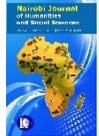




Folklore and identity in selected Joe Khamisi's autobiographical works



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Abstract

Guided by autobiographical and post-colonial theories, this study identified and discussed the use of folklore for sociopolitical identity in Joe Khamisi's autobiography. The specific objectives were to identify integration of folklore in the selected work, and to interrogate how the author uses folklore to signal sociopolitical identity. The selected autobiography is a good record of Kenya's immediate history from the colonial period to the present especially from 1943 up to 2007 when the author lost his Bahari constituency seat.

Keywords: autobiography, autobiographical writing, folklore, identity, Joe Khamisi



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Public Interest Statement

For public interest, this study focuses on identifying integration of folklore in the selected works of Joe Khamisi, and to interrogate how the author uses folklore to signal sociopolitical identity. The study will go a long way in filling the gap in existing literatures on autobiographical writing.

Introduction

Joe Khamisi worked in Kenya and the diaspora as a journalist, a public relations officer, a diplomat, a director and a Member of Parliament. His first publication *The Politics of Betrayal* is a memoir and the second *Dash Before Dusk* is an autobiography. They are both valuable in capturing a period in the Kenyan nation's history. Joe Khamisi uses his autobiography *Dash Before Dusk: A Slave's Descendant's Journey in Freedom* to reveal his identity. The autobiography is a good record of East Africa specifically Kenya's immediate history beginning from colonial times to post-independence days especially from 1944 when he is born up to 2007. It captures sixty-five years of his life. The title *Dash Before Dusk* is an allusion to his father's policy when he was young. His father insisted that his children had to be home before dark (p. 53). He therefore pays tribute to his father in the title and in his autobiography. Dusk can also allude that he is conscious that he is in his sunset years and he has to archive his biography. The title's second part *A Slave Descendant's Journey in Freedom* reveals Khamisi's identity as a slave descendant. He associates with his family's slave history and he takes pride in this identity. He is keen on setting the record straight on his origin and justifying his past actions especially in parliament.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by autobiographical and post-colonial theories tenets from Orientalism, Hybridity and Ambivalence. The theory of autobiography is largely associated with Wilhelm Dilthey (pp. 1833-1911) who sees human sciences as grounded in the understanding of human life and experiences. Laura Marcus discusses that in the course of his studies, Dilthey realised that the biography and the autobiography are both central in the discipline of human sciences. Thus, experience becomes a major aspect of autobiographical criticism since self-writing is a reflection of one's life. He emphasized on historicity as a medium shared by all and auto/biography as a mode of understanding, of self and other, which takes a variety of forms. (pp. 135-141).

Edward Said's views and ideas laid the cornerstone of postcolonial theory. There are other leading figures such as Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Said's theory of postcolonial is mainly based on what he considers the false image of the Orient or the East that has been fabricated by western explorers, poets, novelists, philosophers, political

theorists, economists, and imperial administrators since Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. According to Said, these have always shown the Orient as the primitive, uncivilized "other", in an attempt to create it as the contrast to the advanced and civilized West. Joe Khamisi reveals the norms and culture with an aim of claiming their rightful position in the country. He also celebrates his childhood made memorable by the African culture and folklore. He therefore disapproves the earlier false images of Africa.

Discussion

The discussion is divided into sub titles guided by the different aspects that the autobiographer dwells on.

Culture

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

Khamisi recalls that Arabs owned all the shops at Rabai trading Center. They were kind and generous and allowed credit facilities to the locals. Khamisi ate a lot of ugali and cassava in his childhood. He preferred ordinary ugali made from maize meal to cassava ugali. For vegetables, they have *mchicha* or *mvuna* and bitter *msunga* in the dry seasons. For housing, thin long sticks are fitted together to make circular walls plastered with muddy soil and roofing is made from thick layers of wild grass packed together. Slave descendants built theirs in a square or rectangular shape and theirs is built in this manner. The bats are a nuisance that he cannot forget in his grandmother's Nyanya Emilia's house. As a child, Khamisi equates bats with evil since they descended at night and light had been equated with good and night with evil. Their presence at night is a scary childhood experience. Many fears are developed in this manner as childhood is a formative stage of life.

Songs and dances are important indicators of identity. Khamisi recalls the *mwomboko* traditional music that the Kikuyu community had every Sunday afternoon in

their social club at Majengo. Khamisi has an early exposure to politics at the age of thirteen (p. 47). He says he became “an active youth member of the party.” He joins other activists singing freedom songs led by a trade unionist leader from Western called Menya. Khamisi is nurtured into his future political and journalism careers. Khamisi tried to become a musician at one time. He had a soft spot for songs and music which he attributes to his uncle Leone Matano who was a musician and the coastal carnival mood.

Naming

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

The village name Simakeni roughly means ‘don’t be shocked’ (p. 3), and it is about twenty five kilometers North West of Mombasa. Mombasa is named Mvita locally which literally means the place of war. Some people suggest the name Rabai is derived from Kiswahili *raha hii* translated as a place of pleasure. The Buxton School is named after John Buxton a leading British anti-slavery campaigner in the 1800s. Sadala is buried at a cemetery in Rabai called *Mtakuja* which in Kiswahili means ‘you will come her’. This is a reminder that death is inevitable.

Khamisi observes that his father appeared to have been fascinated by the name Mary. His mother is Maria Faida a version of Mary, he dates a Kamba lady called Mary and gets remarried to Mary Tabu. *Faida* is benefit in Swahili while *Tabu* means trouble. Joe Khamisi names his own daughter Maria after his mother. Pili is the second born daughter and the name seems to allude to her second position as *pili* is a Swahili word meaning second.

Traditions and Superstitions

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

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

Palm wine plays an important part in the customs of the coastal people. *Kuhaswa* is a special blessing given to prospective marriage partners and palm wine is part of it just like in other traditions. This happened to his daughter Josephine Pili. One pours a little wine to the ground to appease the spirits in Mijikenda culture. Birth, initiation into adulthood and marriage rites are discussed. Superstitions include belief in jinni (spirits) and ghosts; rain makers; night runners; and witchcraft.

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

Religion played a role in shaping Khamisi. He becomes an altar boy a task that he has to wake up very early to do since many boys like it. Part of the reason is the wine and he believes it is the smell that made them intoxicated. He sings at the church choir and memorises the Latin lines for mass. He selects the name Lawrence after confirmation after Lawrence Kazungu a friend and classmate of his father at Kabaa High School who was the first town clerk of Malindi. This reveals that religion exists alongside the traditions in support to hybridity as advanced by Homi Bhaba’s Hybridity.

Slave Narratives

Khamisi reveals that he comes from a slave ancestry. He tells his family’s history with reference to the slave trade history in East Africa. He traces his family tree from his great grandparents on the paternal grandmother side and his maternal grandparents’ side. His paternal grandfather’s side is not clearly outlined as his grandmother was a single mother and he claims his father didn’t know his father.

When they visited Kinyakani, Nyanya Pauline his maternal grandmother told them many stories about her childhood. Sometimes she would sing for them. Most of the stories revolved around her experiences at the Rabai mission, the night singings, the weddings and deaths. He would recall her suitor Stephen and how they fell in love at first sight leading to matrimony. She would describe her Arab captors as smelling like spices and her

journey as a slave girl on the journey from Tanganyika to the Kenyan coast.

His maternal grandmother Pauline was matched to her lifelong husband Stephen Sepetu at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission in Kenya started in 1844 by two German missionaries Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebman. It was the first settlement for rescued slaves. (p. 3). “In the late 1880 when the Sultan of Zanzibar issued letters of freedom, former slaves were told to choose their future husbands or wives from a multitude of people from the station. They would be wedded and settled on small plots of land surrounding the mission. These two were settled at Kinyakani on a three acre plot overlooking the main Mombasa/Kaloleni road” (p. 4). Pauline was captured while still in pre-teens on her way from fetching water somewhere in the Tanganyika interior (p. 5). Her community the Zaramo inhabit an area around Dar es Salaam.

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

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

This confirms that slavery was very traumatizing and indignifying.

Political Identity

Khamisi was born in the Native Civil Hospital. He gives a history of the hospital which was built in 1908. Europeans had Mombasa Hospital then called English Hospital built in 1891 and the Asians had Aga Khan Hospital built in 1944. The segregation was common in all hospitals, schools, hotels and other common places. Africans were at the lowest status. All black people are described natives which he claims is: “a derogatory term of racial iniquity common in British colonies”. The segregation of blacks by the colonialists is so much that the use the word *toto* (child) to refer to grown men. According to Khamisi, they are all

called natives because they are not considered intelligent but thought to be foolish. (p. 2). In the early days, Arabs occupied third place in the race tier. It was the Europeans then the Asians then the Arabs and finally the blacks who included African natives and dark skinned Arabs referred to as *Washahiri*. (p. 4).

Khamisi's grandmother Emilia worked as a domestic worker, care-taking children in a European household of British descent. She would take bread remains to eat with her tea without milk. She also confesses to spoon-feeding the children hard liquor to get them to sleep. This amuses him (p. 8). This reveals that the blacks did not have good relations with the colonialists.

Khamisi recalls many memorable events and contributions he made in the ninth parliament in his memoir. There was a fallout between President Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga who had been part of the coalition that ensured the opposition won. Kalonzo Musyoka later broke away from Raila's camp and Khamisi moved with him. Khamisi recalls the Post-Election violence of that year caused by the alleged rigging of Presidential election results in his first book *The Politics of Betrayal*. He provides details of these coalitions and divisions. Other important events in the history of colonial Kenya that the autobiography chronicles include MAU/MAU activism; the state of emergency in 1952; regional political organizations; Legco elections; Lancaster house conferences of 1960, 1962 and 1963, self-governance and independence. Khamisi recounts them in his autobiography. He discusses key historical events in President Kenyatta era 1963 to 1978, President Moi from 1978-2002 and President Kibaki's first term of 2002-2007. Khamisi recalls that their house in Majengo was always a beehive of activity. (p. 49). They had important visitors such as Masinde Muliro, Martin Shikuku, Daniel arap Moi, John Keen and Justus ole Tipis who later became national leaders in independent Kenya. Ronald Ngala visited too.

Khamisi accompanied his father on his 1957 campaigns for a seat at the LegCo. He liked the ululations, chanting and attention he got as his father's son. Joseph Khamisi loses to Ngala but beats Edward Binns in another round of elections held in 1958. International leaders that visited their home included Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and Christopher Kanyama Chiume a close friend of Hastings Kamuzu Banda the future president of Malawi. Khamisi accompanied his father to Kisumu to visit Jaramogi Oginga Odinga who was recovering from a bout of Malaria. This is his first time to go out of Mombasa.

Three conferences were held at Lancaster House in London before independence. Khamisi reveals that his father was among the African LegCo members to attend the first one in January 1960 where no agreement was reached. A framework for self-government was negotiated in the second one held between February and April 1962 and the third was

held between 25th September and 6th October 1963 to finalise constitutional arrangements for independence. Khamisi is working in Nation Media in 1963 and was at Uhuru Gardens to witness the hoisting of the Kenyan flag. Kenyatta received the original copy of the first constitution of newly independent Kenya from Prince Philip husband to Queen Elizabeth. They celebrate in Jeans Bar in Nairobi West until morning (p. 73). There was great optimism at this time. KANU won the May 1963 and Jomo Kenyatta was named prime minister. He became president on 12th December, 1964.

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

Conclusion

Joe Khamisi integrates songs, folktales, nicknames and sayings drawn from the Kenyan sociopolitical background in his narrations. They are important in indicating the slave history identity, the native beliefs, customs and the political practices or ideologies. The revealed culture includes norms, customs, beliefs, superstitions and established rites associated with birth, initiation, marriage and death. Folklore indicates identity and is passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. He proves that the slave descendants who settled at the coast are an important community and deserve to be treated equal and given opportunities to settle well as they are legally and culturally Kenyans. Muchiri in “The Intersection of the Self and History in Kenyan Autobiographies” observes that “an autobiography allows writers not only to narrate their life experiences but also to weave their personal stories to those of their societies” (p. 83). The studied autobiography has effectively achieved this in the narrations.

Author Biography

June Chebet is currently a teacher of English and Literature in one of the secondary schools in Kenya. She holds MA in Literature from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. She has a special interest in literature and linguistics.

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