**An Ethno-Linguistics Perspective on Kingome Swahili Narrative Texts**  

AHMADI KIPACHA  

*The Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania*

**ABSTRACT**

Recording and analysing a language in a natural setting provides ample sources of empirical materials to linguists and ethnographers. Yet, competing opinions arise as to the best method to undertake such endeavour without risking the inherited weakness of the direct elicitation. In this article, I provide three narrative texts of a previously unknown Swahili dialect of Kingome, as currently spoken in Mafia Island, Southern Tanzania, as evidence that ethnographic approach is suitable to record and document ethically sensitive themes that often preserve much sought language and culture heritages of the isolated communities.

*Keywords: ethnolinguistics, Kingome, texts, rituals, and metallurgy*

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This article presents some results of my recent field collection (March – July 2002) of empirical materials of a previously under-studied dialect of Swahili, known locally as *Kingome* or *Kipokome* (Kipacha 2004a; 2004b). This is currently spoken in the northernmost villages of the Mafia Island District off the southern coast of Tanzania. I wish to present three texts¹, along with a morpheme-by-morpheme analysis, to be easily subsumed by interested linguists, followed by free translations. Apart from providing useful insights into the lexis and structure of the dialect, the texts also aid our understanding of traditional Swahili culture.

The methods I employed to record the direct narrations and casual conversations of my local informants has drawn me very close to the use of a typical ethnographical approach. Such a manner of direct elicitation will not meet every field linguist’s approval, as some will claim that it is prone to grammatical judgement (Chelliah 2001). However, before embarking on fieldwork my host, the late Mikidadi Kichange², a well-known figure in the locality, acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ by introducing me to his relatives and other villagers. I was accorded the status of *mwanetu* ‘our son’ which I cherish and honour to this day. In

---

¹ Grants from the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission and The Open University of Tanzania are highly appreciated. I extend my gratitude to Dick Hayward, Pat Caplan and Michael Mann for their advice and help, however, all errors are solely mine.

² The late Mikidadi Kichange was a friend and a companion, and without him this exercise would have been futile. My sincere *shukrani* go also to my anonymous informants.
addition, I had the blessings of and messages to her friends in the village of Kanga from Mama Patricia, otherwise known as Prof. Pat Caplan who has been conducting social anthropological research among the Wangome since 1965. These two personalities paved way for a friend-of-a-friend sampling technique (Milroy 1987: 66) to take place. My informants willingly consented to my audio-recording of our conversations and interviews, although my elderly informants provided me with such sensitive material that it would be unethical to disclose their identities. One of the themes narrated here is seldom addressed publicly: the practice of majini or pepo cults is deemed to be impure by some orthodox Muslims in the villages. I had to be extra vigilant in my endeavours.

The organization of this article is as follows: Section 1 describes the field area. Section 2 presents three selected texts with interlinear transcription. Section 3 is a general discussion, while Section 4 is a set of concluding remarks.

1.0 KINGOME DIALECT

Kingome is part of an understudied Mafia Swahili dialect group designated as G43d, according to Guthrie’s (1967–71) classification. As is typical of the lesser-known and under-studied languages of the world, the speakers of Kingome are found in the more isolated parts of the Mafia island archipelago. The area is estimated to cover 150 square kilometres and the estimated number of speakers is roughly 8,000 in the six villages of Banja, Jojo, Mrari, Jimbo, Kanga and Bweni.

The state of the infrastructure in this area is very poor. Lack of all-weather roads and reliable transport (boat or bus) to and from the capital Kirindoni restricts mobility. Hence, it is no wonder that their form of Swahili is rather distinctive and provides an interesting case of an archaic southern Swahili dialect.

2.0 KINGOME TEXTS

Each text is first presented with a morpheme-by-morpheme analysis, a close interlinear translation and finally a free translation. Texts A and B were narrated by a male informant (XY) aged 65, whilst Text C is part of a recorded conversation with a female informant YY aged between 66 and 70. Text A is about a traditional Kingome marriage ritual. Some of the customs narrated here have begun to change but the words are still known to the majority of people. Text B is a narrative concerning the WaNgome majini cult, which includes belief in ‘owning’ spirits with supernatural power. The narrative involves a person who went to a fundi to ‘buy’ a jinni in Kanga village. Text C was a recorded conversation involving mundu ‘billhook’ forging in Jimbo and Kanga villages.

---

3 This estimation was done by the Agriculture Extension Office (AEO) of the Mafia Islands District Council in 1999.
TEXT A: Marriage Ritual at Bagoni

Mwanamuka baada ya kuorewa hu[w]jiši
mu-anamuka baada ya ku-or-ew-a hu-ishi
1-woman after of 15-Inf-marry-Pass-FV Hab-live

kwa siku saba fungateni. a[y]iši na mumewe
ku-a siku saba fungate-ni a-iši na mu-me-we
15-for 10a-day seven honeymoon-Loc. ISM-live with 1-male-1Poss.

Na ngu zo kawaida, kira asubuhi a-pikirw-a
na ngu zo z-a kawaida, kira asubuhi a-pik-ir-w-a
with 10- cloth 10-ass normal, every 9a-morning 1SM-cook-Appl-Pass-FV

mihogo, kunde, vitumbuwa, mupepeta na
mi-hogo, kunde, vi-tumbu[w]a, mu-pepeta na
4-cassava, 9a-peas, 8-rice fritters, 3-rice crisp &

14-porridge. 9/10-afternoon Hab-eat-Pass-FV 14-rice 14-Ass.

nazi, kitowere kyeñewe ni asari na samuri ya ṣombe
n-nazi ki-tower-e ky-eñewe ni asari na samuri y-a ṣombe
9-coconut 7-broth 7-itself is 9a-honey & 9a-ghee 9-Ass 9-cow

kisa baba wa muka anasema, awarī ya rero
ki-sa baba w-a mu-ka a-na-sem-a, awarī y-a rero
then 1a-father 1-Ass. 1-wife 1SM-TA-say-FV, from 9-Ass. 9a-today

fañeni hisabu mpaka siku ya saba muje
fañ-e-ni hisabu mpaka siku y-a saba mu-j-e
make-pl count until 9a-day 9-of Num-seven 2plSM-come-Subj

mumtowe harusi wenu. Na mama naye
mu-m-to-[w]e harusi w-enu. na mama na-ye
2plSM-1OM-release-Subj 1a-bride 1-ass 1 poss. & 1a-mother &-herself

anatowa habari zi-re uwani. Ire siku
a-na-to[w]-a habari z-ire u[w]a-ni. i-re siku
1SM-deliver-FV 10-news 10-Dem. 11- backyard-Loc. 9-Dem. 9a-day

ya sita mabinamu wa mwanamuka wanunuwa ruzi
y-a sita ma-banimu w-a mu-anamuka wa-nunu[w]a r-uzi
9-Ass. Num- six 6:2-nieces 2-Pos 1-woman 2-buy 11-thread

wawo na sindano ya ko-sonera. Wanatungiya
wa-[w]o na sindano y-a ku-son-er-a. wa-na-tung-[i]ya
A woman after getting married has a honeymoon for seven days. She lives with her husband with her everyday clothes, every morning they cook her a breakfast of cassava, peas, rice-fritters, beaten rice and porridge. In the afternoon she is fed with coconut rice with sauce of honey and ghee. Then the father of the woman says, ‘From today count till the seventh day (then) you come to take your bride out’. And the mother also delivers a similar message to the people in the courtyard. On the sixth day cousins of the bride buy their thread and sewing needle. They thread beads. There is a waist (band of) beads, there is one for hips and there is one for the neck. They put on her a ring and pierce [her] ears.

Free Translation

A woman after getting married has a honeymoon for seven days. She lives with her husband with her everyday clothes, every morning they cook her a breakfast of cassava, peas, rice-fritters, beaten rice and porridge. In the afternoon she is fed with coconut rice with sauce of honey and ghee. Then the father of the woman says, ‘From today count till the seventh day (then) you come to take your bride out’. And the mother also delivers a similar message to the people in the courtyard. On the sixth day cousins of the bride buy their thread and sewing needle. They thread beads. There is a waist (band of) beads, there is one for hips and there is one for the neck. They put on her a ring and pierce [her] ears. The
holes pierced in the ears are called *maphete*. And on the nose they pierce her on one side either left or right. In her ears they put earrings, in her nose a pin with the likeness of a bird. Next they put beads around her waist and the hips. Then her trainer teaches her how to live with her husband and tells her that she ought to follow her husband’s orders.

**TEXT B: Buying a Jinni**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bwana</th>
<th>we</th>
<th>kija</th>
<th>hapa</th>
<th>kutaka</th>
<th>ńikuuziye</th>
<th>jini.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>buana</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>ki-ja</td>
<td>ha-pa</td>
<td>ku-taka</td>
<td>ni-ku-uz-i[y]e</td>
<td>jini.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a-mister</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>1sm-come</td>
<td>loc-16</td>
<td>15-want</td>
<td>15-sell-App-Subj</td>
<td>1a-jinn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Miye      | jini   | wangu         | si-n[h]umi | kank[h]ate | furano         |
| mi-ye     | jini   | w-an'guru     | si-N'[h]umi| ka-N-k[h]ate| furano         |
| 1-pron-   | jinn   | 1-poss        | Neg-1OM-send | 1SM-1OM-cut | somebody      |

| au        | kamurarise | furano. | Situmii | tangu | mizimu       |
| au        | ka-mu-rar-is-e | furano. | Si-tumi-i | taNgu | mi-zimu      |
| or        | TA-OM-sleep-Caus-Subj | somebody. | Neg-use | since | 4- spirits    |

| ya        | mababu  | kuñirusiya   | miye.     | Kunt[h]uma | jini         |
| y-a       | ma-babu | ku-ñi-rus[a] | mi-ye.    | ku-n-t[h]uma| jini         |
| 4-Ass     | 6-ancestors | 15-1sgOM-restrict | 1-pron. | 15-1OM-send | 1a-jinn |

| ukamurarise | furano  | au | amupe | šida |
| or          | TA-OM-sleep-Caus-Subj | 1a-somebody | or | 1SM-OM-give | 9a-problem |

| muth[h]u   | hapano. | Sasa | rete   | kitezo. |
| muth[h]u   | hapano. | sasa | rete   | ki-tezo. |
| 1-person   | no.     | Now | bring  | 7-burner. |

| weka       | mukaa   | na  | rete   | ruvumba. |
| weka       | mu-kaa  | na  | rete   | ru-vuNba. |
| put        | 3-charcoal & | bring | 14-incense. |

| We!        | muzee   | kĩongwečongwe | kija | kiumbe | ayu |
| we!        | mu-zee  | kĩoNgwečOngwe | ki-ja | ki-umbe | a-yu |
| 2sgpron    | 1-elder | kĩoNgwečOngwe | 3sgSM-come | 7:1-person | 1-Dem |

| anakutaka  | awe     | rafiki    | yako.   | umusikify[y]e | maneno |
| a-na-ku-taka | a-wei  | rafiki    | ya-ko.  | u-mu-sikie | ma-neno |
| 1SM-TA-2sgOM-want | ISM-be | 1a: 9-friend | 9-Poss. | 2sg-3sgOM-listen | 6-words |

| gake       | goNh[e] | anagogatakaka | kosema. |
| ga-ke      | go-N[h]e | a-na-go-ga-taka | ko-sema. |
| 6-Dem      | 6-all   | 3sg-TA-6Rel-6OM-want | 15-say. |
An Ethno-Linguistics Perspective

Mister you have come here to ask me to sell you a jinn. I won’t ask my jinn to go and kill somebody or to possess anyone. I have not been allowed to do that since the time of my ancestors. To send a jinni to possess or hurt a person is forbidden. Now bring an incense burner, put on some charcoal and bring incense. ‘You old man Kichongwechongwe, here comes a person who wants to be your friend. Listen to all the words which he wants to say, be with him, look after him and his children, protect them, old man. Guard him against any charm thrown in front of him or from the behind and protect him. Keep his feet from treading on any bad thing whatever. You have an axe to fight with. Guard him and be alert. You will
have your rewards. You will be given your tray of delicacies. You will have a cow slaughtered for you.’ Ok, the ritual is over you take your jinn and use him.

**TEXT C: Forging a Billhook**

Heje? kufura muNdu Jimbo? kwenda
he-je? ku-fura mu-ndu Jimbo? ku-end
Intg-Cl.? 15Int-forge 3-matchete Jimbo? 15Inf-go

nawo bara weye? Basi tafuta ntu₁ʲu
na-wo bara we-ye? basi tafuta ntu₁ᵗu
&-Rel. 9-land 2per.Pron? ok find 1-person

akupangiye harafu aukure.
a-ku-pang-i[y]-e harafu a-u-kurur-e.
1SM-2sgOM-process-App-Subj then 1-SM-3OM-smooth-Subj.
nenda pare kwa Nasoro
n-enda pa-re ku-a Nasoro
2pers -g o 16-Dem 17-Ass Nasoro

akupangi[y]-e. Hebu! nɨ-pa
a-ku-pang-i[y]-e. hebu! nɨ-pa
1-SM-2sgOM-forge-Subj. Alright! 1sgOM-give-Impve

nɨ-u-ringe. Mu-ndu n-zito.
nɨ-u-riNg-e. Mu-ndu n-zito.
1SM-3OM-see-Subj. 3-matchete 3-heavy.

Sasa pereka aukure, kiša aunore sawasawa.
sasa pereka a-u-kurur-e, ki-ša a-u-nore sawa sawa.
now send 1SM-3OM-smooth-FV, then 1SM-3OM-sharpen well.

kama haukururiwa haupati makari.
Kama ha-u-ku-kurur-iw-a ha-u-pati ma-kari.
if Neg-3SM-15-smooth-Pas-FV Neg-3SM-get 6-sharpness.

Akisaunora utakwenda kurimi[y]a
A-ki-ša u-nora u-ta-ku-end ku-rim-i[y]-a

kisa utaku-wa unanora tu kinoroni.
kisa u-ta-ku-wa u-na-nora tu ki-noro-ni.
then 2sg-TA-15inf-be 2sg-TA-sharpen only 7-whetstone-Loc.

Mundu wa korotora ndio unafaa kwa
mu-ndu w-a ku-rotor-a ndi-o u-na-faa ku-a
3-machete 3-Ass 15-Inf.smooth be-Rel 3SM-TA-right 15-Ass.
Free Translation

Hey? Have you forged your billhook at Jimbo? Do you intend to take it along when you go to the mainland? Ok, then find a person who will process it then smoothe it. Go to Nasoro to process it. Alright let me see it. It is a heavy billhook. Now send it to be smoothe. Then, to be sharpened well. If it hasn’t been smoothed, it never becomes sharp. After being sharpened you will use it for cultivation but you will [need to keep] sharpening it with a whetstone. The smoothed billhook is perfect for clearing bush and cutting poles.

3.0 GENERAL DISCUSSION OF THE TEXTS

The three texts are excellent examples of a distinctive form of Swahili as currently spoken in the northern part of a Mafia island. We obtain in these texts a vivid description of the long-standing cultural and social structure of the coastal Swahili. Documenting such surviving examples of Swahili culture are vital at this time when efforts are being made to revive and archive endangered and understudied languages and culture of the world. In what follows I pinpoint the striking and pertinent lexicons on each text that will allow us to establish their link to the general information available so far. We will comment on each text in turn.

3.1 The Traditional Marriage Ritual

Text A describes a traditional Swahili marriage. The narrator seems to be well versed in the traditional wedding ritual of the Wangome, in which the decoration of the bride takes central stage.

The use of maphete, kipini kya ndege, usanga wa mwagaro and harine may be things of the past, but it is an important clue to marriage decorations typical of the coastal Swahili in the 1950’s. There is no sign of foreign influence as narrated by the informant. We see a type of feast that accompanies the celebration and consisting of mupepeta ‘beaten rice’, muhogo ‘cassava’, kunde ‘peas’, vitumbuwa ‘rice fritters’, uji ‘porridge’ and samuri ‘ghee’. More important is the occasion when the fundi, also known on the Swahili coast as kungwi or somo ‘instructress’ teaches the bride in her pre-martial ritual. This is the rite of passage unyago wa kiafrrika, a highly secret female initiation ritual which teaches sex and how to obey and entertain a husband and is common all over Swahili coast and hinterland (see Hashim 1989: 2). We are informed that bride is expected to fera amuri ‘obey’ (her
husband’s) orders’ all the time. The narrator in the text assumed a position of an African traditional storyteller.

3.2 The Swahili Majini Cult

The general beliefs and practices of the Swahili majini cult are not confined to Ngome area alone. They are found in many sub-Saharan countries. A detailed description of the Swahili or Sabaki majini or pepo cults can be found in Caplan (1975), Lambeck (1981), Gilles (1987), and Erdtsieck (2001). However, none of these works have discussed the merchandising aspect of majini or pepo found in the text. The narrator hinted that one can purchase a jinn or pepo for good use or bad. In other words ‘spiritual power’ and ‘authority’ can be bought and sold at will in the Ngome area (and indeed in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa).

The text portrays Jinni as creatures with powerful attributes ascribed to them. They are given localised identities with names, such as Kichongwechongwe, Mbarakuni, Nyororo, and Fatuma. No other Swahili coastal area has similar names. Communication with these jinn, in this case, Kichongwechongwe, follows ceremonial chanting and the use of sacred languages plus the creation of an environment that pleases him, including the burning of specific ruvumba (14)-’incense’ in the kitezo (7)-’burner’. Once a jinn is felt by an ‘expert’ as being present, he is then told why they called him and assigned various tasks such as protecting the buyer and him (his family) against other bad spirits and the evil-eye. In return, he is promised a special sacred feast ‘kyano’ or an animal ‘nkwavi’ to express their thanks for the job undertaken, and to ensure continuing prosperity and protection against future calamities and any form of affliction. It is interesting to note that the Wangome use their own form of sacred language here represented by kurworeza ‘to slaughter’, nkwavi ‘animal’, panga ‘sacrificial cave’, kyano ‘feast’ or kuturu ‘sacrifice’, and tambo ‘sorcery’. Consider the term nkwavi ‘animal or cow’ as used in Ngome majini ritual practices, other parts of the Swahili coast use different terms such as farasi or tuyuri to refer to sacrificial animal or fowl. This is an interesting area worth examining. There is a need to extend the collection of culturally-specific terminology in Swahili dialects as already initiated by Caplan (1997: 239–242). There is no sign in sight that these practices will dwindle with the advent of more advanced technology, western medicine, greater political awareness or indeed greater religious orthodoxy since, as the text reveals, they are part of everyday indigenous healing practices. Even Islamic religious leaders are unable to stop the practice of these secretive but powerful ancient healing and divination practices.
3.3 Traditional African Metallurgical Technology

Text C pays tribute to the existence of a traditional African metallurgical technology passed from one generation to another. This is part of well-documented Swahili craftsmanship (see Allen 1974: 115). The following are key Kingome metallurgical terminologies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metallurgical terminology</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mundu</td>
<td>‘billhook (sickle)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fura</td>
<td>‘forge’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurura</td>
<td>‘smoothen’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nora</td>
<td>‘sharpen’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinoro</td>
<td>‘whetstone’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rotora</td>
<td>‘first-time, new’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that *mundu* ‘billhook’ and *Kinoro* ‘whetstone’ (the latter appears as *Chinolo* ‘whetstone’ in the neighbouring Kimakonde language, see Steere 1876: 3). *Miyundu* ‘billhooks’ are famously forged by a skilful group of iron-smiths in the Jimbo area. However, a newly-forged billhook ‘*mundu wa kurotora*’ still needs further work before it can be used. We are told of the division of labour in Ngome area, as one needs to consult another craftsman named Nasoro in Kanga in order to smooth a newly forged *mundu* made by another. The handy *mundu* is not only used for slashing and cutting weeds, but also for the clearing of bushes, the building of mud huts and cutting of *kongowe* ‘polls’. Generally, such iron smelting in Ngome is part of wider indigenous metallurgy skills found throughout Swahili coast (Chami 1998).

4.0 CONCLUSION

The texts presented here form important documentation of severely diminishing records of ancient Swahili culture and socio-economic life. I have attempted to present and discuss these texts so that both anthropologists and linguistics could use the material. The article does not pretend to be exhaustive but offers a small contribution to documenting our Swahili heritage.
REFERENCES

Swahili culture reconsidered: some historical implications of the material culture of the northern Kenya coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Azania 9: 105–137.

Caplan, P. 1975.  


Chami, F. 1998.  


Comparative Bantu: An introduction to the comparative linguistics and prehistory of the Bantu languages. Four volumes. Farnborough: Gregg.


Lambek, M. 1981.  


Linguistics Fieldwork. Cambridge University Press.
Steere, E. 1876.  
*A Collections for a Handbook of the Makonde Language.* Zanzibar.  
(Bequeathed to the School of Oriental and African Studies library).

**About the author:** Dr. Ahmadi Kipacha is a lecturer at The Open University of Tanzania. His research interests are: Swahili dialectology, Bantu phonology and morphology, and anthropological linguistics.