- 1) For a fuller discussion of this process, see Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp.60-62.
- 2) See, for example, the East African Literature Bureau's series *Helpful Hints for Authors*.
- 3) See also Geraldine E. Coldham, *A Bibliography of Scriptures in African Languages* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1966), pp.617-644 for individual publications of these works (although print-runs are not given here).
- 4) Tippu Tip, *Maisha ya Hamed bin Muhammed El Murjebi Yaani Tippu Tip*, translated by W.H. Whitely (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1966), p.49.
- 5) Samuel Sehoza, *Mwaka katika Minyororo* (London: U.M.C.A., 1921), p.42.
- 6) In this sense it may bring to mind the ideas relating to various interpretations associated with the dialectical materialism found in Pascal, Kant, Hegel, Marx and others.

- 7) This same narrative shape (of the U) is also fully developed in Sehoza's life of Augustine, *Augustino Mtakatifu* (London: S.P.C.K., 1928), it being a notable example of Christian hagiography and a life's story that certainly follows this process.
- 8) See Herbert Read, *English Prose Style* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), p.71; see also pp.87-180 for more about this arrangement.
- 9) Tippu Tip, p.45.
- 10) Sehoza, p.21.
- 11) Genesis, 41:25. There are, of course, dreams too in Islamic literature which may have affected this narrative; however, since Sehoza was an Anglican priest, this influence seems doubtful.
- 12) See Alter, p.92 for a fuller discussion.
- 13) Ibid. Also see Bruce F. Kawin, *Telling It Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972).

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