

POLITICS IN A POETIC GARB:
THE LITERARY FORTUNES OF MATHIAS MNYAMPALA

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"A Nation Cannot be Built Save
on Character..."

- Mnyampala

Although his writings date back to the early 1950's, the reputation of Mathias E. Mnyampala's as a poet came much later and rests largely on his two volumes of a special kind of poetry called Ngonjera which appeared posthumously in 1970 and 1971 as sequels under the title Ngonjera za Ukuta, Books I and II.¹ Ngonjera is a kind of dialogue verse in which two or more people discuss an issue with one side feigning ignorance on the matter under discussion. By its very nature, therefore, Ngonjera is a very didactic poetry and, in the form in which Mnyampala wrote it, it is a vehicle for socialist ideology. The poet is credited with having "invented this type of popular poetry in 1964."² Rarely, has the genesis of such a fluid art form been so unequivocally attributed to one individual and date! But Mnyampala, like Shaaban Robert, was a prolific author and a versatile experimentalist. Besides poetry (both secular and religious), he wrote books on political and legal matters, theory of poetry, religion, sociology and fiction.³ In fact, as I propose to argue below, his two volumes of Ngonjera are the least satisfactory in so far as the craft of poetry is concerned. In them, Mnyampala surrenders his rights as a poet of originality and vision and dons a political garb, sometimes rather grotesquely, as popularizer of the Arusha Declaration. One wishes he had also tried to be its interpreter.

One of the first works by the poet was called Fasili Johari ya Mashairi in which are included parts of the Bible and the Holy Quran translated into Kiswahili verse. This makes Mnyampala the first poet in modern Kiswahili letters to recognize the Bible as Literature and discuss and translate it as such. In the introduction to his translations, the poet disclaims any role of "creator" (of poetry). The poetry, he says, is already in those Holy books; what he is doing is recast some of the phrases to achieve greater coherence and rhyme. Here, for instance, is what he does with Genesis 4:23-24:

Sikilizeni sauti yangu, Enyi wake zake Lameki,
 Sikilizeni maneno yangu, Tegeni sikizo msisaki,
 Maneno nasema ya uchungu, Jinsi gani mwakwaa visiki
 Ndicho kisa nimeua mtu, Ndipo akanitia kuwaza,
 Rohoni nimejitia kutu, Madhambini nimejipakaza;
 Kaini alilipizwa kisasi, Na alilipizwa mara saba,
 Lameki kalipizwa kisasi, Kumbe mara sabini na saba
 Ameniandama Ibilisi, Kwako Mungu ninaomba toba.⁴

The commonly accepted syllabic length in contemporary Kiswahili poetry is sixteen. The above composition, the translator reminds us, has 10 and 9 syllables. It must be remembered that in Kiswahili poetry a syllable is made up of a consonant and a vowel or a single vowel which comes after another vowel (e.g. "mwakwaa" = mwa-kwa-a = 3 syllables or "nimeua" = ni-me-u-a = 4 syllables). Thus, the first line in the above verse is divisible, syllabically, as follows: si/ki/li/ze/ni sa/u/ti ya/ngu, E/nyi wa/ke za/ke La/me/ki. (Ten and nine syllables respectively). Mnyampala calls the original of the above verse "the first steps toward the discovery of the art of poetry." Then he explains why he made the translations:

Nimeandika kwa kusudi la kuwashawishi
 na kuwabainishia wasomaji wajue idili gani
 na shauku iliyo ya sanaa hii iliyomo jinsi
 ilivyoanza tangu zamani za kale.⁵

I have written this in order to persuade
 and to clarify things for readers who are
 filled with the desire to know how
 this art of poetry began in those
 ancient times.

The poet shows great facility with the Kiswahili language in his translation. His choice of words is made

with the carefulness of a writer who realizes that he'll have a difficult time convincing his audience on the validity of his point. The excerpt, particularly its opening lines, is reminiscent of a Shakespearean Brutus. Without referring back to the original text in the Bible, this is the way we would restore the passage into the English language, line by line:

Listen to my voice, you wives of Lameck
Listen to my words; prick up your ears and
 be attentive
I speak words of remorse on why you stumble
 over tree stumps
That is why I've killed a man; for he hurt me.
He is a naughty young man who forced me into
 deep thought
I have put rust on my heart; with sins I've
 smeared myself
Cain was avenged but seven times
Lameck has been avenged seventy-seven times
Satan is upon me. God Almighty, I beg your
 forgiveness.

The rhyming and alliterations in the Kiswahili version cannot be recaptured in translation. The internal rhymes for line 4, 5 and 6 make an interesting descriptive sentence when put together: "Mtu mtukutu kutu" ("A naughty man is but rust"). It is an apt description of the villains of society. The excerpt as a whole shows that Mnyampala was not a man lacking in imagination or the penchant phrase. Many of the poems in Fasili Johari ya Mashairi are of comparable quality. However, besides the artistic competence which the poet's translation of parts of the Bible brings out, one must needs consider the political significance of such work. For the poet did not stop with these excerpts. He went on to write book-length epics on the subject. Two of these are Utenzi wa Zaburi (Psalms) and Utenzi wa Injili (Epic on the New Testament). Heretofore, religious epics had been written on Islamic subjects, inspired by the Holy Quran. One such work is Utenzi wa Ayubu (The Epic of Job); completed in June 1835 by one Umar bin Amin). Albert Gerard, in his book, African Language Literatures, contends that the work was based on a much earlier poem, dating at least from the early eighteenth century. He adds that whoever the original Kiswahili writer may have been, it is obvious that the ultimate source is to be found in Koranic commentaries and that the original author was unacquainted with the Biblical

Job story.⁶ The dominance of Islam in the creative endeavors of most East African poets up to about the turn of this century is what has led Jan Knappert to make the following observation:

The main theme of traditional Swahili poetry is invariably religious. It deals with moral precepts and instructions regarding ritual, praises of God and His Prophet, the horrors of Hell and the Pleasures of Paradise. Where the moral rules are not given directly, they are given by implications, in the form of Historia Sancta, the legendary history of the Prophet, his family and his followers... The perfect example of the Prophet and his followers is the model of life that must be imitated by everyone who desires to attain Paradise. These legends are not entertainment, they are elimu, knowledge required for all who want to lead a righteous life.⁷

Mnyampala deviated from this "tradition", by, first, using the bible and Jesus instead of the Quran and the Prophet and, secondly, by discussing the art, not the moral precepts, of Biblical writings. Since the religious and the political are inextricably intertwined in a colonial or neo-colonial situation, the poet's action constitutes a break from Islamic hegemony over the arts. But it also goes counter to what the missionaries (the harbingers of colonialism) wished to preach, namely, the redemptive power, not the literary merits, of the Holy Book. Moving away from quasi-religious poetry, Mathias Mnyampala published in 1965 Waadhi wa Ushairi⁸ a collection of 182 poems of varying lengths and covering a wide range of themes. In this collection, Mnyampala succeeds where many a Kiswahili poet has failed. He is able to produce one-stanza poems of great merit. Nearly all Kiswahili poets write multiple-stanza poems because they cannot, it seems, concentrate their thoughts into a stanza of four lines. Kiswahili poetry is predominantly narrative in conception. To this, as we shall see below, Mnyampala added the dramatic element. Shaaban Robert is the only other poet to have written one-stanza poems. But, in many cases, he usually disregarded the four-line rule. So, the final effect is one of many stanzas "threaded together" by the absence of the conventional refrain.⁹

The poems in Waadhi wa Ushairi, though separate and ostensibly self-contained, show Mnyampala's dexterity not only with imagery but also in developing what ultimately hits us as a well knit poetic sequence. A look at poems 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 and 40 in Waadhi (pp. 5-6) will illustrate this point. The eight poems are separate entities with the following titles: "Umoja," ("Unity"), "Siasa" ("Politics"), "Kabila" ("Tribe"), "Taifa", ("A Nation"), "Rangi" ("Color"), "Viongozi" ("leaders"), "Utamaduni" ("Culture") and "Uhuru" ("Freedom").

In poem number 33, the poet discusses the importance of unity for a people trying to liberate themselves from the yokes of colonialism. He uses the image of red ants and examines the significance of their unity. He says:

Siafu wangetengana, kama ingefaa hoja,
La sivyo wangegombana, wakaiasi pambaja
Waliona si maana, kuvunja wao umoja
Fimbo yetu ni umoja, kutengana udhaifu

The red ants would not unite, if such deed
could do them good;
They would fight each other and rebel against
embrace.
They saw no sense in breaking up the unity
Our stick is unity; disunity is weakness.

Mnyampala's use of the phrase "wakaiasi pambaja" (rebel against embrace) effectively hyperbolizes the sadness as well as the unnaturalness of disunity among ants (i.e., kins). If he wasn't striving for effect the normal way to say it would simply be "They'll refuse to cooperate with each other." In this the poet differs from such poets as Saadan Kandoro who, at his most political, did not bother to seek literary refinement. He went for the jolting language of the playcard.

In "Siasa", Mnyampala describes the nature and universality of political action among an oppressed people and concludes that:

Sumu yake ni siasa, ndio itayoitoa.
Politics is the poison that will kill it
(oppression).

This poem, standing as it does between "unity" and the next one, "Tribe", clearly serves as a bridge between

those two ideas because in the latter poem he argues that a nation is only a nation if the clans become a tribe, and tribes have amalgamated into a larger unit (nation). You cannot build a nation, he argues, if you have no tribes. And "build" is used in the sense of "put together" not "develop." His recognition of the autonomy of the ethnic groupings may seem to contradict his call for national unity. However, a close examination of the poems ordering, reveals that this is a deliberately constructed structure which has proposals and counter proposals alternating before finally finding a synthesis. And this synthesis is achieved in the fourth poem, "Taifa", ("A Nation") where the separate and disparate multitudes form a common front:

Taifa halijengeki, lisipokuwa na sifa,
Lipambwe na halaiki, raia kila msafa,
Umoja wa itifaki, ni msingi wa taifa,
Umoja ndilo taifa, vinginevyo haifai.

A nation cannot be built save on character
Adorn her with crowds and citizens in every row
But the oneness of voice is the nation's corner-
stone

Unity is the nation; no other way suffices.

The word sifa in the first line is used to convey multiple meanings. First there is the "praise" which must flow from the people to their "nation" (nation, here, standing for that undefinable, disembodied concept of state which all citizens, nevertheless, feel obligated to hero-worship). Then there is the conduct and character of the citizens themselves. (Good people produce a good nation!). Finally, there is the "praise" which, consequent upon the attainment of unity, good character and other dynamics within a nation, flows from outside; i.e. the way the rest of the world thinks about a particular nation. And, although it is the combined effect of all three levels of praise which brings respect to a nation, the poet feels that unity overrides them all. Note the metaphor in the last line: unity is nation.

In the next poems, the poet discusses the old question of colour and colour discrimination. Like Shaaban Robert ("Rangi Zetu") Mnyampala reaffirms the oneness of mankind in spite of their differences in appearance. Then, alluding to the colonizer - colonized situation prevailing in his land, he comments:

Mwekundu urujuani, mvaa pete na tepe
Rangi zetu siyo shani, ubaguzi tuukwepe.

The red and the semi-white,
Those who wear rings and others who don fillets
Our colors are no weird things
May we shun discrimination.

From the theme of unity and color, Mnyampala moves to leadership, culture and finally "true" independence. Of independence, he says that it makes one;

Bwana mkubwa...na uso upate nuru

A big man...and the face radiates light.

"Light (Kisw: nuru) is the metaphor for bliss. After this poem, the poet breaks away from the theme of nationalism and independence. In poem no. 41, "Moyo Upendacho" ("What the Heart Desires"), to 87, Mnyampala describes, the human character and parts of the body in poems of two and finally, four stanzas each. There is therefore a definite movement in the sequence of his compositions. In the second half of the book (stanzas 89-182) he picks up the classical themes on the transience of life in general and the frailty of the human heart in particular. A typical poem is number 160: "Mtu Dhaifu wa Moyo" ("A Man is Weak of Heart"). Structurally, the poems grow longer and longer. The last fifteen have ten or more stanzas each. Waadhi wa Ushairi is a well planned book with competently executed verse. Mnyampala, already a master of the alliterative and hyperbolic nuance, proves also to be a consummate exploiter of the paradoxical. His poem on "Mali" ("Wealth") juxtaposes conceptual opposites and skillfully manipulates the philosophical ambiguities generated therein. The first stanza (there are 5 in all) is worth quoting:

Pana neno lisemalo 'nguvu ya mtu ni mali',
Ni neno litakiwalo, kilichungua ni kweli
Lichungue sana hilo, hata nawe takubali
 Nguvu ya mtu ni mali, ni mali nguvu ya mtu.

There is a word that says: "the strength of man is (his) wealth."

It is a word deserving of thought;
Weigh it well and you, too, shall agree.
The strength of man is his wealth;

 The wealth of man is his strength.¹⁰

The poet develops his argument by giving the pros and cons of each of the opposing ideas and finally resolves the issue by saying that if you are physically weak but have wealth, your wealth makes you appear strong. And if you have a good physique, your strength has the potential to make you rich. In his words, strength is potential wealth. The poet successfully contradicts a popularly held axiom. Later, in another poem titled, "Ukubwa" ("Rank"), he argues that rank is a garbage dump.¹¹ With the publication of Ngonjera za Ukuta, these philosophical ruminations ceased. Even the art which had characterized his Epic of the Holy Gospel, Utenzi wa Enjili Takatifu, (which Jan Knappert calls a masterpiece¹²) disappeared. In their place comes a turgid political verse whose substance and phrase are lifted verbatim from The Arusha Declaration of 1967.

As it was pointed out above, Mnyampala is acknowledged as the originator of Ngonjera. But although he had been writing it since 1964, it was not until after The Arusha Declaration that this form of dialogue verse became known to a wider audience in East Africa. It is not clear what exactly inspired Mnyampala to adopt this type of verse. But whatever else it was, his people's oral traditions - in particular songs - appear to have played a large part in the crystallization of his new poetic style. One writer, J.S.M. Mwangomango, has drawn our attention to the existence of "Nyimbo za kujibizana" ("Dialogue Songs") among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. These songs are called, locally, Ikilumba or Akapote.¹³ And during the struggle for independence, songs cast in the vein of what would later be called Ngonjera were sung to politicize the masses against colonial rule. The most famous were those of Mr. Makongoro, a charismatic and talented composer and lead singer who, for nearly two decades after the formation of TANU (1954), dramatized the plight of Tanganyikans in song and pantomime. The nation swayed to the rhythm of his enthralling performances.

But the story of Dialogue Verse (Mashairi ya Kujibizana) as a genre in Swahili literature must begin far earlier than Makongoro or Mnyampala. Writing in 1954 in Africa Journal,¹⁴ Lyndon Harries reports not only the existence of dialogue within a poem, but also dialogue between poets. He gives examples of the Taylor Manuscript which has nineteenth century poems by Sheikh Abubakar bin Bwana Mwengo and Sheikh Ali bin Athman (Ali Koti) and the "sage" Mwalim Musa al-Famau, discussing

the duty of prayer and comprising some forty verses.¹⁵ Harries quotes a large chunk of a "Dialogue verse" from the Taylor Papers, transliterated from the Kiswahili-Arabic script. The poem is called "Mashairi ya Mdeni na Mwandaniwe" ("The Songs of the Debtor and His Friend"). The form of the "dialogue" is exactly as it later appears in Ngonjera; with each speaker taking up a whole stanza to make his case. But the multiple verse format was also not unknown. Harries writes:

The dialogue in the above poem is expressed in single consecutive verses. In the scripts belonging to Sheikh Mbarak Ali Hinawy of Mombasa each participant has in turn at least 4 verses.¹⁶

From the point of view of this study, therefore, it is not completely accurate to suggest that Mathias Mnyampala "invented" Ngonjera as J.J. Komba has argued in his poem, "Mtumishi Wetu Mnyampala" ("Our Servant Mnyampala"). Komba captures the history of the verse in verse:

Sasa nakupa kiini,
Lini hizi kazibuni,
Na hapa hapa mjini,
NGONJERA zilianza

Mwaka sitini na nne,
Katu si mwaka mwingine,
Mambo haine haine,
Fani ilipoingia.

Now I give you the genesis
The time when he invented the genre;
It was right here in the city
That NGONJERA had its beginning.

The year was nineteen-sixty four
Not ever another year;
Things became brisk and nimble
When the genre came into being.¹⁷

However, to dispute Komba's thesis is not to deny that Mnyampala played an important role in the development of this genre. For it is he who recast and renamed it from its earlier, amorphous forms in the oral traditions (where it existed in song). In this, as I have already pointed out,

he owes it to the Arusha Declaration. The didacticism which permeates the poet's Ngonjera za Ukuta is something which he had planned carefully. He considered it as the kernel of Ngonjera. He articulates it in his introduction to the books:

Kama hayana mafundisho ama vidokezo vya kufurahisha, mchangamsho na kadhalika, hayawezi kuitwa ngonjera. Si laiki ya ngonjera kutumia lugha mbaya ya matusi ama mambo ya kupuuzi... Ngonjera huwafunza wasikilizaji wake mambo mbalimbali yanayohusiana na siasa ya nchi yetu. Vile vile kufunza maadili na utamaduni wetu. Kwa kifupi, ngonjera ni uzindushi.

If they (i.e. poems) have no teaching or interesting anecdotes, humor and the like, they cannot be called ngonjera. It does not benefit ngonjera to use abusive language or trivial subjects... Ngonjera teaches its hearers about the different issues which pertain to the politics of our nation. It also instructs on wisdom and matters of culture. In short, ngonjera means conscientization.¹⁸

The poet reaffirms the above statement in the opening poem titled, "Ngonjera ni kitu gani" ("What is Ngonjera"), when he declares that:

Ngonjera zina kiini, cha mafunzo ya busara
Mafunzo yenye kipini, cha kuamsha fikira
Za mawazo akilini, na kugeuza majira
Maana yake ngonjera, ni mafunzo kwa shairi.

Ngonjera poems have one objective: to teach lessons of wisdom;

Teachings which have the power to awaken thoughts
Making the mind alert and changing the times.

The meaning of ngonjera is "lessons through poetry"¹⁹ (My emphasis).

It is a perplexing reality that a poet who wrote so eloquently when "theorizing" on Ngonjera, fails to live up to our expectations when it comes to the actual writing of the "dialogues." The poems have neither the

sharpness of edge to "awaken thought" nor the propelling potential for "changing the times." Nothing he says here has not been said before, and often-times, more forcefully. Here are the nine titles under which he divides Book One of his Ngonjera: "Ngonjera ni kitu gani" ("What is Ngonjera?"); "TANU na siasa Yake" ("TANU and her Policies"); "Viongozi Wetu" ("Our leaders"); "Ujamaa" ("Familyhood"); "Azimio la Arusha" ("The Arusha Declaration"); "Elimu ya Utamaduni" ("Cultural Education"); "Siku ya Taifa" ("National Holiday"); "Uhusiano mwema" ("Co-existence") and "Mafumbo" ("Parables"). All these are topics which President Julius Kambarage Nyerere had written about in his many publications, including Uhuru na Umoja, (Freedom and Unity), Elimu ya Kujitegemea (Education for Self-Reliance) and The Arusha Declaration itself. And all were still very fresh in the minds of the people when Ngonjera came out. Thus, to succeed artistically, Mnyampala should have eschewed the familiar and the hackneyed, in substance and phraseology. Unfortunately he did not. Instead, he wrote such dialogues as:

RAIA

Ndugu kwako nimekuja, nasikitika moyoni
Ninalo jambo la haja, linanitia huzuni
Kuna jambo walitaja, sisi kuhama mjini
Ujamaa vijijini, faida yake ni nini?

MWANASIASA

Kuhama mijini tija, tuhamie vijijini
Tukaipate faraja, ya maisha ya kuwini
Tutokane na haraja zatutia umaskini
Ujamaa vijijini, faidaye uchumi.²⁰

CITIZEN:

Brother, I come to you with a saddened heart
I have something important that is weighing on
my mind
Something you have said about us leaving the city.
Ujamaa in the rural areas; what benefit does it
have?

POLITICIAN:

Leave the city you must; we'll live in the country
We shall get happiness there and be winners in life
Let us eschew empty words as they impoverish us.
Ujamaa in the rural areas means economic advantages.

By the end of the poem, against all rules of plausibility, the "citizen" is completely convinced on the "profitability" of living in a rural village and he promises to buy a hoe and move out of the city. The same pattern of "Question - Answer - Conversion" is repeated in all the poems. Nothing fails. The arguments are one-sided as the questioner is always portrayed as ignorant; almost verging on idiocy. The poet, Mnyampala, seems to have overlooked two important factors when he put Ngonjera at the service of "serious issues", as he postulates in the introduction quoted above. First, that 'serious' issues demand deeper probing (be it poetic or philosophical) than "trivial" ones. Second, that the use of persona in dramatic poetry, as in drama, demands a certain degree of plausibility in character or conceptual transfigurations.

It is clear from reading the dialogues in Ngonjera I and II that the issues are not discussed or explored in any depth to reveal the contradictions inherent in Ujamaa policies or the difficulties of policy implementation. He makes things look incredibly easy with one segment of humanity waiting to be led away like cattle. This is both idealistic and unrealistic. It blatantly contradicts the reality of Tanzania as it existed between 1967-1969 (when the ngonjeras were written) and even the spirit of the Arusha Declaration itself. The same misconception and idealism is discernible when the poet tries to "explain" (through his persona) why people flock to town. Listen to the "Citizen" tell the politician why he does not want to leave the city (the politician has just said that city life is too rough for the "citizen"):

RAIA

Taabu na zetu shida, tumezoea mjini
 Hutakata kina dada, kutwa kushinda hewani
 Hutakata kwazo poda, si kwema huko porini
 Ujamaa vijijini, faida yake ni nini?²¹

We are used to city life and its problems
 Look at those shining sisters; forever on the
 wing of time
 They shine with perfume; bush life is no good
Ujamaa in rural areas; what benefit does it have?

The roots of urban unemployment go deeper than the hedonism or will power of one individual or a small band of

individuals. It has both historical and colonial ramifications. And if anyone must be held responsible, it is the bureaucratic bourgeoisie who, in the words of Frantz Fanon, have removed the colonizer in order to replace him. The fact that the fruits of Uhuru have not filtered into the rural areas is proof that nothing has really changed since the departure of the colonial governments. The poet, by placing the blame on the poor and the unemployed is, inadvertently or otherwise, shielding the bureaucratic petty bourgeois from responsibility and the inevitable wrath of the masses. A few years before Mnyampala painted this picture of the ordinary man, the man in the street had seen the true anatomy of Uhuru as well as recognized the new but familiar pattern of power alignments. In a poem entitled, "Nusu Kifo Cha Uhai" (lit: "Half Death of Life"), one Khamis S.S. Wamwera, wrote:

Mtu akiwa fukara, dunia ghali ya bei
Anachofanya hasara, manufaa hakitoi
Tajiri mwenye kipara, hucheka na kufurai
Nusu kifo cha uhai, nimeona ufukara.²²

If a man is poor, the world is dear in price
Whatever he does comes to nought, yielding no
profit;
A bald but rich man, laughs and makes merry
I see poverty as the half death of life.

Then, another poet from the same socio-economic class, clinched the point in less universalistic, almost Brechtian, terms;

Kabwela ni letu jina hakuna tulichopata,
Nawe dada unaona, mambo yangu tukuta
Mashati kushonashona, wengi tumejikunyata
Hakuna tulichopata, kabwela ni letu jina.²³

For us the poor, only the name is ours
Nothing has been gained.
You, sister, can see what is befalling us;
Continually, we patch up our shirts.
We, the majority, are miserable;
Nothing was gained.
For us the powerless, only the name is ours.

Clearly, the buffalo of Uhuru (Okot p'Bitek) has fallen on the people with disastrous results! It is a false robe

thrown upon their undernourished frames by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie to whitewash an unjust system. That is what the poet means by "only the name is ours." Mnyampala's inability to understand this ideological maturity as well as the political-dynamics of the "common man" constitute the low point of his career as a poet.

Lyndon Harries, in his assessment of Mnyampala's ngonjera concludes that its failure to have a wider and more lasting effect on the Tanzanian masses must be traced to the hard vocabulary which the poet uses.²⁴ This assessment is incorrect. Ngonjera za Ukuta fails as poetry because Mnyampala chose, in his last years, to be the "kipaaza sauti cha waniasia"²⁵ ("loud speaker or amplifier for the politicians") instead of the people's conscience and seer. The historical matrix in which the poet did this has to be associated with a call made by President Nyerere of Tanzania on June 5, 1968, in the wake of the Arusha Declaration of 1967, when he "took positive action to bring Kiswahili poetry into the service of the state. He invited a group of Tanzanian poets to use their talents in order to promote a better understanding by the people of the land (wananchi), of national policies and particularly the responsibilities of the citizen resulting from the implementation of the Arusha Declaration."²⁶ It was mainly in response to this challenge that Ngonjera za Ukuta was written and sung widely in Dar es Salaam before being committed to print. At the same time, hundreds of other poems celebrating or edifying the Arusha Declaration were published in the local press. They were unanimous in their unqualified praise of the government. Most of these were later republished in book form in 1971 under the title, Mashairi ya Azimio la Arusha (Poems on the Arusha Declaration)²⁷. This was followed by another volume a few years later.²⁸

Mathias Mnyampala and this less known coterie of poets eulogized the Arusha Declaration because they considered it a revolutionary landmark (which it indisputably was). But by not contesting some of the heavy-handed bureaucratic practices which accompanied its implementation, they have done a disservice to both art and the cause for which the declaration was promulgated. Jean-Paul Sartre, a man whose words always have a ring of truth for African literature once defined the writer's responsibility to his society as an intellectual:

He is someone who is faithful to a political and social body but never stops contesting it. Of course, a contradiction may arise, between his fidelity and his contestation; but that is a fruitful contradiction. If, there is fidelity without contestation, that's no good: one is no longer a free man.²⁹

Another aspect of Mnyampala's ngonjera which may have contributed to its short-lived popularity is the apparent sexism permeating the poems. For a literature conceived in an admittedly revolutionary era, such poems as "Mke Kuomba Ruhusa Kwa Mume" ("A woman asks permission from husband") and "Mke Wangu Twende Shamba" ("My wife, let us go to the rural areas")³⁰ may be too ideologically parochial to stand the storms of informed criticism. Women are portrayed as liars, (e.g. alizua jambo la kutaka kwenda mjini - She invented an excuse so that she could go back to the city: p. 40), helpless creatures, indolent and quite prone to be involved in extra-marital affairs (Ngonjera: 1:41). The formula in Mnyampala's conception of life under Ujamaa is quite simple: The politicians "teach" the citizens where to be and what to do. They are the fountain of all wisdom and revolutionary initiative. The common man has none. Likewise, the men over women. Hardly the stuff out of which social revolutions are made! It is clear that the poet's epistemological world was heavily influenced by the Bible which he studied and translated extensively - as well as so exquisitely. That exquisiteness of phrase, which we also saw in Waadhi wa Ushairi, is, in the opinion of this writer, absent in his two famous books - Ngonjera I and II. The shiner facets of his literary fortunes must rest with his other works.

NOTES

1. Mathias E. Mnyampala, Ngonjera za Ukuta; Kitabu cha Kwanza (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Ngonjera za Ukuta: Kitabu cha Pili. Juu ya Azimio la Arusha came out in 1971 from the same publisher.

Ukuta stands for Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania which is a society for poets in Tanzania formed in 1959 with M.E. Mnyampala as its first chairman. Literally translated it means "The perfection of poetry and the Kiswahili Language in"

Tanzania." The titles of Mnyampala's two books, therefore, reflect the umbrella and inspiration under which the poems were written. The sub-title to the second volume "Juu ya Azimio la Arusha" ("On the Arusha Declaration") denotes the theme and substance of the poems.

2. See. J.J. Komba, "Mtumishi Wetu Mnyampala," Kiswahili: Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research. Dar es Salaam. Vol. 39/1 and 2 (1969), p. 11
3. The number of his publications exceed the dozen mark. By sheer energy, creative diversity and experimentalism, he ranks among the most prolific authors in the history of Kiswahili literature. His better known books include: 1. Mila na Desturi za Wagogo (sociology). 2. Kisa cha Mrina Asali na Wenzake (fiction). 3. Diwani ya Mnyampala (Poetry). 4. Waadhi wa Ushairi (poetry, theory of Kiswahili poetry). 5. Utenzi wa Injili (poetry and religion). 7. Mbinu za Ujamaa (poetry and politics). 8. Umoja ni Ngome Yetu (politics). 9. Mashairi ya Hekima na Malumbano ya Ushairi (poetry on politics). 10. Taaluma ya Kiswahili (literature) and 11. Kisa cha Bahati na Wazazi Wake (fiction).
4. Mnyampala, Fasili Johari ya Mashairi, (Nairobi: The Swahili Committee, 1964), p. 9.
5. Mnyampala, (1964), p. 9.
6. Albert Gerard, (1981), p. 107.
7. Jan Knappert, Traditional Swahili Poetry: An Investigation into the Concepts of East African Islam as reflected in the Utenzi Literature (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1971) p. 11.
8. Mathias Mnyampala, Waadhi wa Ushairi (Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1965). Pamoja na utangulizi ulioandikwa na Marehemu Sheikh K. Amri Abedi. All excerpts come from this edition.
9. See, for instance, "Mazungumzo" in Almasi za Afrika (1972), p. 64; "Nimepotea" in Sanaa ya Ushairi (1972), p. 16; "Maagano" in Mashairi ya Shaaban Robert (1968), p. 21, and there are many others.

10. Mathias Mnyampala, Waadhi, p. 44.
11. Mnyampala, P. 45.
12. Jan Knappert, Four Centuries of Swahili Verse: A Literary History and Anthology, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), p. 278.
13. See his article "Ngonjera za Ushairi," in Kiswahili (Dar), Vol. 41/2, (Sept. 1971), 67-71.
14. Lyndon Harries, "Dialogue Verse in Swahili", Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. xxiv, (1954), 157-159.
15. Harries, p. 157.
16. Harries, p. 159.
17. J.J. Komba, op. cit., p. 18 and 19 (stanzas 176 and 182). The complete poem has 192 stanzas.
*The city referred to is Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. J.J. Komba was a close friend and colleague of the poet. This poem was written to mourn Mnyampala's death in 1969. Obviously it is clouded with emotion and sentimentalism. It is, however, surprising that some scholars (e.g. Mwangomango) have taken this to be the authoritative history of Ngonjera.
18. Mathias Mnyampala, Ngonjera za Ukuta: Kitabu cha Kwanza, (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 3.
19. Mnyampala, p. 5.
20. Mnyampala, p. 38
21. Mnyampala, p. 39.
22. Khamis S.S. Wamera, "Nusu Kifo Cha Uhai" (a poem), Mwafrika, Jan. 24, 1964, p. 6.
23. S.A. Salum Mzee, "Hakuna Tulichopata" (a poem), Mwafrika, Jan. 24, 1964, p. 6.
24. See his "Poetry and Politics in Tanzania," Ba Shiru, Number 4, (1972), 52-54.

25. This phrase, "Kipaaza sauti", is used by Abdilatif Abdalla in his introduction to T.S.Y. Sengo's book, Shaaban Robert: Uhakiki wa Maandishi Yake (Dar es Salaam: Longman, 1975) in connection with poets who merely reproduce what has been said by the policy makers and are always in agreement with it.
26. Lyndon Harries in "Poetry and Politics in Tanzania," quoted in Albert Gerard's African Language Literatures, op. cit. 147.
27. Mashairi ya Azimio la Arusha (eds.). Grant Kamenju and Farouk Topan, (Dar es Salaam: Longman, 1970).
28. A second volume of poetry on the Arusha Declaration was published under the title, Azimio Baada ya Miaka Kumi (The Arusha Declaration After Ten Years) (ed.) Abdilatif Abdalla. M.M. Mulokozi has called this collection of verse "parrot poetry" because of its unquestioning attitude and lack of originality. See his article, "Ushairi na Ukasuku," Kiswahili, Vol. 47/2, (Sept. 1977), 1-17.
29. Quoted in Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer's Freedom," English in Africa, Vol. 4, No., 1, (March 1977) p. 47.
30. The two poems appear on pages 40-44 of Ngonjera, Bk. I.