

Literature as Medium for Moral Instruction: A Swahili/Islamic Analysis of Ahmad Nassir's *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*

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Abstract

This paper analyzed a narrative poem *Mtu ni Utu* by Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo. The analysis will be guided by the thesis that Swahili-Islamic poetry has been and continues to be an important tool for moral instruction following in the teachings of the holy Qur'an and *sunnah* of the Prophet of Islam Muhammad (PBUH). The poem continues in the long tradition of Swahili poets using literature as a tool for moral instruction in society. The poem exhorts an individual and society to preach and practice love, impeccable morality, to value and strive to uphold marital vows since family is the cradle and foundation of humanity; to peacefully co-exist, cultivate and uphold good manners. All these are the sure ingredients to a morally upright social order comprising of God-fearing individuals, tolerant, mindful of other people's welfare-beliefs, life-styles, culture and above all else, to be each other's keepers as the holy books teach. It was found out that, the poem addresses basic tenets and teachings of not only Islam, but humanity which are a sure ingredient to a harmonious society. Since Kiswahili literature (poetry) now traverses the globe (it is widely read outside its traditional setting), it is our view that it is an avenue for the construction of moral values even to a non-muslim non-Swahili audience the world over.

Key words: Medium, Swahili, Islamic, poetry

Introduction

Any literature, be it oral or written, serves two basic functions - pedagogical and aesthetic. The two always go hand in hand and any useful literature always strives to balance between the two. Before the advent of Arabs and Europeans into the East African coast, Swahili society (like other African societies), solely depended on orature as the avenue and medium for expression and especially, as a means

of imparting morals and passing on its culture to latter generations. As Swahili society came into contact with such peoples as Arabs, Persians, Indians, and other peoples, and later on Europeans missionaries, explorers and colonialists external influences gradually crept into Swahili culture and way of life.

However, the greatest influence upon Swahili society was the Islamic religion and its worldview. This was a direct consequence of Arab traders' migration and eventual settlement on the East African coast even before the 6th century AD. The Swahili (being Muslim), had learnt the Arabic script to enable them read the Qur'an and other religious texts (in *madrassahs*). Eventually, this script was adopted by the Mijikenda and other migrants to the region and was used for both formal and informal communication in all spheres of life.

Mazrui and Mazrui (1995) argue that the influence of Islam upon the Swahili people was so great that it gave rise to some of the greatest verses and poets who were either religious scholars or very knowledgeable about Islam. In fact, Islam as an ideology, fuses worldly and metaphysical phenomenon so much that, one's deeds in this world are considered and taken to be *ibadah* (worship) and they would determine one's station in *akheerah* (hereafter). The power of ideology is succinctly expressed by Metzarus (1989) who is of the opinion that any dominant ideology, has the power to forcefully assert itself upon an established social system at all levels i.e from the coarsest to the most refined. This is the reason one can arguably say, Islam is an attribute of the Swahili people, but not necessarily part of their definition.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a rapid development of Kiswahili literature and especially (prosodic)poetry. This poetry, like other African literary genres, was directly linked to the day to day affairs of the Swahili people. Shariff (1988) attests to this fact by arguing that though Swahili poetry was rich in aesthetic value, it did not lack in moral themes. However, it is important to note that Swahili Poetry of the time, was particularly inclined towards an Islamic and Swahili perspective. Some of the earliest verses composed are *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* (Mwanakupona's Epic), *Utendi wa Ngamia na Paa* (The Camel and the Gazelle), *Utendi wa Masaibu* (The poem of Adversity), *Utendi wa Miqidadi na Mayasa* (Miqdad and Mayasa), *Utendi wa Ayubu* (The Poem of Job) and *Utendi wa Qiyama* (The Last Judgement), amongst others. In the recent past, *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* follows in this tradition.

Analysis

Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu by Ahmad Nassir Juma (Bhalo), comprises 453 stanzas. Like its predecessors composed much earlier, this verse follows in the tradition of being divided into sections: the first being the preamble (containing the invocation or prayer). "We would at this juncture wish to reiterate that this 'formula' has its roots in Islamic ideology: that for each and every (good) action

undertaken by a Muslim, they would start with this ‘prayer’. Later on, it became the norm in prosodic verse. This is attested by the fact that all composers of classic Kiswahili verse prior to the 20th Century, were Muslims. Stanzas 1 and 2 of the poem testify to this:

Kwa jina lako moliwa
Mikono nayenuwa
Kukuomba mwenye quwa
Mpaji wa qulla ndiya
Ni wewe pweke Wahidi
Ni wewe pweke Wadudi
Na Mtume Muham’adi
Nabiyullahi Nabiya
In the Name of God
My hands I do raise
To implore You Most Powerful
He Who Guides in all matters
You are the One and Only
You are the only One, Loving
And the Messenger Muhammad
God’s Messenger and Prophet

It is particularly telling in this verse that the ‘invocation/ prayer’ covers stanzas 1 to 9. At times, the composer may ask for writing materials (mostly ink and a reed). An account of the unworthiness and incompetence of the poet may follow at this juncture or be placed at the very end of the poem”. (*Kwako ni mja dhwaifu...Stanza 10*) (Allen, 1971). Allen continues to assert that, composers often complained of the decay of morality in society. Hence the necessity of using the poem to impart morality. Stanza 14 is quite clear in this:

Nambe nao kwa utenzi
Malimwengu ni mazinzi
Na duniya ni upinzi
Wache kuitegemeya
So I may speak to them in verse
Worldly affairs are a quagmire
And the world is but temporal
They should depend on it not

At the end of the *dibaji* (preamble), the thematic assertion or subject of the verse together with some reference to authenticate it could be mentioned. Thereafter, the poet would present the main body of the poem. In *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*, stanza 57 concludes this preamble thus:

Basi hapa tafupiza
Dibaji kuendeleza
Nipate kuwaeleza
UTU nilokusudiya
And here I will conclude
Writing this preamble
So I may tell you
The HUMANITY I intend

From the foregoing discussion, the end is seldom sudden; the composer would probably put in one or more verses naming the author, date of the composition, number of verses, et cetera. *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* has a preamble from stanza 1 to 57. In stanza 48, the poet exhorts thus:

Sasa bora mbele yetu
Ni mtu kajuwa kitu
Akawafunza na watu
Na wao wakatumiya.
The best of persons
Is the one who knows something
And lets it be known by others
So they may act upon that knowledge.

This is in line with Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) *hadith* (tradition) that "the best person, is the one who learns the Qu'ran (or any other piece of knowledge) and imparts its content to others". Stanza 50 says this succinctly:

Na mwenye kajuwa kitu
Akawa hafunzi mtu
Ni kama mtukukutu
Mughuriwa na duniya
And one who knows something
But wouldn't teach anyone
Is like an ignorant person
Whom the world has led astray

Stanzas 58 to 187, handle one of the main themes of the verse including the cultivation of love amongst humanity. Stanzas 188-211 discuss the themes of mutual tolerance, understanding and forgiveness in spite of social class, social standing, adversity or riches. Stanza 58 reads:

Sasa nitakalo mno
Kuwaekeza hapano
Taanza kwa UPENDANO
Uzainio duniya

My greatest wish of no
Herein is to exhort you
LOVE is my departure
Binding the world together

Stanza 185 and 186 is a deep and encompassing advice that needs deep contemplation. They read:

Basi kheri tuateni
Vitendo viso thamani
Walezi tuwaenzini
Na wazazi wetu piya

It is well if we let go
Of unbecoming behaviour
Hold our guardians in awe we must
Just as we do our parents

Stanzas 212-280 specifically concentrate on the institution of marriage as the cradle of humanity, love, mutual understanding and perseverance. These are some of the main virtues that contribute to a blissful marriage and a conducive environment in which to bring up children. Stanza 213 in particular summarizes the essence of a successful marriage:

Na mke mtwii mumeo
Na mume twii mkeyo
Mutuzane zenu nyoyo
Musitendane ubaya

A wife to be obedient to husband
Likewise a husband should obey the wife
To comfort each others hearts
As it has been passed

Would this stanza be informing about the ideal wife/husband relation in a Swahil/ Islamic setting?

A description of an invaluable friend and their attribute is discussed in stanzas 297 to 316. In stanzas 317 to 431, the composer details the ingredients of a perfect human being endowed with human-like attributes. He draws an analogy from past religious leaders whose efforts have enriched the Islamic religion with a complete constitution. Stanza 318 reads thus,

Yaani ubora wetu
Kwa killa aliye mtu
Ni kujipaamba kwa utu
Akasifiwa twabiya

That is our worth
Whoever a human is
Has to adorn humanity
Actions to speak for them

From stanza 432 to 444, the poet mentions his name, his aliases or pen name, his hometown or locale (this was and continues to be the norm with prosodic poets) the name of the verse and the number of stanzas (...*Kwetu ni Kuze Uwani, Ya Mombasa Kisiwani*...St. 435). Finally, stanzas 445 to 457, is the conclusion.

Genuine Love for one Another

Genuine love and care for one another is the first theme the poet discusses, whereby he refers to love as 'uzainio wa duniya' (st.1) (an ingredient that adorns the world (or life). In everything that a muslim does, one begins with the invocation: 'In the name of Allah (God), the Beneficent, Merciful'. This invocation in itself, teaches human beings to be aware of the creators' love and care for all His creatures. As for the human being, God is beneficent. He bestows of his bounties and blessing to all human beings whether or not they are obedient (believing in Him). This attribute refers to man's temporal life on earth. As for the hereafter, God is merciful i.e, human beings will be judged according to their deeds (good or bad) on earth. Of course, God will have sent messengers (warners) and bearers of good tidings to faithful believers.

The poet insists on '*mapenzi ..nikuswafiyana nyoyo tuwe kitu kimoja*' (st 61) 'true love...is to have only the best of wishes for one another.' This ingredient cements genuine brotherhood of man which would ward off ill-intention and suspicion (st.65-70). We should strive to be known by the attribute of being humane and mindful of other people's welfare (st 74). Genuine love wards off every kind and form of discrimination. There should be no '*mnyonge msonge*' (st 78) (the weak/less fortunate to be mistreated or trampled upon). That genuine love for one another is the basis for good relationships and human development, as brought out clearly in stanza 64:

Viumbe wakipendana
Milele husikizana
Na mambo mengi hufana
Kwa utakafuwaaniya

When people love one another
They will forever relate well
Many things will work well
Because of the goodwill therein

The poet further encourages human beings to love one another as '*mapenzi ndiyo amani na neema duniyani*' (st. 83) (love is peace and bounty in this world).

This kind of love should be cultivated amongst all beings irrespective of their race, religion, country, region or colour. Peace and harmony are the sure end-products of love amongst humanity. Once this is achieved, then human beings would find heavenly bliss in this life. Human beings should desist from the adage ‘the world is evil, a bad place’ since it is us humans, who are the source of all the evil deeds in this world (st.90-96). He reiterates the fact that love begets blessings, peace and good tidings to those who know its worth.

In the same vein, the poet insists that unity and togetherness is also an important ingredient to creating humane beings (st.104-111).The composer discusses unity as being ‘*umoja ulimwenguni...ni nguvu ziso kifani*’ (st-105)(unity in this world...is immeasurable strength) unity is freedom. This metaphorization of unity attests to the weight attributed to it as an ingredient of human existence.

Stanzas 109 to 122 discuss tribalism or ethnicity.The poet is of the opinion that ‘*ukatili ndiyo sumu utanguwao kaumu*’ (st,111) (tribalism is the poison that annihilates a nation). But it is ironical that human beings are one, from one source-Adam and Eve. God almighty, in His wisdom, created us and allowed us to reside in different nations for a purpose. The Holy Qur’an attests to this fact:

*Oh mankind! We created you from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes,
that Ye may know each other
(not that ye may despise each other). Verily
the most honoured of you
In the sight of God
Is (he who is) most
Righteous of you.
And God has full knowledge
And is well acquainted
With all things.
(Surah Hujurat XLIX:13*

It is worth noting that in stanzas 123-140, the poet impresses upon several levels of unity as a measure towards the creation of humane beings, mindful of each others’ welfare. He insists that despite all the differences that exist between humans, it is an indisputable fact that ‘*...kwa Adamu na Hawa, ndiko tulikotokeya*’... from Adam and Eve do we all claim on origin. That the human being has to learn self-control and self-restraint cannot be overemphasised (st.125-6), though one may be inclined to desperately want to do something there is the conscience to guide and temper their actions. The acquisition of knowledge, goes a long way into making sure ones actions are modest in line with logic and morality. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) has exhorted believers thus.

The acquisition of knowledge is mandatory to all believing men and women. In the same vein, our actions should be guided by knowledge (st.129-30) . Furthermore, East African unity is imperative in fostering good relations with other countries and peoples (st.133-135), till the whole world comes together as one. In order for this to be achieved, moderation in all our actions is mandatory (st. 148). Respect for one another, being moderate in deeds and words are useful characteristics with which human beings should adorn themselves. This should be followed by exhorting others to do good and to strive to be morally upright. The Holly Qur'an exhorts thus:

Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity (S III: Al-I-Imran: 104).

Stanzas 156-187, explain the relationship that should exist between parents and their children. Parents are obliged to show their children the proper way, just as children are obliged to do the same by being careful not to disrespect their parents in any way (st.158). Children should always be aware that parents came before them and they deserve much respect. The Qur'an clearly enjoins this:

*And out of kindness lower to them
The wing of humility, and say: "My
Lord! Bestow on them thy mercy as
They cherished me in childhood."* (SXVII: Bani Israil: 24).

And in this vein, a child is obliged to seek a parent's forgiveness (st.164-183). A child should always remember and appreciate the pain a mother undergoes during childbirth and how weak and helpless one is as a child. Parents undergo a lot of hardship as they bring up children. For this reason, a child should be eternally grateful to the parents and should pay for their good health and prosperity.

Relationships (with Fellow Beings, Marriage, as Guests, Friendship)

In life, there are certain matters that need great attention and consideration. This is the reason (stanza 188) the poet discusses the important role of relationships in life. He discusses one's relation with fellow beings, the institution of marriage, friendship, co-existing among other issues.

Foremost, the poet raises the issue of differences in income (and class) between people (st.188-191). The poet reiterates that it is God who sustains all beings and has no partner or adviser as to how His creatures receive His blessings. As such, one should always remember that God "*Aweza kukupa sasa.....Na akitaka ku'asa yote yakakupoteya*" (st.190) (He can bless you now.....And if He so wills, you could loose all).

Stanzas 194-196 hint at the aloofness and arrogance exhibited by some individuals that have been blessed. The writer advises against this behaviour since it is God who determines who gets what, when, how and in what measure. Thus the importance of “*Tajiri na masikini, tuishi kwa moja niya*”.... Both rich and poor, should live as one people (st. 188). The human being should always be grateful for what they get, in whatever measure (st.201-201). The most important thing to do is to continue working hard as we pray. We should therefore strive to do good and shun bad ways so that we may be successful in this life and the hereafter.

The institution of marriage, its role and function in human society is discussed in stanzas 212-280. Foremost, a couple should have mutual respect, love for each other and always strive to do good to one another (st.213). The husband provides and the wife takes care of the home, to be taken care of well by the spouse. Stanzas 216 ‘*Kipigo cha mwanamke.....ni nguo na kula kwake*’ ...A wife’s beating is clothing and food). This attests to the fact that Swahili culture demands that the husband, being the head of the family, takes care of the wife in all respects. The Holy Qur’an says,

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means (S IV: An-Nisaa; 4:34).

The Swahili say, *Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo* (literally, a man’s duty is to work, a woman is to adorn herself). This means, a man (husband) is obliged to work in order to provide for the family (here symbolized by ‘mwanamke’). In this sense, both Swahili culture and Islamic tradition recognizes both a wife’s and husband’s roles, functions and duties in an ideal marriage. Furthermore, the husband is duty-bound to be patient with a wife so he may teach her (as she gradually gets to know him better), he should lead by example (st.219), should be God-fearing (st.220), treat the wife ‘*Kama mtoto*’- (like a little child), and he should also live peacefully with her. The poet’s advice to a married couple summarizes the ideal Swahili couple. Stanza 215 reads:

*Mke ‘sitende maovu
Mume ‘siwe mshupavu
Na kujifanya mwelevu
Ukatenda yaso ndiya
A wife should not misbehave
And the husband never bossy
To pretend a know-it-all
And end up being way-ward*

In stanzas 223 to 226, the husband is advised to shun hearsay especially about the wife. A person should always verify what they hear before taking action

(st.226). Furthermore, there are five duties (obligations) that a wife needs to fulfil so to please both, God and the husband. They are enumerated as *M'ngu* (God), *Mtume* (the Prophet), *babako na mama* (your father and mother) and finally, the husband. This poem follows in the tradition of performing a pedagogical duty as well as continuing in the tradition of using literature as a medium for moral instruction, it has intertextual links with *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* (Mwanakupona's Poem) written in 1858 and Shaban Robert's *Utenzi wa Hati* written in 1956.

Stanza 23 of *Mwanakupona* reads:

Nda Mungu na mtumewe
Baba na mama wajuwe
Na ya tano nda mumewe
Mno imekaririwa

To God and His Prophet
Know your mother and father
And the fifth is your husband
It has been reiterated.

This poem, written in 1858, continues to inspire young maidens as they prepare for marriage in the majority of Swahili households. It should be noted that, both Swahili culture and Islam concentrate more on wifely obligations and duties since upon marriage, the woman leaves her parents' home and joins the husband. A wife is advised to continue having good relations with her siblings, relatives, neighbours and not to let spite and arrogance be part of her character. She should ensure the husband is pleased with her till death does them part. The same message is passed to Mwanahashima (Mwanakupona's daughter) in *Utendi wa Mwanakupona*, stanzas 234 and 235 of this poem.

Stanza 26 of *Mwanakupona* reads:

Siku ufufuliwao
Nadhari ni ya mumeo
Taulizwa atakao
Ndilo takalotendewa

On Resurrection day
The say will be your husband's
He will be asked what he wants
And that is what will be done to you

In the current verse, stanza 234 reads:

Siku ya fufuko lako
Taulizwa mume wako
Atakalo juu yako
Na M'ngu tamtendeya

On your being resurrected
Your husband will be asked
What it is he wishes for you
And that is what God will fulfil

This is figurative language in the sense that woman's station and dwelling after marriage is the husband's family or residence. In this case, a husband's worth and deserving status, is God-like. The Qu'ran confirms that each and every person will be judged and compensated in line with the commissions or omissions of this worldly life; be it a woman or a man. The Holy Qur'an has this to say:

*Never will I suffer to be lost
The work of any of you, be he
Male or female: Ye are members,
One of another.* (S.III Al-i-Imran:3:195).

Finally, the poet summarizes this section by reiterating the temporal nature of life on earth (st.250). This theme is common in both pre-20th century and modern Kiswahili literature. Both *Mwana kupona* (Mwana kupona binti Mshamu) and *Inkishafi* (Ali Nassir) mention this in almost the same wording. This is in line with the Qu'ranic verse,

*For the life of this world
Is but goods and chattel
Of deception.*
(S.III Ali-Imran. 3:185)

Nassir tells us that '*Ulimwengu ni kivuli, hakisimami na ndiya*' the world is but a shadow, it does not stand the test of time). Stanza 6 of Mwanakupona says: '*mwanadamu si kitu, na ulimwengu si wetu*'the human being is nothing, and this world is not ours (permanent) dwelling/ home. *Inkishafi* says:

*Wangapi dunia waipeteo,
Wakataladhadhi kwa shani lao,
Ikawasumbika kwa mizagao,
Wakanguka zanda waziumiye*
How many people have passed through the world?
They had their share of leisure,
it (the world) dazzled them momentarily,
they fell down (dead) in regret

Stanzas 281-296 reiterate good morals especially with the presence of others. One should, as the Swahili say.....*Wendapo kwa wasoona, nawe jito fumba sana* ...When you are with the blind, close your eyes (st. 286). This may mean that

people come from different backgrounds, cultures, religions and beliefs (sts.295-296).

The characteristics and the value of friendship is discussed at length in stanzas 297-316. A good friend must be of good character; be honest, give sound and valuable advice (st.306), warn the friend of any of danger, be mindful of one's well-being in health and ill-health and finally, a good friend (st.316). Stanza 298 reads:

Yaani kumuelewa
Rafiki yako wa sawa
Ukitaka kumjuwa
Ni kupima twabiya
In order to understand
Your real friend
If you really wish to know them
Just know their character

Finally, stanzas 317 to 431, present general characteristics that make a person human. Such persons should adorn themselves with good manners, impeccable moral values, be God-fearing, should never become haughty and arrogant because of riches. Mention is made of great personalities in Islamic history such as Abubakar (the first Caliph) Ali (the fourth Caliph), Uthman (the third Caliph), the prophet's (PBUH) grandsons Hassan and Hussein, the brave Miqdad, Mayasa the heroine of ancient Arabia. Here again, the theme of the temporal nature of life on earth is reiterated. It was and still is, an important theme in Kiswahili prosodic poetry.

The theme of imminent death and resurrection before recompense for good or bad deeds, follows the mention of the virtuous people mentioned above. Ultimately, all human beings will die. *Utakufa wondoke, waje watu wakuzike... You will die and people will gather for your funeral* (st.362). This is the final rite of all human beings and before that happens, one should seek forgiveness from fellow beings and God. In this verse, the author mentions his name, his attributes, his lineage and home (sts.-432-444). He goes on to pray for himself and his audience. Further, he pleads with the Creator that peace may prevail on Earth (st.440). The poem was written in 1960 and was published in 1978.

Conclusion

This paper analysed Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo's *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* (1978). The poem continues in the long history of Kiswahili poetry serving the didactic function of being a medium for moral instruction. The analysis used a Swahili/ Islamic perspective since this is the setting in which the poet lives and writes. The

poet exhaustively discusses the themes of love, impeccable moral standing, the institution of marriage and the ingredients to its existence. The composer also demonstrates the way to peaceful co-existence. All these themes are the sure ingredients to the creation of a morally-upright social order comprising God-fearing persons who are tolerant and mindful of other people's welfare. These people would respect other people's beliefs, traditions, customs and above all be each other's keepers by always being ready to co-exist together as one people, one community, under the care of one loving Creator, God Almighty.

It was found out that Swahili-Islamic poetry continues to perform a didactic function of imparting moral values following in the teachings of the Holy Qu'ran and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (P.B.U.H). And since morality is a basic human trait, the poem is an invaluable reference text for the construction of morals not only amongst Swahili society and muslims, but even to non-Swahili and non-Muslim communities the world over. This is given the fact that, technology and the expansion of institutions of learning all over the world, has made access to literatures of many societies.

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