

FOLK NARRATIVES AND THE REFLECTION OF (*UTU*) HUMANNESS IN SHAABAN ROBERT'S *ADILI NA NDUGUZE*

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Abstract. This paper examines Shaaban Robert's novel *Adili na Nduguze*. It seeks to explain how humanness is embedded in the plot of this prose fiction. The study uses *Utu/Ubuntu* as a theory of analyzing and explaining the events and the actions within this novel. The focus of the paper is to explore the plot of the novel in order to see how it reflects humanness (*Utu/Ubuntu*) as it is perceived among the Bantu. The analysis is done by examining the reason of characters' appellation and the author's attention to diction which shows how royal characters intervene a conflict within this creative work. Also the study examines the novel in order to provide an account of the ontological conflict of two opposing beliefs in which a city is turned into stones (*Mji Uliogeuka Mawe*). Lastly, the paper attempts to inspect and explain reasons why Hasidi and Mwivu, Adili's two brothers are turned into ba-boons, subjected to severe whipping from Adili and the cause of the removal of the curse placed upon them which subsequently makes them humans again.

Keywords: folk narratives, humanness, power, *Utu/Ubuntu*, *Adili na Nduguze*

Introduction

Adili na Nduguze (2010) is one of Shaaban Robert's Novels written in Swahili. The author employs folkloric materials in order to present different issues related to humanness. In the introductory part of his novel, Shaaban Robert argues that although the book employs people and supernatural beings in its characterization, the narrative is specifically about land and plants, mines and their minerals, animals and their products business and its profit, journey and its importance, wealth and its blessings, rulers and their respect and people and their deeds.

The narrative presents the story of three brothers Hasidi, Mwivu and Adili. After the death of their parents, the three brothers inherit immense sums of money. Hasidi and Mwivu, the two elder brothers, decide to increase their wealth through mercantile trading. The business, however, proves to be unsuccessful after a shipwreck which results into great loss. In returning, Adili decides to share his wealth among his brothers who later manages to convince him to join them in their trade. In this journey, Adili succeeds to discover an ancient city which is enchanted and turned into stones. He returns in ship with, Mwelekevu, the daughter of the king of that city and plenty of germs and gold which he collected from that city. His brothers, notwithstanding the large amount of wealth given to them by their brother, covets the girl and suggests that she should be given to them also or she should be married by the three brothers. On refusing, the two brothers throw Adili in the sea. However, Adili is rescued by a genie that had been saved by Adili. The genie pronounces a curse to the two brothers and subsequently they turn into apes. Adili is ordered by the genie to whip them every night. Later, it is discovered that the apes are Adili's brothers and the king of Ughaibu (Adili's country) intervenes this conflict by writing a letter to the king of genies requesting him to restore

the apes into human form. The request is granted and the two brothers are restored to humanity again.

Thematically, and stylistically Shaaban Robert's *Adili na Nduguze* is considered to be adjacent to oriental folk stories (Njogu, 2008). However, the writer sets the work apart from oriental style by employing Swahili folklore and language. Khamis (2005) notes that all of Shaaban Robert's novels: *Kusadikika* (1951), *Kufikirika* (1967), *Siku ya Watenzi Wote* (1968) and *Utubora Mkulima* (1968) are identical in homiletic and didactic, but distinguishable from other Swahili novels of their generation in their thematic preponderance and method of functionality. Like all Shaaban Robert's works, *Adili na Nduguze* contributes to the development of self-awareness of East African society (Misyugin, 1993). It carries social and philosophical aspects which can be described by using the lens of African philosophy as we have attempted in this study.

African philosophy and literary criticism

That which is now known as African philosophy owes much to the publication of Placide Tempels (1906-1977) whose missionary work in Congo produced *The Bantu Philosophy* (1945). This work sparked critical investigation on African philosophy which resulted into John Mbiti's work; *African Religious and Philosophy* published in 1969. Early before Tempels, the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule, had undertaken studies of the Dogon of West Africa, and he left behind his famous work *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (1948). All these and the other works on African philosophy have created a body of literatures in which the question whether Africa generated its philosophy and thinkers has been demystified. African philosophy finds its way in many spheres: in daily life, in tradition and customs, in language and literature and in religion. The fact that the application of the philosophy can be traced in different spheres necessitates it to be a theoretical guidance of exam-

ining literary works written by Africans authors in both indigenous African languages and foreign languages. This study has applied the theory as a major tool of analyzing and describing different events in the text.

The term *ubuntu/utu*, which recurs frequently in this article, is a Bantu concept which in literal is translated as humaneness. In this study, we have considered its duality in pronunciation differences. These differences are chiefly due to morphological affixation in the major steam *-tu*. Thus, *ubuntu* and *utu* have been both used interchangeably to imply the same thing. In this study we have chosen to use the Swahili *utu* because it is a common concept and discourse among the Swahili speakers and it recurs liberally in the analyzed text. Nevertheless, *ubuntu* has been also retained for it is common to many people.

Appellation and reflection of Utu/Ubuntu

A close reading of the narrative shows that appellation in *Adili na Nduguze* reflects the essence of *utu*. These names, as Ngonyani (2001) puts it rightly, are "onomastic chosen as raw materials for manipulating the essentiality of the plot". There are names which portray two opposing forces in the narrative, names that depict humanness (*Utu/Ubuntu*) and other names show opposition to *utu*. *Adili* (which means impartial or just) is so created as to represent humanness. Throughout the narrative, *Adili* is depicted to act upon in an impartial and just way by behaving as a role model of morality which reflects humanness. On the other hand, *Hasidi* (which means malicious) and *Mwivu* (which means envious) are drawn to show opposition to humanness. In the narrative the two brethren (*Hasidi* and *Mwivu*) are portrayed to be acting contrary to humanness. Their names seem to have been created to show binary opposition between humanness and inhumanity. There are other names which seem to have been chosen as instruments of safeguarding humanness or rather as instrument of punishment against its violation. The introduction of super-

natural characters in this narrative carries a role of instrumentality. This role is reflected upon their names and the effort they perform. The genie called Mjeledi (whip) and Kisasi (vengeance), for instance, perform the work of punishment against Adili's brothers as part of execution of vengeance. "The author deliberately draws his characters in which the focus is on the message or the issue in the novel" (Topan, 2006). In this narrative, Adili is compelled to whip his brethren by using *mjeledi* (not the character but instrument) every night. It should be noted that this punishment is performed because the two brothers depart from humanness, the philosophy upon which the entire narrative is pivoted.

Royal power and *Utu*

The powers of kings and queens in this narrative reveal the meaning of African humanness (*utu*). Kings play a major role in solving the conflict between the three brothers Adili, Hasidi and Mwivu. The narrator portrays the King of Ughaibu by giving him particular attributes and then goes on describing the actions which the King does in the narrative. The following description shows special traits which the king in this narrative is given by the narrator:

Rai mfalme wa Ughaibu, alikuwa mfalme wa namna ya peke yake duniani. Alikuwa na tabia iliyohitilafiana kabisa na tabia za watu wengine wa zamani zake. Tabia yake ilijigawa katika theluthi tatu mbalimbali kama ngozi ya pundamilia. Katika theluthi ya kwanza alikuwa msuluhifu akapendwa na watu kwa theluthi ya pili alifanana na Daudi akaheshimiwa kama mtunzaji wa wanyama, na kwa theluthi ya tatu alikuwa kama Sulemani akatiiwa na majini. Kutawala suluhu na mapenzi ya wanadamu, utunzaji wa wanyama na utii juu ya viumbe wasiioonekana kama majini hutaka uwezo mkubwa sana (Adili na Nduguze, p. 1).

[Rai, the king of Ughaibu was a peculiar ruler in the world. His character was different from other people of his generation. His personality was divided in three parts like the skin of zebra. In the first part, he was such a reconciliatory that he was loved by humans. In the second part he resembled King David and he was respected for animal husbandry skills. In the third part he resembled King Solomon and was obeyed by genies. To rule over reconciliation of humans, animal husbandry and winning the obedience of supernatural beings such as demons requires great power.] (My translation)

Why is this king given such attributes? Among the Africans, the power of kings and queens was/is regarded with immense awesome. "Kings were not simply political heads; they were mystical and religious head the divine symbols of their people's health and welfare" (Mbiti, 1990). The depiction of the king of Ughaibu in *Adili na Nduguze* reflects such powers. Despite the fact that Shaaban Robert writes in the time when kingdoms in East Africa were almost crumbling due to the intrusion of colonialism, the imaginations of traditional Swahili kings and kingdoms were still vivid in his thoughts. The novelist 'connects centuries of old traditions of oral written literature with the demand of modern times' (Zhukov, 1998; 2004). The power of kings also is manifested in the conflict of beliefs as depicted in the tale of *mji uliogeuka mawe* (the city that was turned into stones) as it is revealed in the following text:

Tukufu alimtazama msemaji akasema kwa ukali, "Nini kili-chokujusulisha kusema upuzi Mrefu? Kama kwa sababu ya urefu wako ubongo wako umeyeyuka kwa jua, kaa kitako chini ya kivuli cha mizimu yetu utaburudika. Kama umerogwa, Kabwere atawakomesha waliokuroga. Riziki ya wanadamu hutoka mimeani. Kwa sababu hiyo,

mimi na kaumu hii twaabudu miti funga ulimi wako bwana. Usipofunga hasira ya mizimu itakuwa juu yako (Adili na Nduguze, p. 29).

[Tukufu turned and looked at the person who was speaking and he spoke harshly: How dare you to utter nonsense Mrefu? If due to your tallness, your brain has been melted by the sun, sit down under the shade of our *mizimu* you will be refreshed. If you are charmed, Kabwere will stop that charm. People's basic needs come from plants. It is for this reason; I and this multitude worship the trees. Shut up your mouth, if you cannot the wrath of the *mizimu* will be upon you.]
(My translation)

This conflict cannot be comprehended easily unless examined via Bantu's ontology. It is the conflict against the intrusion of alien belief. Tempels (1959) argues that the supreme value among the Bantu is life. Any force that enables a person to live strongly is well thought-out as vital force. "*Muntu* (person) denotes vital force endowed with intelligence and willpower. Among the Bantu God is viewed as a great person." He is the greatest power and reasonable living force. Things (*vitu*) according to this philosophy are also beings or forces which unlike God, human beings or *mizimu*,¹⁾ they do not have intelligence and will. Under such a belief, extraordinary creature such as Mrefu is considered by the king as a normal person who is probably charmed because there is no ordinary person who can attain such a gigantic stature.

The tradition Bantu believe in medicine men (the *baganga*). These (the medicine men) are believed to possess ability in vision of mutual forces. Such people as, Tempels (1959) observes, have the ability to 'select these forces and direct them towards the determinist (*Bantu Philosophy* p. 38). Similar features of such beliefs in *Adili na Nduguze* can be manifested in the tale of the city which was turned into stones (*Mji Uliogeuka Mawe*). Tukufu, the king of that

city, attempts to threaten Mrefu saying; 'if you are charmed Kabwere (the medicine man) will stop that charm'. It is important to note that although Tukufu professes to believe in *mizimu*, he however, declares 'I and this multitude worship these trees.' According to the text, the trees are visible forces and behind these forces are invisible forces, the *mizimu*, which emanate power of life to the trees.

The essence of *utu/bunted* is pivoted upon manners of people. A *mntu* (person) is a rational force. Any deed/action below the standard of rationality renders a person subhuman and irrational force. Under such condition, a *mntu* is considered a *kintu* (thing) rather than a *mntu* (person). To be a *mntu* as Tutu (1999) articulates is 'to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life'. *Utu* is about wholeness. It speaks about compassion' Tutu (2004). In *Adili na Nduguze*, the deeds of some of the characters explains better this concept. When Adili is forced by his brothers either to surrender Mwelekevu or to share matrimonial life with them, he reminds them the importance of humanness as the following text reveals:

Ushirika katika ndoa ulipasa wanyama na ndege. Mtu alikuzwa mno kuliko wanyama. Huchukiza Akiishi maisha duni. Ilipasa watu wa wakati ujao katika Afrika, Asia na Janibu kuishi maisha bora ya utu na kuifanya dunia mahali pa kiasi, siyo ulafi na uchu (Adili na Nduguze p. 32).

[Promiscuity was fit for beasts and fowls. A human being was higher being than beasts. It was displeasing if a human being lived in low standard life. It was supposed for the people of Africa, Asia or Janibu to live in a better life which is compatible with *utu* (humanness) and to make the world a place for temperance and not a place for gluttony and lust.] (My translation)

Adili, the speaking voice in this text, describes the importance of good deeds in relation to *utu*. He reminds his brothers to know that they are human beings and that, their coveting tendency is unbinding them from the cord of humanity and that self-control is an important virtue for human beings, whereas lust and gluttony are low characters observed among the beasts. Also, this text reveals that *utu* (humanness) is a way of life convenient for all human being and the departure from it, results in suffering. Indeed, as Hasidi and Mwivu conspire to drown their brother, they are consequently turned into beasts as the following text reveals:

Walakini alikubali kuwasamehe kwa sharti la kuwageuza wanayama. Aliwalaani watoke katika umbo la wanadamu. Mara ile ndugu zake walikuwa manyani. (Adili na Nduguze, p. 40)

[However, she (Huria) agreed to forgive them on condition that they must be turned into beasts. She pronounced a curse by ordering them to depart from human form. Instantly, his brothers became apes.]
(My translation)

This text reveals that, Hasidi and Mwivu had allowed emotions and feelings to rule over their senses. By so doing, they lost their humanness. The loss of humanness subjected them to the treatment similar to beasts. The genie (Huria) as it has been discussed comes in the scene as an instrument to guide *utu*. She pronounces a curse which removes humanness completely out of the two culprits and henceforth they become beasts. Yet again, the ill-treatment of the two brothers in which Adili is compelled by Huria to chastise them every night, is contrary to humanness which requires a person to pardon unconditionally. The efforts done by Rai, the king of Ughaibu, is part of endeavors to restore humanness (*utu*). These efforts succeed as the following text shows:

Mara ile Huria alirudi kwa Adili akatangaza kuwa hoja ya Rai ilifaulu. Mfalme wa majini alikubali ndugu zake kuwa watu tena. Aliyakabili manyani akasema tokeni katika uhayawani mrudi katika utu. Walikuwa watu tena wakajiangusha miguuni mwa ndugu yao kuomba radhi. (Adili na Nduguze, p. 47)

[Presently, Huria returned to Adili. She announced that Rai's request had been granted. The king of genies accepted that Adili's two brothers should be human being again. She confronted the two apes and said "depart ye from being beasts and return to humanness (*utu*)". Instantly, they became human again and threw under Adili's feet asking their brother for his forgiveness.] (My translation)

Conclusion

Shaaban Robert's *Adili na Nduguze* reflects humanness as it is viewed among the Africans. Through appellation, the characters show opposition and supposition to humanness. In the role of kings there are drawn the description of intervention in the conflict between Adili and his brothers. The incidence of the tale of *mji wa mawe* in this novel reveals an ontological conflict which can be easily understood through the meaning of *utu*. Again the attempt of the two brothers Hasidi and Mwivu to drown their brother encounters a severe punishment in which the two brothers are condemned to be beasts. Nevertheless, turning human beings into beast and subjecting them to regular whipping is also against humanness. Thus, the two brothers are turned into human beings once again by removing the curse placed upon them.

NOTES

1. Among the Bantu the belief that dead people continue living in another world (*kulimu*) is popular. These dead people are referred to as *mizimu*.

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