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SOME REMARKS ON KITHAKA WA MBERIA'S POETRY¹

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Kithaka wa Mberia (b.1956) is one of the most innovative Kenyan poets. Until now he has published four collections of poems and three plays. His poems contain a strong political and social criticism, sometimes in the form of animal allegories. He condemns various acts of violence done to women, like rapes of schoolgirls or prostitution caused by poverty. Some compositions seem life-stories of real persons, others are overtly didactic and moralizing, but in all the theme of social justice is almost obsessive. Another group of poems highlights the author's concern with his surroundings and with the "health conditions" of the Earth in general; thus, for instance, he denounces the devastation of Kenyan soil in order to get foreign currency. His love of nature makes him address affectionate verses to animals, insects and plants.

Formally the poems have little in common with the poetic tradition of the Swahili coast as they are in free verse. Kithaka exhibits a rich vocabulary of botanical and zoological terms and is fond of various forms of word-playing like chiming and punning; an important role in his poetry is played by parallelism. Moreover, he introduces into Kiswahili visual poems where typography is relied upon to perform expressive effects.

Kithaka wa Mberia, together with other East African contemporary poets, proves that Swahili poetry is able to express universal themes and can reach a high artistic value even without repeating traditional models.

Introduction

Kithaka wa Mberia is a Kenyan poet, playwright and linguist, born in 1955 in the Tharaka district. He teaches Linguistics and Kiswahili at the University of Nairobi, where he obtained all his degrees in linguistics, having researched into his mother tongue, Kitharaka. Until now he has published four collections of poems, *Mchezo wa karata* (1997), *Bara jingine* (2001), *Redio na mwezi* (2005) and *Msimu wa tisa* (2007), as well as three plays, *Natala* (1997), *Kifo kisimani* (2001) and *Maua kwenye jua la asubuhi* (2004). In *Natala* the eponymous character rebels against the traditional practice of inheritance that deprives the widow of her husband's goods. *Kifo kisimani* ("Death by the well") is a sort of modern version of the Fumo Liyongo epic, while *Maua kwenye jua la asubuhi* ("The blooming of morning flowers") revolves around the theme of civil strife and ethnic tension in an imaginary African country.

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Kithaka is the most innovative Kenyan poet. As Mikhail Gromov puts it,

The poetry of Kithaka wa Mberia [...] still mainly lies outside the focus of attention of literary critics in the poet's native Kenya as well as outside the country.² However, his poems could be considered as being the most inventive – especially from the stylistic point of view – in contemporary Kenyan *art de verse*. Kithaka wa Mberia is one of the very few modern Kiswahili poets who use free verse, employing traditional poetic patterns only as allusions. (2006: 109f)

Only the first two collections will be examined here; special stress will be laid on the first one, *Mchezo wa karata*, whereas Gromov has analysed the second one, *Bara jingine*.

Content

The 42 poems in the first collection, *Mchezo wa karata* (“A game of cards”), contain a strong political and social criticism, sometimes outspoken (e.g. *Wimbo wa mkulima*, *Nyumba ya udongo* or *Kero*), sometimes in the form of allegories, mostly animal ones. Besides common negative symbols like crocodiles (*mamba*), sharks (*papa*), locusts (*nzige*), cockroaches (*mende*), bedbugs (*kunguni*), hyenas (*fisi*), mice (*panya*) etc., negative characters are represented, in turn, by mongooses (*nguchiro*), honey badgers (*nyegere*), weaverbirds (*kata-dole*) or maggots (*viwavi*), and even by a thorny acacia hard to uproot (*mgunga shambani*), or by ghouls (*mazimwi*) who in a game of cards change the rules every time they are losing (*Mchezo wa karata*). Thus, for instance, in the poem *Nyuki, ndege na nyegere* a group of birds propose the bees to help them looking for pollen, but behind this collaboration hides a plot of birds and badgers who want to deprive the bees of their honey. Sometimes the poet's commitment in fighting the bad ones shows directly (*Vitani na panya*).

The second collection, *Bara jingine* (Another continent), contains 34 poems written in the Eighties and Nineties. It is possible to divide them thematically in two groups: those concerning political and social topics and poems describing environment and nature. In the first group there are poems commenting some events of topical interest like *Kikaoni Addis Ababa* or *Jumapili ya damu*. Several compositions condemn various acts of violence done to women, like rapes of schoolgirls which ruin their whole life (*Giza mbele*, *Pamela*, *Flora na wenzake*), or prostitution caused by poverty (*Mimi Monika*). Some poems seem life-stories of real persons, like a painful story of a woman deceived by a married man and now destroyed by illness (*Nakumbuka ulivyokuwa*), others are overtly didactic and moralizing (e.g. *Ni sumu kwa watoto*), but in all of them the theme of social justice is almost obsessive. Kithaka dreams of a better future – of Africa full of libraries and laboratories, of children no more suffering from measles and whooping cough, of modern agriculture producing enough yams for the whole continent

² In the meantime, however, at least two university theses on Kithaka's poetry have been presented: *Mwingiliano wa Fani na Maudhui Katika Ushairi wa Kithaka wa Mberia* by Perminus Kasilus Nzuki (MA thesis, 2002) and *Maudhui Katika Msimu wa Tisa ya Kithaka wa Mberia* by Christopher M. Nchebere (post graduate thesis, 2009).

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so that there is no more need to beg for leftovers (*Hatutaaga ndoto*), of a continent without tyranny, corruption and fratricidal wars (*Bara jingine*).

Another group of poems highlights the author's concern with his surroundings and with the "health conditions" of the Earth in general (*Ngao*); thus, for instance, he denounces the devastation of Kenyan soil in order to get foreign currency (*Jinamizi, Bwawa la Ithanje*) or the fact that the river Nairobi has become a cloaca (*Mimi, mto Nairobi*). Kithaka's love of nature makes him address affectionate verses to animals, plants and even to raindrops (*Matone ya mvua*) and particles floating in the air (*Kamba na jabali*). Thus the poem *Nieleze* opens with the following question:

<i>Nieleze</i>	Tell me
<i>Ewe binadamu mwenza</i>	My fellow human being, my friend
<i>Ni mara ngapi</i>	How often
<i>Uzungumzapo na jirani?</i>	Do you talk to your neighbour?

These neighbours (*jirani*) are green pigeons (*ninga*) pecking with chickens in the courtyard, the tamarind tree (*mkwaju*) that provides its fruits without requiring any care from the man, an old beetle (*kifauwongo*) pushing wearily its lump of dung on the road, or the stars illuminating the night. The poem ends with another question:

Anga ya usiku nakawa ingiapo
Ikapendeza kwa pambo linalometameta
Unaanziha mazungumzo na nyota
Unapekua mienendo ya mbingu za mbali
Unadadisi sayari, miezi na vimwondo
Au hiyo elimu isiyokera kwa karo
Unaipuuza kwa ujeuri
Na kubakia katika giza?

When the fragrant night air sets in
So beautiful in its glittering decorations,
Do you start a conversation with the stars?
Do you study movements in distant skies?
Do you query planets, moons and meteors?
Or do you choose to ignore
This science that is free and friendly
And thus remain in darkness?³

³ I am grateful to Prof. Cristiana Pugliese for her help in translating the poems in a literary way rather than simply literally.

Expression

As regards the form, the poems are in free verse, generally short – two or three words in a line, seldom more. For instance in the poem *Mruko wa nyuki* (II⁴) each line contains only one short word to imitate buzzing and whirring of bees. The stanzas are of various length and the length of poems themselves also vary. In the first *diwani* most poems do not exceed one page; they are poignant and go straight to the point. Kithaka's longest poem (of six pages) gives the name to the second collection (*Bara jingine*) and presents a better continent, imagined by the poet.

What is striking in both collections is the rich vocabulary of botanical and zoological terms: instead of trees in general Kithaka speaks of acacias (*minga, migunga, vikwata*), of flamboyant trees (*mikakaya*), dwarf palms (*mikoma*), tamarind (*mkwaju*), jacaranda (*mja-karanda*) and eucalyptus (*mkalitusi*). His poems feature honey badgers (*nyegere*), beetles (*vi-fauwongo*), green pigeons (*ninga*), snails (*makonokono*), herons (*yangeyange*), maggots (*vi-wavi*), lizards (*mijusi*) and many other creatures. Animals – whether mammals, birds, or insects – are either symbols for various human types, or they are Kithaka's neighbours and friends and, as such, he addresses or questions them amiably.

Symbols and allegory are recurrent **tropes** in Kithaka's poetry,⁵ as has been said above. The two most common tropes, however, are simile and metaphor.

Some of Kithaka's similes are obvious (*tamu kama asali* – sweet like honey), but more often they are unusual (*kijani kama majani ya mtango* – green like cucumber leaves):

*Ndoto yangu / Ni tamu / Kama asali,
Kijani / Kama majani ya mtango,
Angavu / Kama jua la asubuhi,
Pendezi / Kama bustani ya mawaridi. (Bara jingine II)*

My dream / Is sweet / Like honey,
Green / Like cucumber leaves,
Bright / Like the morning sun
Amiable / Like a garden full of flowers.

or

*Uwanja wa shule / unayeyuka taratibu / kama barafu ya rangirangi
The school yard / melts slowly / like a multicolour ice. (Giza mbele II)*

⁴ The number (I or II) after the title indicates the collection – *Mchezo wa karata* (I) and *Bara jingine* (II).

⁵ Tropes are devices involving alteration of the normal meaning of an expression – a formal or semantic deviation. Symbolism is the optional extension of the meaning from literal to figurative, whereas allegory may be described as a multiple symbol, in which a number of different symbols, with their individual interpretations, join together to make a total interpretation (Leech 1969: 162-163).

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Metaphor is more concise and immediate than simile.

<i>Mchana unajiandaa</i>	The day is getting ready
<i>Kupasha usiku kigongo</i>	To turn its back to the night
<i>Katika riley isiyokoma,</i>	In an endless cycle,
<i>Mawingu nyuma ya vilima</i>	The clouds behind the hills
<i>Yanawaka moto mwekundu</i>	Are burning with red fire,
<i>Na kuipa anga</i>	And the sky
<i>Sura ya damu</i>	Looks like blood. (Giza mbele II)

Anyway, rather than tropes I would like to analyse schemes of Kithaka's poetry. **Schemes** may be identified as foregrounded repetitions of expression – phonological, graphological, or formal (i.e. grammatical and/or lexical) patterns (Leech 1969: 74) – and include repetition of phonemes like alliteration, verbal repetition like anaphora or enumeration, as well as syntactic parallelism.

One of Kithaka's main characteristics is **euphony**, obtained by the means of alliteration, here intended as repetition of the initial consonant or consonant cluster of the syllable (e.g. *elimu isiyokera kwa karo* in *Nieleze II*), assonance – repetition of vowels only (*hali ya haki* “state of right” in *Siku chungu I*), derivation – the use of several words derived from the same origin (*unatona matone ya kite* – “it drips drops of moans” in *Siku chungu I* or *Masikio yasikiayo / Na hisia zihisizo* – “the ears that hear / and the feelings that feel”), horizontal rhymes (*maliwazo – mawazo* “soothing – thinking”, *kumbo (bila) umbo* “shapeless shove” in *Siku chungu I*) and vertical rhymes (*zama / zahama* “time – chaos”, *mezani / mizani* “at the table – balance” also in *Siku chungu I*).

The whole poem *Amba I* (of two pages) is built on the same disyllabic rhyme – *amba* (“perhaps” or “exactly”) which rhymes with *mamba* (“crocodile” or “black mamba”), *shamba* (“field”), *mwamba* (“rock”, also fig.) etc.:

[...] <i>Natangaza kwamba</i> <i>Huyu mamba</i> <i>Ndiye mwamba</i> <i>Unaoharibu shamba</i>	I declare that The black mamba Is the master That ruins the field
 <i>Bali naamba</i> <i>Ingawa amejipamba</i> <i>Kwa magamba</i> <i>Hatahinda kamba</i> <i>Ivunjayo miamba</i> <i>Kwenye mashamba ...</i>	 But let me add that, As strong and elegant As he may seem, He can still Be defeated By the persistent wind.

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Often several of these devices are combined, like assonance and alliteration in the following examples:

majonzi na machozi! / maisha ya mashaka! (Dhiki na ndoto I)
misery and tears / life of hardship

kwa ujahili usiojali / na ujeuri unaojeruhi (Aibu! I)
with careless cruelty / and hurtful arrogance

matundu machungu / ya msumari mtundu (Siku chungu I)
bitter holes / of a mischievous nail

In some of these examples we may speak of chiming. In fact, Kithaka is fond of various forms of word-playing like chiming and punning.

A pun is a foregrounded lexical ambiguity which may have its origin either in homonymy or polysemy (Leech 1969: 209). In the homonymic puns the poet is taking advantage of an arbitrary identity of sound, i.e. of the fact that two words with different meaning are spelt the same way. The effect is similar even if the homonymity is approximate rather than absolute.⁶ E.g. *pacha la picha* (“twin picture”), *mtima* (“heart”) – *mzima* (“whole”), *kalamko* (“smartness”) – *kakamko* (“strain of muscles”), as well as in

(wale) wafunda mafunda / ya asali asili (Siku chungu I)
those who gulp down mouthfuls / of pure honey

(tazama) wasiwasi waziwazi / inayowakaza wakazi (Siku chungu I)
(look at) the evident worry / engulfing the inhabitants

This kind of repetition differs only in the degree of similarity from that called chiming – the device of connecting two words by similarity of sound so that you are made to think of their possible connections (Empson 1947: 12, quoted by Leech 1969: 95).

bawaba za mabawa “hinges of wings” (*Karamu ya nzige I*)
janga la jangwa “disaster of the desert” (*Fujo tumboni I*)

When, instead of similarity of sounds, the repetition concerns words with a similar meaning, we may speak of enumeration, i.e. listing of synonyms or quasi-synonyms:

njama na ulaghai / unafiki na ubaguzi / na / kiburi na vitisho
plotting and cheating / hypocrisy and discrimination / and / arrogance and threats
(*Sisimizi nijulisheni I*)

⁶ In this case, according to some linguists, it is technically not a pun, but a jingle. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Oxford 1964), however, gives another definition of ‘jingle’: make a jingle – be full of alliterations, rhymes, etc. (p.653)

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More often, however, it is the same word which is repeated in contact or at a distance. Exact verbal repetitions in equivalent positions of the relevant unit of text are called verbal parallelism. The most common figure of speech belonging to this category is anaphora – initial repetition, whereas epistrophe – final repetition is almost excluded from the (rhymed) poetry as it clashes with the requirements of the rhyme. Both figures are present in the following lines:

<i>Kwangu mezani</i>	At my table
<i>Nisipotafuna</i>	If I do not chew
<i>Nitatafuna wapi?</i>	Where will I chew?
<i>Kwangu sebuleni</i>	In my living room
<i>Nisipotabasamu</i>	If I do not smile
<i>Nitatabasamu wapi?</i>	Where will I smile? (<i>Utandabui muuaji I</i>)

Parallelism plays an important role in Kithaka's patterning of verses. The term "parallelism" is above all associated with syntactic repetition – the repeating of the same morphosyntactic pattern accompanied by rhythmical, phonic or lexico-semantic repetitions or differences. See, for instance, a series of simple nouns followed by locative nouns in the poem *Giza mbele* (II)

Vitabu mkononi / Kutojua akilini / Umasikini nyumbani
Books in his hand / Ignorance in his head / Poverty in his house

or as in *Nyuki, ndege na nyegere* (I)

<i>Kwa nuru nyusoni</i>	With a glow on their faces
<i>Tabasamu machoni</i>	A smile in their eyes
<i>Na ndoto nyoyoni</i>	And dreams in their hearts
<i>Nyuki wakakubali</i>	The bees agreed.

Parallelism is the principle underlying all versification, that with regular metre and rhyme as well as free verse. It often extends to both lexical and grammatical choices. Thus in the following stanza, the first two clauses are built in a parallel manner: subject consisting of two nouns, verb in the same tense, and object. Moreover, *nzige na kupe* ("locusts and ticks") are linked with *wezi na wauaji* ("thieves and murders") not only by the parallelism, but also by the repetition.

<i>Nzige na kupe</i>	Locusts and ticks
<i>Hubadilika rangi,</i>	Change their colours,
<i>Wezi na wauaji</i>	Thieves and murders
<i>Hubadilisha mavazi</i>	Change their clothing
<i>Bali hubaki</i>	But they remain

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Nzige na kupe

Locusts and ticks

Wezi na wauaji!

Thieves and murders! (*Dira usitupe!* I)

Parallelism may involve patterning on both phonological and formal levels. Thus syntactic parallelism is combined with a pun in

kwa kalamko za akili / na kakamko za misuli (Fujo tumboni I)

with smartness of brains / and strain of muscles

Anaphora is often accompanied by syntactic parallelism, especially when the word repeated at the beginning of the line is a conjunction.

The poem *Si maskani mapya!!* (I) consists of two stanzas, where each line of the first stanza is parallel with the corresponding line of the second stanza.

Si maskani mapya!!

Haya si maskani mapya

Maskani mapya gani, ambamo

Tunanyonywa damu dawamu

Na kunguni vitandani

Na chawa nyweleni

Na mbung'o njiani?

Haya si maskani mapya

Maskani mapya gani, ambamo

Tunapokonywa ndoto daima

Na nguchiro vizimbani

Na mende majikoni

Na panya maghalani?

A new home

This is not our new home

This is no place we can call home:

Bedbugs torment us at night

Lice thrive in our hair

And there are tsetse flies outside.

This is not our new home

This is no place we can call home:

Time and again we are robbed of our dreams

By the mongooses who raid our coops

By the cockroaches who scuttle across our kitchens

And by the mice who hide in our barns.

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Every parallelism sets up a relationship of equivalence between two or more elements; interpreting the parallelism involves appreciating some external connection between these elements: a connection either of *similarity* or of *contrast*. When formal parallelism is combined with an implication of contrast, we speak about antithesis. Antithesis brings together two units with opposed meaning. It may concern words, phrases or sentences.

The poem *Wimbo wa Mkulima* (I) consists of two perfectly parallel stanzas, where the first three lines and the last but one are almost the same. The contrast created by the antithesis is between breeders of animals and peasants on the one hand, and those who enjoy their products on the other hand.

***Wimbo wa Mkulima* (I)**

Inakera sana moyo

Hii anga ambayo

Inawapa

Maziwa ya ng'ombe

Na mayai ya kuku

Wasiofuga

Ng'ombe

Na kuku

Na kutemea mate

Wafugaji!

Inaudhi sana moyo

Hii anga ambayo

Inawapa

Ugali wa mahindi

Na uji wa wimbi

Wasiolima

Mahindi

Na wimbi

Na kutemea mate

Wakulima!

Peasant's song

What exasperates beyond all bearing

Is this sky that

Bestows

Cow's milk

And hen's eggs

To those who rear

Neither cows

Nor hens

But spits

In the farmer's face!

What irritates beyond all bearing

Is this sky that

Bestows

Maize porridge

And millet gruel

To those who cultivate

Neither maize

Nor millet

But spits

In the peasant's face!

If there are more than two phases to the syntactic pattern, it moves towards a *climax*. See, for instance, the poem *Jembe, surupwenye na kalamu* (I), where the first two stanzas are built in parallels, in a calm movement, whereas in the last stanza the rhythm changes: the four rhymed closing lines, short, swift and cutting, form an unexpected climax.

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Jembe, surupwenye na kalamu (I)

Jembe limelalamika

Napanda mpunga

Napalilia migomba

Napura mawe

bali

Nasononeka

-Kwa ombwe tumboni

The Hoe, the Overalls and the Pen

The Hoe protests:

I plant the rice

I weed the banana trees

I clean the millet

but

I feel pain

-Because my stomach is empty

Surupwenye imenungunika

Nafua chuma

Naunda mitambo

Nabeba makasha

bali

Nagofuka

-Kwa ukata maishani!

The overalls grumble:

I forge iron

I make machinery

I carry weights

but

I feel weak

-Because I spend my life in poverty!

Ndipo kalamu

Inapoinuka, inapokeza

Hilo ni janga

La kulenga

Kwa kijinga

Cha umalenga!

Then the Pen

Stands up and rejoins:

This is the blow

I craft with the flame

Of the burning fire

So that poetry may glow!

The poem *Dhiki na Ndoto* (I) starts with two figures of chiming that suggest a connection not only between misery (*majonzi*) and tears (*machози*), but also between life (*maisha*) and hardship (*mashaka*). The central part features both semantic parallelism – all the nouns belonging to the same semantic field (animals) – and syntactic parallelism: a noun phrase followed by an adverbial of place; notice also the anaphoric repetition of *na* and the final repetition of the locative *-ni*.

The repetitive figure in the final part of the poem is called anadiplosis – the last part of one unit is repeated at the beginning of the next. The parallelism of the two shortest lines brings together in contrast sadness (*ghamu*) and light (*nuru*).

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Dhiki na Ndoto

Majonzi na machozi!
Maisha ya mashaka!
Ai chawa nyweleni
Na kunguni kitandani
Na mende mekoni
Na panya ghalani
Na nguchiro kizimbani
Na nyegere mzingani
Na fuko shambani –
Ghamu!
Dhiki na ndoto
Ndoto ya makungu
Makungu ya kesho –
Nuru!

Sorrow and Dream

Misery and tears!
 A life of hardship!
 Alas, lice in the hair
 And bedbugs in the bed
 And cockroaches in the kitchen
 And mice in the barn
 And mongooses in the coop
 And honey badgers in the beehives
 And moles all over the field –
 Oh sadness!
 Sorrow and dream
 Dream of the daybreak,
 The daybreak of a new tomorrow –
 Light at last!

At last another important and perhaps the most striking aspect of Kithaka's poetry must be mentioned: he introduces into Kiswahili **visual** (or **graphic**) **poems** (*mashairi-picha*) where typography is relied upon to perform expressive effects (Cf. *Nyumba*, *Dau haliendi* and *Boga* in the first volume).

See, for instance, how the poet represents a collapsed road in the poem *Mruko wa nyuki* (II):

... njia	ya		the left
<i>kushoto</i>			road
<i>i</i>	<i>po</i>		col
<i>li</i>	<i>ro</i>	<i>ka</i>	lap
	<i>mo</i>		sed

In the second collection there is, for instance, a visual poem (*Mwashi mahiri*) praising the advantages of breast feeding compared with bottle feeding; the two stanzas of the poem are printed in form of breasts, and this is the only clue to the interpretation of the poem, as neither the title or the text mentions nursing.

The following poem, instead, reproduces a pumpkin (*boga*) and symbolizes common African heritage.

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BOGA

mboga
uliozaa
boga
hili,
hukuupanda
sikuupanda;
tulipozaliwa
tuliukuta
unastawi
shambani
shamba
tuliloachiwa
na
wazazi;
maadam
sisi
wawili,
tu
warithi
wa
shamba
hili,
utajiri
uliomo
shambani,
si
urithi
wako

si
urithi
wangu,
ni
urithi
wetu;
boga
hili
basi,
si
mali
yako,
si
mali
yangu,
ni
mali
yetu;
basi
nasisitiza
tulikate
sehemu
mbili,
sehemu
sawa,
yako
na
yangu.

PUMPKIN

The plant
that produced
this pumpkin,
was not planted by you
or me;
when we were born,
we found it
thriving
in the field,
the field
left to us
by our parents;
and so
the two of us
are the heirs

of this field,
the wealth
in the field
is neither yours
nor mine:
it is our wealth;
and so
this pumpkin
is not your property,
nor is mine
it is our property;
and so, I insist,
let's cut it into two pieces,
equal pieces,
yours and mine.

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According to Florence Indede, in Kithaka's visual poems structural changes of poetry have reached their climax.

Ushairi huu umeumba upeo mpya wa mtazamo wa ushairi na kujitokeza kwa umbo la kiupekee ambalo limezua changamoto kwa wahakiki na wachambuzi wa mashairi. (Indede 2008: 82)

This poetry has created a new horizon in viewing poetry, emerging in a unique form which stimulated literary critics and researchers.

Indede points out that in visual poems not only there are no traces of traditional prosody, but instead of poetical imagery a direct representing of what is meant takes place. If the poet is too outspoken, the critic has nothing to interpret. And, she asks, where is the art in such works? (Indede 2008:87) However, it must be remembered that visual poems represent only a minimal part of Kithaka's poetry

Conclusion

Although, as we have seen, Kithaka's poems have formally little in common with the poetic tradition of the Swahili coast, they are nonetheless remarkable for their stylistic refinements as well as for density and richness of significance.

Kithaka wa Mberia, together with other East African contemporary poets, has made a great contribution towards the renewal of the genre, proving that Swahili poetry is able to express universal themes and reach high artistic standards even without following traditional models.

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