

Lessons From Kimondo: an Aspect of Kiswahili Culture*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The *kimwondo* or *kimondo* comes from the Bantu component of the Kiswahili vocabulary. It is used to refer to a shooting star - a bright shiny object or meteor which glows and lights up the clear African sky at night as it races from one point and disappears at another point. From its Bantu origins, it has undergone considerable cultural and linguistic reinterpretation. There are two main factors responsible for these meaning transfers.

Firstly, the advent of Arabs and Persians from the Near East with a new religion called Islam gave the term added significance. Kimondo, for this reason, is used also to refer to the 'Devil's Torch'. The torch or firebrand is a blinding flame in the form of a shooting star. These flares or meteors are thrown across the sky by the good and faithful angels in heaven in an attempt to prevent Satan or Lucifer and his lieutenants from getting in and out of heaven. The devils are constantly trying to steal 'top secrets' or snoop around for vital information about Allah's plans for the world. Their aim is to carry out mischief amongst the children of God on earth. In Kiswahili and Islamic thought, therefore, devils can and do get into heaven provided that they can beat the barrage of shooting stars which blind them and confuse them and lead them astray. This philosophy, in some way, is closer to our African traditional religious thought about the phenomena in the spirit world.

Secondly, the arrival of Europeans to East Africa was accompanied by the establishment of European institutions. These have affected the lives of the Waswahili. The Europeans introduced structures of administration and political power by means of which they ruled, as overlords, the countries of East Africa. Though the Arabs of Oman were the colonial masters of the coast from 1698, by the end of the nineteenth century the Europeans replaced them as an effective power, and except for Zanzibar and Pemba up to 1964, the Arab rule was largely ceremonial.

One of the legacies of the European rule after independence was political elections. The peoples of East Africa have, therefore, considerable experience in

* Inter-Faculty lecture delivered at the University of Ghana, Legon, on the 5th of December, 1991. Minor corrections have been made in this copy.

the exercise of civil political power and liberties through participation in the electoral process.

1.0.1 The Kimondo Tradition

Although the Kimondo tradition can be traced further back into Kiswahili history, the Kimondo of today as a literary and political tradition was first established by the Waswahili of the Lamu East Constituency of Kenya. Lamu is an island off the Kenya coast. The Kimondo tradition is a verse tradition in the satirical genre. But, generally, it is more than just a satire; it is a blinding flash that leads to inner self-examination and questions about the propriety of one's social, religious and political order and conduct. In the Lamu East Constituency, the Kimondo verse tradition is used as an effective means of participating in the electoral process of the country, particularly the parliamentary system by which people are elected as Members of Parliament and as leaders of the Constituency. We shall see then how the Waswahili of Lamu are exploiting their cultural values to great advantage in modern Kenya politics. We wish to point out, however, that Kiswahili society is more or less theocratic in nature, and politics cannot be divorced from religion easily. For this reason, the Kimondo is a political, social and religious whip. It is used in both a satirical and serious manner to bring political, social and religious deviants down to earth where common sense prevails. The Kimondo is also a vein for deep political and philosophical thought about the world and the behaviour of its peoples.

In this paper, therefore, we shall concentrate on some of the lessons which we as Africans can learn from the Kimondo verses of Lamu. The paper has been divided into four main parts: a) The Essence of the Ballot Box, b) The Kiswahili Concept of Power and Authority, c) The Philosophical Problem of Fated Indispensability and d) Arrogance and the Theme of Fated Indispensability.

1.0.2 The Kimondo Verses

The verses which form the basis of this study may be divided into two parts. a) Kimondo Namba 2. These are verses in support of Bwana Mzamil Omar Mzamil. Bwana Mzamil was a candidate in the Lamu East bye-election of 1975. He was the opponent of the incumbent Member of Parliament in 1974 and succeeded in defeating him at the general elections of Kenya in the same year. b) The Madhubuti Kimondo. These are verses supporting Bwana Abubakar Madhubuti, the incumbent who was defeated in 1974. He was the other candidate in the bye-election of Lamu East Constituency of 1975.

The Lamu East bye-election took place because of allegations of electoral impropriety made against agents of Bwana M.O. Mzamil by Bwana Madhubuti

and his followers. The claims of malpractices were upheld by a court of competent jurisdiction and a fair and free election was called for by the judge.

The composer of Kimondo Namba 2 was Bwana Mahmoud Abdul-Kadir alias Mau, while the composers of the Madhubuti Kimondo were Umar Bakari, Said Al-Haj and Muhammad Nabahani.

2.0 THE ESSENCE OF THE BALLOT BOX

The first Kimondo flash across the East African sky can be seen in the verses below:

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| 4. Na kwanda nawasuali
wanawake na rijali,
wala musiwewe wakali
ikiwa nimekosea. | And firstly, I beg to ask you a question
ladies and gentlemen.
And please do not be hard on me (2)
if I err along the way. |
| 5. Ni kwa nini hini voti
kufanywa kila wakati?
serikali haiwati
ikawa ni mara moja? | Why does this act of voting
have to take place every time?
Why does not the Government decree
that it must be done once and for all? |
| 6. Myaka mitano ikisha,
Serikali hupitisha
amri ya Bunge kwisha
na likabuniwa piya. | After every five years,
the Government orders
the dissolution of Parliament
and the reelection of a new one. |

The question which the poet asks, with all the confusing irony of the Kimondo meaning, is applicable to any country which is like Kenya where power is monopolized by one political group, party or by a dictatorship and a despot. In Kenya, only one party rules supreme. That party is the Kenya African National Union - KANU. If we look at the blinding flash closely, we can spot the military regimes also in this equation and the dictatorships of the far east, and Latin America and Africa. In some of these one-party or no-party regimes some semblance of an electoral process exists.

The dizziness caused by the Kimondo style question of the poet, Bwana Abdul-Kadir, can be explained as follows: It seems farcical, if not a charade, to have an electoral process whose only goal is to perpetuate the life span of a ruling clique or dynasty rather than to afford the electorate the genuine opportunity to make meaningful choices that can significantly improve their lives and their knowledge about the world. If the ballot box is no more than a rubber stamp for the status quo, then why can we not have just one election for a life time in the same way that there are life-presidents, and hand-over-to-whom rulers etc? It would seem that such a life-government can be tolerated since it cannot in theory

be uprooted so that it can acquire, over a period, the same respectability that we find in institutionalized monarchies, and, perhaps, it can gain some legitimacy. During the long history of the Waswahili on the coast, they fought tirelessly to remove one king or the other who was a dictator. Right up to independence, the Mazrui of Mombasa and other local sultans fought tirelessly against Arab domination from Oman and later from Zanzibar. Even though these revolts were crushed, the Waswahili learnt to cope with tyranny. They learnt also to attack it subtly in verse. It is this aspect of Kiswahili culture, their yearning for true freedom, which the Kimondo as a blistering verse form uses to attack the way and manner the electoral process is handled in Kenya. The Kimondo's biting truth is relevant to the way in which African countries manipulate the electoral process in the name of democracy.

The true Kimondo is a double-edged shining sword. After pointing out the ridiculous manner in which the ballot box is put to in Kenya, the poet behaves in typical Kiswahili fashion by pointing out that even within a monolithic political framework, the electoral process must be retained because it has inherent virtues which a system without it cannot enjoy. In short, therefore, there must be something that can be salvaged within the narrow choices available to Kenyans and Africans. The poet, Bwana Abdul-Kadir refers to these benefits in the verses below

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| 7. Bila shaka tutaona
kuna jambo la maana.
Na ndipo nchi kufana
yakifanywa kama haya. | Without doubt, as we shall discover,
there is good sense in this process.
For by means of it a country prospers
when things are done by the ballot. |
| 8. Na kura hikima yake
ni umma unufaike
wasofaa waondoke
na waingie wapiya. | The wisdom underlying the vote
is to bring progress to the people.
They can drop the good-for-nothing candidates
and bring in new blood. |
| 9. Nchi ya demokrasi
kama hini yetu sisi
watu huwa na nafasi
watakao kwangalia. | In a democratic country
such as ours here,
people usually get the opportunity
to look after their own affairs. |

There is a lot of double punching in these verses: first above and then below the belt. In the Kiswahili opinion, the ballot box and any electoral process are lesser evils than no ballot box and no system for electing leaders of the constituency and the nation. At the very least, some changes can be made in the selection of the type of people who will become the mouth-piece of the masses. Corrupt representatives, fattened up by the wealth of the nation, may be voted out of office, while more honest and decent citizens can get into positions of authority.

In keeping with Kiswahili practices, the Lamu poets are wise enough to describe a system they cannot forcibly change as 'democratic'. As the proverb says, 'Mwenda pole hajikwai, na akijikwaa haumii' (One who treads carefully never stumbles, and should he stumble, he does not get hurt.) Kenya, therefore, is, for practical purposes, a democratic country. Many African countries share the same accolade. In Kenya, particularly in Lamu East, some choices are available to the electorate. At the constituency level, they can vote out their Member of Parliament without reference to the Party or the President. There is freedom of speech provided it is restricted to local matters, or matters which affect the lives of the people in the locality. Now, if we reverse the poet's argument, it would imply that Kenya is not a democratic country in the wider sense of the word. This is just how the Kimondo works. Thus, the National, Regional and District political leadership cannot be changed by the vote of the masses even if they are known to be corrupt. The leadership cannot be criticized and cannot be made accountable to the voters. In Kenya, as in many African countries, fundamental rights are freely taken away at the pleasure of the ruling caucus, detention and disappearances are very common place events.

In the next verse, the poet maintains or rubs in the sarcasm and this underlines the sad face of democracy in Kenya and other countries.

10. Raia wana uhuru	The electorate has the liberty,
wanawake nadhukuru	including the women folk, I must say,
kuwatoa makaburu	to remove despots in their midst
wenye kudhili raia.	who humiliate and defraud the people!

What the poet says may be true at the constituency level in the election of an M.P. But at the national level, which voter can tell President Arap Moi, his provincial and district commissioners or who could have told the late President Jomo Kenyatta that they are/were oppressive, bankrupt and fraudulent and, therefore, must leave the political scene with their entourage and still walk about freely in Kenya? Few oppressors and African leaders care about the vote of the masses particularly if the aim is to remove them from the centre of power. The essential value of the vote is not in doubt; but there are severe limitations to its effective use in African societies. Through the Kimondo vein, the poets succeed in taking a swipe at the entire political structure while pretending to be concerned with the local politics at Lamu East. The proverb says "Linda ulimi" (Watch your tongue) and another says "Akili ni mali" (Wisdom is power). The Kimondo shows us how the wise can influence the process and struggle for positive change and avoid the gaping dangers of being a political, social and religious critic.

2.1 ON DESPOTISM

Who is a despot or oppressor and how do we recognize a dictatorship? The Kimondo Namba 2 provides one answer and the Madhubuti Kimondo another answer. Let us look first at what the Kimondo Namba 2 says. Consider the verse below:

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| 11. Na kaburu si lazima
awe Mzungu twasema.
Ni vitendo ziso zema.
Ndizo tunazichukia. | The Oppressor is not necessarily
a Whiteman, as people think.
It is in the evil deeds of a person.
And that is what we find resentful. |
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Despotism, from a Kiswahili point of view, is a mental disposition of any individual member of the human race. Any person or leader who takes delight in intimidating and inflicting unjustifiable pain on people or on his citizens rather than providing them with relief for their sufferings is a dictator or oppressor. If it is a government of a state or community, it is a dictatorship. For example, in the Lamu East Constituency, the Veteran M.P. Bwana Madhubuti is described as a dictator because it was alleged that he always suppressed the citizenry by ensuring that they made no significant progress in their endeavours. Whenever he saw them hard at work and were on the brink of breaking through the poverty line, he would move heaven and earth to destroy their enterprises. Bwana Abubakar Madhubuti is alleged to have mused on one occasion that:-

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| 51. Kwao hawa mafakiri
ikidumu hini kheri,
kwangu itakuwa shari,
na mwingi mno udhia. | If for these paupers,
this prosperity is allowed to continue,
it will be to my detriment,
and this will cause me many anxieties. |
| 52. Hawa wakineemeka
mwishoni watazunguka.
Nami hapo bila shaka
taabuni nitaingia | If these people do well,
they will turn against me in the end.
And no doubt for me, if that happens,
I shall be in great trouble! |

Here, Bwana Madhubuti, the two-time winner of the seat in the Lamu East Constituency, is branded a dictator because of his thoughts and deeds. Bwana Madhubuti was afraid of the consequences of success among a largely "illiterate" electorate who had voted him to Parliament (3). Madhubuti's fear was simply that prosperity would make the electorate aware of their rights and liberties. Challengers would then emerge to contest the constituency elections with him. By oppressing them and keeping them jobless and ignorant, he hoped he would be able to divide and cow the masses and becloud their minds with his rhetorics. It seems, therefore, right to infer from Bwana Madhubuti's attitude that some leaders consort with the down-trodden in order to exploit their gullibility and abject

conditions to keep themselves in power or to grasp power. As the M.P. for the constituency, it was, after all, Bwana Madhubuti's duty to create job avenues for the electorate and not to create joblessness.

Now let us see how the Madhubuti Kimondo views the issue of despotism. The charge made by the Madhubuti camp against Bwana Mzamil O. Mzamil and his faction was this:

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| 233. Basi haya nyi jamani
isingie saa hini!
Saa isiyo amani
na ufukara pamoya. | Well, fellow citizens,
this Saa (clock) must not go through!
This clock which is luckless,
and brings poverty in its trail. |
| 234. Saa hini fahamuni
ilipokuwa Bungeni,
tende, unga madukani,
zote zilitukimbia. | This Clock you must understand,
when it was in Parliament,
dates, flour, in our shops,
all vanished before our eyes. |
| 235. Hini Saa ya shari
yenye kufukuza kheri.
yataka muifikiri
sana na kuzingatia | This is an evil Saa (Clock),
which drives away bliss!
It behoves you to think it over
very well and reflect on it. |

The contention by the Madhubuti faction is that when the Honourable M.P. Bwana Mzamil was briefly in Parliament, all the basic necessities of life, especially food, could not be found in the shops. The result was hunger and distress for the masses. The Kimondo taunt, therefore, suggests that the absence of food, clothing and shelter is a far more serious form of oppression of the people. Once a people have the wherewithal to survive, their conditions of slavery do not matter much. Human rights, and despotism should not be viewed abstractly but practically. In short, what do the rabble need full employment, freedom of speech for if they cannot seek out a living that keeps them sober and healthy?

The choice of the Lamu East electorate between these concepts of despotism was demonstrated by voting out, once more, Bwana Madhubuti, in a humiliating manner, at the bye-election. The Kiswahili concept of liberty was thus forcefully expressed, through the ballot box and their loathing for despotism, i.e. subjugation, was vividly demonstrated. As another Kiswahili poet once wrote "Stiklali ni tamu, kutawaliwa karaha" (Freedom is sweet, Oppression is sour). (4)

There is a corrosive truth which, however, underlies the Madhubuti faction's conception of despotism. The Kiswahili proverb says 'Maskini akipata matako, hulia bwata' (When the poor man gets a foot-hold, he speaks nonsense). The Kimondo's lesson is that if we provide all the needs of the poor man, including enlightenment, we give him the opportunity to talk what, in other peoples' view, is a load of rubbish to his benefactors. In short, he begins to put on airs and to get quaint, exaggerated and queer ideas of his own importance. It is, therefore, better

to leave a poor man poor and ignorant in order to safeguard the authority and power of the leaders of the day. As the Waswahili say, 'Mjinga kierevuka, mwerevu yu mashakani.' (When the fool becomes wise, the wise is in great peril!).

In Africa and in many other countries, well-meaning and not so well-meaning individuals and groups have risen to power by the ballot box or the barrel of the gun. Bwana Madhubuti, for example, served two terms as M.P. through the ballot box. All these leaders have a favourite slogan - Power to the people, education for all and so on, and down with exploiters, and accountability now! However, within a short time, the very same leaders can enthusiastically be seen clipping the wings of an awakening people. They proceed to stifle the media, gaol many critics and generally accuse everyone except themselves of ignorance, trifling and talking nonsense. They end-up as despots like Bwana Madhubuti and play havoc with the nation's resources.

3.0 THE KISWAHILI CONCEPT OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

The following verses from Kimondo Namba 2 give some indication of the Kiswahili view of power and authority in the Kimondo vein. The setting is, as usual, centred around the Lamu bye-election.

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| 368. Wakati hunu wa sasa,
watu hawataki pesa.
Twataka mwanasiasa,
na mambo kumwelea. | At a time such as this,
people are not interested in money.
We want a seasoned political candidate,
who is well-informed about affairs. |
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The verse suggests that for the Waswahili, power and authority are not abstract concepts. Power and authority are instruments of social control which can only be entrusted to enlightened individuals, i.e. men and women who are abreast with the times, with the needs of the people, the state of the national wealth and the world order. Furthermore, the right to vote is sacrosanct and the vote itself is more valuable than gold. Its proper use can determine the fate of the people of Lamu East for the next five years at the very least. For all these reasons, contends the poet, the vote is not for sale and can never be put up for sale by any voter. This point may be put in another way. There are times when a voter can decide to play poker with his or her vote, and there are times when he cannot afford to do so. For example, if those in authority, like Bwana Madhubuti or Bwana Mzamil, are evidently incompetent, unreliable or down right crooks, then, the voters owe a duty to society and themselves to use their franchise to put into the leadership positions men and women who can stop the rut. These are men of integrity who can also deliver the goods and keep faith with the people.

In the verse below we learn of the kind of man of the people for whom the Waswahili yearn.

369. Na sisi tuko imara And we have completely resolved
kwa kumpa zetu kura to cast our votes for him
Mzamilu, mwenye ghera, Mzamilu, the dedicated nationalist
ambao mejitolea. who has offered himself for election.

The leader in Kiswahili country is a man who is independent minded. He should be fearless in adversity and must be seen to be so. He must defend the rights and needs of the voters at all times. This kind of daring leader and critic of what is going on within the society, as the Kimondo seeks to bring to our notice, has all the attributes typical of many great leaders and scholars in Kiswahili history such as Fumo Liyongo, Muyaka, Suud, Mwataka, al-Mambassy and others. It is for people like these, those who can stand up to a delinquent leadership and oppressive regimes, that the voters of Lamu are expected and exhorted to cast their votes. Bwana Mzamil is portrayed here as the leader with sterling qualities, the fitting candidate in the Lamu of 1974 and 1975.

The Kiswahili concept of power and authority also requires the electorate to set a good example by rejecting those in power who have become complacent, insipid, insensitive, and crooked. Bwana Madhubuti is depicted as the villain in this case. He has been in power for ten years but the electorate feels he lost all sense of nationalism and descended to the stage of buffoonery. In the bye-election, as in the general elections, the only antidote to the return of the dreaded goblin was to vote him out of office unanimously, and humiliatingly. Otherwise, as the proverb says 'Zimwi likujualo, halikuli likakwisha' (The goblin who knows you will never finish eating you up), and so if Bwana Madhubuti returns, they should expect the worst.

The next concept of power in the Kimondo style is a fatalistic one. We find this in the verse below:

370. Tena twawambia wazi, Once more we are telling you openly
kabisa hamutuwezi. that you cannot defeat us at all.
Wakati wa yenu enzi Your time of glory
umekwisha wapitia. has long passed you by.

The poet is rubbing the bitter truth in here when he tells Bwana Madhubuti before the bye-election that his glorious days are over. Every elected or hereditary office has a natural end to its term. No leader can stay at the top forever except through the folly of men or unless ordained by God to stay there like a god. The wise leader is the one who recognises that his star is waning and that it is time to leave the stage to others rather than stay on and meddle and bungle to the dismay and fury of everyone. Unfortunately, Bwana Madhubuti did not heed the warning of the poet and ignored the electoral barometer. After ten years, he felt he was invincible and that he was only at the beginning of his glory. This was his undoing. No amount of stratagems, vote buying could stop the angry floods. But then the proverb says 'La kuvunda, halina usukani' (A ship destined to run

aground has no working rudder). In a similar manner, common sense often deserts a doomed leader.

4.0 THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF FATED INDISPENSABILITY

In order to understand the philosophy of fated indispensability revealed by the Kimondo's glistening light, let us look at the verses below:-

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| 7. Sasa niete himdi,
nimshukuru Wadudi
kwa voti hini kurudi.
Ndiyo tulokizengea. | Let me begin then with the praises and thank
the One God,
for the holding of the bye-election.
That was what we were fighting for. |
| 8. Nina nyingi shukurani
kumshukuru Manani
kwa kumtoa bungeni
hiana alotumia. | I have many thanks
to give to the Giver (God)
for getting him thrown out of the Bunge
due to the foul tactics he used. |
| 9. Kuona hawakushinda
kama vile kawaida,
ila walifanya inda,
ndiyo wakatulemea. | It was plain that they did not win
in the usual manner,
but used underhand tricks
and so were able to suppress us. |
| 10. Hawakushinda kwa haki,
japo wakitudhihaki
na maneno yenye chuki,
makali wakitwambia! | They did not win by fair means,
even though they taunt us
with barbed language,
and tell us outrageous things! |

In the view of the poet, the Lamu bye-election was necessary and justifiable. The Mzamil group, in his calculations, could not have won the general elections if voting had been free and fair. Against a master and veteran strategist like Bwana Madhubuti who had ten solid years of electoral experience, Bwana Mzamil's camp must have employed some devious tactics to win the general elections.

The poet's attitude towards defeat is what I call Fated Indispensability. It is the philosophy of any doomed leader who clings on to power because of his belief that he is THE Godfather of the people. With this illusory belief, we find that Bwana Madhubuti's setback at the general elections is not blamed on his faults and shortcomings or blunders. His reverses are blamed on wicked manipulations by agents of reaction and power hungry vermins like Bwana Mzamil and his followers.

The Madhubuti Kimondo further confirms the view that they were destined to win the elections, but were frustrated by fiends. Three separate verses illustrate their claim.

111. Hao watu lao lengo The aim of these people
ni kuifanya mipango is to hatch plots,
gambara katika shingo a noose round the neck
ili wapate tutia! to hang us with.
115. Tushikeni hapa hapa Let us hold on to him here and now (5)
Mola wetu mezotupa; whom God has given to us;
kwani wengine ni papa because the others are sharks
kumiza wamezoea. who are used to snapping at others.
14. Wapinduzi wa kofia na watukuzi wa bambo,
bado hamuyatambua! Japo mwatia kisongo,
tembo hamkutukia! Fundi wa yambo ni yambo!
Mungazifanya Sombombo, Mjumbe ni Madhubuti!

Our translation is as follows:

14. "You upsetters of crowns and plunderers of thrones,
you have not yet realised how things stand. Even though you rub it in,
you are not yourselves averse to liquor! But then the connoisseur of a thing
is often a problem!
Even if you introduce discord, Madhubuti is the Representative."

In the verses above, the underlying feeling of a section of the electorate is laid bare for critical examination. The examination unearths a curious Kiswahili and perhaps African belief in authority and leadership. Here, Bwana Madhubuti is portrayed as an extraordinary man. He is a man sent by God, or Allah to the Lamu electorate - a man of Destiny. For this reason, it is argued, all decent citizens would follow the Chosen One. All others who refuse to tow the line are in league with spoilers, sharks, criminal gangsters, overthrowers of legitimate order and looters of established systems or seats of power. These negative elements act against the will of God. In the Kimondo, we learn that defeat is something unnatural and a scapegoat must be found and hanged for it, however unpleasant that might be!

We can see in these claims about legitimate order how a leader or the leadership gradually assumes the role of a deity and begins to feel irrevocably indispensable to the people, the constituency and the nation. But more intriguing is the view somehow that power once gained by a human god cannot be relinquished, except when he is removed by some means or other. His demise, however, is impossible since God is his backbone. The Madhubuti group, therefore, asserts that come rain or shine Madhubuti is and will be the leader of the Lamu East Constituency.

The theme and philosophy of fated Indispensability comes out strongly in other verses from the Madhubuti party such as the ones below:-

9. Yenu hayawi kabisa! Tamaa zenu katani!
Kwa Jahi ya Tumwa Musa na Muhammad Amini,
amezie kukikosa! Harudi tena bungeni.
Kwa nguvu zake Muweza, Mjumbe ni Madhubuti.
10. Bungeni mulimtia, kusudi kupeleleza.
Maneno alowambia, hakuweza kutimiza.
Mekwisha badili nia; ataka katwangamiza.
Kwa nguvu zake Muweza, Mjumbe ni Madhubuti.
11. Waja wako tulingene. Hukuomba tujibie;
utupe moyo tuwane mpaka tumwangamize.
Mjumbe wa nyezi minne, hizo hizo na zitoshe.
Metoka, simrudishe! Mjumbe ni Madhubuti.
12. Na hini ndiyo dalili kuwa huyu hana heri.
Mungu mtenda fiili na muyua zote siri,
yeye amefanya hili kutuepusha na shari.
Kwa nguvu zake Jalali, Mjumbe ni Madhubuti.

The translation of these verses is as follows:

9. What you say cannot be! Give up your greed!
Through the esteem graces of the Prophets Moses and Muhammad the Faithful,
he has already lost his seat and will not go to Parliament again!
By the power of the Almighty, Madhubuti is the leader.
10. You voted him to Parliament in order to size him up.
The promises he made, he could not fulfil any of them!
He has now changed his mind and wants to ruin us.
By the power of the Almighty, Madhubuti is the leader.
11. Your servants turn to you. We ask you to answer our prayers.
Give us courage to fight until we have routed them all!
This M.P. of only four months, even this period is more than enough!
He is now out! Do not let him go back! Madhubuti is the Man.
12. All this is proof that this fellow (Mzamil) brings no prosperity,
God who punishes evil and knows all secrets,

has done this to save us from disaster.

By your powers, Oh! God Most High, Madhubuti is the M.P.

The Kimondo verses here reveal another side of Kiswahili culture. Opposition to people in authority is not a welcome prospect or development. For the supporters of Bwana Madhubuti, any opposition to their entrenched and vested interests cannot be healthy. Yet curiously, as the Kimondo's lashing meteor hits its mark, we realise that Bwana Madhubuti himself only came to prominence and became undisputed leader of Lamu East by opposing and defeating his opponents twice at the ballot box. Ironically, therefore, now that he and his lieutenants have tasted power, they seem to suggest that the ballot box is not, perhaps, the proper way to determine changes in the leadership of the Islands in Lamu. The electoral chair has suddenly become a sacred throne which only the anointed Bwana Madhubuti is ordained to occupy forever. Even the Holy Prophets, God Almighty, the ancestral spirits, all support and recognize Bwana Madhubuti. They have forsaken the opposition. For this reason, Bwana Mzamil's brief stay in Parliament i.e. four months before the bye-election is referred to derively by the Madhubuti group. They claim that his four months was a total fiasco and that he failed to improve the lot of the masses. The Madhubuti group further claims that four months was even too much. If Bwana Mzamil had any meaningful programmes they should have yielded positive results for the constituency in that time. In the opinion of these Waswahili, God had put Bwana Mzamil on probation and he had failed. This act of God was meant to teach the electorate that Bwana Madhubuti is the only saviour favoured by him and he is indispensable as the M.P. of Lamu East. God was now ready to restore the rightful heir to the electoral chair in the bye-election.

This belief or faith in ones indispensability doomed a man like Bwana Madhubuti, who had served his term but refused to leave the scene to crash to pieces in the Lamu bye-election. The defeat was more painful because the Kimondo meteor which fell at his feet exploded the myth of godhead and indispensability of the man and revealed only a human mortal like everyone else. Given the fate that befell Bwana Madhubuti, we learn the lesson that the fated indispensable leader is usually blinded by his own self-righteousness and the sycophancy, toadism and bootlicking attitudes of his entourage. Every leader must, therefore, learn to avoid these twin evils of leadership. And above all, how many African and world leaders want to go down the perilous path of a doomed indispensability before seeing the writing on the wall or feeling the deadly Kimondo knockout.

To conclude this section, let us look at the following Kimondo prayer in verse from the Madhubuti repertoire:

2. Mupe jaha Rahamani akomeshe udhalimu.
Arudie Masikani kwa baraka za Hashimu.

Twakuomba ya Manani kwa dua zetu adhimu.
Mpe jaha Madhubuti ajilisi kiti chake.

Our translation is:

2. Give him grace, Oh Gracious One, to bring oppression to an end.
Let him return to his post with the blessings of the Hashimite.
We ask this of you the Giver with our honourable prayers.
Grant honour to Madhubuti so he may sit again on his seat.

We can see that this prayer to God reflects the Kiswahili belief in the indispensability of Madhubuti as leader of Lamu East. What a hard time the Good God must be having in deciding which prayers to answer and which ones to reject. Should he allow new blood to build his Kingdom or should he bow to the wishes of old and spent forces who have proved, perhaps, disreputable and permit them to stay on as Honourable Members of Parliament, Ministers of States, Heads of State, Managing Directors, Chief Cooks etc and resurrect or, as is most common, destroy the Kingdom? In Lamu, God's choice was not in any doubt. The newcomer with new ideas and a new image won the bye-election. It may not be too long before similar changes occur in Africa and the world.

5.0 ARROGANCE AND THE THEME OF FATED INDISPENSABILITY

Pride and arrogance among elected leaders or officers are aspects of negative behaviour in Kiswahili culture. These are, therefore, exposed by the Kimondo's scorching fire. The vices of arrogance and pride are sub-themes of the philosophy of fated indispensability. Let us look at the verses here-under for evidence of these vices and their consequences on the concept of leadership roles and power.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 198. Alipokipata kiti
akipita kwa matiti,
na kuwambia umati
Yeo kwenu nimekuja. | When he was elected M.P.,
he used to walk with a strut,
and used to tell the electorate
"Today, I have got round to you!" |
| 199. Akenda kwa Mdhihiri,
kamtukana vizuri
huku akiyifahiri,
Basi bado nakwambia. | He then went up to Mdhihiri,
and insulted him roundly!
And then went on vaunting, saying,
"And this is just the beginning!" |
| 200. Na siku alosimama
mbele ya wengi kauma
kwa bayana akasema
Kiti ni changu sikia. | And there is the day he stood up
before a large crowd
and said distinctly
"This seat is mine you understand?" |

201. Na hapo akatukana And here too he was abusive.
 yaso maana tanena I shall tell you of his unspeakable words,
 watu wafahamu sana so that people may understand very well
 yote alotangazia. all that he blurted around the place.

The above verses are from the Madhubuti Kimondo. They allege that as soon as Bwana Mzamil snatched power from Bwana Madhubuti, he gloated and boasted openly and claimed that the Lamu East seat in Parliament was his by natural right. If we assume that the allegations are true, then the Kimondo is doing its usual duty of exposing the arrogance and pride endemic among Kiswahili leaders. The speed with which Bwana Mzamil forgot that the Lamu East Constituency chair is a contestable one and not a hereditary throne, or stool or skin and that he could lose it once the voters have reason to be displeased with the style and quality of his leadership is a Kimondo lesson in the folly of men. It is perhaps coup leaders and occupiers of uncontested portfolios in particular governments or institutions who could claim that the nation, a factory, an organisation etc. belonged to them for keeps. Even so, this situation could only exist for as long as there are no reshuffles, successful counter coups, deaths, or a restive citizenry.

The purported attitude of Bwana Mzamil O. Mzamil indicates to us that having attained power, he also came to believe in his own indispensability. The taste of power seems to make some people, in our view, a little insane and irrational in their behaviour. The best lesson is the one the saying teaches: 'Ulimi hauna mfupa' (The tongue has no bone to check it), or alternatively, 'Heri kukwaa kidole kuliko kukwaa ulimi' (It is better to falter with the finger than to falter with your tongue). Petulant and indiscreet statements cannot be retracted easily and come back to haunt their author particularly when he/she wants to stand for an elected office. The fated indispensable person is normally blind to such considerations.

Let us now turn our attention to Bwana Madhubuti. We may admire his tenacity in the face of insurmountable obstacles. The verses below illustrate how arrogance is a necessary ingredient of fated indispensability and how Bwana Madhubuti was a victim of it.

118. Katika maneno yake With the kind of words
 ya kudharau wenzake, by which he dispises his fellow men,
 ni ile kauli yake it was in the same vein of speech
 Korti aloiambia. that he addressed the court.
119. Aliiambia Korti, He told the court,
 Watu wa Lamu maiti, "The people of Lamu are like corpses,
 hawashiki hawaati. they cannot grasp or let go an idea.
 Hawaisi jambo moyo. They do not understand anything at all."

120. Alisema kuwa sisi mambo yote hatuisi, mwishoni kutia Xsi, latushinda hilo pia. He said we are ignorant of everything and even placing an X on a ballot paper is infact beyond our intelligence!
121. Alitwambia wajinga, na yeye ndiye malenga, awezaye kutuchunga kama ng'ombe na ngamia. He said we were ignorant fools, and he was the enlightened one, who could shepherd us like cattle and camels are tendered.

The verses are from Kimondo Namba 2 of the Mzamil group. Bwana Madhubuti was alleged to have made these statements during the court hearing which brought about the bye-election.

The accusations above throw another search-light on Bwana Madhubuti's qualities as leader. Bwana Madhubuti came to believe in himself as the redeemer of his people and this feeling of indispensability as the Messiah made him arrogant and undiplomatic and contemptuous of the electorate during his ten years in power. This is a fated side effect of Messianic leadership. Bwana Madhubuti after many years at the helm felt that only he could understand the feelings and needs of the masses. The people were incapable of looking after themselves without his guidance and counsel. They could not, for example, vote accurately without his leadership. He, Bwana Madhubuti, was the Good Shepherd who could lead his flock to the Promised Land of Milk and Honey, of abundance and plenty. Any other pastor who takes over from him would only lead the flock astray and into peril. The "conscientization" of the masses would be stalled except under his tutelage, for the masses are still ignoramuses. A stampede by these cattle and camels is inevitable and uncontainable except under his command.

The best metaphors and similes are those which depict the voters of Lamu as corpses, cattle and camels. If Bwana Madhubuti's claim that he is irreplaceable is true, one may wonder what he had been doing during his years as undisputed M.P. of Lamu; and what kind of new enlightened leadership could he possibly offer the people during a third term in office? We shall not attempt to answer this question here. What seems clear is that once Bwana Madhubuti had got hold of the structures of power, he turned round to deride the wisdom and intelligence of the Lamu people who put him there. He then became a god, all-knowing, all-wise, all-mighty. But the Lamu East voters got their chance to reply during the general and subsequent bye-election. The majority of the electorate encouraged Bwana Abubakar Madhubuti in his errant thoughts, helped themselves to his huge campaign funds and finally voted him out of office. That was the 'coup de grace' delivered by 'conscientised' corpses, cattle and camels. So well then had the masses learnt their lessons about their rights and responsibilities under the guardianship of Bwana Madhubuti in ten years, that at least they decided, whether out of ignorance or otherwise, that they no longer wanted an arrogant, abusive and disrespectful god as their leader.

5.1 THE PUZZLE OF INDISPENSABILITY

When Bwana Madhubuti saw that the battle was going against him, he resorted to admonitions, threats and intimidation of his opponents. He told the electorate that it would be making a sad and regrettable mistake if it failed to return him to power. The consequences, he claimed, would be cataclysmic and lead to confusion and internal discord. The only way to ensure peace and tranquility and also stability is to vote for Madhubuti. Any other choice would be dangerously unfortunate. As a reaction to this final claim of indispensability as leader of Lamu, the Kimondo beamed enigmatic flashes into Bwana Madhubuti's face. The puzzle of indispensability and the dilemma of the indispensable leader come alive in these verses from Kimondo Namba 2.

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| 206. Na huyo mtu daima
killa anaposimama
na hujidai ni mwema
ni mtu alotimia. | And this same person, very often
when he stands up in public
proclaims that he is the best choice,
he is a man who is accomplished. |
| 207. Hunena tukimuata
shida nyingi tutapata
tena mno tutajuta
tweenende kumwangukia | He says if we abandon him
we shall encounter great hardships,
and we shall regret so much so that
we shall come and prostrate at his feet (for
salvation). |
| 208. Na ikiwa neno hili
alisemalo ni kweli,
kwani hajitengi mbali?
Mbona atukakamia? | And if this assertion
of his is true,
why does he not step down?
Why does he force himself on us? |
| 209. Nende zake atuate
na taabu tuzipate,
turudi tumfuate,
kwa matozi tukilia! | He should go his way and leave us helpless,
and let us suffer untold hardships,
so we may come back to seek him out
and implore him with our tears. |
| 210. Na tuate ende zake
shida nyingi zitufike
wema wake tukumbuke
kama anavyotwambia. | He should leave us alone and quit the scene,
and let many calamities befall us,
so that we may remember his beneficence
the way he says we will do. |
| 211. Lakini tunamuona
anzidi kutubana.
Si usiku si mtana,
huzunguka akilia. | But we see him at all times,
continuing to harass us.
By night and by day,
he goes about haranguing. |

212. Nda nini kufanya haya Why does he have to go through all these
na yeye alitwambia when he told us
kuwa sisi tutalia that we would weep and lament
bungeni akitongia. if he were not voted back to Parliament?

The Kimondo sarcasm is very much in evidence here. Even if Bwana Madhubuti and his regime were as indispensable as he claimed, the majority of the voters of Lamu were demanding unequivocally that he should prove this by stepping down. They demanded the right to test his hypothesis so they could learn the truth for themselves. The Lamu electorate said they wanted an overhaul, a change after ten years of Madhubuti's rule. The old regime should, therefore, make room for new faces and a new order for better or for worse. Bwana Madhubuti rejected the wishes of the majority of the electorate and insisted on saving them against their wishes. But should an unwanted saviour insist on completing his unwanted mission in this way? The answer probably lies in the proverb which says 'Mchovya uki, hachovi mara moja. (The person who tastes of honey, never does it once). Few African leaders give up the honey of power even when they are drowning. It is simply too good to let go. And so it happened with Bwana Madhubuti of Lamu in Kenya.

The above proverb takes us to our last verses in this lecture. The verses are:

215. Yeye una milioni. He has millions of shillings in his account
Nda nini ta'abu hini, So why all this fuss,
na kungia aibuni, and the constant humiliations,
na mwingi mno udhia? and the many inconveniences he suffers.
216. Kwani haketi kalala Why does he not pause and take a rest
milionize kazila? and enjoy some of his wealth?
Mengia kwenye madhila, He has got himself into a quagmire,
na taabu kummea. and is engulfed by problems.
217. Haketi katamakani He wont sit down and play the (retired) master
akafurahi moyoni. and savour the whole scene quietly.
Amejitia dhikini He has put himself into deep waters
na kupoteza rupia. and is losing money as a result.

The verses above confirm the truism of the proverbial saying cited a while ago. Bwana Madhubuti was reputed to be a millionaire by Kenyan standards. He made his wealth, by implication, while he was M.P. for the Lamu East Constituency. Money, therefore, was probably not the reason why he did not want to relinquish his grip on the electoral chair, though, what the proverb says could well apply here too. There must, therefore, be some secret grace, pleasure and relish in the post of M.P. to justify Bwana Madhubuti's struggle to remain M.P. of Lamu. He

could have bowed out honourably to enjoy the fruits of his labour and investments.

The fall of Madhubuti is a lesson to us all. We should learn to stop eating just when we think we could take a little more. The Kimondo, the fiery meteor in Kiswahili culture, has brightened the skies to reveal what political hyena's look like and what genuine herdsmen are made of.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The Kimondo is a hail of burning meteors hurled by Kiswahili poets at their opponents in a combat. In this lecture, we have seen that the combat is a political one. The battlefield is the Lamu East Constituency of Kenya. The personalities who are the subject of praise or criticism are Bwana Mzamil O. Mzamil and Bwana Abubakar Madhubuti. Bwana Mzamil is a new-comer to the politics of Lamu only in the sense that he is contesting the chair of the Constituency for the first time. Bwana Madhubuti is a veteran. He has been at the game for some ten years.

The lessons we have learnt from this struggle for power are varied. Firstly, the ballot box is the best means and the most democratic manner by which changes in leadership positions can freely and fairly be undertaken. Any act contrary to this is tantamount to oppression and dictatorship. Secondly, there are limits to which the advantages of the ballot box can be exploited once it falls into the hands of a despot or a despotic group such as the Ruling K.A.N.U. party in Kenya. However, since real power lies with the voters, even a ruler who manipulates the electoral system can be brought down if the electorate has the courage and the will to say that enough is enough and damn the consequences.

The politics of power, we learn from the Kimondo verses of Lamu, is like a rough road. No driver can ply it smoothly or in a straight manner or both unless he or she is made of sterling and impeccable virtues of honesty, dedication, imagination, foresight, humility and decency. In Lamu East, Bwana Madhubuti was originally hailed as the best driver of his time. Subsequently, he began to drive carelessly and scared more sober compatriots to the sidelines. He then came to believe in his indispensability and invincibility until the voters put an end to his tactics and antics.

We learn from the Kimondo that although experience is the most useful asset in the governance of men, it can only be acquired over time and gradually. And if one has not gained it over some period, one is never likely to get it in a life time. For example, how could one expect Bwana Mzamil to produce any meaningful developmental results for the constituency after spending barely four months in Parliament? What more could Bwana Madhubuti do for the electorate after what they believed was a pitiful performance over ten years? The Lamu East voters were angered by the court's decision which unseated Bwana Mzamil and brought about the bye-election. They refused to desert Bwana Mzamil and voted him back

to serve his term of five years. The message of the voters is that none has the mandate to unseat the man of their choice (unless the candidate is guilty, beyond doubt, of a criminal offence or some serious misdemeanours). Let each man serve the term given him by the people. This act of defiance shows that in Kiswahili culture, high principles, integrity and fidelity to one's choices and preferences are cardinal ingredients of a good life. Above all, the Waswahili understood and knew the intrinsic worth of the vote.

The most intriguing question left behind by the Kimondo's dying embers is whether Africans are naturally and subconsciously predisposed to dictatorial tendencies and are addicted to power for power's sake? Why does Bwana Mzamil vaunt and swagger as soon as he wins the elections? Why does Bwana Madhubuti invent excuses in order to cling on to power even when his end is within sight? Why do all these leaders attempt to stay in power by hook or crook whether through vote buying, manipulation of the results, gerrymandering, cancellation or repudiation of the final outcome etc.? The reaction of the Lamu voters to the Madhubuti court action was meant to drive home, in Kimondo fashion, the African view that the best warrior or contestant is the one who accepts defeat as graciously as he acknowledges a triumph. The Kiswahili proverb says: 'Asiyekiri ushinde, hakuwa mshindani' (He who accepts no defeat, never was a warrior (of merit)). Sadly, many of our third world rulers, like Madhubuti, brush aside these beautiful lessons of their culture and lead their followers into many strikes.

We learn in the Kimondo a poignant lesson about the relationship between freedom and social control. From the Kiswahili viewpoint, dictatorship of some kind is inevitable. But the positive aspect of their culture is that freedom is preferable to despotism whenever possible. There must, therefore, be a constant struggle to prevent a slide into absolute dictatorship. It is for this reason that the poets and learned men of Kiswahili society, who represent the press and the media in the community, courageously and repeatedly throw Kimondo flares and fire bombs in verse at the leadership to bring their heads out of the clouds and down to earth!

Finally, the Kimondo accuses human beings of being so attached to glory and power to the extent that they become intransigent, stake a claim to indispensability, become proud and arrogant along the way until finally they are pilloried, humiliated and denigrated and booted out of office. How far all the accusations of the Kimondo should be taken lightly or seriously we leave to each man to decide. But there is wisdom in the saying 'Mtaka yote hukosa yote' (He who wants to grasp all, loses all) and also 'Ulimwengu mti mkavu, kiumbe usiulemele.' (The world is like a withered tree, Oh man lean not on it).

EPILOGUE

Sometime has passed, between the delivery of this lecture and sending it for publication. Events in Kenya have changed somehow. Kenya has since reverted to

a Multi-Party State. KANU, nevertheless, remains the dominant political ruling group after the elections of 29th December, 1992. The monopoly of Power remains in the same hands as described in the Kimondo. Events before, during and after the multi-party elections confirm all that the Kimondo satirizes. The singular belief of opposition politicians and the ruling party stalwarts in their indispensability and invincibility culminating in the fragmentation of the opposition front and the 'brutal' gerrymandering of the elections by KANU only go to confirm the enduring lessons of the Kimondo political verse tradition of Lamu East. We find the same hallmark of greed, selfishness, egotism and messianic illusions depicted by the Kimondo, and replayed recently in Kenya's general elections, all over Africa -- in Rwanda, Angola, Zaire, Malawi, Madagascar, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Cameroun, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo and Algeria! We may add to the number countries outside of Africa such as Burma, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Haiti and so on.

If we contemplate the political scene deeply, we soon realise that the Kimondo, in form, structure and content (excepting its islamic cultural bend) is a rare masterpiece of art, literature and an acute political and social judgement on *la condition humaine* in Africa and the rest of the world which posterity may yet drink from for years to come.

REFERENCES

1. The verses in this lecture have been taken from chapters 3 and 4 of my book *KIMWONDO: A Kiswahili Electoral Contest (1990)*. The points discussed here, like many others, were left out of the book to allow readers to draw their own lessons to suit their peculiar conditions of life.
2. Even though I retain some of my original translations of the poems in the lecture, in many places, I have changed the translation whenever I felt this would bring out the meaning more clearly.
3. The term "illiterate" is used here only in the sense of being educated in the Western European sense. Many Waswahili men and also women are educated in the Islamic tradition and are literate. However, the Koranic education is limited in scope for most of the Waswahili and does not equip them adequately to read and write English or French etc., the languages by means of which they are governed and ruled today.
4. This line of verse has been taken from a poem by Mathias Mnyampala (1965:67)
5. The line could also mean: 'let us cling on to the office, which God has given to us.'

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