Shaping and Being Shaped by Lamu Society: Ustadh Mau's Poetry in the Context of Swahili Poetic Practice

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As a father, Qur'ānic schoolteacher, chairman of the Lamu Muslim Youth, and speaker of the Education Trust Committee; as an imam, preacher, and poet, Mahmoud A. Mau not only illuminates, teaches, and molds society, but is himself shaped by the particularities of the society into which he was born. This essay shall provide background information about the conventions of language use, textual production, and speaking conventions of Lamu society in which Ustadh Mau has lived and worked most of his lifetime.[1]

In Lamu society, poetic discourse is prevalent in everyday speech; moreover, proper conduct in Islamic life and one's manner of speaking are necessarily intertwined. *Utendi* poems such as Ustadh Mau's *Ramani ya ndoa* (2006) and *Wasiya wa mabanati* (1974), as well as those by other contemporary poets, and even older ones such as the nineteenth-century *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, were composed to be taught at home and/or in Qur'ānic schools to instruct adolescents on how to respectfully interact with one another in their upcoming adulthood, and especially how to verbally interact with their spouses in their future marital lives.[2] These poems, together with other verbal art forms such as songs, verses, and proverbs, are, however, not only a means of teaching proper

1 Acknowledgement: This essay is heavily based on my PhD project, which investigated the agricultural Vave oral literary genre through the anthropology of text and the Islamic discursive tradition; on these approaches, see, respectively, Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Paper Series (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986). The observations are based mainly on the research I conducted in the Lamu archipelago between 2011 and 2014. I owe thanks to the people of Lamu and the Lamu archipelago at large who opened my senses to perceiving and understanding oral texts. The analysis, perspectives, and errors in this essay, for which I take responsibility, are solely mine.

2 In a YouTube video clip, two former neighbors in Mtaamwini/Lamu play the role of husband and wife, demonstrating how couples in Lamu conversed with each other through poetry in former times: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdSs-Ks4zms (accessed September 1, 2022).

parlance or verbal interaction, but are themselves the products of respectful and proper communication.[3]

Poetic discourse is prevalent in Lamu because two fundamental paradigms of social interaction form the basis of a particular style of poetic communicative behavior and language use. These paradigms are *sitara* (modesty/concealment/protection) and *heshima* (honor/respect). In addition to poetry's function of teaching practical wisdom for life, it also has a role in conveying conflictual sentiments that may not be voiced explicitly in ordinary speech. The Swahili have the notion that conflictual sentiments, discontent, and denial may only be conveyed implicitly, through poetic art forms, in order to maintain one's modesty (*sitara*) and respect (*heshima*) as a fellow Muslim.[4]

Several authors have commented on the paradigm of *sitara* and *heshima* among the Swahili.[5] These paradigms not only refer to women and clothing in Muslim societies, but concern all aspects of life.[6] In Swahili communities, "modest concealment" is likewise applied in communication or verbal social interaction.[7] The verb *kusitiri* means to conceal, to veil, or to safeguard from being judged as having done something shameful, i.e. to safeguard one's honor

3 Longer poems, such as the didactic poems of the *utendi* genre, are also preserved in writing; some of these were composed as long ago as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but were still taught in Qur'ānic schools as little as twenty years ago, such as the abovementioned nineteenth-century didactic poem *Mwana Kupona*.

4 Ibrahim Noor Shariff, *Tungo zetu: Msingi wa mashairi na tungo nyinginezo* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1988), 81. In a similar way, Lila Abu-Lughod has outlined how Bedouin women use poetic speech to express sentiments such as vulnerability and weakness, which if expressed in ordinary (social life) discourse would be inappropriate, according to the people's ideology of social life (i.e., basic cultural notions about one's society, social relations, and the individual). See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

5 Kjersti Larsen, *Where Humans and Spirits Meet: The Politics of Rituals and Identified Spirits in Zanzibar* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); John Middleton, The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization (London: Yale University Press, 1992); David Parkin, Continuity and Autonomy in Swahili Communities: Inland Influences and Strategies of Self-Determination (London: School of Oriental & African Studies, 1995); J. Marc Swartz, The Way the World is: Cultural Processes and Social Relations Among the Mombasa Swahili (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

6 See also Rose Marie Beck, *Zeigen ist Gold: Zur Definition einer kommunikativen Gattung in afrikanischen Gesellschaften, Working Papers on African Societies 41* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000); Rose Marie Beck, *Texte auf Textilien in Ostafrika: Sprichwörtlichkeit als Eigenschaft ambiger Kommunikation* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2001); Minou Fuglesang, Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1994); and Paola Ivanov, Die Verkörperung der Welt: Ästhetik, Raum und Gesellschaft im islamischen Sansibar (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2020).

7 Beck, *Zeigen ist Gold* and *Texte auf Textilien*; Ivanov, *Die Verkörperung der Welt*.

and respect, or as Ivanov says, "das Wahren des sozialen Gesichts."[8] One means by which to achieve such veiling in language is indirectness and ambiguity,[9] which is accomplished through the aesthetic styling of language, i.e. through verbal art forms such as proverbs, preexisting texts, and metaphors. Indeed, the Swahili regard this "veiled language" (*verschleierte Sprache*) as the highest aesthetic ideal.[10] Using "veiled language" is a modest way of communicating immodest sentiments.[11] So why is denial, negation, disagreement, or contradiction considered immodest? This is because one of the central ethical principles of Muslim societies is to discipline the tongue by using a "good," "fine," or "pure speech" that does not annoy or hurt others. The virtue of utilizing the "purest of speeches" is concretely invoked in several *āyāt* of the Qur'ān (sura/*āyāt* 4:148, 17:53, 22:24). For instance, God ordered the Messenger^{SAW} to teach all Muslims:

> Say to My servants that they should (only) say those things that are best: For Satan doth sow dissensions among them: for Satan is to Man an avowed enemy.
>
> Qur'ān 17:52

It is also proclaimed:

> For they have been guided (in this life) to the purest of speeches; they have been guided to the Path of Him who is Worthy of (all) Praise.
>
> Qur'ān 22:24

In this latter *āyah*, it is stated that those who, in this life, guard their speech by pronouncing only good things shall be among those who enter paradise. Among the predominantly oral Swahili, the virtue of "good speech" is regarded

8 Ivanov, *Die Verkörperung der Welt*. The translation of the German statement would be "the maintaining of one's social face." This means that things are considered shameful in particular contexts depending on who the judging audience is. Usually, separate judging audiences are gender- and generation-segregated, but also distinguished by other categories. The complexity of this issue is outlined in ibid.

9 Beck, *Texte auf Textilien*, 110.

10 Ivanov, *Die Verkörperung der Welt*.

11 Cf. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 240 and D.F. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Similarly, Reynolds (*Heroic Poets*, 149), in the context of Egypt, talks about the *shakwa* theme (rhetorically structured complaints), which represents a poetic discourse in which one may express feelings and emotions that would be dishonorable to express in action or in everyday speech; see also Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*.

as one of the most important virtues; a virtue that is thus consistently cultivated. On the other hand, it is at the same time the responsibility and moral obligation of all Muslims to guide each other by "commanding right and forbidding wrong," i.e. to remind and correct one another in order to lead one another to the "right path."[12] By holding fast to a way of polite and poetic speech that veils criticism through diverse literary devices, a Muslim can accomplish these two apparently contradictory demands: namely, being responsible for another's moral condition, that is, criticizing someone (e.g., for one's loose moral behavior) while not actually voicing any complaints or negative words, but couching them in euphemisms, which fulfills her/his duty of maintaining accord, harmony, and unity among mankind.

In general, the Swahili are said to be famous for composing on-the-spot,[13] which is due to the fact that expressions of dislike and discontent can only be voiced through poetic speech, not through ordinary speech. This has resulted in two interdependent discourses: poetic discourse and the discourse of ordinary social life.[14] As sentiments of negation, denial, dislike, disagreement, discontent, or contradiction are inappropriate to express in the discourse of ordinary speech, but ultimately unavoidable in social interaction, the Swahili have found a way of expressing them without violating their notions, namely by embedding these negative sentiments in a more detached, impersonal, and euphemistic speech; and by conversing in metaphorically saturated, obscure or ambiguous, and improvised or preexisting text forms such as poems, song verses, and proverbs.[15] These kinds of figures of speech conceal the negative content of what is being said, and foster the speaker's detachment from what she or he says.[16]

Although the practice of spontaneous poetic composition is receding in Lamu, preexisting texts such as song verses, poems, and proverbs continue to be inserted into the discourse of ordinary social interaction when sentiments of dislike or denial have to be expressed. Using the negative form is still considered impolite; thus, one will say "yes," although she or he means "no." One who is

12 Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Kai Kresse, "'Swahili Enlightenment'? East African Reformist Discourse at the Turning Point: The Example of Sheikh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 3 (2003): 296.

13 Shariff, *Tungo zetu*, 76.

14 Cf. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*.

15 Beck, *Texte auf Textilien*.

16 The rigid form of verse and its high degree of conventional structure, also in formulaic language, affords a certain level of protection to the individual who is expressing "deviant" sentiments of dishonor and immodesty (cf. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 239).

not accustomed to the interplay of these two distinct but interdependent discourses within the same speech act might easily accuse one's conversation partner of being mendacious or hypocritical.[17] According to Western values, this way of speaking is often condemned as hypocritical behavior. Many Swahili, on the other hand, think of Western speech and manners of expression as too direct, harsh, or rude. Spontaneously recited oral art forms in ordinary speech are there to veil "deviant" sentiments, and should therefore be recognized as a form of discourse well integrated into a people's social life.[18]

Among the Swahili, poetry is an immensely rich and important field of social discourse.[19] Communicating in verse is associated with good manners (*heshima na adabu*)—a notion most obviously influenced by Middle Eastern culture. In Arabic, the term *adab* is used not only for the concept of literature or oral literary art forms, but also for education and a person's good conduct, good manners, and discipline: that is, everything entailing how a person should be.[20] Speech is therefore seen as one of the most important fields of knowledge that a Swahili should acquire and cultivate in order to become a respectful member of his/her society (i.e., *muungwana*/*mstaarabu*).

The Swahili regard the use of "polite" language as a way of practicing Islam, and vice versa; if one uses more direct or even insulting language, it is regarded as violating the Islamic faith. Islam is not only a way of living or walking,[21] but also a way of talking. In Lamu society, conflicts are dealt with or resolved through verbal art forms. Since expressions of discomfort, disagreement, or contradiction usually derive from or generate conflict situations, verbal compositions—which are created in order to sustain the ideology of modesty—have the characteristics of a call-and-response speech act. Thus, criticism is not a

17 Steven C. Caton also states that "truth" is merely alluded to: "Although it is important to be truthful and reliable, it is not necessarily a virtue to be frank and outspoken. In fact, a premium is put on the ability to allude to the truth rather than state it baldly. At the same time, the auditor has to be able to read between the lines, as it were, or infer the speaker's intentions and references, for these are rarely spelled out." See Caton, *"Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 36.

18 Cf. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 28.

19 Kai Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); "Enduring Relevance: Samples of Oral Poetry on the Swahili Coast," *Wasafiri* 26, no. 2 (2011): 46–49.

20 Zachary Wright, Living Knowledge in West African Islam. The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niasse (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 14.

21 Michael Gilsenan comes to the conclusion that his kind of walking differed considerably from the kind of walking of his interlocutors and friends in Lebanon. See Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1982).

one-sided assault, but invites argumentative exchange.[22] This argumentative exchange is called *kujibizana* (composing in a call-and-response dialogue), and is regarded as a much-valued rhetorical device (see also the poems *Mchezo wa kuigiza* and *Jilbabu* in this anthology, which are composed in dialogue form). Thus, whenever a song or poem is voiced, the Swahili listener automatically presumes two things: there is a conflict, and this composition must be either a provocation or a response to some foregoing incitement. In most cases, one has to know the context to understand a poetic composition.

Poems that emerge from a personal conflict are not transmitted directly between the two individuals involved. Although the conflict has already been rendered detached and impersonal, most of the time, a transmitter or middleman is needed to convey the poem from the composer to the accused. Personal conflicts are mostly resolved through short, improvised or preexisting verbal text forms, and communal conflicts mostly through longer poems or songs that are uttered in a more public sphere, such as at weddings, funerals, political rallies, and during cultural or religious festivities and rituals.

The idiom of on-the-spot improvised poetry has vanished over time, especially due to formal education among the younger generations. As Kresse, who works on intellectual practice among the Swahili, says, "(F)ew Swahili poems or poets seem to be known to those in their teens and twenties. This marks a great cultural decline from the times, still remembered by the elderly, when practically everyone knew how to compose poetry."[23]

Especially in a society in which, due to modern formal education, composing on the spot is in decline, yet the notions of "pure speech" and "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" are still of utmost importance, creative and versatile people like Ustadh Mau are important figures. Ustadh Mau not only composes longer didactic poems, but also composes on commission for people who are not as creative and versatile as he is, but who still feel the need to express something in a more polite, pure, and poetic language. The composition of poetry is especially still prevalent in the field of social events, such as weddings, funerals, and birth or name-giving ceremonies, for which many approach people like Ustadh Mau to compose pieces for their personal needs (see the poems *Jilbabu* and *Mola zidisha Baraka* in this anthology).

Cultivating the virtue of "pure speech," which gave rise to the particularly Swahili way of conversing through oral poetic art forms, contains the characteristics of various verse forms and the call-and-response speech act. These oral art

22 See also Asad, *Anthropology of Islam*, 232.

23 Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa*, 71.

forms, which are discursive and negotiative, are mostly performed and voiced on different communal occasions such as celebrations and rituals. Mohamed H. Abdulaziz gives the example of *gungu*, a great oration dance held at weddings and other important social and political occasions in Lamu, at which "[t]he poets would meet and challenge one another in the art of composing *mashairi*. Almost the whole town would attend these dances. It was a suitable occasion for the poet-sages not only to entertain their audience, but also to exchange ideas, and seek advice from one another, as happened in this case."[24]

Any communal occasion is also a platform for voicing social, political, or religious criticism and/or negotiating about controversial issues in a manner that reflects the people's standard moral way of conversing, i.e. through poetry. *Nyimbo* (sung poems/songs) are used to communicate and negotiate political affairs and other matters, while the *mashairi* (recited poems) that Abdulaziz mentions and the *utendi* (didactic poetry) genre in which Ustadh Mau most often composes are used to elicit religious criticism or to provide a response to previous religious criticism; thus, these genres are more closely associated with theological debates.[25]

In particular, public speech must conform to *heshima* and *adabu*:[26]

> Allah loveth not the shouting of evil words in public speech, except by one who has been wronged, for Allah is He who heareth and knoweth all things.
>
> Qur'ān 4:148

In 1975, for the first time, Ustadh Mau composed poems for election campaigns and the selection of candidates for the parliamentary seat of Lamu East. Ustadh Mau's poem *Kimwondo* ("Shooting Star," 1975) is named after the genre in which it was composed. The genre of poetry called *kimwondo* was part of the political debate in Lamu at that time (Amidu 1993). Amidu describes the satirical genre as a genre that "leads to inner self-examination and questions about the propriety of one's social, religious and political order and conduct." The *kimwondo*

24 Mohamed H. Abdulaziz, *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979), 118.

25 Ann Biersteker, *Kujibizana: Questions of Language and Power in 19th- and 20th-Century Poetry in Kiswahili* (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 1996), 234.

26 Official occasions such as the inauguration of groups, societies, or the opening meetings of conferences and workshops also always include the recitation of a poem that was specifically composed for the respective occasion (see Ustadh Mau's poems *Tupigeni makamama*, *Bandari ina mawimbi*, *Mwalimu*, *Kilio huliya mwenye*, and *Za Washirazi athari* in this anthology).

genre was utilized as an effective means of participating in the electoral process of the country, by which members of Parliament are elected as leaders of the Lamu East Constituency/County.[27] As Amidu says of this genre, it is "a political, social and religious whip. It is used in both a satirical and serious manner to bring political, social and religious deviants down to earth where common sense prevails. The Kimondo is also a vein for deep political and philosophical thought about the world and the behaviour of its peoples."[28]

Beyond these kinds of political issues, Ustadh Mau's poems address pressing social issues, such as excessive *khat* chewing (*Mukhadirat*, 2009) and AIDS (*Ukimwi ni zimwi*, *Mwenye ukimwi si mwanga*, and *Tahadhari na ukimwi*, all composed in the 1990s). Ustadh Mau's poetic guidance also includes the condemnation of moral decay and the appeal to proper religious conduct, thought, and behavior. Considering his repertoire of poems of critique, guidance, and advice to be a form of poetic discourse, Ustadh Mau fulfills God's demand of negotiating and counseling among each other.

Ustadh Mau not only contributes as a poet to the Muslim social obligations of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" by utilizing "pure speech"; as an imam, he carries a double weight of responsibility, offering moral advice to his fellow Muslims through sermons and religious lectures. The Friday sermon (*khutba*) in particular is regarded as an institutionalized tradition of social criticism.[29] Morally corrective criticism or giving moral advice (*nasiha*) is a concept of central importance in Islamic moral theology.[30] According to Asad:

> *Nasiha* signifies advice that is given for someone's good, honestly and faithfully. It also has the meaning of sincerity, integrity, and doing justice to a situation. *Nasiha*, then, is much more than an expression of good intention on the part of the advice giver (*nasih*): since in this context it carries the sense of offering moral advice to an erring fellow Muslim (*mansuh*), it is at once an obligation to be fulfilled and a virtue to be cultivated by all Muslims. Thus, in the context of the sermons and religious lectures under discussion here, *nasiha* refers specifically to morally corrective criticism.[31]

27 Assibi Amidu, "Lessons from Kimondo: An Aspect of Kiswahili Culture," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 35.

28 Ibid.

29 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 213.

30 Ibid., 214.

31 Ibid.

In contrast to the Enlightenment view, in which criticism is regarded as a *right, nasiha* directed at religious or political authorities is, among Muslims, regarded as the *duty* of every Muslim, ruler and subject alike.[32]

Ustadh Mau was the first imam in Lamu to deliver his Friday sermons in the Kiswahili language, with the aim that his listeners could fully understand and comprehend his advice; this fact only reflects Ustadh Mau's utmost sincerity, integrity, honesty, faithfulness, goodwill, and sense of justice when practicing his obligation of leading his fellow Muslims onto the "right path." Ustadh Mau is, indeed, a social philanthropist[33] who through his poetry shapes, and is himself shaped by, Lamu society.

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32 Ibid., 215.

33 See Raia, this volume, p. 72.

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FIGURE 5 The poet at the entrance of his Asilia Bakery on Lamu in 2000