

**A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF UTENDI WA MWANA KUPONA: A
SWAHILI/ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper has the objective to make a thematic analysis of a classic poem Utendi wa Mwana Kupona using a Swahili/Islamic approach. The poem is believed to have been written by Mwana Kupona binti Mshamu in 1858. The poem is intended to be a motherly advice to her daughter about her religious and marital duties in a Swahili society.

As a background to this paper, it was found out that Swahili culture has been greatly influenced by Islam. Ever since Arab, Persian, Indian and other merchants from Asia and the Middle East visited the East African coast to trade or settle, the Waswahili people embraced Islam. The Islamic religion influenced Swahili culture greatly. One of the more direct influences was the adoption of the Arabic script which the Swahili used to write their poetry and used it for other communication.

The Arabic language had a lot of impact on the Kiswahili language, enriching it with new vocabulary, and especially religious and literary terminology. This is why a majority of the Waswahili are Muslims; hence Islam is an attribute accompanying the definition of 'Mswahili'. A modest estimate would put words borrowed from the Arabic language into the Kiswahili language at between twenty to thirty percent.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rapid development of written Kiswahili literature, especially in verse form. The majority or almost all of the poets of the time were very religious or very knowledgeable about Islam. This is the reason most poems of the time were pervaded by Islamic religious themes or other themes but definitely using an Islamic perspective. Utendi wa Mwana Kupona is one such verse. It is a mother's advice to her daughter about her duties and obligations towards God, and specifically, towards a husband.

KEY WORDS

1. Utendi
2. Mwanakupona
3. Swahili
4. Islam
5. Thematic
6. Verse
7. Culture
8. Analysis
9. Advice
10. Motherly

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1.0 BACKGROUND

Before the advent of Arabs and Europeans into the East African coast, Swahili society had only orator as its sole form of expression. After it came into contact with such peoples as Arabs, Persians, Indians, etc, external influence started to gradually creep into Swahili culture, ideology and way of life. However, the greatest influence upon Swahili society was the Islamic religion and its worldview. Islam was a consequence of Arab trade migration and eventual settlement on the East African coast even before the sixth century A.D. The Swahili learnt and used Arabic script to write poetry (the oldest written genre), religious instruction and other forms of communication.

Mazrui and Mazrui (1995) argue that the linkage between the Kiswahili language and Islam, gave birth to some of the greatest classical poets who were either very religious themselves or very knowledgeable about Islam. It is no wonder then that this poetry is pervaded by religious themes. Islam has had a tremendous influence and effect upon Swahili culture and to-date, the majority of the Swahili are Muslim hence Islam is an attribute accompanying the Swahili, but not necessarily part of their definition.

Being a language of the Qur'an and very susceptible to Islamic teachings, the Arabic language has enormously enriched this language. This is one reason the early Christian missionaries like Edward Steere in Zanzibar and Dr. J.L. Krapf and J. Rebman in Mombasa, readily used the language to spread Christianity as early as the 1850s. At present, a modest estimate would put words of Arabic derivation or borrowing into the Kiswahili language at between twenty percent (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995) and thirty percent (Chimera, 1998).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rapid development of Kiswahili literature and especially poetry. A number of poems were written touching on different subjects but almost all using an Islamic perspective in their thematic assertions. Some of the earliest verses composed are *Utenzi wa Tambuka* (The Poem of Tabuk), *Hamziyya* (The Hamziyya), *Utenzi wa Ngamia na Paa* (The poem of camel and gazelle), *Utenzi wa Ayubu* (The poem of Ayub), *Utenzi wa Shufaka* (The poem of compassion), *Utenzi wa Masahibu* (The epic of tribulations) and *Utenzi wa Miqdad na Mayasa* (The poem of Miqdad and Mayasa).

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Utendi wa Mwanakupona was composed by *Mwana Kupona binti Mshamu* for her daughter *Mwana Hashima binti Sheikh* around 1858. The poem was intended to be a mother's advice to her daughter. It is evident the mother had been ailing for a while and hence decided to exhort her daughter (as religion and tradition directed), in her marital life and specifically on her duties towards God (Allah), the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*Mtume*), her husband (*mume*) and other members of the society.

This paper has as its objective, to make a thematic analysis of the composition using a Swahili/Islamic perspective. The issues expressed in the verse, relate directly to Swahili culture and society, and the teachings of Islam. The poetess intended the Swahili people to be her immediate audience. As such, it is hoped that this poem would be understood better from this perspective.

3.0 ANALYSIS

Utendi wa Mwana Kupona comprises of 102 stanzas. Though lacking in literary and aesthetic appeal, it has been read in Swahili households and especially by young maidens about to get married for a long time. The poem is divided into a number of parts, each one discussing a specific issue.

3.1.0 Religious obligations

Part one of the poem is the introduction where the poetess calls out to her daughter to come sit close to her for she wished to narrate, *kukwambia* (to tell you) a story to her. The wording of the third stanza attests to the close affinity between oral and written literature otherwise referred to as the oral/written interface. This formulaic introduction was and still is a feature of Swahili/Islamic poetry and even modern Kiswahili prosodic verses. This aspect also impresses upon the intertextual links between poems composed in the Swahili cultural and regional contexts. Stanza 3 reads;

*Moyoni nina hadithi
Nimependa kukwambia*

In my heart I have a story
I wish to narrate to you.

Stanzas 4-11 express the poetess's objectives as well as offering prayers to Allah (God) and salutations to the *Mtume* (Prophet). It is worth mentioning that in the sixth stanza, the poetess reiterates the Islamic view of the temporal nature of human existence and the human beings failings/weaknesses.

*Mwanadamu si kitu
Na ulimwengu si wetu
Walau hakuna mtu
Ambao atasalia (stz. 6)*

The human being is nothing
And the world is not ours
And there is no one
Who will remain (eternally)

This theme was and still is popular with Swahili/Islamic poets (Knappert, 1967). An instance is Ali Nassir's *Al-Inkishafi* where the poet expresses it thus,

*Suu ulimwengu uutakao
Emale ni lipi upendeyao?
Hauna dawamu hudumu nao
Ukimilikishwa wautendaye?*

The world you so crave for
What good in it attracts you?
It will not last, neither you with it
What would you do with it were it given to you?

This view is derived from the Qur'anic verse that states;

Nothing is the life of this world but play and
amusement. But best is the Home in the
Hereafter, for those who are righteous will ye not
then understand? (Al-An'am, 6:32).

In the 8th, 9th and 10th stanzas there are instances where the poetess uses metaphorical language to foreground and impress upon the daughter, the import of her message to her. In stanza 8, she says *twaanikupe hirizi* (take this here amulet) while in stanza 9, she refers to it as *kidani cha lulu na marijani* (a pearl and red coral necklace). The two—the priceless amulet and necklace, are meant to guide and protect the daughter through her life's journey.

Stanza 12 lays the basis of Islamic faith and ideology. The poetess impresses upon the daughter to adhere to and understand the basic tenets of a muslim's faith. These are explained by the mention of some basic concepts of the religion of Islam. Foremost, she is to uphold the religion and the pillars upon which faith is constructed. The stanza reads,

La kwanda kamata dini
Faradhi usiikhini
Na sunna ikimkini
Ni wajibu kuitia (stz 11)

Foremost, hold steadfast onto religion
Obligation do not ignore
And if necessity uphold tradition
It must be included.

Qur'an says;

There is no god but He; that is the
witness of Allah, His Angels and
those endued with knowledge,
standing firm on justice. There is
no god but He the Exalted in Power,
the Wise (Al-Imran, 3:18).

The Holy Prophet has said that a person who loves my Sunnah (tradition) loves me, and will be with me in paradise (Tirmidhi).

This stanza is the basis upon which Islamic faith and ideology is based. First, is the pronouncement of the *shahada* (oneness of God) and belief in the *Nabii* (prophet) followed by performance of the *wajibat* (obligatory) acts which are referred to as *faradhi*. The acts proposed and practiced by the Prophet in his lifetime (*sunna*) would earn an individual *thawab* (blessings). The daughter is impressed upon to cultivate a good character and be truthful in order to gain the confidence and goodwill of fellow members of society.

The second most important piece of advice the poetess gives her daughter is the cultivation of character. She admonishes,

*Pili uwe na adabu
Na ulimi wa thawabu
Uwe mtu mahabubu
Kula utakapongia (stz. 13)*

Secondly, observe noble character
And speak only about good
You will become a loved person
Wherever you go

Truthfulness, is a trait the poetess impresses, would give all members of society faith in her; she would be loved. Stanza 14 exhorts the daughter to be truthful in these words,

*La tatu uwe sadiqi
Wambiwao ulithiqi
Mtu asoshika haqi
Sandamane naye ndia (stz. 14)*

Thirdly be truthful
believe whatever you are told
an unjust person
should not be your friend

It cannot be overemphasized that the truth, sets one free. And that is the mother's message to her daughter. She is asked to be conscientious, to weigh out matters, and to avoid the company of the unjust. In stanza 15, the poetess advises her daughter to humble herself before those in authority over her. Her words are,

*Tena mwanangu idhili
Mbee za maqabaili
Uwaonapo mahali
Angusa kuwenukia (stz. 15)*

My daughter humble yourself
Before those in authority
Whenever you should meet with them
Hasten thee to show respect.

The use of the word 'maqabaili' (those in authority) in this stanza has raised a lot of controversy since it has been interpreted variously by scholars and critics of different schools of thought. Mulokozi (1982), is of the view that the stanza portrays woman as a faithful serf to her lord with no feelings of her own. Ndungo (1985), is more acrimonious in her view not only of this stanza but the poem in its totality. She asserts that in certain Islamic sects (no mention of any sect is made) do not advocate for the education of women; that women are only taught to be good wives to their *mabwana* (lords/husbands). These two scholars belong to the socialist realist school of thought – they have used an approach that is more useful in analyzing historical, economic and labour relations, other than religious doctrine. Suffice to say that the word 'maqabaili' has been interpreted out of context; this paper would wish to adopt the meaning of 'leaders' in line with the qur'anic verse that expresses this view:

O ye who believe! Obey Allah and
Obey the messenger, and those charged
With authority among you... He who obeys
the messenger, obeys Allah: But if any turn
away, we have not sent thee to watch over them.

(Annisaa, 4: 59)

Stanzas 17-21 admonish and guide the daughter towards cultivating an impeccable personality. She is advised to keep good company, to be in good relations, not to be suspicious or involve herself in matters of no concern to her (*situkue dhana kwa mambo usoyaona*) (stz. 19) (Do not judge matters of which you know nothing about), *sandamane na wainga* (do not befriend fools) or *wasoyua kuitunga* (those who know not proper etiquette), *ziembe wasio tanga* (persons who not know what path to pursue (stanza 21). All this is meant to guide the young maiden into growing up to be an upright, intelligent, faithful and religious person – acceptable before her creator Allah (God) and fellow human beings.

3.1.1 A wife's obligations and duties

Obligations of a wife and duties are expressed in stanzas 23 to 26. Since each and every mother (or parent) would only wish what is best to their children, the poetess uses parabolism to impress to her daughter the imperatives to becoming a good wife. Foremost, stanza 23 exhorts her thus,

*Nda Mungu na mtumewe
baba mama muyawe
na ya tano nda mumewe
mno imekaririwa.*

First, God and His prophet
Father and mother know this well
and fifth is your husband
it has been reiterated.

We have already discussed the issues or concepts of God and His prophet. After the declaration of the faith (*shahada*) a Muslim is obligated to be kind to parents and treat them with love, humility and hold them in high esteem. This is because; one is because of their parents. The Holy Quran says,

Thy Lord has decreed
That ye worship none but Him
And that ye be kind to parents.
Whether one or both of them
attain old age in thy life,
Say not to them a word of
contempt, nor repel them
but address them
in terms of honour
(Bani Israil, 17:23)

In line with the above Qur'anic teachings, the poetess (parents) as mentioned earlier, uses parabolism to impress upon her daughter the status of a husband in this life and the hereafter. She says,

*Siku ufufuliwao
nadhari ni ya mumeo
taulizwa atakao
ndilo takalotendewa (stz. 26)
kipenda wende peponi
utakwenda dalhini
kinena wende motoni
huna budi utatiwa (stz.27)*

When you are resurrected, with
your husband will be the decision.
He will be asked what he wishes
that is what will be done.

If he wishes for you to enter paradise
Therein you will be blissfully
If he says you go to hell
be sure it will be fulfilled

Islam does not expressly declare this, for it will be against Allah's (God's) important attribute of being the Just, standing in justice over all of His creation. This is figurative language – language using parabolism. Being a caring mother's way of impressing upon the daughter to fulfill both her religious and wifely duties to the best of her ability i.e. in Islam both worldly and religious affairs are complimentary – one strengthening and turning tenet and concept into action. One's good deeds in this life, are compensated by Allah's grace and a place in peponi (paradise). The Quran says the following about deeds (good or bad) and how they are compensated for,

If ye did well, ye did for
yourselves; if ye did evil
(ye did it) against yourselves
(Al-Isra, 17:7)

Whoever works righteousness,
man or woman and has Faith, verily,
to him will We give a life
that is good and pure, and We
will bestow on such their reward
according to the best of their
actions (An-Nahl, 16:97).

Stanzas 28 to 50 enumerate a Muslim couples relationship though the husband's obligations, duties and functions are not mentioned by the poetess. However, it can be deduced that good, begets good and that a

husbands roles and duties are to be referred in this context. It is to be understood that a husband should reciprocate a wife's performance of her duties in the sacred union. The Quran enjoins that,

Is there any reward for
Good other than good?
(Ar-Rahman, 55-60)

The above verse, would surely provide the husband with the awareness of his duty towards his Creator and his wife. The realities of the next life (hereafter) are hoped to be enough for him to be accountable for each and every of his actions – seen or unseen, of commission or omission. Briefly, a man's duties are expressed thus in the Quran,

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
(An – Nisaa, 4:34).

Being the protector and supporter of women, Islam teaches husbands to strive to be faithful to their wives, to support them spiritually and materially, to enforce Allah's commands, to work for their wives and family, to offer guidance in both worldly and spiritual matters, to cook for them, wash for them (or provide a servant in lieu of); in totality, to provide spiritual and material comfort to the best of their ability. The Qur'an is explicit on this complimentary role of the ideal muslim couple. It reiterates,

The believers, men and women are
Protectors, one of another, they enjoin
What is just and forbid what is evil:
they observe regular prayers,
Pay zakat and obey Allah and His
Messenger. On them will Allah pour
His Mercy: For Allah is Exalted in
Power, Wise.
(At – Tauba, 9:71)

The poetess goes out of her way to insist her daughter cultivates faith in God and her spouse, to be generous to him and avoid acts that would result into misunderstandings and harmful conflict. She is advised to bid her husband farewell whenever he leaves home for work, welcome him back home warmly and make the home a conducive place to live in. In total, it is a wife's duty (as indeed it is the husband's) and obligation, to make each other feel loved, wanted and respected. This is expected to be reciprocated by the husband whose kindness is reiterated by Prophet Muhammad in these words,

Kindness to the members of the
family is an act of worship
as when one puts a piece of
food in his spouse's mouth (Bukhari).

This is why the poetess uses the word *kijana* (young child), metaphorically to reiterate the level of kindness expected between a couple. However, the use of this word in stanza 35 has raised a lot of debate and controversy. For instance, Khatib (1985), views Mwanakupona's verse as poisonous advice that puts the human being's development into retrogression and specifically for enslaving woman.

Senkoro (1988), critiques the poem by saying it portrays a stereotypical image of woman as an ornament. This is the image, status and identity of woman in the feudal system that existed in Swahili society in the 19th century before the advent of European colonialism. This critique is faulty bearing in mind the critic did not put into consideration the ideology behind the poem, the setting or context and the objective – which is essentially a mother's advice to her daughter about her future relations and especially, on her religious and wifely duties.

Stanzas 37 to 42, impresses upon the daughter to observe hygiene and, personal cleanliness and adornment for the sake of self and spouse (husband). She is exhorted her *kupea na kuosha choo* (stz. 37) (to sweep and wash the toilet) and *kowa na kuisinga* (stz.38) (wash and groom yourself) *ukae kama arusi* (stz. 39) (be beautiful and appealing as a bride), *nyumba yako inadhiifu na mumeo umsharifu* (stz.42), (clean your house and respect and hold your husband in high esteem). All this is in line with human logic, African tradition and Islamic teachings. The Holy Prophet is reported by Bukhari to have said,

Islam is a clean religion,
so cleanse yourselves
physically and spiritually for
only the clean will find abode in
paradise

The theme of woman's freedom is handled in stanza 44. The poetess impresses upon her daughter to observe chastity and to seek permission whenever she wanted to leave her marital home. This is in line with Islamic teachings. Furthermore she is admonished to dress in a manner that would preserve her chastity and guard against people disrespecting her. This is the reason she is advised,

wala sinene indiani
sifunue shiraani
mato angalia tini
na uso utie haya (stz. 46)

observe silence on your way
uncover yourself not
lower your gaze
and shyness in your eyes

The Holy Qur'an has the following to say about a muslim woman's dressing code in order to preserve her integrity and chastity,

And say to the believing women
that they should lower their
gaze and guard their modesty;
that they should not display
their beauty and ornaments
except what (must ordinarily)
appear thereof; that they
should draw their veils over
their bosoms and not display
their beauty except to their
husbands, their fathers, their
husbands' fathers, their
husband's sons, their brothers
or their brother's sons or
their sister's sons, or
other women or the slaves
whom their right hands
possess, or male servants
free of physical needs, or
small children who have
no sense of the shame
sex; and that they
should not strike their feet
in order to draw attention
to their hidden ornaments
And o ye Believers
Turn ye all together towards
God, that ye may
attain bliss.

In the same vein , the Qur'an admonishes muslim men to guard their chastity, their honour and their faith by guiding them thus,

Say to believing men that they
should lower their gaze and guard
their modesty; that will make for
greater purity for them: and God
is well acquainted with all that
they do.

3.1.2 Relations with Others and Prayers

Foremost, in stanzas 52-55, the poetess recollects her life with her late husband. It is revealing that whatever it is she is telling her daughter, is part of Swahili culture and tradition – compounded with

Islamic teachings – and passed on from generation to generation, mother to daughter, father to son. Above all else, it is a parent's (mother's) experience, adherence and faith talking here. She recollects,

*Alinioa babako
Kwa furaha na ziteko
Tusondoleane mbeko
Siku zote twalokaa (stz .52)*

I was married to your father
in laughter and happiness
Never did we put each other to shame
all the years we lived together.

After stanza 55, the poetess invokes and seeks Allah's guidance, blessings, forgiveness for herself, other people and a cure for her illness. This is in true Swahili (African and Islamic spirit – she is being mindful of other people's welfare and well-being despite being unwell herself. In stanza 94, Mwanakupona reiterates the guiding principles of her verse – that is a priceless gem and guiding light for the continued guidance of young women about to wed or who are recently married. She says,

*Someni nyute huramu
Mutii waume wenu
Musipatwe na zitunu
Za akhera na dunia (stz. 94).*

Read O ye maidens
Respect your husbands so
You may evade suffering
Of the hereafter and present (life)

4.0 Summary and Conclusion

This paper had its objective an analysis of themes in *Utendi wa Mwanakupona*. The poem fuses Swahili culture with Islamic ideology in its thematic assertions. This is as a result of the age long association and close relationship the Swahili people have had with Islam, brought to them by Arab merchants and migrants on the East African coast centuries ago. The poem has intertextual links with other verses of the period like the use of formulae, Islamic viewpoint and the graduation of verses into about three parts – the introduction (prayers), the message and conclusion (summary and prayers).

It was found out that the verse uses a Swahili/Islamic viewpoint to divulge a wife's duties and obligations toward the creator, the Holy Prophet, the parents, the husband and fellow human beings. Though the husband's duties and obligations in marriage are not discussed, we saw it prudent to quote Qur'anic verses and traditions of the Holy Prophet mentioning them so that the scholars, and critics who are of the view that the poem put woman into servitude, understand the import of the poetess's message given the setting, the ideology and time of this composition.

The poem is a summation of the traditions and religious teachings every Swahili mother (and father) would happily and dutifully impart to their daughters (and sons). Being a central human institution and the cradle of human perpetuation, marriage has to be nurtured and upheld by imparting only the best of cultural traits and religious teaching for its sustenance. This is the reason the poetess metaphorically refers to her composition as a *hirizi* (amulet) and *kidani* (precious necklace) for the continued guidance of young maidens (and young men) just about to be married (or wed).

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