

Folklore and Socio-Political Identity in Joe Khamisi's *The Politics of Betrayal: Diary of a Kenyan Legislator* and *Dash Before Dusk: A Slave Descendant's Journey in Freedom*

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Abstract

*Joe Khamisi's first publication **The Politics of Betrayal** is a memoir and the second **Dash Before Dusk** is an autobiography. They both contain a personal and a group identity narration capturing a period in the Kenyan nation's history. This paper discusses the use of folklore for sociopolitical identity in the two texts. This is a qualitative research study. Close reading has been done followed by interpretation of the selected works based on the study objectives. The specific objectives are to identify integration of folklore in the selected works, and to interrogate how the author uses folklore to signal sociopolitical identity. Tenets from the postcolonial and autobiographical theories provide a study guide. The selected works are a good record of Kenya's immediate history from 2002 to 2007 and the colonial period to the present especially from 1943 up to 2007 when the author lost his Bahari constituency seat.*

Key Words: Folklore, Socio-political Identity, Betrayal, Integration, History

Introduction

The Politics of Betrayal is a political memoir that Khamisi wrote after losing in the 2007 parliamentary elections. He had been collecting newspaper cuttings as a hobby and he compiled the book from them. Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* argues out the difference between an autobiography and a memoir. Roy puts it that in an autobiography proper attention is focused on the self-whereas in a memoir, focus is on others, events or places (4). The first book is a memoir and the next is the autobiography which focuses on self. He mentions many key political players and unreservedly comments on their conduct in both works which portrays him as brave since most people prefer to keep quiet and watch as things go wrong for fear of being victimized.

Khamisi published his memoir *The Politics of Betrayal: Diary of a Kenyan Legislator* in 2011. He gives an insight into the inner circle of Kenyan leaders and how they make pacts and betray the voters as they ensure that they have a grip on power. He gives his perception of the Moi administration and how Moi betrayed his former loyal allies when he settled on Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor. He chronicles how the people who had been humiliated came together to defeat the ruling party. He narrates the Kibaki

government key players who include Kalonzo Musyoka and he discusses how he was instrumental in the alliance that saw Kalonzo as deputy president in the second Kibaki term. Khamisi also discusses the events that led to the 'Kibaki Tosha' declaration by Raila Odinga among other key political events in Kenya.

The titles of the texts are intentionally selected to reveal identity as a son of his father, a slave descendant and a Kenyan legislator. The author justifies the first part of the title 'The Politics of Betrayal' by revealing the voices which he seeks to give agency to. He says *Wanjiku* is a victim of the 'politics of betrayal'. *Wanjiku* is a term popularized by retired President Moi to refer to the downtrodden.

Joe Khamisi uses his autobiography *Dash Before Dusk: A Slave's Descendant's Journey in Freedom* to reveal his identity. He inscribes himself into the history of Kenya and interprets this history of the nation through his life narrative. The autobiography is a good record of East Africa specifically Kenya's immediate history beginning from colonial times to post-independence days especially from 1960 up to 2007. It captures sixty-five years of his life. The title *Dash Before Dusk* is an allusion to his father's policy when he was young. They had to be home before dark (53). His father was a journalist and a politician just like him. He was a strict disciplinarian, maybe a little too hard, but with age Khamisi can see through his tough exterior and to love him for who he is. He says: "My father was a strong character in my life. Despite everything that happened in my childhood, I was convinced he was a good, loving father. He gave us a good Christian upbringing and core values I have cherished throughout my life" (101). He therefore pays tribute to his father in the title and in his autobiography. We see him trying to follow in his footsteps through journalism and politics. He identifies himself first as his father's son.

The title's second part *A Slave Descendant's Journey in Freedom* reveals Khamisi's identity as a slave descendant. He associates with his family's slave history and notes that Rabai is now a museum. The stories that he heard in his childhood seem to have given him a kind of fascination with slavery. He takes pride in this identity and through his writing; he makes one to feel like it is a privileged to be a slave descendant. He is keen on setting the record straight on his origin and justifying his past actions especially in parliament. He gives voice and agency to the colonized Kenyans, the slave descendants, the economically challenged Kenyans and abused women.

Culture

Khamisi grows up in Rabai from the age of two to five and he says it was a lot of fun. He says he loved Rabai. He remembers the fishes *papa* (shark) cooked in coconut and *nguru* (king fish) fried in oil as irresistible. Both were buried deep for seasoning purposes. He recalls the palm and mango trees; the tangerines and mango fruits; the guavas; cassava, coconuts and sweet potatoes. Rabai was agriculturally very fertile. He describes the importance of the coconut tree "It yields products that range from roofing materials and broom sticks, hair and cooking oil, to refreshing soft and alcoholic brews. *Mnazi* is discussed to be the primary drink of intoxication" (15). He notes the negative effects of the *mnazi* alcohol which is addictive and "drinkers end up ruining their lives and becoming social misfits" (17). He remembers a children play song they sang about the coconut tree as evidence that it features in poetry and songs because of its commonness and importance.

Khamisi recalls that Arabs owned all the shops at Rabai trading Center. They were kind and generous and allowed credit facilities to the locals. They ate a lot of ugali and cassava in his childhood. He preferred ordinary ugali made from maize meal to cassava ugali. For vegetables, they have *mchicha* or *myuna* and bitter *msunga* in the dry seasons. For housing, thin long sticks are fitted together to make circular walls plastered with muddy soil and roofing is made from thick layers of wild grass packed together. Slave descendants built theirs in a square or rectangular shape and theirs is built in this manner.

Songs and dances are important indicators of identity. Khamisi recalls the *mwomboko* traditional music that the Kikuyu community had every Sunday afternoon in their social club at Majengo. Khamisi has an early exposure to politics at the age of thirteen (47). He says he became “an active youth member of the party.” He joins other activists singing freedom songs led by a trade unionist leader from Western called Menya. He tries to become a musician at one time. He has a soft spot for songs and music probably because of his uncle Leone Matano who was a musician, and maybe because of the carnival mood of the coastal life. However he reveals that his father did not like the career.

Naming

There is a lot of history in names. On a personal level, people were named after relatives and close friends or selected names based on people they admired. On the public domain, places were named after heroes or the traits and characteristics they showed. Khamisi is given only one name Joseph after his father when he is born. His full name would have been Joseph Francis Joseph Khamisi which he thinks ‘didn’t sound clever.’(3) He calls himself Matano after his maternal uncle Leones whom he admires but later drops it and names himself Joe Khamisi through a gazette notice. He also picks the name Lawrence during confirmation in his days as an altar boy. In school, he is nicknamed Kimbo because of his physique, and fire brigade because of the uniform that his father buys them which resembles the uniform of the fire brigade.

The village name Simakeni roughly means ‘don’t be shocked’ (3), and it is about twenty-five kilometers North West of Mombasa. Mombasa is named Mvita locally which literally means the place of war. Some people suggest the name Rabai is derived from Kiswahili *raha hii* translated as a place of pleasure. The Buxton School is named after John Buxton a leading British anti-slavery campaigner in the 1800s. Sadala is buried at a cemetery in Rabai called *Mtakuja* which in Kiswahili means ‘you will come her’. This is a reminder that death is inevitable. Khamisi observes that his father appears to be fascinated by the name Mary. His mother is Maria Faida a version of Mary, he dates a Kamba lady called Mary and gets remarried to Mary Tabu. *Faida* is benefit in Swahili while *Tabu* means trouble. Joe Khamisi names his own daughter Maria after his mother. Pili is the second born daughter and the name seems to allude to her second position as *pili* is a Swahili word meaning second.

Traditions and Superstitions

Khamisi reveals the traditions associated with birth, initiation, marriage and death passed from generation to generation. Rabai is home to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the author is active in church from a young age. However, Khamisi is brought up by his grandmother and traditions play a big role in his life. His first

mention is the ancient custom that used to happen when a child was born. Old men would have a ceremony of burying the umbilical cord to signify belonging. The forefathers believed that “the burial place of one’s placenta defined one’s origin and outlined the beacon of one’s territory” (3). This does not happen to him. He is born in a hospital and even if he had been born at home, his father was away and he does not live close to his paternal relatives often tasked with such customary duties.

Palm wine plays an important part in the customs of the coast people. *Kuhaswa* is a special blessing given to prospective marriage partners and palm wine is part of it just like in other traditions. One must pour a little wine to the ground to appease the spirits in Mijikenda culture. There are rites for each stage of life. Birth, initiation into adulthood and marriage are some. Superstitions include belief in jinni (spirits) and ghosts; rain makers; night runners; and witchcraft.

Khamisi is not psychologically prepared for circumcision and detests the man who performs the custom. He describes him as dirty and smelly (22). He remembers the pain in his penis and collapsing on the ground then crying to sleep in his grandmother’s arms. He says he was not even ten years of age. This is a contrast to the pride that other African autobiographers narrate the experience. It is supposed to signify crossing over from childhood to adulthood.

Slave Narratives

Khamisi reveals that he comes from a slave ancestry. He tells his family’s history referring to the slave trade history in East Africa. He traces his family tree from his great grandparents on the paternal grandmother side and his maternal grandparents’ side. His paternal grandfather’s side is not clearly outlined as his grandmother was a single mother and he claims his father didn’t know his father. However, he knows his name and one step sibling of his father. When they visited Kinyakani, Nyanya Pauline his maternal grandmother told them many stories about her childhood. Sometimes she would sing for them. Most stories revolved around her experiences at the Rabai mission, the night singings, the weddings and deaths. He would recall her suitor Stephen and how they fell in love at first sight leading to matrimony. She would describe her Arab captors as smelling like spices and her journey as a slave girl on the journey from Tanganyika to the Kenyan coast.

His maternal grandmother Pauline was matched to her lifelong husband Stephen Sepetu at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission in Kenya started in 1844 by two German missionaries Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebman. It was the first settlement for rescued slaves. (3). “In the late 1880 when the Sultan of Zanzibar issued letters of freedom, former slaves were told to choose their future husbands or wives from a multitude of people from the station. They would be wedded and settled on small plots of land surrounding the mission. These two were among them and they were settled at Kinyakani on a three-acre plot overlooking the main Mombasa/Kaloleni road” (4). Pauline was captured while still in pre-teens on her way from fetching water somewhere in the Tanganyika interior (5). Her community the Zaramo inhabit an area around Dar es Salaam. He does not remember much about his maternal grandfather Stephen. Together they had five children: Francis, Livingstone, Leones Matano, Regina and Maria his mother.

His paternal great grandmother Kalekwa got married to Khamisi Sadala who had retired from the British Army and were settled at Simakeni. Both were from Nyasaland (Malawi). They bore his paternal grandmother Emilia and Juma Sadala. Kalekwa was bought by missionaries because she was considered too young for the overseas market. This was how slave trade commodified humans. His description of the slave ship that carried his maternal grandmother Pauline and general conditions of capture, marching and holding is similar to many historical texts on slavery like Cyril James explains that

some of the slaves were born in Africa and were sold during the transatlantic trade where they endured marching to the coast and the middle passage. The slaves were collected in the interior, fastened one to the other in columns, loaded with heavy stones of 40 or 50 pounds in weight to prevent attempts at escape, and then marched the long journey to the sea, sometimes hundreds of miles, the weakly and sick dropping to die in the African jungle” (9). This is very traumatizing and indignifying.

Nyanya Emilia is born in Rabai but is not married when she becomes pregnant by “a man who came to Rabai from Sagalla in the Taita hinterlands” (7) Frederick Elijah Mwangombe. His father was born in Simakeni and he adopted 4th August 1913 to be his official birthday- the day of his patron Saint Francis of Assisi (8). His mother could only remember that he was born either at the beginning or at the end of a big war. At this time, the Africans were not educated and there was poor record keeping of births. Khamisi is the name of the father of Nyanya Emilia. The family doesn't identify with the father of Francis Khamisi.

Political Identity

Khamisi is born in the Native Civil Hospital. He gives a history of the hospital built in 1908. It was then located where the General Post Office is in Mombasa next to the Makadara recreational grounds. It was moved in 1957 to the Tononoka area, overlooking the Nyali creek. Europeans had Mombasa Hospital then called English Hospital built in 1891 and the Asians had Aga Khan Hospital built in 1944. The segregation is common in all hospitals, schools, hotels and other common places. Africans were at the lowest status. All black people are described natives which he claims is: “a derogatory term of racial iniquity common in British colonies”. The segregation of blacks by the colonialists is so much that the use the word *toto* (child) to refer to grown men. According to Khamisi, they are all called natives because they are not considered intelligent but thought to be foolish. (2). In the early days, Arabs occupied third place in the race tier. It was the Europeans then the Asians then the Arabs and finally the blacks who included African natives and dark skinned Arabs called *Washahiri*.(4).

Khamisi recalls many memorable events and contributions he made in the ninth parliament in his memoir. There was a fallout between President Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga who had been part of the coalition that ensured the opposition won. Kalonzo Musyoka later broke away from Raila's camp and Khamisi moved with him. Khamisi recalls the Post-Election violence of that year caused by the alleged rigging of Presidential election results in his first book *The Politics of Betrayal*. He explains these coalitions and divisions.

Khamisi describes the pain he felt when he lost in the elections after being voted the best in CDF use for the five years he served. He had also opened an office and made himself accessible to his constituents. He had sponsored bills to make their lives better. People immediately stopped coming to look for him and he was in deep sorrow. He compares it to Sigmund Freud 'denial of reality'. He had purchased an air ticket for travel out of the country and he left for New York. He realizes that the 2013 loss for Prime Minister Raila Odinga and Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka must have been a stinger as they immediately lost all privileges having come so close to power.

Khamisi acknowledges that politicians are given too much responsibilities by their constituents and it encourages corruption. He realizes that greed is the problem in the society and President Kibaki didn't make it better. He recalls scandals like Goldenberg where no one has been persecuted. He hopes that President Uhuru Kenyatta will make a difference but he is skeptical because of impunity and unethical leadership.

Important events in the history of colonial Kenya include MAUMAU activism; the state of emergency in 1952; regional political organizations; LEGCO elections; Lancaster house conferences of 1960, 1962 and 1963, self-governance and independence. Khamisi recounts them in his autobiography. He discusses key historical events in President Kenyatta era 1963 to 1978, President Moi from 1978-2002 and President Kibaki's first term of 2002-2007. Khamisi recalls that their house in Majengo was always a beehive of activity. (49). They had important visitors like Masinde Muliro, Martin Shikuku, Daniel Arap Moi, John Keen and Justus ole Tipis who later became national leaders in independent Kenya. Ronald Ngala visited too. Khamisi accompanies his father on his 1957 campaigns for a seat at the LEGCO. He likes the ululations, chanting and attention he gets as his father's son. He loses to Ngala but beats Edward Binns in another round of elections held in 1958. International leaders that visited their home included Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and Christopher Kanyama Chiume a close friend of Hastings Kamuzu Banda the future president of Malawi.

Khamisi accompanied his father to Kisumu to visit Jaramogi Oginga Odinga who was recovering from a bout of Malaria. This is his first time to go out of Mombasa. He is excited and can chat freely with his father unlike in the hostile home environment. He describes the places, people and wild animals they see on the way and his impression on them. Three conferences were held at Lancaster House in London before independence. Khamisi reveals that his father was among the African LegCo members to attend the first one in January 1960 where no agreement was reached. A framework for self-government was negotiated in the second one held between February and April 1962 and the third was held between 25th September and 6th October 1963 to finalise constitutional arrangements for independence.

Khamisi is working in Nation Media in 1963 and was at Uhuru Gardens to witness the hoisting of the Kenyan flag. Kenyatta received the original copy of the first constitution of newly independent Kenya from Prince Philip husband to Queen Elizabeth. They celebrate in Jeans Bar in Nairobi West until morning (73). There is great optimism. KANU won the May 1963 and Jomo Kenyatta was named prime minister. He became president on 12th December, 1964. Disillusion is soon to set in as the new government fails to deliver the promised jobs, good house and big cars to the Africans. There is an

attempted mutiny of soldiers on 2nd January 1964 at Lanet in Nakuru and President Kenyatta is worried since many soldiers are Kalenjin and Kamba (74) former first and second world war veterans and not from his Kikuyu ethnic community. At this time, Khamisi worked with *Taifa* a Kiswahili newspaper of the Nation Media group owned by the Aga Khan family.

In both texts, Khamisi may sound biased in his depiction of some communities. In describing the people she saw on the way to Kisumu he says of the Duruma community. "The Duruma I saw at Samburu reminded me of my step-mother Tabu when she first came to us; simple in demeanor, but callous in determination" (55). This is a generalization portraying his ethnic stereotype. Khamisi also seems to have been disappointed by members of the Kikuyu community. He claims that his father had been selected to translate Mahatma Gadhi's autobiography to Kiswahili but Jomo Kenyatta selected a Kikuyu instead. He reveals that upon his father's return from India, he was fought by another Kikuyu tribesman for his non militant approach towards freedom fight in his newspaper and he went back to the coast.

Conclusion

Joe Khamisi worked in Kenya and the diaspora as a journalist, a public relations officer, a diplomat, a director and a Member of Parliament. He integrates songs, folktales, nicknames and sayings drawn from the Kenyan sociopolitical background in his narrations. They are important in indicating the slave history identity, the native beliefs, customs and the political practices or ideologies. The revealed culture includes norms, customs, beliefs, superstitions and established rites associated with birth, initiation, marriage and death. Folklore indicates identity and is passed by word of mouth from generation to generation.

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