

# Kiswahili Poetic Aesthetics: From the General Identities to the African Prodigy

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## Summary

This article assesses the evolving Kiswahili poetry aesthetics and argues that the art is an African prodigy. It evaluates the arguments of both the conservatives and the liberals in the debate and asserts that the identities which the two camps tend to front are tenuous considering that they straddle the general and the specific. Based on the constructionist theory, the article analyses the standpoints of the conservatives and the liberals in the debate and contends that they reveal three subsets of identities: the Swahili, the Africans and the universal. The article unearths the various methods that have been employed to ascribe Kiswahili poetry to such identities and argues that they mainly derive from some generalised and unstable postulations – facets such as historical epochs, orality and literacy, geography, language, literature, social class, religion and gender. By referring to the same facets, while also taking into account Kiswahili's poetry medium of dissemination, its authors and consumers, functionality, aesthetics and locality, the article asserts that the art is after all an African genius.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die ontwikkeling van die Kiswahili poëtiese estetika geëvalueer en word aangevoer dat dit 'n Afrikawonder is. Die argumente van die konserwatiewes en die liberales in die debat word beoordeel en daar word beweer dat die identiteite wat die twee kampe voorhou aanvegbaar is omdat hulle sowel die algemene as die spesifieke omvat. Al die standpunte van die konserwatiewes en die liberales in die debat word op grond van die konstruksieteorie ontleed, en daar word aangevoer dat hulle op drie subidentiteitsgroepe berus, naamlik die Swahili, die Afrikane en die universele. In die artikel word verskeie metodes blootgeië waarvolgens die Kiswahili-digkuns aan sodanige identiteite toegeskryf word. Daar word aangetoon dat hulle grotendeels op veralgemenings en ongegronde veronderstellings berus – onder meer historiese tydperk, oraliteit, geletterdheid, geografie, taal, letterkunde, stand, godsdiens en gender. Deur vermelding van hierdie aspekte en met inagneming van die verspreidingswyse van die Kiswahili-digkuns van Kiswahili digters en verbruikers, asook van funksionaliteit, estetika en omgewing, word aangevoer dat die Kiswahili-digkuns inderdaad van 'n Afrika-genialiteit getuig.

## Background to Kiswahili Poetry

People use various means to identify themselves or others. They use, for instance language, geography, religion, social class, gender, age, ancestry, education, arts or even sectarian inclinations for the purpose. However, not all these aspects are always brought to the fore to express identity. Only some of these facets come to the surface, depending on the contingencies of a particular conversation, place and time. Regarding the arts, and specifically literature, Mazrui (2007: 46) argues that “needless to say, literary form and literary aesthetics may be deeply implicated in the question of identity. People tend to identify their literature not only in terms of their language and content, but also in terms of peculiarities of its form and style”.

This scholar, for example, argues that poetry has been the best expression of the Swahili identity. This is as a result of its attachment to prosody, a style that is fronted as an emblem of Swahili artistry. Shariff (1988) claims that among the reasons that have facilitated this prosodic composition is the structure of the language – words appear in the consonant-vowel matrix; the language employs a variety of derivations as a result of its agglutinating nature, as well as its class system based on the structure of Bantu languages.

Yet, there has been a heated debate between conservatives<sup>1</sup> and liberals<sup>2</sup> over prosody in Kiswahili poetry composition. It is apparent that literacy is an important factor in the debate. For a long time, Kiswahili poetry was composed in extempore situations, implying that its strength depended on the audio-visual attributes during performances (Mulokozi & Sengo 1995). At the audio level, its message or theme, intonation, tone, pitch and so forth, were distinguishable for aesthetic purposes. At the visual level, aspects of performance such as acting, gestures, mood variation, stage presence, stage movement, or costumes and decor, were discernible. In the wake of the writing skill, however, another phase of the visual level became apparent. Some bards became conscious of the aesthetics of the printed word. Literacy also ignited the question of poetry ownership in line with intellectual property protection contrary to the pre-literacy period when oral genres belonged to the whole polity.

In 1955, Tanzania’s Kaluta Amri Abedi formulated prosodic rules that were to be followed by all composers of Kiswahili poetry. He asserted that his prescriptivism was driven by the urge to stick to the Swahili culture and heritage. It is, however, arguable that the rules for writing Kiswahili poetry were intended to shore up the Swahili ethno-nationalism. The upshot of this was the creation of the asymmetry between “appropriate” and

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1. Those who subscribe to the prescribed rules of writing Kiswahili poetry
  2. Those who are opposed to prescriptivism in the writing of Kiswahili poetry

“inappropriate” verse. This obviously put Kaluta Abedi and his ilk on a collision course with the liberals, who were opposed to prescriptivism in poetry composition.

### **Theoretical Basis**

Identity is not a concept that is always easy to fathom because it is not a unitary thing. Ivanic (1998: 11) rightly argues that the term “identities” is more reliable than “identity”, because it captures the idea of multiplicity in identification. In this case, a person’s identity should not be viewed as a unitary or a fixed thing. However, while identities are not fixed, individuals have a sense of unity and continuity about their identity. In this regard, they define themselves in both particularised and group affiliations, distinguishing themselves from other people or groups. In this article, however, the approach to identity is not taken from individuals’ premise, but from groups’, as it focuses on a people’s distinctiveness, which is said to obtain from Kiswahili poetry aesthetics.

While literature can be used to index people’s identity, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) show that identity goes hand in hand with nationalism. According to them, nationalism attempts to place people in a historical folk narrative of common cultural roots, enduring traditions and the establishment of a nation-state. It also spatially defines people geographically as belonging within defined borders. Additionally, it entails a sensuous physicality of the land and humans within borders, creating a feeling-at-home aura.

Based on these characteristics, nationalism becomes a narrative that is operative as it tends to homogenise people, a unity which this article evaluates. The article is based on the constructionist theory of meaning in language (Hall 2003). The constructionist approach shows that objects per se do not have meaning, but that people construct meanings of them by using representational systems such as signs and concepts. In this case, the article sets out to investigate how several identities obtaining from Swahili poetry are linguistically constructed through literary stylistics and buttressed by a nationalism threaded from a common histo-religious narrative.

### **Conservatism in Kiswahili Poetry Composition**

When Kaluta Abedi laid down rules and regulations that were to be followed by all Kiswahili poetry composers, he got support from a number of his contemporaries. Among these were Abdilatif Abdalla (1976), Ahmad Nassir (1983), Ibrahim Shariff (1988), Mwinyihatibu Mohamed (1984) and Shiha-budin Chiraghdin (1983, 1984). The prescriptivism appearing in Abedi (1955) can be summarised as follows:

- A poem must possess a harmonious metric pattern
- A poem must have a synchronised rhyming structure
- The lines in a poem must be arranged in subdivisions
- A poem must possess a refrain in the last line of every stanza
- Every stanza must be independent of other stanzas
- Poems should only be composed when one has inspiration
- Classical Kiswahili vocabulary should be used in composing poetry
- Feminine idiom should be used in composition to enrich poetry

Kaluta's foregoing prescription presupposes that composers of Kiswahili poetry were distinct from composers of poetry in other media. Their distinctiveness further suggests some unique identity. The question is: Whose identity was being expressed by Kiswahili poetry writers? To answer this question, it would be prudent to make an analysis of the arguments raised in the debate between the conservatives and the liberals over prosody in Kiswahili poetry. The following stanza from the poem "mnazi" demonstrates how the prosodic effects were realised in Kiswahili poetry:

Pani kiti nikitile, niwasifiye mnazi  
 Faida'e ni makuti, huvimbiya paa wazi  
 Kigogoche hukiketi, na wenzawa habarizi  
 Sitouwata mnazi, mti wa faida nami

(Ahmad 1983: 95)

From this example, the prosodic values in question are manifest. The metre has 8 syllables in each part of the poetic line as exemplified below:

Pa-ni ki-ti ni-ke-le-ti, ni-wa-si-fi-ye m-na-zi  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16  
 Fa-i-da'-e ni ma-ku-ti, hu-vi-mbi-ya pa-a wa-zi  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16  
 Ki-go-go-che hu-ki-ke-ti, na we-nza-wa ha-ba-ri-zi  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16  
 Si-to-u-wa-ta m-na-zi, m-ti wa fa-i-da na-mi  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8, 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

There are two subdivisions in every line, each comprising 8 syllables, totalling 16 syllables in each line. Alongside the metric aesthetics, there are synchronised rhymes at the end of each segment. The rhyme pattern is illustrated as follows:

_____	ti,	_____	zi
_____	ti,	_____	zi
_____	ti,	_____	zi
_____	ti,	_____	zi

From the above illustration, it is apparent that the rhyme flow at the end of the first segment is *ti*, while in the second segment it is *zi*. This concordial rhyming is not only visually appealing, but can be audibly resplendent as a result of the rhyme and rhythm.

The language of the poem is also worthy of comment. It is written in the Mvita dialect, which is mainly used in the Mombasa locality. Additionally, it relies on a Kiswahili poetry composition style whereby syllables can be added in vocabulary to realise the required metric or rhyming structure, as is evinced by a word like *niketile* (to sit). Furthermore, the style is reflective of Kiswahili classical vocabulary that was in vogue in the 19th century, as one can garner from the poetry of Muyaka wa Haji. Such choices enable the poet to realise the rhyming pattern and the necessary metre with ease.

When we read through the 25-stanza poem “mnazi”, it becomes apparent that there is only one refrain that is repeated in all the stanzas. According to the conservatives, the refrain carries the thrust of the whole stanza, and by extension, the whole poem. It is supposed to highlight the independence of each stanza’s message and at the same time, aid in cohering the messages in all stanzas, to realise a close-knit poem. Its repetition is expected to enhance the beauty of the poem by reinforcing the metre, the rhyme and the line fragments as is illustrated below:

\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sitouwata mnazi, mti wa faida nami

\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sitouwata mnazi, mti wa faida nami

The conservatives raise a number of issues with regard to the stipulated rules of composing Kiswahili poetry. For example, Chiraghdin (1984) argues that a Kiswahili poem loses its structure if it fails to incorporate the rhyme and metre. The poet also accuses the liberals of cowardly “copying” aspects of European poetry, instead of braving the rigours of creativity. The conservatives argue that Kiswahili poetry has had a long history and has been observing prosody all along. Prosody is touted as an important gem in the Swahili literary tradition, which is also an identitarian trait. The conservatives also see free verse as a colonial hangover and an agent of subversion.

Shariff argues that the debate over prosody is only a façade of deeper ideological differences.

As it is, all people have the freedom to speak and write what they want, as far as they do not contravene the country’s laws through their writing. In my

opinion, this debate has little to do with rhyme and meter or the free verse. Instead, these factors have been used as scapegoats to cause tensions and polarity between those who front the European culture and Christianity (and to others, Europeanism and socialism or communism, or Europeanism and capitalism) on one hand, and between Arabicism and Islam on the other.

(Shariff 1988: 211)

By invoking the Islamic religion, the foregoing quotation strikes a similar cord with those of other proponents of prescriptive poetry, who are mainly Muslims, and who assert that the liberals are being used by Western Christians to purge the Muslim culture. This is understandable considering that Mulokozi and Sengo (1995: 72) reveal that 69,2 % of Kiswahili poets are Muslims, despite their caveat that the statistics should not be viewed as foolproof. It is also instructive that Kiswahili poetry, to a large extent, has its roots in the East African coast, an area that has been predominantly Muslim for a thousand years. This brings the literary debate into the realm of religious nationalism, arguably another important identitarian facet for the Swahili, besides poetic aesthetics.

## **Liberalism in Kiswahili Poetry Composition**

In contradistinction to the conservatives are the liberals who articulate the cause of Kiswahili free verse in post-independent Kenya and Tanzania. The liberals mainly comprise highly educated people who interrogate various issues, among them prescriptivism in Kiswahili poetry composition. They trace their backgrounds in the East African inland and are largely Christians. They include Euphrase Kezilahabi (1974), Farouk Topan (1974), Kithaka wa Mberia (1980, 2000), Mugyabuso Mulokozi (1982, 1999) and Mahiri Mwita (1996). The arguments of the liberals can be fleshed out as follows:

- The free verse develops Kiswahili poetry structurally
- The free verse is liberating from poetic enslavement
- Composing the free verse does not necessarily imply inability to compose prosodic poetry
- If poetry in the rest of the world is expressed in the free form, why not Kiswahili's?
- What is important in a poem is its content, and not so much its form
- The language of the free verse is contemporary and comprehensible, and not archaic
- A poem is not necessarily a song
- Rules on writing poetry coerce poets to write what they never intended

While defying the prescription of writing Kiswahili poetry, the liberals go further to the point of staking attempts on new modes of poetry

composition. A case in point is Kithaka wa Mberia's pictorial or graphic poetry. Graphic poetry is designed in such a way that the message tallies with the visual picture of the poem, enhancing the iconicity of the piece, as is evident in "nyumba", house.

		nyumba	
	hii		ambayo
	ilifumwa		kwa
	mawe		yaliyoumbwa
	na		maumbile,
	mawe		ambayo
	yalisongwa		na
	maskini,		nyumba
hii			ambayo
ilisimamishwa			kwa
saruji			itokanayo
na			viungo
vya ardhi			vilivyochimbwa na
yahe,			nyumba
hii			iyoezekwa
vigae			vitokanvyo
na			udongo
kimano			tuliorithi
kutoka			mama,
nyumba			hii

iliyopambwa kwa vioo vilivyotengenezwa na  
matambara, kwa nini wasistarehe katika nyumba  
hii wale ambao misuli yao iliipa uhai

(Mberia 2000: 19)

In the foregoing poem, the author raises a pertinent subject regarding the socio-political concerns in Africa. He argues that the house, *nyumba*, which is perceptible from graphitisation, was erected of stones procured from nature. It states that the stones were cut and modelled into right sizes by the poor. It asserts that the house was buttressed by cement, while the roofing consisted of tiles, all which had been dug from the earth by the indigent masses. Despite all this, the irony is that the house occupiers are people who had nothing to do with its construction, while the masses who toiled and sweated to put it up remain shelterless. The house symbolises resources like coffee, cotton or sugar cane, etc.: the masses slog to produce these, but upon selling, the elite who have little to do with their production realise the profits.

Kahigi and Mulokozi (1973), while appreciating that prosody is good for Kiswahili poetry, sound a warning:

[I]t is also our view that composition of poetry must be dynamic just like the Kiswahili language itself; the style of composing poetry has to change ....

If we remain rigid and fail to change Kiswahili styles, we will make young poets, especially those from upcountry think that writing poetry is ... an art that is a province of the Coast people alone, those whose ancestry is Arabic, and who have a relationship with Islamic religion .... Yes, let a poet know the rules and regulations of composing poetry, but they should not view them as guidelines which should never change.

(Mulokozi & Kahigi 1973: 5)

The above quotation can be viewed in the same light as Mazrui's observation that "[t]here is no doubt that the style [of the liberals] engenders a big change in Kiswahili poetry. And just as is common in life, every change, especially in culture, is first rejected eliciting a big controversy between those agitating for old ways, and those introducing change" (Mazrui 1994: xiii).

Mazrui, a composer of both prescriptive and free verses, qualifies his argument by stressing that in Africa, many changes occur as a result of Western influences, which in a number of cases are unavoidable.

Topan (1974) argues that what determines the success of a poem is not its structure or style, but a composition that eloquently articulates the thematic issues about people. Additionally, Mulokozi and Kahigi (1979) make reference to the traditional Kiswahili poets such as Shaaban Robert and A.M. Pacha to show that it is not only renowned artists who followed prosody in their compositions. The liberals argue that they are not opposed to prosody in Kiswahili poetry, but all they are after, is the introduction of new styles in the composition of the genre. They aver that deeming prosody as the defining trait of Kiswahili poetry is anomalous to taking into consideration that this aspect is prevalent in most of the world poetry such as Persian, Arabic, Greek and English. They also argue that contemporary Kiswahili poetry is different from the old poetry, because it is no longer the domain of the people of coastal East Africa. They protest against prescriptivism in compositions, which they assert stultifies the art they are out to redeem through the free verse.

## **Thesis: Kiswahili Poetry and Identity**

Going by the arguments of Cope and Kalantizis (2000), Ivanic (1998) and Mazrui (2007), it is evident that the debate between the conservatives and the liberals points to several levels of identity. For example, it is apparent that the conservatives' standpoint is that they are rooting for the cause of the Swahili people. Conversely, the liberals tend to speak of poetry written in Kiswahili language thus, which is composed by Africans from different locales. In view of this, there is the traditional school of defining Kiswahili poetry solely from a particular people's perspective, while on the other hand, the modern school defines it from both linguistic and people-centred



perspectives. The liberals' approach to poetry from linguistic and geographical planes smacks of an art that has a bearing on African or Bantu values. Arising from the debate of conservatives and liberals, a third understanding of identity based on universalism of poetry also emerges.

## **The Swahili Poetry**

It was earlier mentioned that Cope and Kalantzis (2000) show that people's identity can be discerned from several factors, among them historical, linguistic and cultural. Basing his argument on similar lines, Shariff (1988: 6) argues that a people can be recognised by their ancestry, language, race or even culture. He asserts that the Swahili are a distinct people going by their common ancestry, nationalism, geographical position, unique language and distinctiveness as a community. Shariff further explains that the double heritage of the Swahili is based on African and Arabic ancestry. He states that the Arabs intermarried with the indigenous people, and it is therefore no wonder that Swahili poetry has strong influences of Arabic culture.

Similar views are held by Mazrui (2007), who argues that Kiswahili poetry composers found rhyme and metre from the Arabic compositions integral to the composition of all their poetry, such that by the 19th century, they had already imbued and assimilated the stylistic features. It was earlier mentioned that the Swahili had embraced and revered Islam, whose origin was Arabic, and therefore, it was also in order for them to embrace the Arabic literary aesthetics.

Shariff (1988) legitimises the Arabic influence on Swahili poetry by asserting that geologists have proved that Africa and the Middle East were once unitary. He avers that in this case, Arabic poetry cannot be said to be alien to the Kiswahili one, an issue that is fully addressed in the subsection of Kiswahili poetry and universalism. His argument is that Africa was one with Arabia and if there was any influence from Arabs, it was still home-grown and an expression of African culture and aesthetics. This postulation is in tandem with Bohannan (1980) and Mazrui and Mazrui (1998), who hold that the whole Arabian peninsula was unified with the African continent. However, Shariff (1988) complains that this geological truth has over time been undermined by English scholars. Nonetheless, the question of Arabic influence on Swahili poetry is nothing out of the ordinary bearing in mind that similar influences are ever taking place the world over, a case in point being the Latin influence on English poetry.

All this notwithstanding, the ascription of Kiswahili poetry to a single community tends to restrict and confine it to the coastal strip of East Africa, which is home to the Swahili people. In this case, Kiswahili poetry can be said to be an index of the Swahili. However, it would be anomalous to considering the poetry as reflective of only one people in view of the fact that Kiswahili poetry composers comprise non-Swahili people also, both

within and outside East Africa. There is also need to take cognisance of the fact that while Kiswahili was earlier the language of the people of Coastal East Africa, this can no longer be said to be the case. Today, the language has spread in East Africa and beyond, and there is ample evidence that Kiswahili poetry is being composed by non-East Africans. Topan (1974) is right when he argues that in the past, a Kiswahili poet geographically belonged to Coastal East Africa and practised the Swahili culture, unlike in the contemporary world. It would therefore be preposterous to expect composers from different cultures to stick to the monolith of prosody in their composition, or to dismiss them as uninitiated poets only because they elect not to operate within the parameters of prosody.

Senkoro (1988) raises a controversial argument that the talk about the Swahili poetry is erroneous since there are no people called the Swahili today. This treatise would not wish to buy such an argument so easily, especially when the likes of Sheikh Nabhany, as documented by Mulokozi and Sengo (1995), stake claim to the Swahili identity. However, it would pay off to investigate who exactly the Swahili person is today, especially considering that the so-called Swahili also answer to other nationalistic titles such as Waamu, Wamrima, Wamvita, Washirazi, to mention just a few. The veracity of the existence of the Swahili notwithstanding, it would be both disingenuous and ridiculous to attempt to confine the cultures of all Kiswahili poetry composers to the so-called Swahili culture through the prescriptivism of Kiswahili poetry composition. This brings us to the postulation that there is a difference between the Swahili (people) poetry and Kiswahili (language) poetry.

## **Kiswahili Poetry and African Identity**

In view of the liberals, Kiswahili poetry encompasses all poetry composed in the language. Mazrui (2007) relates to the transethnic definition of Kiswahili literature when he argues that the art no longer reflects the Swahili culture and society. Instead, it is integral to new nations of East Africa implying that it represents literature composed by Africans in Kiswahili. By asserting that Kiswahili poetry implies all verses which are composed in the language, the liberals hold that the definition is born of African and Bantu traditional values, implying that the poetry earns the broader African identity. This standpoint rejects the viewpoint that Kiswahili poetry is composed only by the Swahili people, as has already been mentioned.

However, while Kiswahili poetry was taken by the liberals as standing for all poets who composed in the language, Mazrui (2007) raises a pertinent matter when he stresses that there is need to demonstrate whether the poetry that has been translated into Kiswahili from other languages fits the

definitive phrase “Kiswahili poetry”. Is it possible that Kiswahili poetry has distinct features that single it out from the poetry in other languages of the world? If so, what are these features, besides the language used? Mazrui brings us close to the answers to these questions when he asserts that

one notices that there is a marked difference between the poetic sentiments of the Swahili literary elite (of both the liberalist and conservationist orientation) and the poetic sentiments of the *mwananchi* (the common/average) citizen .... The *mwananchi* is predominantly a product of “vernacular” oral culture. As a result, any verse, free or rhymed or metered, can be aesthetically appealing to the *mwananchi* as long as it addresses her/his struggles, sentiments and desires in the language that is plain, neither unduly abstract nor archaic, and in a style that can be subjected to the dictates and power of song and performance.

(Mazrui 2007: 78)

The foregoing quotation alludes to the commitment of Kiswahili poetry, a factor that points to its African status. Commitment has been the defining motif of African literature for a very long time, and the question of art for art’s sake appears to have little room among composers laying claim to African ancestry. For example, Ngugi (1994) defines literature from a functional or commitment point of view, when he states that it is authored by a person in society, about people in society and for consumption by various societal members.

This notwithstanding, there are scholars who aver that by composing literature that is socially committed, artistry may be sacrificed at the expense of the ideals of the writer’s social preoccupations. They assert that such a basis may dichotomise African literature as parochial, in comparison with that of the rest of the world, which can be said to be universal. For example, Irele (1981) argues that there are scholars who tend to denigrate African literature claiming that it is wanting regarding the human import as a result of its commitment. To strike a point of convergence between the binary sides, many writers incorporate both sociological and formalistic theories in their works. Social commitment and art are blended to form the foundation of African aesthetics. In view of this, Kiswahili poetry can be approached as a global phenomenon.

### **Kiswahili Poetry as a Global Phenomenon**

So far, it has been shown that Kiswahili poetry can be representative of both the Swahili and the African people. However, this representation is still not exhaustive. For example, while rooting out for the Swahili identity through poetic prosody, some scholars inadvertently articulate the case of universalism in poetry. If we go back to the arguments of Shariff (1988) that the dichotomy between Africa and Arabia is very thin taking into account

that Africa and the Middle East were once unitary, several ideas come to the fore. A case in point is that any traces of Arabic influence in the Kiswahili poetry should be welcome, since Africa and Arabia are historically one entity.

However, by raising this postulation, the author fails to realise that he is also articulating the universalism of Kiswahili poetry since it traverses two continents. The author further fails to appreciate that the free verse is also attributable to other African communities, which are said to be Bantu and non-Bantu, and is not solely a European phenomenon as some conservatives argue. It is surprising that the likes of Shariff are so quiescent to the Arabic influence in Kiswahili poetry, but are averse to influences from other African communities in the continent.

Taking cue from Shariff's contention also, it is arguable that the Africans in the East African region who compose Kiswahili poetry can historically trace bonding with other people in other regions. For example, the Bantu trace their origin in West Africa in the Cameroon, through Central Africa during their dispersal, and to various localities in eastern and southern Africa. The same people have linkages with both Arabia and southern America, where their brothers and sisters found homes, thanks to the slave trade. In this respect, if Kiswahili free verse has its roots among the traditional Bantu cultures, suffice it to say that it is universal since the people of Bantu origin, with their arts, straddle all continents in the world.

It should not be forgotten that charges and counter-charges that are raised by both the conservatives and the liberals over the composition of Kiswahili poetry allude to a global status of the verse. For example, the free verse is criticised by the conservatives as deriving from European influence, while on the other hand, the liberals argue that prosodic poetry is an Arabic influence. In the light of this, it is evident that the two camps feud over the indigene of Kiswahili poetry, a feat that is not easy to prove going by the histo-geological factors at play. It is ironic that each group appears to be struggling for some form of freedom, either from the Arabic or the European, charges which nonetheless accord Kiswahili poetry global status.

Besides, the liberals insist that their poetry should be evaluated in the parameters of the term poetry the world over. However, while this argument is welcome since it is in consort with globalisation, it appears too embracing. This is because there is evidence that Kiswahili poetry is still distinct in some aspects, its medium of dissemination being paramount. However, despite staking claim to universalism in their poetry, the liberals still refer to particular societies and communities when they claim that the free verse is founded on African oral traditions. This brings to mind the distinctiveness of Kiswahili poetry. Regarding this, are there any attributes that define Kiswahili poetry as a distinct genre?

## **The African Prodigy in Kiswahili Poetry**

Going by the levels of identity which the foregoing analysis has so far unearthed, it is clear that Kiswahili poetry signifies two main levels of identity: the specific and the general. The general is the universal level since it has already been argued that it traverses several continents. However, there are several parameters that ascribe it to African identity. These are the medium of disseminating it, its function which revolves around the motif of commitment, people who author or consume it, their geography, and its aesthetics. The poetry is composed in the medium of Kiswahili, an African language which enjoys widest use in the continent of Africa, where it also traces its origin.

It has also been shown that the subject of commitment in literature is largely a characteristic of African arts. Considering that both prescriptive and free verses in Kiswahili adhere to this tenet, this is further proof that the poetry is African in nature. The poetry composed by authors from the opposing camps captures the African environment and the struggles of people in their daily lives, while attempting to proffer solutions. The majority of the people who are expected to consume it are Africans who understand the language (where there are no translations), while its chief objective is to reawaken them to their experiences, toils and trials.

By a similar token, most of Kiswahili poetry is authored by Africans, who hope to reach out to audiences who are mainly Africans, going by the wide usage of the language in Africa. Yet, these authors and their audiences are geographically placed in the African continent, with some few exceptions. To add to this, the aesthetics of the poetry whether prosodic or free, are features of African mores. While, for example, Mazrui (2007) states that the metric system in Kiswahili poetry has its origin in Arabic poetry, it is axiomatic that identity is generally dynamic, and the prosodic aesthetics of Kiswahili poetry are in the present day part and parcel of African literature. In addition, Senkoro (1988) is candid about the free verse in Kiswahili being akin to other African oral traditions such as song, chant and folklore. In view of this, the aesthetics of Kiswahili poetry distinguish it as an African prodigy.

## **Conclusions**

This article has addressed the debate over prosody in Kiswahili poetry between the conservatives and the liberals regarding identity. It has evaluated arguments that have been raised by the opposing camps in the debate. The article has demonstrated that from these arguments, there arise three facets of identity in relation to Kiswahili poetry: The Swahili people poetry, Kiswahili poetry as a Bantu or African art, and Kiswahili poetry as a universal phenomenon. It has shown that some of these identities are rather

generalised and incompact, and keep oscillating amongst themselves. However, the article has attempted to specify Kiswahili poetry as an African prodigy. This has been done by analysing its medium of dissemination, commitment motif, authors and consumers, locale and aesthetics.

The article has also demonstrated that the debate over prosody has much to do with the difference between orality and literacy. In this regard, literacy brought a sense of poetry ownership to the Swahili people necessitating a prescription on how it was to be composed. However, before the advent of literacy, the question of prosody was not a big issue, and it has been shown that free verse was also in vogue. In this case, literacy brought a sense of identity among the Swahili, who used prosodic poetry to distinguish themselves from other communities. However, the article has also shown that prosodic poetry was also in use in Europe, Asia and Arabia; it can thus not be claimed to have solely been a reserve of the Swahili.

As Pynsent (1996) argues, nationalism, which can be viewed in the same prism as identity, is both ideology and mythology. As has been mentioned, people's identities can be garnered from a number of facets such as historical epochs, geography, language, literature, social class, religion, gender, literacy levels and so forth. Though Kiswahili poetry is generally determinable from all these facets, it is still very specific to Africans and their environment as a result of language, functions, aesthetics, composers and consumers, and topography. Suffice it to say that Kiswahili poetry is an African prodigy.

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