

## THE DIALOGUE OF AN AUTHOR: KEZILAHABI'S *KAPUTULA LA MARX*

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### 1. Introduction

In Swahili Forum III Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková (1996) discussed some of the political criticisms, expressed in the form of literary motifs and imagery, that emerged in the works of the Tanzanian Swahili writer Euphrase Kezilahabi since 1978 onwards. She situates this emergent critique in the new political discursive context where critical reviews of the Ujamaa policy could now be publicly voiced since President Nyerere himself admitted the failure of Ujamaa in his delivery *Azimio la Arusha baada ya Miaka Kumi (The Arusha Declaration Ten Years Later, 1977)*. According to Bertoncini this admission "clear[ed] the way for critical literary works" of which Kezilahabi satirical play *Kaputula la Marx (Marx's Shorts, 1978)* and his short story *Mayai - Waziri wa maradhi (Eggs - Minister of Sickness, 1978)* were among the first.

The direct link that Bertoncini establishes between Nyerere's admission and the emergence of critical literary works, as if writers waited and longed for a sign of approval, is somewhat questionable. First of all, Nyerere did not admit the failure of his Ujamaa policy and beliefs, but only the failure of the Tanzanian politicians to live up to the code of conduct stipulated in the Declaration of Arusha. He pleaded for a renewed moral effort of the political leaders - just like President Kapera in *Kaputula la Marx* does when his ministers fail him.

Secondly, in Swahili scholarship there has always been great interest for a particular sociological question, namely that of the impact of Ujamaa politics and the Arusha Declaration on various domains of intellectual life, especially literature. A Lihamba for instance has classified the many Swahili plays according to their relation with the Arusha Declaration (Lihamba 1985). Other scholars have focused on the emergence or renovation of poetic genres within the Arusha incentive (e.g. Harries 1972, Ndulute 1985, Bulcaen 1994). Still others have discussed Ujamaa and the Arusha Declaration as a frame of reference for social-realistic and engaged Swahili literature (e.g. Harries 1971, Ohly 1981, Bulcaen 1994, Blommaert 1997). But apart from a meeting of Nyerere with some writers in 1968 and an articulation of Kawawa of the aims of the 'new poetry' (both events reported in Harries 1972), there is no trace of any directive on literature by Tanzanian politicians. I believe that socio-historical analyses of Swahili literature should allow for more internal explanations of the emergence and development of literary genres. One aspect of Swahili literature is for instance the fact that most writers are scholars who work in an university and international African context.

Essential to that context then is that most African intellectuals feel it their duty to contribute, in an often theoretical and critical vein, to the nation-building and development of their countries.

Thirdly, one has to take into account that Kezilahabi has always taken a veiled critical stance towards Tanzanian and Ujamaa politics. His first collection of poems, *Kichomi* (1974), for instance already contains a critical poem about the promises of Ujamaa (*Kuchambua Mchele*). Bertoncini (1980, 1989) herself has also drawn attention to this early critical stance. Kezilahabi situates the political question of African socialism within broader social problems like the fate of the peasantry, the relation between traditional and modern values, and the emergence of a young and angry urban class of primary school leavers (Kezilahabi 1980:78). Although in his early works the author suggested that rural life and Ujamaa organization might be solutions to these problems, he has always stressed that Tanzanian intellectuals and politicians did not pay enough attention to these problems. His novel *Dunia Uwanjo wa Fujo* (*The world is a battleground*, 1975) is an attempt at exploring these problems in the context of independent pre-Arusha Tanzania and of emergent Ujamaa Tanzania (for a defense of his particular political commitment, see Kezilahabi 1980).

But it is true that since 1978 his critique was more outspoken and politically oriented. Kezilahabi's critique can be extremely concrete or highly metaphorized. Bertoncini (1996) traces these two forms of criticisms in his play and second collection of poetry, *Karibu Ndani* (*Come on in*, 1988). The audience or reader immediately recognises Nyerere, his words and his way of speaking. There are unmediated references to anti-democratic facts of Tanzanian politics. On the other hand the play and poems abound with symbols and imagery that refer to popular, traditional, modern and international understanding and contexts.

In this article I would like to present a few additional facts about and analyses of Kezilahabi's *Kaputula la Marx*<sup>1</sup>. Through an analysis of the intertextual links I hope to show which political and literary contexts are relevant to the understanding of *Kaputula la Marx*. In the end I wish to refine the above-mentioned deterministic influence of Tanzanian political discourse on Swahili literature. The pungency and vigor of Kezilahabi's sarcasm cannot be explained by Nyerere's allowance for critique. I will also discuss the position of *Kaputula la Marx* in the development of Swahili and African literature in general, on the level of content as well as form. Before developing my argument a summary of the contents of the play is in order (cf. also Bertoncini 1996).

The play consists of six acts that alternate between a bleak prison setup with six prisoners, referred to by numbers, who present themselves as political prisoners, and a farcical government under the heading of President Kapera. The play starts with the attempts of the prisoners to gather information about the current political situation 'out there'. The dramatic scene here reminds one of the early plays of Beckett and other absurdist playwrights. At the same time (act 2) the President, after reading Marx and

<sup>1</sup> In Bulcaen (1991) I translated the play into Dutch and analysed it in a Bakhtinian perspective. I have also translated the play into English, but this version still has to be published (as does the original Swahili text). In translating and interpreting the play I could rely on the knowledge and generosity of E. Kezilahabi, J.S. Madumulla, J. Blommaert, R. Mabala, P. Mlama, M.M. Mulokozi and E. Bertoncini.

others, decides to change his politics, to the benefit of his people. This is to be realised by putting on 'the short trousers of Marx' and a Mao vest. Both are oversized (Kezilahabi uses the amplifying connective *Kaputula la Marx*, a phrase that can thus be translated as 'the baggy shorts of Marx') and impractical. His ministers oblige and wear the same garments. They subsequently leave in act 4 for a quest to the land of Equality. Despite their efforts and the directions of the giant Korchnoi Brown, they do not succeed because the ministers are not up to it. President Kapera nevertheless opts for another attempt to reach Equality. The prisoners in the meantime (act 3) have performed several little imaginary scenes that comment upon the political situation of the country. Most importantly their leader, Mwangaza Africanus (the only prisoner with a name), has read out a message to the leaders of the free African states in which the prisoners defy the politics of those leaders. At the beginning of the fifth act we learn that five prisoners have been pardoned. After these four long, intense and richly symbolic acts follow two short final acts that demonstrate a few further aspects of the sad political situation such as torture or the blindness of the members of parliament and ministers. In the final act the revolution, prepared by Mwangaza Africanus, overthrows the government of Kapera. Kapera himself is betrayed by all of his ministers. The laughter of Korchnoi Brown ends the play.

## 2. History and context of the play

Euphrase Kezilahabi wrote *Kaputula la Marx* quickly after the university students' protest demonstration of 5 March 1978<sup>2</sup>. At the University of Dar es Salaam there had been a long history of student protest and governmental retaliation. The much contested visit of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time of the Shaba rising, the Wete Pemba decisions of 17 January 1978 by which Members of Parliament raised their wages and privileges, the disastrous economic and health situation and the generally perceived failure of Ujamaa politics fuelled the students into action. Because of manipulations by the vice-chancellor, the students were not able to get a hearing with President Nyerere and decided to hold a protest march from the University campus up to the Parliament. They were forcefully halted by the police but managed to read aloud their message to the Members of Parliament. Nyerere expelled the protesting (some 350) students from the university and banned the DUSO student organisation. After negotiations, in which Nyerere was informed of the background of the students protests, all students were re-admitted to the university<sup>3</sup>. I will return to that message of the students in the following section.

E. Kezilahabi sympathized completely with the actions of the students and was shocked by the unwillingness of the university and government authorities to lend an ear to the criticisms of the students. In a very short timespan he produced a text, relying a few ideas that he had been developing over the last years. The play was not produced on stage but the typed

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication by E. Kezilahabi. This was not the first time that Kezilahabi reacted in literary form to an historical political event. The plot of his novel *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (1975) was inspired by the murder in 1972 of Dr Kleru, Regional Commissioner of Iringa, during an Ujamaa meeting.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of this and other student demonstrations and protests, see Kangero (1984) and Peter & Mvungi (1985).

manuscript circulated among the scholars and the students who received it enthusiastically. The prominent playwright Penina Muhando Mlamba (1978) wrote an introduction to the play in which she praised the ground-breaking dramatic structure and intense political satire.

In fact, on 2 February 1978, a play by her and her colleagues Amendina Lihamba and Ndyanao Balisidya was produced at the university in honor of the first anniversary of the Chama cha Mapinduzi. In their *Harakati za Ukombozi (The Revolutionary Struggle)* the authors opted for a loose structure of subsequent scenic events in which improvisation and prudent satire were dominant. Kezilahabi's play demonstrates some structural similarities to *Harakati za Ukombozi* but goes a lot further in its satire.

Very quickly the name of the play and the author spread. But when Tanzania Publishing House decided to publish the play, the publisher got a strong hint from the government not to go ahead with the publication, and so happened. The author himself never experienced any personal harassment because of his play. In September 1988 the play was finally performed at the occasion of the seventh Art Festival of the Chuo cha Sanaa of Bagamoyo. Last-year students performed the play three times to the great amusement of the public. However, during the first performance, which took place in front of the CCM headquarters in Bagamoyo, the CCM-members walked out in indignation<sup>4</sup>. The play had lost nothing of its pungency and actuality.

### 3. A dialogue with the times

In their message to the Tanzanian Members of Parliament, the students pointed out that the Wete Pemba decisions go against the resolutions of the Arusha Declaration and the CCM constitution. Being an elected representative "has become a question of exploitation and establishing economic power of those so elected" (quoted in Peter & Mvungi 1985:193). The students demanded a reversal of the decisions and furthermore, basic economic changes and a renewed pan-African revolutionary effort.

Working in this 'urgent' and highly politicized context, Kezilahabi took the students' message as a model for the message that the prisoners in his play deliver to the leaders of Africa during an imaginary protest march which they organize in their cell. This scene comes in the middle of the third act, i.e. in the middle of the play itself, and is quite long. The leader of the prisoners, the revolutionary Mwangaza Africanus, first describes the fate of a demonstration that the prisoners allegedly held that morning in front of the Headquarters of the Organisation of Free African States. The demonstration was met by brutal police force. It is clear that Kezilahabi refers here to the fate of the student protest march mentioned above. The second part of the prisoners' message concerns the wages and privileges of the African leaders. Some phrases are literally taken out of the students' message, and the message contains

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication of Henry Maeda and Christa Kamba who directed the play

references to the economic hardships of the African people similar to those expressed in the students' message.

After this prisoners' message follows another imaginary scene performed by the prisoners in which some of them are the victim of a serious instance of class justice. This scene recalls the harsh and unjust fate that the university students met after their protest march. Although act 3 ends on a note of fatigue and despair, the reading aloud of the message can be understood as the beginning of the revolution. In the fifth, short act only one, non-political prisoner is still locked up. He gets word of Mwangaza Africanus who reports on the revolutionary activities of the former prisoners. In the sixth and final act then the revolution breaks out.

Kezilahabi wrote his play in reaction to a concrete historic event and in constant interaction with the participants of that event. The first and immediate audience of the text will have understood this fairly unmediated intertextual link with the original students' message. The prisoner's message is a crucial moment in the play, not only for the above-sketched denouement, but also for understanding what the author wishes to communicate with his text and how he situates himself in the contemporary literary, social and political discourse and reality. In short, understanding and analyzing intertextual links gives insight into the dialogue that an author has with the context that surrounds her and her work (Bahktin 1981, 1986).

Up to act 3 the audience has understood that President Kapera stands for President Nyerere. Although act 1 takes place in a bleak, nameless place and the name of the country is never revealed throughout the play, many of the things that the prisoners observe through the hole in the prison wall refer to Tanzania. When we meet President Kapera in the second act, his way of speaking, his sudden decisions, his moralizing stance and so on remind us of Nyerere. But it is in act 4 that the most elaborated intertextual link with Tanzanian politics surfaces. The whole trip of Kapera's cabinet is one grand metaphorical depiction of the political-ideological development of Nyerere. It is striking that this metaphorical trip comes after the prisoners' message. Act 3 has sharpened the attention of the audience, made the play relevant and painful to their own lives. It drives the point of the farcical act 4 all the more home. The allegory is not only understood within the history of Nyerere and his one-party state, but also with relation to the recent, critical experiences of the university students and their sympathizers. This particular structural embedding of various intertextualities, in itself innovative for Swahili drama (cf. following section), makes for a well-structured play in which the message of the author cannot be ignored.

Obviously, for readers acquainted with Tanzanian politics recognition is quickly established. For those less well-informed, the text is more ambiguous. In fact, Kezilahabi explicitly ambiguates his text by including elements from the discourse and politics of other African leaders and countries. The prisoners always speak of Africa, their message is addressed to the leaders of Africa, the name of Kapera's country is never mentioned, Kapera has a goatee and a fly-whisk (like Jomo Kenyatta), his christian language also reminds us of Kenneth Kaunda, and

so on<sup>5</sup>. Although Kapera is immediately recognisable as Nyerere, the persona is framed into a more general image of the semi-dictatorial African leader. These elements of other intertextual links point at the attempt of the author to situate the Tanzanian example into the broader African context.

#### 4. Development of Swahili Drama

The intertextual links so far discussed relate to political discourse and events. The exceptional position of *Kaputula la Marx* within the whole of Swahili drama and literature, as confirmed for instance by Penina Muhando Mluma (1978) and Fikeni Senkoro (1990), can also be explained by reference to intertextualities, as long as intertextuality is also understood to exist on the formal and generic level.

First of all, there is the resemblance of *Kaputula la Marx* to *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) by Wole Soyinka. The topic of Soyinka's play might be different (the struggle between traditional and modern African rulers), but the words, thinking and activities of Kongi and Kapera reflect each other. Both are surrounded by similar personae, their cabinets (the Secretary of Kongi vs. Kapera's Minister of Foreign Affairs) and the critical antagonists (the Aweri counsel vs. the prisoners), and both are betrayed and overthrown. Of course, both plays rely intertextually on the general image of the African semi-dictator and his politics. This image has not emerged in the first instance in critical writing, but through autobiographical writings by these moralistic and prestigious leaders and various hagiographic forms of literature about them and the struggle for independence and development. In Zambia for instance, there is the autobiography of Kaunda (*Zambia shall be free*, 1966) and the *Black Mamba Plays* (1971) of Kabwe Kasoma that depict the struggle for independence, next to all kinds of popular songs, small plays, khanga messages, etc. Very often the action of this literature is situated in an imaginary or unnamed country. In short, the above-sketched framing by Kezilahabi of his personae and their activities into a local as well as international context is common to the development of African literature.

In fact, Kezilahabi's familiarity with the whole of African literature, critical as well as hagiographic, high as well as popular, contributes to the exceptionality of his play. Another factor of that exceptionality is Kezilahabi's affinity with (Western) absurd theatre. I already mentioned the Beckettian setup of the prisoners' act<sup>6</sup>, but there are also resemblances between

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<sup>5</sup> At this point I should mention that Bertocini (1996:141) is mistaken when she suggests that the greeting formulae used privately by President Kapera and his Minister of Foreign Affairs stem from Kizanki (the mother tongue of Nyerere). The expressions are of an imaginary Bantu language, and as such contribute to the framing of Kapera and his cabinet into a broader African context. Ethnic ties and abuse of power are something which we associate more with other African countries rather than with Tanzania.

<sup>6</sup> In Beckett's *Endgame* (1959) the personae look at the world outside through a small hole and speculate about what is happening 'huko nje'. There is also the general fatigue that characterises Kezilahabi's prisoners and Beckett's characters. Further, the trip to Equality by Kapera and his cabinet reminds one of Vladimir and Estragon's wanderings in *Waiting for Godot* (1956).

Kapera's activities and the theatre of Ionesco or Arabal. This exceptionality however is mainly to be explained within the canon of Swahili literature. I will discuss two aspects of that canon, dramatic structure and satire, and in the conclusion evaluate their weight relative to the political intertextualities summed up in section 3.

Although *Kaputula la Marx* shows some structural resemblances to earlier Swahili plays, in particular, as mentioned in section 2, to *Harakati za Ukombozi*, it clearly stands out as an elaborately and tightly structured play. Kezilahabi's play brings together two strands of Swahili theatre, i.e. the Aristotelean-cathartic theatre of Ebrahim Hussein on the one hand and the more popular Brechtian-scenic theatre as published for instance in the *Michezo ya Kuigiza* series<sup>7</sup>. This structural difference relates to the contents of these plays. Whereas Hussein's theatre is more philosophical of nature, the Brechtian plays address specific topics with emancipatory aims in mind. Kezilahabi relies on both strands in order to create something new. Act 1 and 2 can be seen as introductory, slow movements. At the same time they contain many different scenes that refer to various facts of Tanzanian and African social and political life and contain many elements of humor. Act 3 and 4 are the critical moments of the play and are again made up of various little scenes. Act 5 and the beginning of act 6 bring some peace into the play (the calm before the storm, as in all classical plays) and are somewhat repetitive with relation to the previous acts. The play ends with a cathartic outburst. While an Aristotelean line of dramatic development can be discerned, each act has a unique structure in terms of its setup and action.

A second important aspect of the development of Swahili drama that I wish to discuss is that of satire. Both Penina Mlama (1978) and Senkoro (1990) have pointed out that *Kaputula la Marx* represents the most sarcastic piece of literature produced in Swahili. Senkoro (1990) situates it in the development of satire in Swahili. Interesting is that satiric Swahili literature is highly allegorical of nature and often is situated in imaginary places or countries (e.g. Robert Shaaban's *Kusadikika*). Senkoro also stresses that satire in literature, especially in the popular forms, is gentle and friendly of nature and does not really present any danger for those in power. Very often mild forms of satire are tolerated or encouraged by politicians in order to stimulate their popularity, something which Etherton (1982) also noted in Nigeria (the exception being the work of Soyinka). Again, Kezilahabi's play stands out and remains to do so<sup>8</sup>. There is a certain development of satire in Swahili drama and the above-mentioned play *Harakati za Ukombozi* represents a small breakthrough. *Kaputula la Marx* however blows up this tradition because there is no salvation for the ruling powers. Contrary to *Harakati za*

<sup>7</sup> By using the terms 'Aristotelian' and 'Brechtian' I do not wish to imply that Swahili plays are only modelled on European examples. I take the view that *written* African drama consists of emergent internationalized genres in which structural elements of Western drama are actively adapted to African needs and beliefs. Furthermore, there are quick developments in African drama such as the re-introduction of traditional and popular theatrical forms (e.g. the work of Penina Mlama in Swahili).

<sup>8</sup> Senkoro (1990) notes that this play probably facilitated the flourishing of satirical plays. Nevertheless these plays are to be situated in the above-sketched power-friendly and fairly noncommittal vein.

*Ukombozi*, the critique, irony and sarcasm are not didactic or instrumental in putting the rulers back on the right track.

### 5. Conclusion

As a conclusion I wish to bring together the various intertextual links in order to explain the emergence of a play like *Kaputula la Marx*. The immediate cause for writing cannot be found in the Swahili canon, but within a combination of individual concerns (the author's sympathy with the students's cause and fate) and a local critical context (the University of Dar es Salaam as a hotbed of critical, Marxist studies of Tanzanian society). The background and deeper cause for constructing the play is the particular, negative history of Ujamaa politics and the Arusha Declaration. For the author the deeper and immediate causes collapse together in the harsh and unjust reaction of Nyerere to the students' actions. What the students have done is in fact paying heed to the call for a renewed moral effort by Nyerere. Nevertheless they are ignored and pushed aside by the same Nyerere.

On the other hand, the particular form that Kezilahabi chooses for venting his outrage and critique, can be explained by reference to the development of dramatical structure and satire in Swahili drama and to the socio-political contents of African drama in general.

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