The canonisation of Kiswahili poetry through the metric system: An examination of the debate between the ‘conservatives’ and the ‘liberals.’

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Preamble

For a long time, Kiswahili poetry has been constructed formalistically by strictly following the metric form. This has happened for several centuries, even prior to the advent of writing. Whenever griots recited or chanted poetry before audiences, mainly in extempore scenarios, their tact and ingenuity in observing the metre was a key parameter used in identifying the best among them. With the advent of literacy and writing, it therefore followed that all the Kiswahili poetry which was written had to incorporate the metric pattern.

Tanzania’s Kaluta Abeid went further and outlined metric rules which were to be followed by every poet. Indeed the metre was prided as a distinguishable trademark of Kiswahili poetry. The upshot of this was that Kiswahili poetry was canonised owing to the metric rules. However, in the 1970’s, there emerged “liberals” who started composing Kiswahili poetry without necessarily observing the metre. These were mainly formal education scholars who had graduated from colleges and universities. They were however denigrated as “weaklings” and “rebels” by the conservatives, but they stuck to their guns and never dropped their new mode of composing poetry. By and by, they got followers, and soon, their new way of writing poetry became yet another canon in Kiswahili poetry.

The liberals new way of writing poetry was a refusal of the monolithic manner of composing poetry which they deemed as not only hackneyed, but also enslaving. Interestingly, the new form of composing Kiswahili poetry also engendered the incorporation of critical and sensitive themes, unlike in the past when, thematically, poetry bordered on praise and counsel. This paper will make a critical analysis of the debate between the conservatives and liberals, which canonised Kiswahili poetry, and postulate that the importance of the move taken by the later cannot be overemphasised, not only in engendering democratic breathing space to the genre, but also in other spheres of life.
Statement of purpose

This paper is geared towards arguing that the new mode of writing Kiswahili poetry amid fulmination from conservatives was not only brilliant and bold, but was also a harbinger of freedom in other fields, for example politics and economics. For example, in Kenya, the new form of poetry sold new ideas to readers, and assisted them in starting to interrogate issues. The poetry of Alamin Mazrui or Kithaka wa Mberia, for example, dwelt on the issue of the working masses in post-independent Africa, hence, a sensitising agent to many readers. This paper will argue that the debate between conservatives and liberals over the formular of composing Kiswahili poetry was welcome, especially, the experiment of writing it in a new manner, because it served as an agent of creating democratic space in other sectors of our countries. The thesis of this paper will be that development and progress of any nature entails synthesising the good that a people have with the good that they learn from other people, since nobody, possibly except God, can claim exclusivity of perfection of his or her own ideas.

Some of the References

Some of the references for this paper will be drawn from the following authors and critics:

- Kaluta Abeid
- Sheikh Ali Nassor
- Mathias Mnyampala
- Kithaka wa Mberia
- Euphraise Kezilahabi
- Kahigi, Mulokozi
- Alamin Mazrui
- Ndeda Wallah