

Rüdiger and Ole and the Untranslatable Question of Destiny

Clarissa Vierke

Ole sounds like a Swedish name. It could refer to Ole from Astrid Lindgren's "The Noisy Village" ("Die Kinder von Bullerbü"), which Rüdiger certainly used to read to his sons. It could also be the name of a friend Rüdiger watches soccer with. But, as you will see below in the poem, Ole is a friend of those who turn sixty and comes from Mombasa, where both Rüdiger and I spent time in 2006 (when I also accompanied him to his wedding).

Aliyekimbia ole ♦ mwendo wa myaka sitini
Akenda umngojele ♦ ukele mitilizini
Ukamba ndoo tukale, ♦ mwandani wangu mwandani
Aikiuza ni nani ♦ ukamba simi weleo

He who outran destiny for sixty years
Found it waiting for him, sitting on the threshold.
"Come, sit with me, my dear friend," it said.
"And who are you?" he asked. "Your destiny, of course," it said.
(My translation modified but based on Abdulaziz 1979, 232, 233)

The verses above were composed by the Mombasan poet, Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassany (1776–1840), famous for writing poetry in an elegant Kimvita, the Mombasa variety of Swahili, and in a poetic genre, the *shairi*, which he is supposed to have reached an unprecedented mastery of. His verses, venerated also by subsequent generations of poets, while uncompromising in prosodic virtuosity, are more secular, popular and bold in spirit—bringing "Swahili poetry out of the mosque to and into the marketplace" (Harries 1962, 2). His poetry comments on social ills, rebels with subtle metaphors against Omani rule, sings verses of love, portrays mundane life in 19th-century Mombasa,

and ironically refers to human experience. In the verses above, age is put on stage in a dialogic scene: Destiny welcomes the wanderer at home, where it awaited the sixty-year old and invites him to sit down. The poem stops here, but putting ourselves into the cultural context of 19th-century Mombasa, we can further imagine the two to sit down on the veranda (*baraza*) where they have coffee or tea as well as a betel bite musing about the past sixty years as well as about the future to come.

Ole, which is here translated as destiny, an archaic Swahili word now, is derived from a verb *-oa* “to write” already considered archaic in the dictionary of 19th-century Swahili by Charles Sacleux (1939, 706).¹ The noun *ole*, ‘destiny’ or ‘predestination’, literally means ‘what has been written down’, referring to the notion that Allah has written down what is going to happen to us in life. This is a widespread notion recurring in many now archaic Swahili verses and aphorisms, which are hardly understandable to Swahili speakers anymore, like in the following verse, where *-oa* appears in a passive form: *Loliwelo huwa* “What is written comes true” (Sacleux 1939, 706).²

The notion that Allah has written down the course of human life and history into a book, called the “Preserved Tablet” (*Lauh al-Mahfuz*, اللوح المحفوظ) is not particular to the East African Coast but found widely in the Muslim world. In the ‘Sura of the Pilgrimage’ of the Quran, we can read for instance (Sura 22,70):

أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ فِي كِتَابٍ ۖ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ

Do you not know that Allah has knowledge of what the heavens and the earth contain? All is recorded in a book; all this is easy for Allah. (Khanam 2009, 255)

What interests me here is less the common notion of a destiny that is written down by God in a book that provides a blue print for human history and individual biography, but more the specific Swahili semantics. I am more interested in the “untranslatable,” i.e. in the nuances and web of meanings of the

1 There are two words which sound alike but have different roots, namely, *-oa* “to marry” and *-oa* or *-owa*, “to bathe.” Lots of puns, including poetic ones, are made with the homonyms.

2 *-olewa* “to be determined” (in the sense of being written down by God). See also *Mkusudiwa halile, riziki nda olewao*. “He for whom (the food) was intended has not eaten of it; the provisions of Providence are for him for whom they are ordained (who has them written for him).” (Taylor 1891, 63)

Swahili terms. Swahili, for instance, does not simply borrow the Arabic word-ing (as it does in other contexts). It does not use the word *kitab*, “book,” found in the Arabic Sura above, which is otherwise a common loanword for book (*kitabu*) in Swahili, but, in expressing a similar concept, makes use of this particular archaic Bantu form derived from *-oa* “to write” which opens up a different conceptualization.³

With regard to its etymology, my most important sources, William Taylor (1891, 44), the Anglican Bishop who collected aphorisms and verses in Mombasa in the 19th century in collaboration with the reputed scholar Mwalimu Sikujua, and the White Father, Charles Sacleux (1939, 706), who compiled the most comprehensive Swahili dictionary including all Swahili dialects, note “to straighten, to direct” as the original meaning of *-oa* and both record an old saying: *Lowe Mauliwa loke, k'ombo nyoa penyi tao*. “Straighten it, my God, that it may be straight; stretch straight the crooked where it is bent.”⁴

For both, Sacleux and Taylor, apart from “to write” also meaning “to see,” “to behold” is derived from *-oa*. “To see” or rather “to observe” implies “to direct one’s gaze or one’s eyes.” There is an archaic Swahili word *maozi* for “eyes” an agent noun, i.e. a noun that is in control of the action or that has agency, derived from the same verb: the eyes are the ones which direct themselves ‘straight’ towards the thing to be seen. (How problematic the agency of the senses and in particular the eyes are, who direct their gaze towards the pleasures of the world that seduce the soul and refuse to obey the insight that the world is full of delusion, is the topic of a whole range of Sufi poetry of the time).

-oa, in the sense of “to write,” is not merely used with reference to God, but as referring to writing more general and in a quite technical sense (like in the poem quoted below). The semantic connection between *-oa* in the sense of “to write” and “to direct (the pen)” seems obvious, since writing in the Swahili context in the 18th and 19th century meant, first of all, writing verses, which needed a pen that could create straight lines (see below *mistari*) on a page (see below *lahu*). In the *Utendi wa Shufaka*, “The Poem of Compassion,” a parable of mercy, the unknown poet, who translated the fable from Arabic sources to

3 Nowadays, I have often heard Swahili Muslims expressing the same idea of predestination with the now commonly used verb *-andika* to “write”: *imeshaandikwa* “it has already been written, i.e. predestined.”

4 *-oa* is “hidden” in both inflected and derived forms *lowe* “straighten it” and *loke* “it may be straight.”

reach wider Swahili audiences as it was typical of the time, calls for writing utensils, “which are a pleasure to write with” or, more literally, “a pleasure to draw straight lines with,” in the first stanza.

Akhi patia hiburi
Na lahu ya mistari
Na kalamu ya sifuri
Ipendezao kwolea

My brother, bring me ink
And lined paper
And a copper pen –
A pleasure to write with
(Büttner 1894, 3; translation CV)

For Sacleux (1939, 706), the profane meaning of *-oa* “to write” is merely a later extension of the divine act of writing: “En parlant de Dieu, écrire ce qui doit arriver; de là par ext. en parlant de l’homme, écrire en gén.” Furthermore, as he seems to suggest, the notion of writing and seeing with regard to God can hardly be separated, since, when discussing the sense of “to see,” he also mentions that *-oa* can also mean “prévoir” (“to foresee”). He gives the example: *ambapo Mola hayoa na uchendralo haliwi* “Quand Dieu n’a pas prédestiné (l’événement), ce que l’homme fait ne réussit” (If Gold has not predestined it, whatever man does, will not succeed” (Sacleux 1939, 706). The double-entendre of writing and seeing in *-oa* is hard to keep in translation: “If God has not foreseen it/written it down, . . .”

Most interestingly, and different from Arabic, the common etymology rooted in a notion of “to give something a direction,” “to straighten,” “to direct” semantically links the sense of vision to the act of writing. Both writing and seeing are actions of directing attention here towards the future or “straightening” the past, writing down in visual signs what has not been aligned in words yet or seeing something that has not become visible yet. In contrast to the oral and the aural, which are important ways of sharing and passing on knowledge in Swahili society, *-oa* emphasizes the visual sense. The eyes have, as discussed before, an active role not merely of perceiving an external object, but rather, as directing the attention towards it or even interacting with it—as

much as the pen does.⁵ And, if we go by Sacleux's interpretation, the human being's way of seeing and writing is but a (faint) echo of the divine vision and writing of history.⁶

Thus, *ole*, is the destiny or the predestination, the direction life is supposed to take, which has been foreseen and written down by Allah. It is the straight(ened) version, it could take, would we, human beings, not constantly wander about in meandering paths. It is, coming back to the initial verse, also the home, some of us go back to for dinner or a chat on the threshold after long days of meetings, emails, envisioning and forging new cooperations.

There is another aphorism involving *-oa*, which Taylor (1891, 44–45) quotes: “*Kuonana k'olewa* Meeting together is written (by God).” And he comments on it as follows: “When one meets a friend, and the occasion has turned to the profit or pleasure of the parties, on leave-taking one reminds the other that it was not *by chance* they met.”

So, Rüdiger, we have not met *by chance* in Mombasa in 2006, or even before that in Bayreuth or after, before the cluster and in the cluster. *Alhamdulillah*. Ole, you and me should have an Erdinger together soon.

References

- Abdulaziz, Mohamed H. *Muyaka. 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979.
- Büttner, Carl Gotthilf. *Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur*. Leipzig: Felber, 1894.
- Collins, Kristen, and Nancy K. Turner. “Light and Vision.” In *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light 800–1600*, edited by Kristen Collins and Nancy K. Turner, 69–78. Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2025.
- Harries, Lyndon. *Swahili Poetry*. Oxford: University Press, 1962.

5 On the long medieval debates involving both Muslim and Western scholars on optical transmission as either considering the eyes as interacting themselves with external objects or as the eyes receiving the light from external objects, see Collins and Turner 2024: 69ff.

6 In contrast to the Indoeuropean terms that are far more material, concentrated on the technique, and surface material of writing: German ‘schreiben’, French ‘écrire’ have their origin in Latin ‘scribere’ rooted in Indo-European ‘to cut’ *skribh- ‘to cut’, while English ‘write’ originates from the Old English *writan*, meaning ‘to scratch, score, or draw’. This word itself comes from Proto-Germanic *writanq*, also meaning ‘to scratch, tear, or write’.

Khanam, Farida. *The Quran*. New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2009.

Sacleux, Charles. *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1939.

Taylor, William. *African Aphorisms or Saws from Swahili Land*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1891.