

## Tale-Telling Tradition and Popularity of Radio Soap Opera In Tanzania: The Case of *Twende na Wakati*

Herbert F. Makoye\*

### Abstract

The successes and high rate of acceptance and use of radio soap operas in Tanzania, and how fast the form has grown in a short time, shows how the radio program genre has managed to capture the interest of Tanzanian radio listeners. This article, however, has tried to deal with one question: why have radio soap operas become so dear to Tanzanians and the international and local NGOs in a short time of its existence in the country?

### Introduction

Tanzania has an extremely high birth rate, and thus family planning is seen as a necessary initiative to reverse the trend. Hence, in the 1990s most stakeholders in Tanzania, particularly those in the health sector, saw the need to find effective means of communicating family welfare issues including family planning and HIV/AIDS. Mass media like television and print media have a very limited range in Tanzania, and therefore radio-based communication was seen as the most effective means of reaching people. This is because the majority of Tanzanians have no television sets and cannot afford daily newspapers. On the other hand, there is a radio even in the most remote village that allows the inhabitants to get information.

As such, in July 1993 Tanzania radio broadcasting industry for the first time shocked its audience with a new approach to communicating health-related issues like family planning and HIV/AIDS when *Twende na Wakati* (Let's Go with the time) Radio Soap Opera program was broadcast in Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam (Vaughan & Rogers, 2000).

### Brief history of Radio Soap Opera Broadcasting in Tanzania

Radio soap opera tradition in Tanzania started in 1993 when *Twende na Wakati* began to be broadcast twice weekly nationwide. This radio soap was created basically to attempt to change attitudes and behaviours in a positive direction. It dealt with health and family welfare issues like family planning methods, family

\* Department of Fine and Performing Arts, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: [hmakoye@yahoo.com](mailto:hmakoye@yahoo.com)

size and HIV/AIDS. The radio programme was funded by the Tanzania government and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The technical assistance is provided by the Population Communications International (PCI) in New York, USA. Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam provides the technical staff.

When the *Twende na Wakati* started to be aired in 1993 it was only broadcast on Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam. Currently it is aired in other four different radio stations: i.e., Radio Tanzania - Dodoma, Radio Sauti ya Zanzibar - Zanzibar, Radio Faraja - Shinyanga, and Sauti ya Injili - Kilimanjaro. Approximately one thousand and two hundred episodes of *Twende na Wakati* have been aired up to the end of 2005.

*Twende na Wakati* opened the eyes of other radio producers who saw the effectiveness of the programme and decided to initiate other radio soap operas. In 1994, for example, another radio soap opera known as *Zinduka* ('Wake up') was launched. This is another family planning radio soap opera that was developed as part of a larger project called 'Laying the Foundation: Family Planning IEC', which was a collaboration between the Health Education Division of the Ministry of Health of Tanzania and The Johns Hopkins University/Population Communication Service (JHU/PCS). The objective of *Zinduka* radio soap opera was to "...promote quality reproductive and maternal health services" (Ministry of Health/RCHS 2001:2). Like *Twende na Wakati*, *Zinduka* is still on air in Radio Tanzania - Dar es Salaam and also in other radio stations like Radio Free Africa - Mwanza.

Apart from the above radio soap operas that have been on air for almost a decade now, many mini-soaps have been broadcast in Tanzania since mid-1990s. In 1995, for example, the British Council in Dar es Salaam contracted Parapanda Theatre Lab to prepare a mini-radio soap known as *Mnazi Mmoja*. This radio soap had thirty-two episodes that were broadcast on Radio Tanzania - Dar es Salaam. The objective of the programme was to provide voters' education to Tanzanians prior to the 1995 first general multiparty election.

In 1999 the Reproductive Health Unit of the Ministry of Health initiated another radio soap known as *Vijana Wetu* ('Our Youth'). It was a one-year weekly radio soap opera which had 52 episodes. The major aim of *Vijana Wetu* was to provide adolescent reproductive health education to youth between 10 and 24 years of age. Also in 2000 the Parapanda Theatre Lab of Dar es Salaam secured funds to prepare a 24-episode radio soap opera known as *Bibi Msafiri* that was broadcast on Radio Tanzania - Dar es Salaam. This radio programme was on civic education. Again in 2002, Care International funded the Parapanda Theatre to produce a radio soap known as *Baragumu la Haki* (42 episodes). The aim of the radio programme was to provide civic education.

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In 2003 another two-year radio soap named *Mambo Bomba* ('Cool Things') was launched. It was sponsored by the African Youth Alliance (AYA). More than one hundred and fifty 15-minute episodes were broadcast on Radio Tanzania - Dar es Salaam for the two years. The technical support for *Mambo Bomba* was provided by Population Communications International (PCI), Nairobi, Kenya. The major objective of *Mambo Bomba* was to communicate information to Tanzanian youth on HIV/AIDS and Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) issues.

Finally, in 2004 the Small Entrepreneurs Loan Facility (SELF) project under the Vice President's office initiated a radio soap opera called *Kopa Ujiendeleze* ('Acquire Loan for your Prosperity') which is still on air to-date (SELF:2005). The 15-minute radio programme is aired in three radio stations – Radio Tanzania - Dar es Salaam, Radio Free Africa - Mwanza, and Radio Sauti ya Zanzibar - Zanzibar. The overall focus of *Kopa Ujiendeleze* is to change negative attitudes of Tanzanians towards loans; hence serve as an instrument for empowering micro-finance institutions (MFIs) and targeted beneficiaries on how best to access project resources. It is also part of the initiatives to inform and educate Tanzanians on the importance of acquiring loans so as to fully participate in the process of poverty eradication stipulated in National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty - NSGRP (URT, 2005).

*Kopa Ujiendeleze* radio soap opera is also meant to motivate and entice Tanzanians to embark on the formation of microfinance institutions such as Saving and Credit Cooperative Society (SACCOS), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and/or secure loans from institutions that provide microfinance services.

### **Why Radio Soaps in Tanzania?**

Almost all the monitoring and assessments done on the radio soap operas have come with very positive findings: that radio soap operas are encouraging people to appreciate new behaviour; motivating them to seek out more information about how to adopt the new behaviour; and are persuading people to become interested in practicing and advocating the new behaviour as a norm for their society (Fossard, 1998:7).

All the radio soap operas in Tanzania are based on the Sabido method, named after Miguel Sabido, who was vice-president for research at Televisa in Mexico, when he developed the process in the 1970s. This is a methodology for designing and producing radio and television drama that can win over audiences while imparting messages and values. It is based on character development and plot lines that provide the audience with a range of characters that they can engage with – some good, some not so good – and follow as they evolve and change.

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Change is the key to the Sabido method. Characters may begin the series exhibiting the antithesis of the values being taught, but through interaction with other characters, twists and turns in the plot—and sometimes even outside intervention—come to see the value of the program's underlying message. By transmitting values through the growth and development of characters, the Sabido method manages to simultaneously attract large and faithful audiences, and stimulate thoughtful discussions (Singhal et al., 1999).

Sabido's entertainment-education soap operas theory was developed around five theories (Nariman, 1993). The most highlighted theory among the five is Bandura's social learning/cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) that people learn from role models whose behaviour they wish to emulate. Bandura suggests that humans learn social behaviours through modelling their own behaviour after the behaviour of people they see in the mass media, or with whom they interact personally.

Bandura's approach is at the centre of the genre of radio, television and video dramas that deal with social issues, particularly in developing countries, and increase audiences' self-efficacy. Social cognitive theory is the central pole of Sabido's approach to entertainment-education programmes. Practitioners using the approach have been applying it as they develop radio or television soap operas' characters who served as positive and negative role models for the educational theme, and who received rewards or punishments as they practiced or rejected socially desirable behaviours. The remaining other four theories that contributed to Sabido's theory of entertainment-education soap opera are the dramatic theories of Bentley (1967) and MacLean's (1973), the concept of the triune brain, and Shannon and Weaver's mathematical theory of communication (1948).

It is true that radio soap operas have a two-barrel gun that most practitioners believe helps the form to attain its objectives whenever it is implemented. First, it is the educational or cognitive part that radio soap operas provide and how this helps people to change their attitudes towards certain things and practices. Second, it is the element of entertainment that helps the radio programs attract and retain more listeners throughout of its life.

### **Influence of tale-telling tradition towards radio soap operas' listenership.**

Tale-tale or folktales are stories created for entertainment, to teach morals/lessons, or to explain something about things that happen in life. Almost all ethnic groups in Tanzania (there are approximately 120 ethnic groups) have folktales that are somehow similar in presentation. The meaning of most stories are the same, but the title, characters and settings differ because they represent the cultural, geographical and beliefs of the society in which the stories are told. Folktales often help people to understand more about the ups and downs of life—things that happen to them and to others for obvious or no obvious reason.

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The nature of communication or exchange of ideas in tale-telling and in radio soap operas may be similar to other communication channels in which the communicator transfers a message to the audience. However, the additional technique of using entertainment to envelope characters who model ways to improve the listeners' lives is what distinguishes the above two medium of communication from others as Dr. Kimani says<sup>1</sup>

*Our decision to use radio soap operas in Africa to address critical health and social issues was deliberate.... We have realized over the years that entertaining programs that are guided by a positive and humanizing theory have the unique ability to increase knowledge and change attitudes, as well as influence behaviour.*

### **Tale-tale tradition in *Twende na Wakati*.**

There are obvious strategies from Sabido and Bandura's approaches towards creating radio soap operas that model positive changes in the *Twende na Wakati*. The approaches are what helped captivate and make the program dear to most Tanzanian radio listeners the way they revere their traditional tale-telling traditions. As the developers of the programme reported,

*First, the process of extensive formative research which was the first step in developing Twende na Wakati Radio Soap Opera. Before the experts in radio drama (actors and script writers) were hired a team of researchers met with different stakeholders such as government officials, opinion leaders, health providers, Radio Tanzania personnel and the general public to determine the pro-social behaviours that should be modelled (TNW, 1993).*

Then local script writers, actors and the technical production team who speak the language of Tanzanians and are aware of the social-cultural milieu were engaged. This strategy helped in coming with a program which has a Tanzanian flavour, and situations which people could easily identify with. The same happens in tale-telling whereby the stories are not created from vacuum but are made to reflect the realities of their audience.

The second aspect in *Twende na Wakati* is character selection and development. It is true that many Tanzanian folktales are loved and remembered because they include main characters that people find to be funny, interesting, or whom they really care about. All these happen to be so in folktales because the characters are humanized and not detached from the real and daily life of the listeners. This is the same in *Twende na Wakati* which feature ordinary people facing everyday life challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Kimani Njogu is a PCI's Regional Representative in Africa and has been one of the architect of introduction of radio soap operas in Tanzania.

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Characters in the radio soap opera fall into one of three categories: positive role models whose behaviour results in good things; negative role models whose behaviour has adverse effects; and transitional models that start out negatively but turn into positive role models by the end. This is true also in tale-telling where there are cunning characters (tricksters) who are punished for their bad behaviour and the good ones who are rewarded as role models.

For example, secular tricksters in West Africa like tortoise often project the kinds of evil forces and bad behaviours against which the human community must contend with to survive, and which must be kept in check. This goal is rehearsed and achieved in performances of African folktales, wherein the trickster's bad anti-social behaviours are usually punished; and the evil forces are controlled or defeated (Obiechina, 1993).

Therefore, in all radio soap operas—including *Twende na Wakati*—character identification is the most crucial aspect in order to attain behaviour change among listeners. Through character identification, "... audience [listeners] find themselves loving some characters dearly, despising others, wanting to help those in need, and to like those they admire" (Fusser, 1998:4). This makes radio soap opera capable of inserting a powerful effect on individuals and on a society.

In both *Twende na Wakati* program and tale-telling performances characters do not preach about lessons or moral issues they want to put across. Instead, their actions and consequences speak for themselves. For example, in *Twende na Wakati*, Mkwaju who started as the main character, is a promiscuous long-distance truck driver, whose wife Tunu tolerates her husband's bad behaviour at first, but eventually leaves him. With the help from the community, she starts her own business to support her children. At the end Mkwaju contracts HIV and suffers from AIDS, and eventually dies. On the other hand Tunu's hard work pays off, and she becomes a successful business woman.

The third aspect which twin together tale-telling and *Twende na Wakati* is what is called *real-world connection*. At the end of each *Twende na Wakati* 30minute episode, the lessons learnt are summarized in an epilogue. The epilogue also is also followed by, for example, the names and addresses of places where listeners can go and get more information on the issues discussed. This technique is very paramount in Tanzanian tale-telling as Hartmann observed among the Makua people of southern Tanzania:

*The ending of a tale may include a moral: a reminder of the lesson to be taken from the tale, a summing up of the content so as to illustrate the message, or even a new idea may be included, so as to give the ending a different slant and totally different message from that expected (1986:62).*

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Another very important aspect in writing radio soap opera is to have a good story. The patterning of episodes of the story is the most important single factor in the attainment of the other two elements of aesthetic harmony: the emotive and cognitive satisfaction of the audience. In radio soap operas, like in tale telling, for example, it is very important for a writer to relate images and actions in the story to a theme or a comment on a specific aspect of human behaviour among the target audience. The actions or behaviours in the story must be capable of providing an overview about some of the recurrent concerns or values of the community.

The technique of elimination of boredom during the performance is another factor that is highly employed in tale-telling. This is done through the employment of other artforms like songs, dances, poems and so on, instead of solely depending on spoken words. This technique is highly exploited in *Twende na Wakati* radio soap opera. In most radio soap operas, for example, there is a tremendous use of songs, music, dances, recitations, drumming, and so on. In fact music has been a pivot component in each episode. The uses of other artforms help to manipulate listeners' emotions throughout the listening.

Another technique that is employed in both *Twende na Wakati* radio soap opera and tale-telling is the playing with the fluctuation of audience sensation. In both forms the technique is attempted through the paralleling together of two or more characters or stories that the audience is confronted with as an action progresses. In long running of *Twende na Wakati*, for example, one story started with two friends (Mkwaju and Shime). They were both employed as truck drivers and were staying in the same house. At the beginning they seemed to have the same characteristics. But when the story progress they became two different persons. They developed different hobbies and aspirations that nobody amongst the audience expected. That made the story more catching.

To engage fully the audience and ensure the apprehension of the message, in both tale telling and *Twende na Wakati*, the actions are patterned in such a manner that they help eliminate boredom by making the sensations of the audience fluctuate between activation and depression. In both forms, fluctuation of audience's sensations helps also to move the story forward. Moreover, it helps to create a cognitive focus for the audience vis-à-vis the characters' preoccupation.

The employment of actions, characters, and actions that help audience to identify themselves with whatever happens in the story is another technique mostly used in both tale-telling and in *Twende na Wakati* radio soap opera. As Okpewho writes, this technique is also highly used in most African narrative traditions:

[Audience] . . . sees the performer as one member of a society of which its audience is only a random portion. Though he is an artist blessed with uncommon skills in executing a song or a

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tale before an audience, sometimes to the accompaniment of music played by him or attending instrumentalists, his outlook and sensation are not different from those of the rest of the society. The images of his tale are simply the same as those experienced by other members of his community, and at the moment of performance he merely bears with him the charge to convey to a wider public a worldview that he shares with his fellows. The reason why the audience is able to participate actively in the performance of a tale is that there is no division whatsoever between the narrator's apperception of the world of the tale and their own. (1996:168-2)

Finally, another important parallel technique that is highly employed in both tale-telling and radio soap opera is audience participation. When discussing the aesthetic of oral narrative-performance in West Africa, Finnegan noted during the performance of what she called audience behaviour such as "spontaneous exclamations, actual questions .... emotional reaction to the development of yet another parallel and repetitious episodes" (1977:232). Similarly, in radio soap opera the audience is highly encouraged to participate by using different means. For example, there are audience who form discussion groups, others write or make phone calls to producers for more clarifications, or just to share their own experiences and understanding of the stories in the soap operas.

### Conclusion

From the above the discussion we can conclude that radio soap opera as a form of communication is not alien to Tanzanian audience. It is gaining strong roots because it has a lot of aesthetic and artistic similarities with one of traditional and dearest artform to the Tanzanian audience - tale-telling. It is obvious that radio soap opera is based in African tale-telling techniques. Like in radio soap operas ".. aesthetical experience in oral narrative-performance is made up of three inseparable components: captivation of audience, retention of audience and the transfer of cognitive experience to the audience" (Selim 1992:66). These three components are inseparable from each other in both radio soap operas and tale-telling practices.

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