

“If I would not have been imprisoned, maybe I would not have written any poetry ” - a conversation with Abdilatif Abdalla¹

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I became acquainted with Abdilatif Abdalla’s poetry as a student. I remember that the poem "Siwati" ("I Will Never Abandon My Convictions") burned deep in my memory. Still struggling with my Swahili proficiency at that time – and not particularly fond of poems – it was the first time that I was longing to access the meaning behind the words and to overcome the language barrier I encountered. I was eager to understand what the usage of the Swahili language was offering to me in a poem that was stressing the writer’s determination, expressing in a most convoluted way his will to die for his conviction. I learnt that Abdalla had written this poem and others in solitary confinement, scribbling drafts on toilet paper because he had no access to writing materials. "Siwati" opened up my eyes not only to Swahili, but also to the power of language as a form of resistance and as a means to handle the challenges of life in general.

Only later did I learn that Abdalla’s verbal artistic proficiency got a description by scholars: *lugha ya ndani* ("deep language"), a term that stands for the author’s “ability to condense thoughts and topics by means of the rigid principles of Swahili poetics, thus achieving a high density of metaphorical language” (Beck 2016: 5). By using *lugha ya ndani* Abdalla resorts, for instance, to riddles to speak about the unspeakable, the political situation, that cannot be uttered without risking one’s life. (ibid.). “Siwati” was published in 1973 in the anthology titled *Sauti ya Dhiki* (“Voice of Agony”) that was in 1974 awarded the Kenyatta Literary Award: “a literary prize named after [Jomo]

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Kenyatta, the same autocratic president whose suppression of dissenting voices had not only sparked off Abdalla's pamphlet and activism in the first place, but also brought him into jail." (Kresse 2016: 23)

Abdalla's artistic work thus inseparably connects to his political dedication. He was condemned to prison as the pamphlet *Kenya Twendapi?* ("Kenya: Where are We Going?") was assessed as "seditious" by the Kenyan Government. After Abdalla's release in 1972, he went into exile in Tanzania where he held a position of Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Kiswahili Research, University of Dar es Salaam, where he also continued with his political struggle. This remained also true when he moved to London in 1979, where he first worked for BBC Kiswahili Service for the first seven years, after which he became the Editor-in-Chief of *Africa Events*, a current affairs monthly magazine published in London. In 1994 he taught Kiswahili Language and Literature to undergraduates at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In 1995 he moved to Germany to teach Kiswahili Language and African Literature at the University of Leipzig until his retirement in 2011.

Abdilatif Abdalla, born in Mombasa in 1946, still lives in Germany in the city of Hamburg.

In March 2018 Abdalla gave a lecture on "Kiswahili Poetry and Society" at the University of Vienna's Department of African Studies. On the occasion of his visit, he agreed on this interview. Abdalla's entangled strands of his artistic, political and academic worlds were at the centre of this interview.

Q: You are a writer, political activist and academic. Let us start talking about your position as a poet.

A: I do not regard myself as a poet. And I am not saying this out of modesty. People say I am, but I really am not. I think a poet is someone who writes poetry oftenly. I don't. I do so only occasionally – once in a very long while. For instance, if somebody had written an article or two on a particular topic in history, would you call that person a historian? To me, a poet is somebody who is always at it – composing poetry regularly, which I don't. People just decided to call me a poet because of this one book, *Sauti ya Dhiki*, which I wrote when I was in prison. Perhaps if I would not have been imprisoned, maybe I would not have written any poetry. I do not know. So I do not regard

myself as a poet, but as somebody who happened to have scribbled a few poems.

Q: But these poems won a literary prize!

A: Nevertheless! They may as well have received an award. That is how some people regarded me, but this is how I see myself.

Q: In 1976 you gave a public lecture at the University of Dar es Salaam, entitled "Wajibu wa Mshairi Katika Jamii Yake" ["The Role of the Poet in His/Her Society"] and argued that a poet needs to be in touch with, and be knowledgeable about his/her society. How do you see a poet's duties?

A: I think that applies not only to poets, but also to writers in general. Because a writer cannot write anything meaningful to the society unless he or she experiences and lives the life of that society. It is only then that one can come up with something that will reflect the life of that particular society. These things go together and feed on each other – the writer gets his or her material from the society and gets affected by the said society and, in turn, the writer can have an influence on the society by what he or she writes. Therefore, they go hand in hand. You have to be part and parcel of the society in order for you to write something which reflects the real life of that society. Otherwise, you will be just writing your own imaginary things.

Q: You also stated that a poet should represent those whose voices are not heard otherwise. Did you succeed?

A: I do not know. It is for the readers to judge whether I succeeded or not. What I do know is that a poet is traditionally the eye and the ear of the society. Due to the fact that our African societies have been traditionally oral, poets and singers have been the voice of the society. Some went as far as to dare criticise even those in power in order to represent the views and aspirations of the larger society, rather than just the privileged few who wielded power. And throughout history there have been Swahili poets who played a significant role in articulating the aspirations and wishes of the wider society and at the same time resisting either foreign domination or local tyranny from those in positions of power, especially those who misused or abused that power which the society entrusted them with. However, here we must state that there have been different categories of writers. Not all writers hold the same views or positions. There are those who are just not interested in

articulating what the society is in need of. Then there are those who would write imaginary works which do not have any direct bearing to society. And in the third category belong the committed writers, who act as the mouthpiece of the society, as well as its ears and eyes - listening and watching what is happening around them in order to be in a position to speak out on those issues that matter.

Q: Does that apply to the Swahili poems you wrote?

A: I would not say that I chose to be that voice, but that I just found myself in that position. Maybe partly because of our family's history. I always tell people that our family has been a family of troublemakers, who have been mostly at odds with those in power when they misuse or abuse it. One characterised us as "a powerhouse of resistance". In our family, we have been having poets, teachers (religious and secular), singers and painters. But it also consists of community leaders and political activists. For example, we have had members of the family who resisted foreign occupations and rules since during the 15th century, when the Portuguese invaded and occupied our part of the East African coast. Then came the Arabs. We contributed in the struggle against the Arab rule. After that came British colonialism, which saw some members of our family participating against it in the independence struggle. And just three years after Kenya got its independence in 1963, I was passed the baton by my elder brother, Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir, who was one of the founder members of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), which spearheaded the struggle for Kenya's independence in the latter years. In fact, this elder brother of mine is the one who introduced me to political activism. Therefore, I grew up in that environment. And since I was interested in politics, I just could not escape from it. I just found myself using my poetry agitating for issues, or, rather, representing the views, of the marginalised and the "voiceless" in the society.

Q: Using *lugha ya ndani* ["deep language"] thus has a political touch?

A: Ah, yes, it does. Especially if you are writing or composing poems in an environment which one cannot express one's views freely. And this is one of the functions of Swahili poetry in particular, and poetry in general. You still say what you want to say, but in a form of language that not everybody would understand its real meaning. So yes, you have to use that tactic

sometimes, of not writing openly, but of using “deep language”, so to speak. So it becomes very handy, that type of language.

Q: So your role as a poet is very much intertwined with your role as a political activist?

A: I believe so.

Q: Since the moment when you wrote *Kenya Twendapi*?

A: *Kenya: Twendapi?* was the seventh in the series of monthly pamphlets I wrote. I started to be politically active when I was 19 years old. Three years later, I ended up in prison because of this last pamphlet. In it I argued that if the government continued to behave in the dictatorial way it was behaving by denying the people their democratic rights, suppressing dissenting views and harassing its opponents, then the Kenyan people will have no choice except to remove it by force. According to the then existing Kenyan laws, that was a treasonable statement to utter.

Q: Why did you start to publish these pamphlets?

A: As I said earlier, I was politically active at the age of 19 years. In 1966 the first opposition party in independent Kenya was formed. That was three years after Kenya attained its independence from British colonialism. But just two years after, a small, but very powerful clique within the government, started misbehaving by misusing and abusing the power they had. It was as if they had completely forgotten why the struggle for independence was waged. Many Kenyan people sacrificed their lives and limbs to break the chains of colonialism so that we could rule and govern ourselves; so that the Kenyan people could restore their human dignity and exercise their rights and enjoy justice. Instead of making sure that suitable policies were enacted and laid out in order to realise those aspirations, those who were holding the reins of power embarked on amassing personal wealth by whatever means and appropriating large tracts of land, which should have been distributed to the landless and to those whose land was robbed from by the colonial White settlers. In their place we were now having Black land robbers and settlers. Kenya’s independence struggle culminated into the armed struggle against British rule primarily because of wanting to restore the land to the rightful owners. Hence the formal name of the movement of fighters who went into the forest to wage the armed struggle against British

colonialism was Kenya Land and Freedom Army, otherwise known by the name of "Mau Mau". It was the land and freedom that Kenyans fought for. Just imagine this: among the first things that the newly independent Kenyan government did was to secure a loan from the British government in order to buy back the land unjustly appropriated by the settlers from the rightful owners. Now, people thought, that after that land had been bought back, it would be distributed to those from whom it was forcefully and unjustly taken. But that was not to be. Instead, it ended up in the hands of those in power.

However, within that government, there were some patriots who were opposed to how the country was being misgoverned. One of them was the then Vice-President of Kenya, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Together with some of his colleagues they first tried to advocate for changes from within, but were met with stiff resistance from that small, but very powerful, clique within the government. As a result, Odinga and others who held ministerial and other senior positions resigned from the government and the ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), and in April 1966 a new political party, Kenya Peoples Union (KPU) was formed. It became the first opposition party in independent Kenya. I was attracted to the KPU policies, which had socialist leaning. I joined it and became an active member at that young age. Though legally registered, the government did not allow it to operate freely. It suppressed it in various ways: it did not allow it even to hold public meetings, and its leaders and prominent members were constantly harassed. So, some of us young people decided that we had to embark on underground activities. That is how those pamphlets came to be written. Due to the fact that public meetings were near to impossible to hold, pamphleteering was one of the ways in which we believed the party could reach the people. So my task was to write a pamphlet every month - publicising the party's policies as well as criticising the government's misdeeds. The seventh pamphlet, *Kenya Twendapi?* was published and clandestinely distributed in September 1968. In December 1968 I was arrested after being betrayed by one of my colleagues. He was the star prosecution witness during my trial. In fact my being convicted was mainly based on his evidence before the court. Otherwise there was no proof of directly linking me with the pamphlet. I was, therefore, charged with seven counts, ranging from conspiracy to overthrow the government by force of arms, to sedition. Since apparently the lawyers were intimidated by the government not to defend me, I had to defend myself,

while knowing next to nothing about Law. Out of those seven counts I was charged with, in March 1969 the judge found me guilty of three of them and subsequently sentenced me to 18 months imprisonment. But the government appealed against it as inadequate. As a result, I was later taken back to court and my sentence was increased to three years.

Q: Were you aware of the risks when you were writing the pamphlets?

A: I was very much aware. In fact my elder brother I mentioned earlier, Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir, had advised me to detone the language I used in that particular pamphlet, but I refused. After reading the draft he told me that if the pamphlet will be published with its original wording I will this time not escape the wrath of the government.

Q: What did he mean by detoning the language?

A: He was of the opinion that it was too harsh. But I told him that I was not going to change even a single word. He then asked me if I knew what the consequences would be. I told him I did know. In order to make sure that I truly understood those consequences, he wanted me to spell them out to him. I said that the worst they could do would be to kill me, or, if I am lucky, they would imprison me. He then asked me again whether I was prepared for that. My answer was in the affirmative. His response was that if I was sure about what I was saying and did not have any doubts whatsoever, then I have his blessings. I should move forward. But he at the same time cautioned me that if I had even an iota of doubt that once I found myself in trouble with the government I would abandon what I believed in, then I better drop it there and then. While in prison, I thought a lot about this talk I had with him. It is reflected in the poem "Siwati" – that is, I will never abandon my convictions; as well as in the very first poem I wrote while in prison custody, "Nshishiyelo Ni Lilo" ("I Won't Compromise"), which was a letter-poem to this brother of mine..

So, yes, I knew what the risks were. And that talk I had with him helped me a lot in clarifying my position, especially so during my three years of solitary confinement in prison. That kept me going strongly and resolutely. I think if I were not that sure in my mind about that, I doubt if I would have come out of prison with my mind sound and my resolve intact.

Q: It also didn't stop you to remain a political activist?

A: It did not. Imprisonment failed to break me. In fact it made me stronger. I came out of prison with a stronger conviction than when I went in. I always say jokingly that I thank the government for sending me to prison, because while there I got to know myself better and what I was capable of. That is why I continued with political activism after my release.

Q: You were not so sure whether you would consider yourself a poet. Would you consider yourself a political activist?

A: That, I am absolutely sure about. Yes, I am.

Q: Your later occupations were equally connected with places of great thought, for instance, you worked at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s.

A: Dar es Salaam University in the 1970s was the place to be for me. It was the hub of revolutionary and progressive ideas in the whole of Africa. That was a period when that university had intellectuals with radical ideas from different parts of the world teaching there. You had people like Walter Rodney, Clive James, Issa Shivji, Grant Kamenju, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Dan Nabudere, Yash Tandon, Haroub Othman, John Iliffe, Mahmood Mamdani, to mention just a few. It was a fantastic time and a wonderful place to be. That was a golden age! I do not think it will ever come back. Also in those days Dar es Salaam hosted liberation movements waging armed struggles in their respective countries, such as Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Most of their fighters were trained in Tanzania. The leaders and activists of those movements used to come to Dar es Salaam University to give talks and hold discussions and debates on the liberation of Africa. The seven years I worked and lived there were among my happiest and most fulfilling – academically as well as politically. It was the appropriate place for me to be after my release from prison.

Q: Your position as an academic at the University of Dar es Salaam was thus also closely linked to your political activism. After seven years, you left the country. Was this linked to political convictions or academic considerations?

A: I had to leave because I had reached the maximum period which the Tanzanian laws allowed a non-Tanzanian to work there. I don't know

whether the laws have changed now. But in those days, if you were not a Tanzanian citizen you could not work for more than seven years. That was the only reason why I had to leave. Otherwise, I don't think that I would have left. In fact, the government had offered me a Tanzanian citizenship because they wanted me to continue working there. I was then a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Kiswahili Research. I declined the offer, much as I would have liked to stay on. Because if I had taken the Tanzanian citizenship, I would have automatically lost my Kenyan citizenship and, with it, my right to intervene politically in Kenyan affairs. Kenyan laws then did not allow dual citizenship. Accepting Tanzanian citizenship would have made me a foreigner in my own country! And that would have been very painful to me.

Q: So you preferred to go to another exile to be able to continue with political activism?

A: Yes. In fact after having moved to London in 1979 to work for the BBC I became more politically active against the Kenyan government than when I was in Tanzania. In 1982 there was an unsuccessful military coup attempt by a section of the Kenyan armed forces. As a result many people were arrested, many were killed by the loyal government forces, and many had to flee for safety in other African countries and beyond.

As the political situation in Kenya worsened, with killings and wanton violations of peoples rights, some of us Kenyans, who were at that time in London - me, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Shiraz Durrani, Wanjiru Kihoro, Wanyiri Kihoro, Yusuf Hassan, Wangui wa Goro and Nish Matenjwa decided to do something against it instead of remaining silent and sitting idly by in relative freedom and do nothing.. Ngũgĩ had come to London from Kenya to launch his new book, *Devil of the Cross* and got stuck there. He could not return home and to his teaching at Nairobi University, as he received a warning from home not to go back because he was likely to be arrested as well – a fate which was met by other progressive and leftist lecturers and students of that university.

We worked tirelessly for more than ten years – starting in 1982 with the formation of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya (which was basically a human rights committee with a wide membership consisting of non-Kenyans as well), to the launching of the above ground political movement, Umoja wa Kupigania Demokrasia Kenya (UKENYA) – (United Movement for Democracy in Kenya), which supported the

underground movement based within Kenya, famously known by its Kiswahili acronym, MWAKENYA, (Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kuikomboa Kenya) – Union of Patriots for the Liberation of Kenya. A few years later we formed an umbrella movement which brought together several Kenyan political organisations based outside Kenya, known as Umoja-Kenya.

Our two main objectives were, firstly, to expose to the world the atrocities committed to Kenyans by the Kenyan government, as well as the suppression and curtailment of democratic rights; and, secondly, to organise and sensitize Kenyans living abroad to support the struggle. Those were not easy tasks. For example, it took us five years of hard work to make the world listen to us and believe what we were saying. That difficulty was mainly caused by geopolitics during that Cold War period. At that particular time Kenya was the darling of the Western world. However, we ultimately succeeded. But with success came its danger. For instance, there were occasions when the Kenyan government would send its agents to London with the intent purpose of harming us. During my tenure as the Chief Coordinator of the movement, I was once summoned by the London police authorities to be warned that we should take great care with our safety because some Kenyan government elements had arrived in London apparently to hit us.

Another sign that our activities were effective was in the 1980s when the then Kenya's Foreign Minister, Elijah Mwangale, came to London to request the British government to expel me and Ngugi from Britain. But the request was turned down. (At that time the British Foreign Minister was Sir Geoffrey Howe). The British government's response was that it could not meet Kenya's request because we did not break any British law, and that it was upon the Kenya government to counter what we were saying against it if it believed it was not true. Because of my involvement in these political activities I ended up living in exile for a total of 22 years. But it was very much worth it. It was only from 1994 that I started going back to Kenya after the government allowed the multiparty system. Kenya was a one-party state for about 40 years.

Q: After London, you went to Germany. What were the reasons?

A: Because I was offered a teaching job at the University of Leipzig. After working for the BBC for seven years, I was appointed the Editor-in-Chief of a monthly current affairs magazine published in London, called *Africa Events*,

where I worked from 1986 to 1994. Thereafter, I went back to academic life. I taught Kiswahili at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. It was while teaching there, that I was offered the position at the University of Leipzig – a vacancy that I did not know it existed! At first, I could not believe it. I thought someone was pulling my leg, so to speak. But, to my surprise, it was genuine. So I moved to Leipzig in 1995. The initial contract was for three years, which was later extended by another two years. After the expiry of the second contract, I was appointed to a permanent position till my retirement in 2011. That is how the three years ended up to be 15 years.

Q: So being an academic also meant that you were less politically engaged?

A: Yes. When I left London some changes for the good had already started to take place in Kenya. As I stated earlier, for example, in 1992 the government had re-instituted multiparty politics, albeit reluctantly. Of course, some things were not right still, they are still not all right now. But at least we have made some progress from where we were before. It will take some time. They say “Rome was not built in a day.” It is still not the Kenya we would like to have, but change is a process. We have a Kiswahili saying which goes, “Ugonjwa uingavyo, sivyo utokavyo”, which roughly translates as, the way illness enters the body does not leave it the same way. It attacks the body all of a sudden, but takes long to leave.

I always say that political activism or political struggle is like a relay race: you have to pass the baton to a new generation of activists, and they later pass it on to others. It is very important to have those changes, because a political struggle constantly needs new ideas, new activists and new ways of prosecuting it. So, we of the older generation have passed the baton to the younger generation. We are, of course, still around to advise and give moral support, but no longer to occupy the centre stage. That now belongs to the young generation. It is their future that they have to shape. Whenever I communicate with the Kenyan youth I tell them that they have to fully participate in this struggle, because it is for their future. Since we were young we did what we could under those very difficult and dangerous circumstances - in above ground and underground activities. The terrain is now less dangerous. Therefore it is upon them to continue raising the banner of the struggle so that they realise the future they would like to have and the

kind of Kenya they would like to live in. So, yes, since I moved to Germany, I have been less directly politically active than before.

Q: Coming back to your position as an academic: Would you consider yourself an academic?

A: What I can say for sure is that I worked in academic environments in three different countries. If that is enough to make one an academic, then perhaps I am one. I am hesitant to give a direct answer because most of the things which have happened in my life, happened accidentally; I did not plan for them. One of them is that I never anticipated to hold an academic position. For example, I moved to Dar es Salaam to work as a Researcher at the Institute of Kiswahili Research, because there was this vacancy which I applied for, and was later given the job after being interviewed. So I found myself working in this academic institution, which I did not plan to be in. Not even in my wildest dream did I think I would end up in an academic life. After my release from prison, it was next to impossible to get a job in Kenya. Nobody wanted to employ me. Because in those days, if you were known to be opposed to the government, nobody wanted to touch you – not even with a barge-pole!. In fact, even some of my own friends distanced themselves from me. They did not want to be seen to be associated with me, because of my political ideas.

Q: A question to you as an academic: Would you have any wishes for African Studies or Swahili Studies for the future?

A: That is a complex question. But I will give you my simple answer. Every institution has its own objectives for being founded, which differ from the other. However, when looking at the history of African studies in West European universities we find that their main objective was to help those countries effectively rule their colonies in Africa, by training their colonial officers, business managers, military personnel and missionaries the languages and cultures of Africa for the benefit of colonialist Europe. Since direct colonialism is no longer in existence, African studies should be taught in a way that will contribute in the co-existence and mutual respect of respective countries.

Generally, African Studies should be based on what is truly happening in Africa in all its aspects, without putting emphasis only on the negative sides of things. In other words, there should be fairness when dealing with Africa.

Africa is mostly portrayed, especially in the Western world, as a hopeless continent. – a continent of beggars, poverty, wars, diseases and disasters. Whereas in actual fact Africa is one of the rich continents of the world with its abundant mineral, natural and human resources. For obvious, exploitative reasons by the industrialised countries, Africans may be poor but their continent is not. Were it truly poor we would not have seen foreign companies and businesses increasingly investing in African countries. Therefore, for example, I would expect that when students are taught African economy they would also be told the reasons why there is this imbalance between what Africa possesses economically and the actual economic situation of its inhabitants. And when they are taught about the African political situation they would also be taught about the interference of foreign political and economic forces which are partly the cause of the political problems we experience in Africa.

I am not saying this in order to absolve Africa of its mistakes and mismanagement. What I am advocating for is fairness and balance. It cannot be denied that, like other continents, Africa faces many problems, but it also has its positive sides. Those should also be reflected when students are taught African studies.

Q: Thus Africa should be taught very politically?

A: There is no way that politics can be avoided. It is not possible to escape from it. It is in every aspect of our lives. Politics determine how we live, what we eat, whether we get health treatment or not, whether the education we get is good or bad , and so on and so forth. Politics plays a central role in our lives. It is the engine that runs societies.

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