

# A REJOINDER TO ALICE NYAMBURA MWIHAKI'S ARTICLE, "PHONETICS AND THE STYLISTIC APPRECIATION OF A POETIC TEXT: FOCUS ON THE RHYTHM OF KISWAHILI VERSE"

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This is a very interesting and provocative article which tries to link linguistic concepts with the analysis and appreciation of poetic texts. Indeed, this kind of analysis is lacking a lot in the criticism of Kiswahili literature, and any attempt to link the two sides, i.e. the linguistic and the aesthetic approaches to the literature, is very welcome.

In this article, Mwihaki argues first of all that the rhythmic effect of a poetic text is inherently present in the phonetic structure of the relevant language. To support her contentions, she uses Abercrombie (1967), Lotman (1976), and Grigson (1982). The author illustrates her theoretical considerations by using various other authors, the latest being Goldsmith (1990) to show how stylistic analysis of a literary production requires a general knowledge of language structure and "the system" of that language.

Applying her theoretical foundation to phonetics and, consequently, to the concept of *rhythm*, the author examines various other related concepts such as isochronism/isochronic principles and phonematic structures/representations. From the discussion, the author concludes that a deeper understanding of the principles of versification results from insight into the structure of speech rhythm.

After fairly long theoretical deliberations, the article attempts to relate the debate to Kiswahili poetry. The author cites three Kiswahili poets/scholars who have attempted to define the concept of rhythm. She rather hurriedly states that both Mulokozi's/Kahigi's and Abdulaziz's definitions of the concept of rhythm are "vague and distorted" charging that while Mulokozi and Kahigi have confused the concept of **tempo** with **rhythm**, Abdulaziz has, on the other hand, applied "erroneously... the English rhythm on Kiswahili verse." (P.9). More on this later.

## THE INTENDED AUDIENCE

Judging from the theoretical deliberations raised in this short article, it is clear that the author had in mind a rather sophisticated audience comprising University undergraduate/graduate students and their professors. As stated earlier on, the attempt to bridge the false dichotomy between linguistic theories and literary criticism is not only lacking, but also it is a complex field whose audience will definitely not consist of secondary school or even teacher training college students.

## THE CRITIC'S STYLE

The style used in this article is the conventional one which begins with a short summary, and then poses the problem; after which it delves into the different theoretical deliberations. After this section which is also some kind of literature review, the author has then applied the discourses to phonetics and to Kiswahili poetry. This is definitely a good style although one feels that since the title of the paper emphasizes that the focus will be on the rhythm of Kiswahili verse, the article has not done enough justice to justify that part of the title. Indeed, the article seems to me to be in a hurry to state some foregone conclusions without using enough data both in terms of theoretical works done on the subject of Kiswahili poetry in general, and the aspect of rhythm in Kiswahili poetry in particular. What about numerous other scholars who have dealt with the subject, such as Shaaban Robert, Ibrahim Noor Sharrif, E.Kezilahabi, Al Amin Mazrui, and others? As a consequence to this shortcoming, one notices the obvious absence of the authors who have been suggested above in the Bibliography at the end of the article.

Even the data that the author has decided to use to prove her case (a single verse from the poem "Dunia Mti Mkavu") is definitely not enough for us to agree with Mwhaki's analysis and conclusions. Indeed, even such an interesting discussion on the difference, if any, between the concepts of **rhythm** and **tempo** is so hurriedly done that one wonders what exactly are the differences between the two. One queries, for example, what the difference is between rhythm and movement/variation characterized by the regular recurrence or even some patterned alteration of different conditions of similar or even contrasting elements of arranged speech that manifests itself in poetry. Does this regularity of pattern not go hand in hand with the tempo, movement and variations which are complimentary to each other in order to create the desired effect in a poem? Isn't that the kind of effect which, in turn, produces a sense of temporal development of a work of art (Kiswahili poetry included)? Isn't **tempo** a characteristic **rate** or, indeed, even **rhythm** of a poem? I think that these and other questions needed fuller analysis than the one which has been availed in this article.

One gets the feeling that Mwhaki has been too rigid in her definition of rhythm. Rhythm is a combination of sounds pleasingly arranged. It is an emphatic arrangement to which we are tempted to tap our feet, wave our arms or even clap at regular intervals to its accompaniment, depending on where the sounds/words are placed in a poem or a song. The rhythmic combination of words, sometimes produced in repetitive style, touches our sense of order while satisfying our aesthetic sensibilities. This rhythmic pleasure is very essential to the creation of good style; and that good style will depend on a number of factors, such as the general worldview of the poet in question. It is here that the old truism that sound and sense go together applies. The sense will determine the sound and vice versa. It is very possible that such considerations, among others, would have made Mwhaki have a fresh and, perhaps, more "just" look at the poetic theories and practices of Mulokozi/Kahigi and Abdulaziz.



Again, we should emphasize that the attempt to bridge the linguistic and literary approach to a poetic text is very welcome. However, it seems to me that there is also the need to realize that there comes a time when the two sides, if not used carefully, will bring about the danger of making generalized conclusions which are not necessarily correct when viewed from a *purely literary* or *purely linguistic* angle.

## CONCLUSIONS

The above observations notwithstanding, I think that this is a good provocative article. It is the aim of this rejoinder to make the reader revisit the article so as to expand on the discussions and search for more detailed, varied and conclusive data.