Paper Given at University of Nbo

13 July 1984
Some 20th Century Developments in Swahili Prose, 1900-1950

Institute of African Studies
University of Nairobi

J. Rollins
13 July 1984
1. Introduction: Here doing research in 2nd volume
And I want to present to you
an overview of the Swahili lit
history, in special regards to
prose, in a 50 year period, that
I see occurring from 1900-1950.

2. First, let me say that my studies are
genre studies and do not necessarily proceed
chronologically. Rather they are studies on
the development of form, prose types or
genres that see as
subtle extensions
manifestations of cultural proclamation
of ethnic or community (in the larger
sense) identity, value. When one shifts, there is a
subtle shift in the other.

3. Thus one cannot, I think, discuss
form apart from various historical, socio-cul-
tural aspects of a milieu's history or
whether a literature or literatures is/are
produced.

4. And thus what I present to you this
is, one might argue, only part of the
equation — the historical publishing record of
this period. But in so describing this
As Royce and others have shown, a no ethnic group can maintain a viable identity without signs and symbols that point to a distinctive identity.

Indeed, the very ability of an ethnic group to maintain boundaries depends on its ability to marshal an array of symbols such as genre.

But we all know what problems are involved in discussing "Swahili" as an ethnic group.
At the end of the 19th century, one could find in use at least 10 different terms, all slightly different from another as types, for prose literature: Kisa, Hadithi, hekaya, masimulizi, simu, ngano, Riwa, Wasifu, and so on. These, for the most part, have literary histories in Oriental literatures and have been seen to have come into E.A. by way of Islamic literatures, developing in Swahili, in both oral and written forms. I have discussed their historical shifts in ethnic identity, resulted in the uneven development of some types as cultural markers as symbols more favored at different times than others.

Also in the 19th century, I see something very significant happening that was to have an enormous effect on the development of Swahili prose types, the introduction of European translated works, at first Biblical and Church-related literature, and later school texts, in large measure.

These began in 1844 in earnest with Krüpf and were realized in the great translations known as the Mawrella, Zanzibar, Rechl, and Union versions of the Bible.
What developed very early in the 20th century, and indeed in the latter part of the 19th, was a split between a literature that was a reflection of Uswahili as a culturally marked ethnicity and a language and a 'culture' that did not manifestly embrace Uswahili. Rather, the latter was a language and an attendant literature that was deliberately de-ethnicized, a language that deliberately did not demarcate cultural boundaries. This is the single most important event in Swahili after independence in the 20th century.

Thus what one had was a language-literature that did away with ethnic bonds in favor of naturalistic tones and thus prevented the situation that would call for a simultaneous expression of loyalty to both an ethnic group and a nation comprised of many different ethnic groups. There were in fact two Swahili literatures: an ethnic and a non-ethnic. This has caused in-exusable confusion over the years but it is very obvious that the Swahili ethnic culture had to remain different from the national Swahili culture for obvious reasons: One could not be ethnic and national at the same time, although the two phenomena share many common features. But this is a matter more for anthropologists than a literary historian.
With these translations—same good, same bad—came an inevitable consequence, which occurs in all context literatures and languages and to which there should be no values attached (good or bad), and that is borrowing.

In the case of these religious texts—and I will name some here in my chart—one finds, because of the unique nature of the works translated—a borrowing of more than just a few words or concepts: Because the Bible is a unique prose narrative arranged in a narrative sequence unlike any other prose work and because of its wide circulation in Swahili, during the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, it, I feel, significantly affected the development of a line of Swahili prose types not previously known in Swahili—what I would describe as de-ethnicized Swahili prose.
This of course was due to missionaries desire to find one suitable dialect

c. to produce one Bible acceptable
b. to all, coastal & upcountry

c. to rid Swahili of Arabic assoc. too closely allied to Islam (Roehl especially)
da. Gov't too wanted to issue documents in a standard language, Kiswahili sanifka, (missionary)

All of these texts - maintained them -
developed in a narrative fashion unlike Traditional narratives of the 19th century.

Let me give you an example:

Tippu Tip

Flat character: horizontal narrative - no narrative strategy
Arabic chronicles: no clear Western sense of Cause & Effect

This is not BAD - just another way of telling a story.
He lingers, repeats himself, jumps around...

View of causality: Tippu Tip takes the world as it
is given. It is not put in order by him

Bible + other texts (over here)

Narrative strategy - plan, narrator knows the outcome at beginning - idea & illustration, U-shaped narrative. View of causality different. Attempt to sort out all cause & effect - this is why these things happen before hand.

And this of course is the fundamental structure of the novels in all languages. Indeed
Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*

Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*

Features found in narrative structure of Bible:

1. Unity of design: where each part belonged in a particular place to secure some unity of thesis.

2. Material was clearly manipulated to illustrate writer's central idea.

3. General Headings
   - Conception of narrative: set out like an essay, which effects 1st way had in creating - everything related.
   - Arrangement of materials: U-shaped narrative, materials manipulated to reinforce this.
   - Technique of expression: indirect speech, direct speech to reveal character - Tippe Top pictures.
   - Heighten credibility: use of dreams, birth of *Homo faber*.
   - Verbatim repetition: mechanical time as artificial means of imposing order.
The Bible is called the father of the novel

Now when one considers this literary fact and notices the other translations of English novels into Swahili, one may apprehend this line in my graph.

Between the years 1900-1950 there were some 35% works of prose published in Swahili and 34% of them were written by Europeans. (Look at chart)

- Unidramatic Swahili
- English syntax
- Kitia buti ni kikeja
- You metu
- Interlanguage dialogue - Eastman
- Not Kiswahili Nasa
- Lang used by 2 non-Eastman speakers
- Basic structure and word order

With the introduction of the EAB and the EALB, the institutionalized use of a de-ethnicized Swahili came into its own. This is clearly and firmly established and this is the line it comes from.

Now I maintain that there are two different currents in Swahili prose - one coming from this de-ethnicized tradition from the English Bible and another drawn here which is still Ethnic Swahili literature.
Ethnic Swahili lit.

This is a literature that always existed throughout this period but in lesser known expressions.
I'm talking about little books like Musina Nabii Mohammed, or the many translations of Suras from the Qur'an and Hadith.

Like these: EXAMPLES

Use of language as a cultural marker - an ethnic boundary

Heji Mohammed & milieu

Also oral lit. written down as Ethnic

Hekaya za Mabunias, 1001 Nights, Stesves Tales

System of causality: Islamic - oral formula

Arrangement of material: Themes

Structure: like Arabic literature

Also during this time, Schuza, Kayamba, Imbotela, Dua, Shaitan - I put them here because of their combinations of use of Sw. & narr. structure.

(ethnic in some cases)
Thus I see this period as perhaps the most critical in the development of this very important body of literature, for the seeds of these two traditions—ethnic and de-ethnic Swahili prose—were sown and grown in it.

Whether one will be subsumed by the other or whether they will continue to exist side by side remains to be seen. I have heard people express both views. I'd like to know what you think.

I see signs that the ethnic Swahili will always exist on this small scale as long as there are people who continue to see this literature as a symbol, a sign of their ethnicity, and hold on to their distinctive use of Kiswahili as a barrier of cultural identity that separates them from other groups of
Speakers who attach no culture to the language, but may refer only to national symbols in the language.
Ethnic lit

Not just Islamic - any ethnic group must manifest signs and symbols like genre. Genre is in narrative structure, in tropes, in theme, and in means of expression.

So I find ethnicity here in structure, stuff, and means of expression.

= Genre

de-Ethnic lit

All Western lit.

Amaa hawa, tabish, waatu, hugo hawa, tabish, Allah
mwegezi mungu

He who does not respect people
Miss L.A. Gwinyo  
Permanent Secretary  
Office of the President  
Republic of Kenya

The enclosed represent notes taken in this short 6 week period of research. I fear that you will find them disorganized since the attempt gaps I needed filled were scattered throughout my plan for the second volume. These notes are, however, faithful reproductions of the interviews discussions I had here with the people noted on them. 

I have included a general schema of the book indicating where I think certain works belong. This plan I have discussed with everyone I spoke with and indeed it was used as a basis for my informal presentation at the University which was given on the 13th of July.
I shall send to you a draft of the book as soon as it is done—probably in December—then when it is published, the required three copies. Naturally I will have it minded to acknowledge the cooperation I received from you in your office in the Preface.

Should you wish to contact me in any regard, please write to me at:

I am also a Fortini, describing the developments of prose types set in a historical framework in which may be seen various influences—socio-cultural and otherwise—on form. Thus the relationship between the two—lit. form and cultural identity—is unescapable.