

AL-INKISHAFI: A NINETEENTH CENTURY SWAHILI POEM

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Abstract

Within the Lamu Archipelago in Kenya's northern coast, creative writing has been thriving for at least three hundred years. Thanks to the coming to the region of Arab immigrants and the introduction of Arabic script, the locals cultivated a strong literacy tradition especially in poetry. One of the region's finest poetic compositions, created about two hundred years ago, is "Al-Inkishafi" which translates as "Soul's Awakening" (Hitchens, 1972) or the "Catechism of the Soul" (De Verre Allen, 1977).

In this article, I explore the thematic concerns of the poem and their relevance today despite the fact that two centuries have passed since the poem's composition. I also claim and demonstrate with illustrations from the poem the freshness, intensity and elegance of its language. I then highlight some controversies of the poem with regard as to whether or not the poem is complete and whether the piece is not merely a religious sermon rather than a work of art. I end the paper by stating my stand on the controversies.

Key words: Al-Inkishafi, Lamu archipelago, Swahili poem, Sayyid Abdallah Nasir

1. Introduction

Some of our literary scholars, looking pitiable in their Euro-centric lenses through which they see indigenous African languages, would want to make us believe that written literature in East Africa was pioneered by writers creating in English. This is the message that comes through some of their inaugural lectures and literary commentaries. The truth of the matter is that long before East Africans learnt the first word of English and, I might add, long before they saw the first letter of the Roman alphabet, the region was already the proud producer of Kiswahili literature in Arabic script.

For at least three hundred years, the East African Coast has produced written poetry which exists to this day in books and manuscripts. The available evidence indicate that the earliest compositions were created in the Lamu Archipelago in the northern Kenyan coast. The Archipelago consists of the islands of Lamu (or, as the locals call it, Amu), Manda and Pate. Poems reputed created in Pate Town (situated within Pate Island) by mid-18th Century include "Kumsifu Yanga" (1531), "Hamziya" by Sayyid Idarusi (1652),

“Siri ‘l’Asirari” by Mwana Lemba, and “Tabuka” (also spelt and pronounced as Tambuka by Mwengo bin Athumumani (1728); (W. Hichens, 1972: 18-19, M. M. Mulokozi, 1999). Chronologically these compositions were followed by, among others, *Al-Inkishafi*, the subject of this paper.

Al-Inkishafi is 79 stanza-long poem believed to have been composed by Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali Nasir between 1810 and 1820 A.D. Scholars of Swahili literature rate it as one of the finest pieces in Swahili poetry. For instance, W. Hichens (1972: 7) writing the “Foreword” to his English translation of the poem says that:

...the poem is a soliloquy upon mortal defection; and although it is by no means the first nor the last of great poems written by Swahili authors upon that theme we shall note that *the Inkishafi* may be based upon an earlier work) the masterly of style and its vigorous treatment of the historical incident which provides the background to the poet’s homily are surpassed by none.

From this quote, W. Hichens’ high rating of the poem is unmistakable. His choice of positive vocabulary to describe the poem is self-explanatory. Of special significance is his categorisation of the poem as one of the “great poems written by Swahili authors” Furthermore, he sounds fascinated by the composition when he says that “....

its masterly of style and its vigorous treatment of the historical incident which provides the background to the poet’s homily are surpassed by none”

The echo of W. Hichens’ high regard for *Al-Inkishafi* rings in Ali Mazrui’s “Foreword” (in J. de Vere Allen’s English translation of the poem). Ali Mazrui begins his commentary, thus:

Almost by definition, great poetry is untranslatable. Yet, paradoxically, only great poetry is worth attempting to translate. Since no two languages carry the same heritage of association and nuance, a poem inevitably loses a great deal of itself as it traverses a linguistic divide. But precisely because a work like *Al-Inkishafi* is a major artistic achievement, the effort to make it available in other tongues must continue. (Allen, J. V. (1977:7))

The foregoing observations by W. Hichens and Ali Mazrui help to illustrate the high rating of *Al-Inkishafi* among Swahili poetic compositions. Whereas its stylistic beauty can arguably be challenged by a composition such as Waji Waji and possibly by some of Muyaka’s poems such as Dunia Mti Mkavu, Mgogoto wa Zamani and the intensity with which *Al-Inkishafi* uses history and the physical world to interrogate the essence of our earthly life is unparalleled in Swahili literature. Little wonder then, that over the years, numerous scholars have seen worthy of study. Its thematic and stylistic glitter might also explain why it beats other Swahili creative compositions, be they poems, drama or prose works in attracting translators. To add to its credit as the jewel in the crown of Swahili literature, it is the only classic piece of writing in the language to be rendered in Modern Kiswahili due to its demand by readers.

2. Thematic Concerns and Structure

The central thematic concern in *Al-Inkishafi* is mortal life. The poet contends that worldly success comes to naught. Unfortunately, in spite of this reality, the world does beguile human beings into taking it seriously. This should not be the case. One should guard against such deception. The poet admonishes his soul – and through it you and I – to churn earthly glory. Instead, one should live according to God’s will. That way, the soul will escape the eternal horror of Hell.

To put across his message, the poet uses powerful imagery. For example, he likens the world with a raving sea. He says:

This world is a raving sea
It harbors, in plenty, reefs and evils
Whoever rides it is a rebel
Every loss comes his way

(Stanza 13)

As the above stanza shows, the poet is not content with merely likening the world with a raving sea. He extends the metaphor for greater impact. A raving sea is a dangerous place to be in. But the danger is even greater when the sea has coral reefs and all manner of other dangerous phenomena. One can think of several marine fauna that could pose high risk to one whose sea-faring vessel has been wrecked by a raving sea. Such fauna include sharks, sting - rays and moray eels. Such a sea would indeed be perilous. That’s how dangerous the world is.

Despite its unsafe nature, the world is capable of beguiling mortals. Its deception is likened to a shallow pond that would be enticing to a thirsting soul. However, when one approaches the pond is gored by a bull and does not succeed in obtaining the precious liquid.

Moreover, the world is like a mirage when the sun is high. A thirsting person says “its water over there!” and rushes to get it. On reaching where he or she thought there was water, one discovers that there is actually no water. The eyes had merely been deceived by the sun’s heat.

The poet contends that the world is not clean. It is a carrion that only attracts dogs. How then, the poet asks, does one compete with dogs without their soul revolting?

The poet proceeds to develop his theme through three portraits. The first of these portraits shows Pate basking in wealth and grandeur. The second depicts Pate in ruins and desolation. Finally, the third portrait lays bare the reward of the sinner during and after the Day of Judgment.

Each of the portraits is constructed using vivid images. We learn that during Pate’s prosperity, its great men glittered like the sun. They owned arms of war and had at their disposal gold and silver. The entire world paid homage to them and their path was straight. Their riches and power brought about pride. This pride made them walk with their eyes squinted and their necks slanted. They were preceded and followed by throngs of attendants. Wherever they sat became reserved and were protected by guards.

The great men of Pate lived in splendid houses characterized by graceful lighting, beautiful utensils and rail upon rail of fanciful clothes. In these houses, merriment and joy were the order of the day. We are told:

Their lit mansions glittered
With lanterns of crystal and brass
Nights went-by like days
Surrounded they were by fame and honour

Graced they were by select China-ware
And every gobbet was engraved
In their midst they placed crystal pitchers
Among enchanting ornaments

Rails of fanciful clothes
I swear by God, Lord, the Bountiful
Were of teak wood and ebony
Full rail upon full rail

The men's halls resonated
And the hind-quarters vibrated
With voices of slaves and servants
Happiness and merriment rang out

(Stanzas 37 – 40)

The sleeping rooms in these houses had luxurious beds and mattresses. They slept:

In attractive sleeping quarters
In beds laid with mattresses
Green pillows at the head and feet
Embroidered to exquisite finesse

Lovely fabrics they had
Canopied over the couches
Sprinkled with perfumed water
And scented with sandwood and attars

(Stanzas 42-43)

The above portrait of riches, power and grandeur is forcefully contrasted with that of a town in ruins and desolation. The elegant houses and the luxurious life are no more. In their place, we find ruins where young bats leisurely suspend themselves on rafters, spiders have spanned webs, and owls cry out. The niches that once held ornamental China-ware have been taken over by young birds. The rails where once exquisite fabrics hang, now support vultures. Young doves play and incessantly flutter their wings. The ruins now resonate with cockroaches. In the former men's halls, the crickets shrill. Courtyards have been taken over by thickets and the doors frighten you with their clicking when you attempt to open them. The residents have been humbled by death. We are told:

Now sleep they in fingers' span
Without carpets or mattresses
Their bodies are blemished
Agonized by the grave's confinement

Their cheek-bones are damaged
Pus and blood doze out
From the nostrils creep out worms
Changed is their nobility and countenance

They have become food for worms
Chewed are their bodies
White and black ants feed on them
And upon them serpents are entwined

The radiant faces have darkened
To an ape's or mountain-bear's countenance
Lacerated are their skins
And shriveled are their bones and flesh.

(Stanzas 45-48)

Whereas each of the two sets of images depicting Pate before and after the fall is forceful by itself, putting the two side by side reinforces and heightens each of them further. The colourful description of Pate and its inhabitants during its greatness, intensifies the horrid imagery of the ruined town. Likewise, the imagery depicting the horror of the town after its fall makes the reader better appreciate the splendour of the town in its happier days.

Through the foregoing images the poet amply demonstrates that, in its wake, Death levels to the ground even those at the highest rungs of economic and social ladder. It is a great conqueror. Indeed, it is capable of bringing down not only the mighty of Pate. It has humbled even mightier beings. Rhetorically, the poet asks:

Was there not the prophet Solomon
Ruler of men and jinns
It accused and denied him
What chance does another have?

(Stanza 32)

The bard's poetic mission is not merely to show the vanity of worldly success. He admonishes his soul – and the reader – to live according to God's will. Failure to take this counsel seriously will lead one to something much worse than death. Death is not man's ultimate fall. There are greater depths awaiting those who do not live according to God's expectation. Such people will be banished to the fire of Hell.

The poet describes the various stages of Hell. His description is, to put it mildly, terrifying. The reckoning begins on the Day of Judgment. On this day, the seven heavens will be changed and the sun and the moon lowered in the skies. Livers will go aflame and craniums will crack. The wronged will seek justice from

God. The wrong-doers will not pay for their misdeeds in gold or silver. No! They will only pay with their virtues. Those lacking in virtues will be bridled like horses and ordered to carry the sins of their accusers.

The poet, or rather the persona, then enlightens the soul on the agonies to be expected in the various stages of Hell. The soul is counselled:

Soul reflect on Jahannam
With chains and ropings
When the Judge proclaims it
You will cry “Yes Lord, I am in accord!”

You will come trembling
Calling with a voice like of the ass
With a face screwed like the ape’s
Tormented you will be by tongues of fire

There is also the Hawiya, listen keenly
It is a fierce fire
When a rebel enters it, he is looped
And gasps for breath.

Understand well the fire of Sairi
It is a vicious fire among fires
Bountiful in smoke
Therein abide serpents

And listen about the fire of Ladha
Once fanned it goes aflame
You see the flesh dropping off
You see joints burning away

Understand too the Hutama
Its fire lights and thunders
It breaks bones and tears off the flesh
The brain and pus fall.

(Stanzas 72-77)

In view of these horrors, the poet advises, his soul had better take his counsel seriously!

Al-Inkishafi is a quatrain composition; in other words, it has four-line stanzas. Each of the lines has a metrical measure of eleven. In each stanza, the first three lines rime at the end. The rime of these lines changes from stanza to stanza. The fourth line, however, has a consistent ending in – ye.

To achieve this pattern of rime and metre, the poet uses three compositional techniques among other strategies. These techniques are known in Kiswahili as inkisari, mazida and tabdila. Inkisari is a technique that shortens lines. This is achieved in a number of ways. The most common method is to join together

words throwing out some syllables in the process. The second method is to delete a syllable or syllables in a word thereby making it shorter in terms of metrical measure. The third method is to substitute a shorter synonym for a word. Mazida is used both to lengthen lines metrically as well as to create desired rime. It lengthens lines by adding a sound or sounds to a word. In so doing, it changes the syllabic structure of the word. When mazida is used to lengthen lines, the change in syllabic structure is such that it increases the syllables in the word. When the technique is used to achieve a rime pattern, the change in the nature of the syllable occurs without a corresponding change in the number of syllables. In this case, the change in syllable takes place at the end of the line with the effect that the resulting end syllable creates the desired rime. Tabdila is used to substitute a vowel at the end of the line so that the resulting syllable rimes with the other lines of the stanza.

In each of the three cases, the semantic quality of the line involved is maintained *Al-Inkishafi* is constructed such always that bundles of stanzas form thematic sub-parts. The first part is a prayer in the fashion of the composition of long Swahili poems. The prayer is followed by a preface. Then comes a series of rhetorical questions addressed to the poet's soul. These questions prepare the soul for the counsel that follows. After this stage, the poet described the calamities that befell those who were beguiled by the world. He then changes his tone and uses softer language to persuade the soul to accept his admonition. After doing this, he goes on to cite actual historical instances to show that the world is not to be trusted. He does this by using the two portraits of Pate that have already been discussed above. He then describes the happenings on the Day of Judgment. He finally throws ajar the gates of Hell and shows what lurks in its interiors.

These sub-parts are strung together using what we may call bridge-stanzas. These stanzas help create credible flow and cohesion.

3. Interaction with Other Works

At the beginning of this paper, we quoted W. Hichens as suggesting that *Al-Inkishafi* may be based on an earlier work. Later in his "Forward" to *Al – Inkishafi*, W. Hichens revisits the issue and reveals the potential source of *Al-Inkishafi* to be a poem that, he claims, appears today in a mutilated version. He mentions that the authorship of the originally untitled poem, which has been named "Al-Muhadhar", is attributed to a poet known as Muhadhar "who may have been the kinsman and predecessor of Said Abdallah referred to as Muhadhar in V. 57 [of *Al-Inkishafi*]."

While not accusing Sayyid Abdallah Ali Nasir of wrong-doing, W. Hichens acknowledges that a comparison between the two works reveals that "*Al-Inkishafi* bears out in much amplified form the essential idea of the older piece" (W. Hichens, 1972:22).

A second composition to which W. Hichens finds a striking resemblance with *Al-Inkishafi* is "Ayuha al-Maghururi"! (Ah! Thou Deceitful One!)" (Ibid:22). Commenting on the poem he says:

Some conflict of opinion would seem to exist among Swahili authorities as to the period and authorship of this graceful work. In our view, "Ayuha al maghururi" probably pre-dates the *Inkishafi*, and it may have served Sayyid Abdallah [the author of *Al-Inkishafi*] as a source. Were it so, though the evidence as yet in our hands is insufficient to determine the point, it would not be to allege any hint of plagiarism. (Ibid:22)

W. Hichens passes a verdict of “not guilty” on the author of *Al - Inkishafi* on the presumed charge of plagiarism on the ground that:

Redactions, making the fullest use of the works of earlier authors and known to perso-Arabian poetry as *tadmin* and *mukhammas*, are an acknowledged device and liberty of Eastern poets; and they are, indeed, frequent in our own [Western] literature [Ibid:22].

While reacting to the suggestion that *Al-Inkishafi* is based on two earlier poems (as we have highlighted above), M.M. Mulokozi: [Mulokozi:1999:67] agrees that the tone and the theme of the small portion of “al-Muhadhir” reproduced in W. Hachens (1972) are similar to those of *Al-Inkishafi*. However, he contends that, that is not enough evidence to show that the author of *Al-Inkishafi* either copied or imitated “Al-Muhadhir”. Mulokozi goes on to argue that the more acceptable explanation for the similarity is that both “al-Muhadhir” and *Al-Inkishafi* are from the same context, that is, an Islamic setting and the fall of coastal towns. As such, he observes, the similarity in tone and themes between “Al-Muhadhir” and *Al-Inkishafi* is not surprising.

As for the similarity between *Al-Inkishafi* and “Al-Maghururi”, Mulokozi’s position is that the examples given by W. Hichens (1972) indicate that there were many compositions which made use of the refrain “Ayuha al-Maghururi”. Furthermore, he notes that some, if not all, of those compositions were created after *Al-Inkishafi*. He concludes, therefore, that it is untenable to claim that they gave rise to *Al-Inkishafi*.

Until a systematic and detailed study is done to determine the magnitude of the interaction between *Al - Inkishafi* on the one hand and “Al – Muhadhar” and “Al – Maghururi” on the other hand, the issue of *Al-Inkishafi* having been based on the two works will remain a matter of conjecture. Not so the interaction between *Al – Inkishafi* and *the Holy Quran*. The Holy Book and the grandeur and the eventual fall of Pate are the two wells that fed the author’s inspirational stream. Indeed, the Holy Book does more than that. Sayyid Abdaldah Ali Nasir freely draws from its reservoir of images, incidences and references to construct *Al-Inkishafi*.

In Stanza 3 of *Al – Inkishafi*, we are told that:

when Allah’s Praise be sung, it is radiant, bright
 refulgent o’ver us as a lantern–light
 While prayer for peace and mercy we recite,
 that peace the Prophet Muhammad may gain.

As W. Hichens’ points out (Hichens 1972: 49), there is a link between the Stanza and Chapter 24 of the *Holy Quran*. Verse 35 of Chapter 24 of the *Holy Quran* reads:

Allah is the right of the Heavens and earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp with a crystal of the star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth though no fire touched it. Light upon light; Allah guides to His light whom He will.

The highly vivid images used by Sayyid Abdallah Ali Nasir in stanzas 16 and 17 also have their origin in the *Holy Quran*. The two stanzas challenge the reader to behold the mirage when the sun is high in the skies. Seeing the mirage, a thirsty soul infers the presence of water, whereupon he/she runs towards it to quench his/her thirst. On arriving at the point supposedly with the water, the thirsty soul ends up, not drinking the precious liquid, but getting utterly frustrated. The striking resemblance between these images and those found in Chapter 24 of the *Holy Quran* will not be lost on one who has read both works. Verse 39 of Chapter 24 of the *Holy Quran* reads:

As for the unbelievers, their works are like a mirage in
the desert. The thirsty traveler thinks it is water, but
when he comes near, he finds that it is nothing ---

As W. Hichens notes in one of his footnotes to his translation of *Al-Inkishafi*, all the fires mentioned in the closing stanzas of *Al-Inkishafi* are also appear in the Holy Quran. *Al-Inkishafi* mentions five fires; namely, Jahim (Stanza 65), Jahanam (Stanza 72), Hawiya (Stanza 74), sairi (Stanza 74), Sakiri (Stanza 75), Ladha (Verse 76) and Hutama (Stanza 77). Quoting Mohammad Ali Maulana (1928), W. Hichens (1972) writes:

M. Muh. Ali (*The Quran* P. 263) appends: "Hell is mentioned
by seven different names in the Holy Quran: (1) Jahannam or hell; (2)
Laza or the flaming fire; (3) Hutamah, or the crushing disaster;
(4) Sair, or the burning fire; (5) Sakar, or the scorching fire; (6) Jahim,
or the fierce fire; (7) hawiah or the abyss".

In his study of *Al-Inkishafi*, G.D.R. Kiptanui, (1998) demonstrates with several examples that the work shares symbols and similes with other literary works. However, the study shows that this sharing is not as a result of one work borrowing from others. Rather, writers working in the same or similar cultural settings are influenced by the same or similar cultural heritage including shared idiom.

Kiptanui gives "light" and "darkness" as examples of symbols shared by several works. The two symbols appear in *Al-Inkishafi*. But so do they in *Utendi wa Vita vya Uhuru*, *Kinjekitile*, *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* and *Siri l'Asirali*. It is probable that none of the authors of any of the above works is consciously imitating another author. "Light" and "darkness" might appear in their works merely because the two symbols are part of Islamic (and indeed, Judeo-Christian) world-view.

The import of the above observations is that the use by Sayyid Abdallah Ali Nasir of images found in the *Holy Quran* need not be evidence of imitation. The poet need not even be aware that the images he uses have strong resemblance with those found in the *Holy Quran*. He might merely be drawing the idiom from his cultural environment. In so doing, his writing gets informed by his cultural setting which, in turn, is influenced by *Holy Quran*.

4. Some Contentious Issues

There has been a debate among scholars of Swahili poetry as to whether *Al-Inkishafi* is a complete poem. Hichens (1972: 27-29) claims that *Al-Inkishafi* is incomplete. His argument is that Swahili poetry – most likely, he means the long poems referred to as tenzi– begin by invoking the names and the attributes of God and the Holy prophet. He correctly contends that, composers of tenzi conclude their compositions with

prayer stanzas and, quite often, they mention the name of the composer. They also ask the readers to excuse the poet for any mistakes and to correct any errors that they may find in the composition. Hichens continues to say that that is how Sayyid Abdalla Nasir brings to an end his other composition called “Takhmisa ya Liongo”. He also argues that *Al-Inkishafi* mentions only six fires or stages of Hell instead of seven – which is the total number of the fires in the Islamic Hell. According to him, in some two early stanzas, the poet promises to compose a kifungo (rosary) and that we would therefore expect him to have composed not less than 99 stanzas in conformity with the number of beads in the Muslim’ rosary as well as the attributes and names of Allah. Because *Al-Inkishafi* does not fulfill these expectations, Hichens concludes that the work is incomplete.

Commenting on the same issue, another scholar, Wa Mlamali (1980: 65-67) says that the word kifungo in the eighth stanza of *Al-Inkishafi* does not necessarily have to refer to a religious rosary which would be expected to have 99 parts. Moreover, he argues, the composer did not say explicitly that he would create a 99-stanza poem. According to Wa Mlamali, it is not necessary to mention all the names of the seven fires of Hell. Perhaps the poet deemed the six fires mentioned to be adequate for his purpose. Furthermore, praying for blessings for the Holy Prophet at the end of the composition is merely a tradition and, therefore, it is not necessary for a poet to abide by it. Moreover, to admit sins on the part of the poet, to ask for forgiveness, to mention his lineage, and to ask the reader to excuse him for any defects in the composition are just composers’ habits and a poet does not have to conform to them. Although Wa Mlamali does not plainly state it, he is of the opinion that that *Al-Inkishafi* is a complete composition.

In our view, the debate on whether *Al-Inkishafi* is complete or not, is an issue on which we cannot have a definitive conclusion. What Wa Mlamali says has its merits when we take into account the poetry of different peoples and ages. Like other forms of art, poetry is dynamic in both content and form. However, to date, Swahili poetry continues to be generally conservative especially in form. Because of this, we cannot easily brush aside Hichens views except, perhaps, the one on kifungo, which does not seem to have much weight.

In our view, the poem may well be incomplete. The main reason for our opinion is that the poem comes to an end abruptly when the poet is still in the process of describing the various stages of Hell. This sudden ending is in sharp contrast with the systematic and graceful ascend at the beginning of the poem.

5. Conclusion

Whether *Al-Inkishafi* is complete or incomplete, it occupies an important niche in Swahili poetry. Its theme is not merely a religious sermon as claimed by some. On the contrary, the poem brilliantly implores us to pose and examine the essence of life and how we should relate to the world and especially its deceptive material aspects. In this respect, its worth is immense particularly when we take into account the pain that life inflicts on those whose lifestyle places them on cloud nine from where reality becomes alien to them only for them to, some day, come back to earth with a thunderous tumble. .

Its aesthetic beauty, especially its effective use of metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, rhetorical questions and other creative devices, makes it stand out as one of the most beautiful poems of the language. Its use of imagery informed by the poet’s physical and social surroundings, is so vivid that it evokes strong responses from readers’ senses.

This paper, rather than discussing one aspect of *Al-Inkishafi* in detail, examines the work in its totality as away of exposing it to readers not familiar with Kiswahili literature especially classical poetry. Because of the scope of the study, it cannot claim to be have the kind of the analytical depth befitting a poem whose thematic relevance and artistic elegance has seen it retain its appeal to readers for about two hundred years. At any rate, the study does not boast a rigorous theoretical foundation. To that extent, this paper, far from pretending to be the last word on *Al-Inkishafi*, is a challenge to literary scholars to pick up their analytical tools and work on Sayyid Abdalla Ali Nasir's poetic masterpiece.

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