

NYAIGOTTI-CHACHA, CHACHA. SAUTI YA UTETEZI. USHAIRI WA ABDILATIF ABDALLA. XII, 146pp., Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1992.

It is heartening to note that the number of contemporary Swahili scholars whose work is receiving attention in books and university theses is steadily on the increase. This volume adds Abdilatif Abdalla to the list containing, so far as I know, the names of Muhammed Said Abdulla, Ebrahim Hussein and Euphrase Kezilahabi. It is a volume on the poetry of Abdalla which Nyaigotti-Chacha writes with warmth, understanding and a desire to place in perspective the poet's works, in particular, *Utenzi wa maisha ya Adamu na Hawaa* (1971) and *Sauti ya dhiki* (1973). For this reason, perhaps, it tends to be less critical and more informative.

Nyaigotti-Chacha divides his work into four chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the author's reasons for undertaking to write it, originally his M.A. thesis at the University of Nairobi (1980). A brief but useful biography of Abdilatif Abdalla (pp.3-9), and a theoretical orientation to the author's analysis of the works (pp.9-11) - socialistic in the Marxian mould - furnishes the reader with the background required for a better understanding of what follows in the next two chapters which examine *Utenzi...* and *Sauti...* respectively. The final chapter investigates the skills of Abdalla as a poet.

Both works are presented in chapters 2 and 3 through an approach which one might term "explicatory", as the overriding concern seems to be to explain the content of the poems as they relate not only to the context in which they were written but also to a wider human horizon. Hence, for example, the efforts of the author at extracting from the *Utenzi...* aspects of human virtues and vices and to build further interpretations on them. The arguments used are persuasive and didactic in tone. They read well on the whole, except in a few places where their effect is somewhat marred by the inclusion of tangent quotations which do not add much to Abdalla's original message: verses from Abedi (p.76) and Muyaka (p.55) are examples. Muyaka, of course, has a legitimate place in this volume since both poets - Muyaka and Abdalla - have the same background which Nyaigotti-Chacha explains well (pp.67-9) as a comparative backdrop to the political dimension of *Sauti...*

The explanation of *Utenzi...* would have been more compact had the author confined himself to Abdalla's own framework of theological texts and traditions. By widening it to include the Biblical account of Adam and Eve, as well as of one other Muslim sect, and by treating the scriptural accounts as similar to one another, the author has opened the interpretation to nuances absent in the original. This is evident, for instance, in the sentence:

"Vile vile anajua ya kwamba laana ya Mungu itawaandama wana wao maisha yao yote" (p.49)

[He (Adam) also knows that the curse of God will pursue their children (i.e. human beings) throughout their lives].

This seems to go counter to one of the main ingredients of Abdalla's narrative of the celestial drama, namely, God's forgiveness of the couple's transgression, expressed in a number of verses in *Utenzi*... : 411-8; 602-18; and clinched in verses 615-16 when Adam, in order to dispel Hawaa's doubts, informs her that the angel Jiburili [Gabriel] had been sent to him from God with precisely that message of forgiveness. The author does mention some of these verses (pp 56-7) but lets the earlier comment stand; the differing implications of the narrative for the two world religions thus gets blurred

The chapter on the themes of *Sauti*... begins with a consideration of the political situation in Kenya just prior to and immediately after independence. The main circumstances which gave rise to the establishment of the Kenya People's Union as a rival party to KANU are mentioned. Abdalla's relationship to, and role in, the KPU are discussed, a role which resulted in his imprisonment for a period of three years; while in prison, he wrote the poems featured in *Sauti*... . Abdalla's perception of literature as a social tool is also considered. Eleven themes are expounded, among them the parallel situations of Muyaka and Abdalla (mentioned above), truth, warning to politicians, exhortation of the common people, patience, regrets, self-appraisal, advice, the worth of being human, etc. The final chapter discusses the prosody employed by Abdalla and, more extensively, his use of language. Three poems from *Sauti*... - "Ndiya Panda", "Mambo yana mambo yake", and "Mamaetu Afrika" - are discussed.

Nyaigotti-Chacha's work is a useful volume to students of Swahili literature for two main reasons. Firstly, it brings together the more salient verses from Abdalla's works and comments on them; a minor drawback here is that the glossary which accompanied the verses in the original is not reproduced with them. But, to me, a weightier reason is that it places on record, and in perspective, the outcome in Swahili literature of the struggle for free expression in the contemporary period. The struggle is not imagined but experienced. And the poignant point here is that the poems of the aptly titled *Sauti ya dhiki* were written during the three years of traumatic personal experience. This volume manages to present some aspects of Abdalla's inner thoughts during that period.

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