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**KISWAHILI DRAMA AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: A  
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF KISWAHILI PLAY, VISIKI****Dr. Sanja Leo Leonard & Dr. Samson Ongarora**  
University of Nairobi, Nairobi**ABSTRACT**

*This paper seeks to analyze the role of Kiswahili drama in addressing political issues that affect societies and political unity in many African countries. The study is centered on one important question: what is it that denies African countries much needed political leadership and vision to thrive? The study hypothesizes that, what Africa's politics requires is a deliberate effort to find homegrown solutions to its elusive political unity devoid of tribalism and nepotism. To guide this study, the paper used semiotic theory by Roland Barthes. The Barthes codes we applied are: semantic code, action code and symbolic code. To realize the objective of this discussion, we interpreted signs and symbolism in the Kiswahili play entitled Visiki by Khaemba Ongeti (1996). The discussion in this paper concedes that, it is no longer tenable for African countries to rely on the historical narratives like the Nile River Civilization era. The way forward is for Africa to develop proper systems of education and embrace technological innovations. The paper argues that, Africa needs to devise development ideas and strategy that incorporates the unity of her diversified populations and resources. The thesis of the study is that, the continent can no longer afford to cry victim of Western ideological derailments. Rather, Africa requires technological orientations in its politics that is unique to her needs.*

**Key Words:** *Visiki, drama, governance, development, semiotic.*

**Introduction**

Wamitila (2003) and Atkin (2013) argue that, literary works mirrors on the truth. Indeed they assert that, literary works seek to portray the daily happenings in the society and peoples' experiences over time figuratively. This in

turn, unveils the glaring truths in a range of issues such as political democracy and development. Mbuthia and Iribemwangi (2014) contend that, literature is an art whose main architect is language. In our discussion, we defined politics to mean a system of presiding over a political government setup as practiced in many African countries. Politics is crucial in making political statements and development of a nation (Ryan 2012; Van der Eijk, 2018). We interpreted signs and use of symbolism in *Visiki* (Ongeti, 1996) because literary works carry a two-edged meaning. This is what in semiotics is referred to as connotative meaning (Bradford, 1997). The deeper meaning of a literary text is realized by how successfully, the interpretation of signs and symbolism is executed by the reader (Wales, 2011).

### Literature Review

The role of a literary writer is to awaken the society and offer the much needed solutions for its members (Arege & Matei, 2005:142-43). Kiswahili is a global lingua franca and the value of its literary works cannot be less significant (Iribemwangi & Mukhwana, 2011). The interpretation of signs and symbolism in *Visiki* using semiotic theory was meant to justify that significance. Wamitila (2003) states that, literature is an art that uses language creatively to mirror on the society. Literature thus plays a very significant role in the society (Wamitila 2003; Arege & Matei, 2005). The universal role of literature is to address the emerging issues in the society. This is so pertinent and cannot be ignored (Senkoro 1988:10; Iribemwangi & Mukhwana, 2011:93). Language as used in literary works has denotative and connotative meanings thus stressing the need for interpretations (Leech, 1969). The reader of any literary text therefore has a duty to interpret as accurately as possible the signified in order to unveil the underneath meanings for the benefit of the reviewer. Connotative meanings of signs are dependent on factors such as the context and societal trends. Those elements are capable of altering the signified (Shariff, 1988:27).

### Theoretical Perspective

This study uses semiotic theory by Roland Barthes. Semiotics originates from a Greek word, *semeiotikos* meaning a sign. The word *seme* thus means interpretation of signs. A sign is any symbol that unveils connotative meaning. In our discussion, we applied the three codes by Barthes namely: the semantic, action and symbolic codes. Semantic codes are signs that carry connotative meanings beyond the basic definition. Symbolic codes could suggest contrasting meanings thus the need to dig deeper in order to unveil the connotative meaning underneath (Barthes, 1957). Action code shows interrelationship between the current action and the subsequent one. An action code is simply a reminder of some future event or action important to the case under scrutiny. Connotative meaning thus is the suggesting of a meaning of a word or object other than what is explicitly represented by it. Malik (2019) agrees with Barthes when he says that, semiotics addresses itself on how symbols or signs acquire deeper meaning beyond what they represent for objects, ideas, situations and circumstances.

Literary works have the role of highlighting the feelings and thoughts of the members of society on several topical issues such as politics and what it represents in the state. The semiotic analysis of signs and symbolism in the play, *Visiki* in this study is meant to achieve that objective. As Barthes (1964) infers, representation is often mediated by the conscious interpretation based experiences of the interpreter and the desire to correctly unearth the deeper meaning for which the sign symbolizes. Accordingly, interpretations vary from one sign or symbolism to the other (Sanja, 2022). This can interfere with how one comes to the conclusions of what is being signified. Our take of Barthes' semiotics is that, the interpretation of a sign is the meaning that one makes in relation with the object. The context in this case is necessary for proper interpretation of any literary text.

Semiotic theory asserts that, we cannot interpret a work of literature outside the paradigms of the very society that originated it. Interpretation of signs and symbolism in oral literature is meant to be executed in the context of time and space the society is in at the given time. This is so because signs and symbols undergo metamorphosis. The proponent of semiotics view is that, for proper interpretation, the interpreter should look back in time to see what the sign meant then, in order to synthesize the current interpretations and meaning. This should not be construed to mean that all the interpretations are correct and lead to credible analysis (Wafula, 1999). The signs and use of symbolism is not different in the Kiswahili drama.

## Discussion and Results

In discussing issues in the Kiswahili play, *Visiki* (Ongeti, 1996), this paper will concentrate on key areas namely: interpretation of signs, symbolism and connotative meanings as depicted in the play using semiotic theory as propounded by Barthes. The codes we used are: symbolic, action and semantic codes.

### Political Hostage and Political Elitism

Hunger and starvation for a long time has been used as a political tool by politicians when seeking positions of power in most African countries. Any African political elite is ready to hold onto power by any means even when the masses are hungry and nude. Profitable projects such as cash crops benefit only the political elite and their cronies at the expense of the common citizens. The role of the masses is to provide unpaid cheap labour to the bourgeoisie. The author says:

MATANGA: Maua ni chakula cha nyuki. Nyuki wakila maua hutengeneza asali.  
(*Kwa hasira*). Lakini hata sisi tunataka kibuyu kidogo cha asali hiyo.  
(Ongeti, 1996:18)

The flowers are food for the bees. The bees eat nectar from flowers and in the end make honey. (Angrily). We also deserve a share of honey however minimal. (Ongeti, 1996:18) (Our translation)

'Hasira' (anger) interpreted using symbolic code, brings out the frustrations of the citizens towards the cunningness of the political elites in most of the African countries. There is anger because there is no equity in the distribution of resources. When we interpret using Barthes' code of action, this excerpt unveils the distress the common citizenry faces due to weak democracies in many African countries. The political elite want to have it all for themselves. Poverty in Africa is a political vehicle that politicians use to manipulate the political direction various African nations should take even if their decisions hurt the interests of the general population. As witnessed in some East African countries like Rwanda in 1994, the poor are regarded as machines for genocide by both the forces outside and internal political players. This is evident in the activities of Bi. Tamaa and Ndovu when they cause Matanga and Huzuni to become arch-enemies and butcher each other (Ongeti, 1996: 47-50).

### The Politics of Tribalism and Prejudice

Does politics in the African context give a voice to the voiceless? The playwright is quick to point out that, African leaders have been playing politics of tribe and regionalism rather than national politics. The scheme is deliberate. There is no issue-based politics nor are there associations in Africa devoid of tribalism. In fact, politicians tend to hide in their tribal cocoons (our people syndrome) while masquerading as national leaders. Elections are never free and fair; there is fraud and cheating (Ongeti, 1996:1-7). This is evident when the victims of genocide in the Kiswahili drama meet the character of 'God' in heaven. The playwright predominantly

attributes this dirty politics in most African countries to poverty and tribalism. Sensible but not entirely the whole truth though. Thus the playwright writes:

NDOVU: Hata hivyo, kukosa chakula siyo hoja. Tutazungumza tu na kucheka pamoja. (*Anajichekesha . Ni wazi kwamba Huzuni haelewi*) Sisi ni watu wa kabila moja...Lazima ujali. Karibu tutaangamizwa. Kabila letu litaangamizwa na Wavirindwa. (Ongeti, 1996:1-7)

Lack of food is not the issue. We shall talk and laugh with each other (*Laughs. It's obvious that Huzuni is confused*) We belong to one tribe...You need to be careful...Soon, our tribe will be wiped out. Our tribe will be wiped out by Wavirindwa (another tribe). (Ongeti, 1996:1-7) (Our translation)

Semiotics addresses itself on how symbols and signs acquire connotative meanings other than the denotative meanings (Malik, 2019). Thus, as Barthes (1967) infers, representation is often mediated by the conscious interpretations based on one's experiences and based on the meaning for which the sign symbolizes. The confusing laughter by Ndovu, thus signifies the lie that politicians use to confuse the masses. It is a tool for self-destruction by the masses. In this regard, the politician acts as a referee and a player at the same time. That is how politicians in many African states end up awarding themselves undeserved and unchallenged power. The result therefore is that, African political players are not answerable to the electorates and socio-economic and political alignments that would foster societal unity are only in theory. They do not allow democracy to flourish. Political destiny as illustrated by the character 'God', is in the peoples' hands. Thus the author writes:

MUNGU:...Nanyi mnetumia akili zenu kukataa. (*Kimya*). Nilipomwumba binadamu, nilimpa kila mmoja macho ya kuona, masikio ya kusikia, mdomo wa kukana na kukubali, ubongo wa kufikiri. (Ongeti, 1996: 4)

...You should have used your brains and refused. (*Silence*)

When I created humans, I gave each one of them ears to hear with, a mouth to speak what you agree with or refuse that which you don't agree with and a brain to think. (Ongeti, 1996: 4). (Our translation)

Interpretation of signs and symbolism in literary works is meant to be executed in the context of time and space. 'Silence' as depicted by the character of God, interpreted using Barthes' codes of semantics and symbolism sends a very powerful warning to the masses in many African countries. The masses need to rise up and make political decisions from their current leaderships. The role of a literary writer is to awaken the society (Senkoro, 1988). Indeed Iribemwangi & Mukhwana (2011: 93) state that, the universal role of literature is to address the emerging issues in the society. The masses need to be shrewd and uncompromising on the matters of political interests and should dictate their political destinies themselves.

### **Defective Elections and Politics of Deceit**

The African population feels betrayed by the political leadership. Elections in most African states are no longer perceived as being representative of the people's wishes. Rather, they are a manifestation of tyranny and democratic concealment by the political elite who behave as small gods to those who elect them. Indeed they get elevated so high. Thus the playwright writes:

HUZUNI: Lakini hatukutarajia kuwa Ndovu atazisaliti nafsi zetu.  
(Ongeti, 1996:18)  
We didn't know they'll betray us. (Ongeti, 1996:18)  
(Our translation)

MATANGA: Nasi tuliwabeba wanasiasa hao kwa migongo yetu  
(*Kimya*)...Wanapohitaji kura wao hutuahidi mashamba  
makubwa. Lakini wapi? (Ongeti 1996:18)  
We carried those politicians on our backs (*Silence*) ...When they  
are seeking for our votes; they give us promises of big 'shambas'  
(farms). Where are they? (Ongeti, 1996:18) (Our translation)

Idioms are known for their preciseness in relaying information. They thus unveil deeper connotative meanings beyond the denotative meaning of the sign (Akaranga, 1987). That is the connotative meaning of 'silence' in this context. Leaders are portrayed as liars, untrustworthy and serving their selfish interests rather than that of the nation. The underlying semiotic meaning is that, the African voter is dismayed and feels betrayed. Symbolic code addresses itself on how signs acquire deeper meanings. That is what is inferred by '*Nasi tuliwabeba wanasiasa hao kwa migongo yetu*' 'We carried those politicians on our backs'. Connotative meanings of signs are dependent on the factors such as the context and societal trends. Those elements are capable of altering the signified (Shariff, 1988:27). In *Visiki*, the author notes:

NAUTUTU: Mwanangu alikufa hali sisi tumetazama...nasi tulifahamu ni  
njaa, hali tusiwe na la kufanya (Ongeti, 1996: 9-10)

My child died under our watch...we knew what caused the  
death (my child) was hunger yet we couldn't do anything.  
(Ongeti, 1996: 9-10) (Our translation)

HUZUNI: Na siyo kwamba ardhi haipo. La, ardhi ipo  
(Ongeti, 1996: 9-10)

And not that there's no land. Land is available.  
(Ongeti, 1996: 9-10) (Our translation)

To restore confidence, the African leader should portray himself or herself as a servant of the people and not a tyrant king. There is need for equitable distribution of resources and much political participation for all.

### **Time for Progressive Politics and Decolonization of the Mind**

The playwright of *Visiki* is categorical; politics in Africa cannot continue to operate in the yester era narratives. The guise of reciting historical truism that was the Nile River Civilization can no longer sustain Africa's political realities. Thus when Majaliwa says, "*Ilikuwa katika somo la historia...Mwalimu alitufundisha kuwa...*" (Ongeti, 1996: 23), our take is that, this is chorusing of colonial past and a display of arrogance that fails to capture the present as far as governance in Africa is concerned. It is an admission of failure by the political elites. The recitation by the students (Ongeti, 1996: 23), interpreted using Barthes' codes of action and semantics, portrays the contempt associated with the failure of African politics. The sources cited have outlived their usefulness in the African historical politics. Africa needs to embrace proper systems of education and technology that is synonymous to the continent's needs. A case in hand is when in 2017, Kenya shifted from knowledge based

system of education (8.4.4) to competence based (CBC) education system as part of the remedy. It is yet to be assessed how it plays out politically though. Thus the author writes:

MAJALIWA: Ilikuwa katika somo la historia...Mwalimu alitufundisha

kuwa, watu wa kwanza kuishi duniani walikuwa watu weusi. Waliishi katika konde kubwa la Mto Nile hapo zama za kale...ni sisi tuliovumbua maarifa mengi yajulikanayo duniani sasa. Ni sisi tuliovumbua maarifa ya kuandika...(Ongeti, 1996: 23)

It was during a history lesson...our teacher taught us that the first humans to ever exist in the world were Africans (Blacks). They lived in the vast plains of the River Nile many ages ago...we are the architects of the knowledge that drives the world today. We are the ones that discovered the art of writing... (Ongeti, 1996: 23) (Our translation)

The sign as defined using semantic code by Barthes is derived from the relationship between the signifier and the signified. According to (Ali, 2013:120), that is the connotative meaning of the sign. The character, Mwalimu in this context, can only be interpreted using a *seme* code. African leaders are urged to be innovative. It is no longer attainable to keep depending on our former colonizers for handouts and political ideologies. Africa needs homegrown democracies. The views of the character, Majaliwa, interpreted using Barthes' semantic code brings to the fore the political alienations facing many African countries. African people should re-invent themselves in order to be globally relevant politically.

### The Role of Non-Political Elites

It is universally understood that, knowledge is power. The same is not true in the political arena in most African countries. The education systems are tailored to serve the egos of those in the positions of power and to an extent, the modern perpetrators of colonial ideologies. As such, there is need for liberalized thinking among the general population. It is the only catalyst for any meaningful political realization. Thus the playwright writes:

MWALIMU: Ni kwa sababu walituvamia na kututawala. Walitudhulumu na kuchelewesha maendeleo yetu. (Ongeti, 1996: 23)

They invaded and colonized us. They brought us suffering and thus delayed our development. (Ongeti, 1996: 23) (Our translation)

The action code by Barthes shows the interrelationship between the current action and the subsequent one. Western ideology of democracy is irrelevant in African politics in this century in time. The author notes:

BI. TAMAA: (*Ni dhahiri kuwa anasema uongo*) Chanzo cha matatizo

yenu ni makaburu... sio sisi. Twajitahidi tuwezavyo lakini makaburu hawatatuacha. (Ongeti, 1996: 29)

(*It's obvious she's lying*) The people behind your sufferings are colonialists...not us. We are striving hard to free ourselves but colonizers wouldn't let us. (Ongeti, 1996:29) (Our translation)

The connotative meaning of, '*It's obvious she's lying*' using Barthes' code of action, reveals the lies and propaganda that the political elites in many African countries use to defend their poor records of leadership. It is

meant to hoodwink the electorate by maligning the Western nations in order to stir up the masses to revolt. This is a political concealment of the realities as illustrated by the playwright.

### Conclusions

Our key findings of this study are that, in many African countries, tribalism, nepotism and politics of deceit and patronage by a few political elites are rampant. There is no equitable distribution of resources and poverty and hunger is a political tool of manipulation. Many African leaders lack deliberate efforts and will to alleviate hunger and poverty. This is so because they have not embraced proper systems of education and used the huge human resources productively. The situation is further derailed by lack of innovativeness and necessary technological knowhow that is synonymous with their unique situations. To date, African leaders are still notoriously using Western propaganda and false ideologies to sneak into positions of power. Therefore, there is no good representation of the people.

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