

TAARAB AND SWAHILI PROSE*

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Introduction

The osmotic relationship between oral and written literature has been neglected for a long time by literary criticism in post-independence Tanzania: the development of new genres and the related debates about literary values¹ have until the end of the Eighties mostly attracted the attention of the scholars, making thus marginal the study of oral literature until the recent awakening of critical studies.² Residual were especially those oral forms, like contemporary oral poetry, not wholly "traditional" - coming from a pre-colonial past or alluding to unchanging features -, nor enough "modern" and "progressive" to be assigned much interest in scholarship.³

This paper is a tentative to approach the question from a different perspective, presenting the case of one kind of oral poetry - *taarab* songs - , which has been dealt within creative writing, from the pre-independence era until our days - creative literature, being not bound to categorising and coherence as criticism is, sometimes succeeding better than a too "scientifically-oriented" criticism in containing the subtle relations between opponents, like orality and writing, tradition and modernity, élite and popular arts

In the following pages I will discuss three Swahili prose works, namely *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad* by Shaaban Robert (1958), *Utengano* by S.A. Mohamed (1980) and *Siku njema* by K. Walibora (1996), in which *taarab* appears in the narration - both thematically and stylistically -, evidencing the continuities but also stressing the different ways in which symbolism and literary techniques are employed by the authors.

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¹ *Ujamaa* cultural politics have directly or indirectly stimulated the development of new genres, provoking very relevant debates among writers, intellectuals and politicians about the functions and aesthetics of literature. Cf. Jan Blommaert (1999).

² Here I quote a few examples of this renewed attention to orality: S.A.M. Khamis "From oral to written form: a tentative study of the development of Swahili poetry", *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* (Osaka) 1993; Joseph Mbele "Wimbo wa miti: an example of Swahili women's poetry", *African Languages and Cultures*, 9,1 (1996); at a recent Swahili Kolloquium (Bayreuth), the presentation by Ridder Samson of the work of Haji Gora Haji, ("Tungo za Mzee Kimbunga: Haj Gora Haj." *Swahili Forum* 6 (1999): 21-33); S.A.K. Mlacha (1996) has devoted specific attention to *taarab* poetry in: "Women's images in Kiswahili poetry and *taarab* songs: *Gender relations and women's images in the media*, ed. by D.A.S. Mbilinyi & C.K. Omari. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.

³ I use the brackets conscious of the simplification implicit in these labels. In the field of Swahili poetry the debate raised by the introduction of the free verse has been complex and variegated (cf. Alamin Mazrui "Con-servatism and Liberalism in Swahili Poetry: the Linguistic Dimension", *RAL*, vol.23, 4, 1992), but generally modernism in literature was associated to more progressive political views. Cf. J. Blommaert, 1999:145.

Taarab as literary theme

In Swahili literature the first work where we find reference to *taarab* is not a fictional prose but the biography of Siti binti Saad by Shaaban Robert. The portrait of this famous singer from Zanzibar⁴ represents the preceding literary model to the image of female singer depicted in the novels *Utengano* by S.A. Mohamed and *Siku njema* by K. Walibora.

Shaaban Robert describes Siti as an extraordinary personality, a woman from a poor village in Zanzibar who went to town and became a famous and envied singer, promoting the Swahili language through the performance of *taarab* songs.

Disclosing her life the author has conveyed a very positive image: a woman active, curious, communicative, full of initiative - for instance she introduces the *natiki* dance in the *taarab* performance - but clever enough to not transcend the limits of decency and morality in her society. Although the modern reader may feel a touch of paternalism, at that time these values were very modern and progressive in Swahili-speaking literature and society, opening the way to the optimistic vision of more equal gender relations in society.

In the novel *Utengano* the path that leads the main characters to a new society is very hard and treacherous: Maimuna, escaping her father's tyranny in search for freedom and more respectful human relations, plunges into prostitution and alcoholism before regaining her dignity and the perspective of new human and sentimental relations.

On the way to her personal reaffirmation a vital step is represented by the singing activity. One day by chance a manager discovers Maimuna's beautiful voice and proposes her to sing and dance at the Rumbalola Hotel. She becomes pretty famous and her father Maksududi comes to know about her reading an announcement on a newspaper. Then he decides to go to the hotel to beg her forgiveness and when Maimuna appears, unaware of her father's presence, singing lyrics full of sorrow and despair, the scene has a great emotional impact on the reader who participates to this intense moment of *taarab*. For Maimuna sung poetry is the best means to express her deep feelings - she is talking to her heart, not to someone - and to Maksududi it is the best means to understand the state of mind of his daughter - while other people are rejoicing - and feel profoundly ashamed.

*Kama zina ufunguo,
Nyoyo zingefedheheka, fedheheka, fedheheka,
Nyoyo zingefedheheka (Utengano, p.125)*

In this scene I see a touching representation of the complex, non-straightforward form of communication typical of *taarab* performances, in other words the fusion of players, singers and listeners in one atmosphere and infinite meanings - the poetic message getting beyond the intentions of the author and living in the interpretation of the fruitors in a certain context.

⁴ Siti binti Saad was the first East African woman to have her voice recorded on discs, and her songs in Swahili are still remembered as a venue for communicating the issues and concerns of the people. (Fair 1998)

It is probably this vital aspect of *taarab* poetry that makes it so pervasive in Swahili culture, spreading through performances and mass-media (radio, audiocassettes) and being evoked transversally in popular forms of communication, like *kanga* writings⁵, and 'elite' productions like modern novels.⁶

After the story of Maimuna the image of a *taarab* singer reappears in a recent novel titled *Siku Njema*: the mother of the main character is a *taarab* singer called Zainabu Makame. At the beginning of the novel her son Msanifu Kombo, known as Kongoweza Mswahili, narrates in first person Zainabu's life, since childhood strictly tied to *taarab* singing. She was a very clever child and wished to go to secondary school - differently from her brothers -, but the lack of money forced her to give up education. Then she decided at least to pursue her passion for singing - she used to sing in school bands - and became a *taarab* singer beloved overall in East Africa.

This character remind us immediately of Siti binti Saad - her name is in fact explicitly recalled in the novel⁷-, not only because of her poor childhood and the great fame acquired thank to a courageous choice, but also because of her personality, strong, clever, passionate of literature, but at the same time sweet and humble.

In the novel this female image plays an important symbolic role: she transmits to her son the love for Kiswahili language and literature, the search for the truth, the ideal of a better world. Thank to her encouragement he cultivates his passion for Kiswahili and poetry, reading books, going to school, but also visiting old people in search for oral knowledge:

Niliwahusudu wazee wengi wa Tanga kwa umahiri wao katika Kiswahili na kunga zake za ushairi ... Mmoja wao, Mzee Uledi Makali, aliyekuwa mtambaji hadithi hodari, alinifundisha jinsi ya kuimba mashairi katika mahadhi mbalimbali (Siku Njema, p.6).

Through literary creation the writer has succeeded in emanating a very smooth, multifaceted conception of Swahili literature, where there is no rigid boundary between orality and writing, between tradition and modernity, popular and elite arts.

Again in *Siku njema*, like in the preceding works, *taarab* is much more than musical entertainment, it is literature and a vital form of communication, and the main character in the crucial moments of his life listens to his mother's wisdom remembering the *taarab* verses she used to sing, like on the day of her death:

*Milele kuishi, ni muhali sana
Aliye aushi, bado sijamwona
Maisha ni moshi, ujue bayana (Siku Njema, p.13).*

⁵ Often *kanga* names are taken from *taarab* lyrics, cf. Yahya-Othman (1997).

⁶ Carol M. Eastman (1984) has shown how in Swahili communicative competence various oral genres have distinct sets of rules, but can also cross-communicate. In my view the feature of cross-communication can be extended beyond orality.

⁷ "Kama Siti binti Saad asimuliwaye na Shaaban Robert, jina lake mama liliandikwa mioyoni mwa wapenzi wa muziki kwa wino usioweza kufutika." (Siku Njema, p.3).

Taarab poetry as stylistic contamination

In the three prose works I am examining in this paper *taarab* is present not only as a literary theme: another common feature of these narratives is the insertion of *taarab* poetry within the textual structure.

The difference between the work by S. Robert and the two following novels is however striking: whilst in the biography of Siti binti Saad the lyrics are all quotations (either sung by Siti or by her enemies), in the novels *Utengano* and *Siku njema* poetry is an integrating part of the fictional text - revealing a more conscious employment of genre contamination as literary technique.

In the book *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad* the quotation of songs is functional to the depicting of Siti's personality, of her moral strength. As soon as she was getting famous, for example, aggressive and envious enemies composed a song ridiculing Siti for her humble origins and ugliness. She answered immediately, and her comment was decent but efficacious at once:

*Si hoja nzuri
Na sura jamali,
Kuwa mtukufu
Na jadi kubeli,
Hasara ya mtu-
Kukosa akili (Wasifu wa binti Saad, p. 29).*

Songs to blame, songs to praise, songs to self-defence: overall the text the author has employed the lyrics in order to give a more accurate, realistic description of Siti's life and personality through the means of poetic communication, - conveying at the same time the vision of a modern, respectful society.

In the novel *Utengano* instead of quotations we find the use of lyrics as part of the narration itself, revealing thus an experimenting attitude of the writer, playing a sort of *intratextuality* between the Swahili novel and *taarab* poetry, between a prose genre that since its origin in Western literature has been the most open to self-irony and contamination and a poetic genre deeply rooted into Swahili popular communication.

In the novel *Utengano* the poetic parts - including the modern poem *Kilio cha wanyonge* - are related to the fictional texture through a realistic *nexus*, in the case of *taarab* poetry all the lyrics are sung by the character Maimuna, who became for a while a famous singer.

The lyrics of the songs have no direct reference to Maimuna's life and personality, but they are associated to her condition and to some themes of the novel under a symbolic and emotional aspect, like in the scene mentioned in the former paragraph. As a further example, one day Maimuna was singing while doing homework in her poor and decadent house, when a manager by accident listened to her beautiful voice:

*Pindi aingiapo nzi kwenye chakula,
Kukitamani siwezi katu kukila,
Mwenye nafusi azizi hakiri dhila,
Hakiri dhila, hakiri dhila. (Utengano, p. 117)*

These verses are indirectly referring to the difficult condition of this female character, but also, in my view, alluding to misery, personal freedom, class differences and exploitation, all themes deeply investigated in the novel.

In the novel *Siku njema* the use of *taarab* poetry in the narration is also at the same time realistic and highly symbolic: in most cases the main character remembers the verses of his mother's songs, especially in moments of sorrow or fear, like when Selemani menaced to kill him, and the words of Zainabu came to his mind to reassure him:

*Unapapatika, looh! Umefiwa
Unayo mashaka, na tele shakawa
Mwanangu kumbuka, wakati ni dawa*

In this scene, like in other circumstances of the novel, the use of *taarab* poetry emotionally underlines the mother's wisdom and the love for poetry that she transmits to her son.

Both in *Utengano* and *Siku njema*, thus, *taarab* poetry is charged with emotional and symbolic energy and is associated to a more general employ of poetic forms - be it in meter and rhyme or in free verses - suggesting the use of genre contamination as literary technique.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to approach the relationship between orality and written literature not from the point of view of criticism, but of creative writing, considering that the practise of literature itself efficaciously questions rigid labels like orality and writing, modernity and tradition, élite and popular arts. The analysis of the thematic and stylistic representation of *taarab* in some Swahili writings has pointed out that especially in the works *Utengano* and *Siku njema*, the cross-communication between poetry and prose has been interestingly employed by the writers in the construction of the novel.

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