Mabanati in search of an author: portable reform texts and multimodal narrative media among Swahili Muslim communities

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Mabanati in Search of an Author: Portable Reform Texts and Multimodal Narrative Media among Swahili Muslim Communities

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This chapter seeks to situate the poem *Wasiya wa mabanati* (hereafter "*Wasiya*"), its genre, media, and content in relation to modern Swahili Muslim publics in a postcolonial era characterized by reforms and opposition toward Western customs. The focus on its genre, media, and narrative reveals a plethora of aesthetic and performative experiences that help to explain the poem's social resonance and public reflexivity.[1]

Based on latest works on *al-Islam al-sawti* ("voiced Islam")[2] and Muslim media in coastal Kenya,[3] both the *Wasiya* and the Arabic prose pamphlet *Yā-bintī*, which inspired Ustadh Mau's work, provide instructive case studies for investigating the multimodal vehicles through which reform and didactic ideas may be spread and broadcast among Muslim communities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing this, the present chapter will also draw from and contribute to the so-called "new media" (i.e., those new media that provide access to messages and voices that preexisting mass media "restrict or relegate to less public channels") in the Muslim world[4] by adding the scenarios of those Muslim communities of the Kenyan coastal belt, islands included, where solo

1 A first draft of this paper, titled "Reading Poetry—Listening to Advice," was presented in 2017 in occasion of the "Reading Poetry" workshop organized by Clarissa Vierke and Mark Verne at the University of Mainz. I am extremely grateful for the inspiring and fruitful exchange of thoughts and opinions that this paper has enjoyed at various stages along its path.

2 Annachiara Raia, "Texts, Voices and Tapes. Mediating Poetry on the Swahili Muslim Coast in the 21st Century," in "Power to the People?—Patronage, Intervention and Transformation in African Performative Arts," edited by Ricarda de Haas, Marie-Anne Kohl, Samuel Ndogo, and Christopher Odhiambo, special issue, *Matatu* 51 (2019): 139–168. I owe this concept (which I came across for the first time while reading Bang, "Authority and Piety") to Dale, F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, who have applied this term to their analysis of new media in the Middle East; see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. Subsequently, I began using it also in the context of Muslim coastal phenomena in Kenya.

3 Kai Kresse, "Enduring Relevance: Samples of Oral Poetry on the Swahili Coast," *Wasafiri* 26, no. 2 (2011): 46–49.

4 Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World*, x.

recordings of the poem have been disseminated, thus listened to, and used to direct consciousness and craft models of piety.

Yet it is within the *Wasiya*'s story, rooted in social drama, that the poem reveals its aesthetic power. To describe the *Wasiya* narratively, I refer to Michael Bakhtin's concept of polyphony as applied to Dostoyevsky's novels, as well as to an example of a dramatic play, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, whose characters and their "masks," concealing real biographies and family dramas, have inspired both a comparison with the content of the *Wasiya* and the title of this contribution.

The title *Wasiya wa mabanati* translates to "Advice to Young Women," and it is the earliest attested written poem composed by Ustadh Mau, in 1974. Only two years later, in January 1976, the novice poet married his first wife, the mother of his firstborn, Tunda. Ustadh Mau was thus only in his twenties when he composed this poem, still living at his uncle's house, and yet, though just a young man, he shows a surprising empathy and sensitivity to the needs of young women.

When Ustadh Mau was asked to imagine being a painter depicting the *Wasiya*, he said:

> *Kuhusu rangi, ningetumiya rangi ya samawati na nyeupe na nyeusi kwa wasiya wamabanati. Rangi yasamawati niishara yabahari namaisha kwajumla nikama bahari yana mambo mengi yaaina tafauti nawatu aina mbali mbali wabaya nawema. Rangi nyeusi niishara yashida namatatizo namtu kuzumgukwa na majamga kila aina yakamtatiya kama giza lausiku; ama nyeupe nialama yakuwa mambo yanaweza kubadilika badali yadhiki nashida ikajsafuraha naraha; ama nyekundu piya niishara yakuwa duniyani wpo watu wasiojali kufuja nakuharibu maisha yawmngine kwa ajil yakutimiza raha na starehe zao.*
>
> I would have used blue and white and black to paint *Wasiya wa mabanati*. The blue colour represents the sea, and life in general which is is like the sea: It is so diverse and full of different people, both bad and good. The black colour represents the problems and tribulations and a person surrounded by all sorts of tragedies like darkness at night. And white is a symbol of change, joy and happiness instead of trials and tribulations. And red is a sign that there are people in the world who do not care about ruining somebody else's life for the sake of their own joy and happiness.5

5 Translation by Abu Amirah, founding editor of Hekaya Initiative.

He would use blue, "the color of the sky" (*rangi ya samawati*), which symbolically refers to the ocean (*bahari*). The ocean means ambiguity: it implies various good and bad things and people. He would use the color black (*nyeusi*), symbolically indicating the problems and concerns (*shida na matatizo*) that envelop each individual; and finally, the color white (*nyeupe*) which is for him a sign that "things can change" (*mambo yanaweza kubadilika*). As is evident from this visual rendition of the poem, Ustadh Mau maintains the hope (*tumaini*) that rather than only agony and difficulties, things can change and there can be joy and happiness (*furaha na raha*) in the community. Nevertheless, he is realistic enough also to use red (*nyekundu*) as a color that symbolizes the cruelty of this world, in which there are people who spoil and sabotage the lives of others (*kufuja na kuharibu maisha ya wengine*) for the sake of their own interest and happiness.

As noted by previous scholars,6 Ustadh Mau composed his poem for young women, whom he refers to (stz. 7) with the epithet *binti Hawaa* ("daughter of Eve"), drawing from an Arabic pamphlet in prose form titled *Ya-bintī* ("Oh My Daughter"), composed in 1954 by the Syrian ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭawi—"one of the most famous, prominent and best writers and preachers of Islam in the modern era."7 Ali al-Ṭanṭawi's text was meant to warn young ladies and his own daughter not to let themselves be deceived by men in matters of love. His thirty-page booklet, with an image of the famous Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on the cover, enjoyed great popularity and the text was reprinted at least forty-six times.8 Ustadh Mau read this text in the '60s and was inspired by it; a decade later, in 1974, this inspiration prompted his decision to write a story adapted from that booklet in verse: his admonitory poem, the *Wasiya*.9 In other words, Ustadh Mau turned al-Ṭanṭawi's ideas, conveyed through the medium of a pamphlet, into a didactic Swahili verse poem. Still, the Swahili poem is not a translation of the Arabic *Ya-bintī*; apart from several verses that have been

6 Kresse, "Enduring Relevance."

7 Ahmad Munir, "Sheikh Ali al-Tantāwi and His Educational and Literary Services," *Shaykh Zayed Islamic Centre: University of Peshawar* 29, no. 2 (2014): 254–272.

8 As Ustadh Mau explained to me, one of the printed versions of *Ya-bintī* ("Oh My Daughter") is part of Ali al-Ṭanṭawi's larger work, of 385 pages, titled *Ṣuwaru wa khawāṭir*. On the other hand, the *Ya-bintī* booklet version that he received was printed in Kuwait, and sadly we could not retrieve its publishing year.

9 Al-Ṭanṭawi is a Syrian writer whose grandfather was Egyptian; he first moved to Syria and then to Egypt. He died in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 1999, at the age of 90. His *Ya-bintī* ("Oh My Daughter") has been published in Pakistan and translated into Urdu and Farsi. Another work composed by the author, titled *Ya-Ibnī* ("Oh My Son"), did not find the same success that *Ya-bintī* did.

adapted by the poet, the entire composition, its plot, characters, and the surprising metanarration framing the last part of the poem comes from Ustadh Mau's own pen, and marked his beginning as a talented storyteller and poet.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to carry out a comparative reading of al-Ṭanṭawi's pamphlet versus the *Wasiya*. Rather, since narrative can be realized through many different media, in the following, I will use narrative and its related media (i.e. the media chosen to tell a story; in the context of this study, the *same* story, that of the *Wasiya wa mabanati*) as a conceptual frame for shaping social and religious discourse on coastal Kenya.10

More precisely, this chapter investigates the role of these so-called "reform and didactic texts" and their fictional power according to the context in which they have been produced, their authors, genres, and the media—intended as the channel of communication/entertainment and technical means of artistic expression—that Muslim audiences have become accustomed to and that allow stories to travel and be adapted.

1 Situating the *Wasiya* and *Ya-bintī* in Their Context of Knowledge Production

The *Wasiya wa mabanati* is a 140-stanza rhymed verse poem that was written at a time when the Ustadh Mau felt that local customs were under threat on Lamu: poets like Ustadh Mau would plead for the respect of Muslim customs and culture at a moment when, according to him, hippies came to the island, bringing cannabis and the habit of using drugs.11 More broadly, the context of the *Wasiya*'s composition seems to reflect how Muslim reformers strove to resist the kind of European-style modernity emerging in various African societies in the shadow of Western influence. As Robert Loimeier puts it, "all Africans, including Muslims, had to learn to live with and within the boundaries of modern (European-style) nation states in this period [the nineteenth century]."12

Ustadh Mau's community was also experiencing what he considers a Western-style modernity, which he refers to with the epithet *shetwani wa sasa* ("the devil of modernity," stz. 5) or explicitly by the literal term *mila ya kizungu* ("Western customs," stz. 134). For him, the Westernization of customs was

10 For further criticism on narrative and media, see Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

11 Ustadh Mau, personal communication, July 2019.

12 Robert Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 2.

haunting the Swahili Muslim people, particularly the youth, and most of all the young ladies (Sw. *mabanati*, a term of Arabic origin, or Sw. *wanawake*), and this moved the poet Ustadh Mau to compose a poem offering advice and warnings to the younger generation in Lamu and beyond the archipelago, along the Swahili Muslim coastal belt (*pwani*). As a matter of fact, Ustadh Mau's main audience is his Muslim coastal community in Kenya.

Both al-Ṭanṭawi's booklet as well as Ustadh Mau's *Wasiya* can be regarded as reform texts—particularly intended to help and educate women—which, in their own style, touch on moral and ethical themes dear to their respective communities. Surprisingly, a similar text that al-Ṭanṭawi composed for his son, *Ya-ʿibnī* ("Oh My Son") did not gain as much popularity as the *Ya-bintī*. At this point, one might wonder if, content-wise, addressing and delivering advice to the abovementioned "daughters of Eve," the young women, was a more pressing issue in the time of postcolonial reform time, and one that Muslim publics were accustomed hearing about; this would explain the writers' sense of responsibility to open people's minds and caution Muslim girls, who represented the most fragile and neglected side of Muslim society.

To start with, I shall delve into some of the main features of reformist and didactic poems.

2 Features of Didactic and Reformist Texts

It is commonly known that didactic poetry in ancient Greece or Rome was not regarded as a separate genre of literature; the term encompasses "a number of poetic works (usually in hexameters) which aim to instruct the reader in a particular subject-matter, be it science, philosophy, hunting, farming, love, or some other art or craft."13 In Arabic literature, Arabic didactic verse (*shiʿr taʿlīmī*) is regarded as instructive, adding to one's knowledge and aiming at improving one's morals. Yet it has been conceived by some Arabic critics "not as true poetry since it is devoid of emotion and imagination, both of which are essential constituents of poetry, besides metre and rhyme."14

If one delves into modern African examples of didactic poetry, much of modern Hausa verse, for instance, can be either didactic in tone or is written in

13 Schiesaro, Alessandro, "Didactic Poetry," December 22, 2015, https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-2153.

14 Ṣafāʾ Khulūṣī, "Didactic Verse," in *Religion, Learning and Science in the ʿAbbasid Period*, ed. R.B. Serjeant, M.J.L. Young, and J.D. Latham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 498.

praise of God, a person, or a political party.15 West African Arabic poetry mainly follows the Arabic canon and can be split into two poetic genres: lyrical (*al-shiʿr al-ghināʾī*) and didactic (*al-shiʿr al-taʿlīmī*). Lyrical poetry represents the majority of poems, which range from panegyric to elegy. It is interesting to consider a feature that Abdul-Samad Abdullah highlights with regard to the register West African Arabic poets use in composing didactic poetry: "their didactic poetry is characterised by popular language understandable to the masses."16

Taking this last statement into account, I would like to investigate the language used in the *Wasiya* and the evocative power that resides in its "popular language." I will not make use of this notion of popular language as a depreciative one, as has been done in the past, to the point of neglecting and/or pushing aside didactic texts considered as devoid of lyricism. On the Kenyan coast, the dialects of Kiamu, spoken on Lamu, or Kimvita, spoken in Mombasa, were used for literary and public purposes up to postcolonial times. The use of these dialects was prominent in traditional, precolonial genres, such as the *utendi* meter, and they were also employed and strongly advocated by the Swahili Muslim editors of postcolonial local Swahili Muslim newspapers. Kiamu in particular became the literary language of the didactic genre both within and beyond the Lamu archipelago from the nineteenth century onwards.17 More precisely, as Ustadh Mau himself describes the *Wasiya*, *ni utendi wa mafundisho, mfano wa utendi wa Mwana Kupona, si utendi wa masimulizi tu*; "it is a didactic poem like the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* [an admonitory poem on the wifely duty of the poet's daughter]; it is not merely a narrative poem."18 The term *mafundisho* "teaching" that Ustadh Mau uses here derives from from the causative form *kufundisha*, meaning "to instruct someone, to teach someone." As his statement clearly highlights, the precise educational objective inherent in this genre differentiates it from purely epic or historical war narratives like the *Utendi wa Miqdadi na Mayasa* ("The Poem of Miqdad and Mayasa") or the *Utendi wa Vita*

15 Graham L. Furniss, "Aspects of Style and Meaning in the Analysis of a Hausa Poem," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45, no. 3 (1982): 546.

16 Abdullah Abdul-Samad, "Sheikh Ali al-Tantāwi and his Educational and Literary Services," in *al-Idah* 29, no. 2, (2004), 369.

17 See C.H. Stigand, *A Grammar of the Dialectic Changes in the Kiswahili Language. With an Introduction and a Recension and Poetical Translation of the Poem Inkishafi. A Swahili Speculum Mundi by the Rev. W.E. Taylor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915; Gudrun Miehe, "Die Perioden der Swahililiteratur und ihre sprachliche Form," Paideuma 36 (1990): 201–215; and Roy Mathieu, kiamu, archipel de Lamu (Kenya): Analyse phonétique et morphologique d'un corpus linguistique et poétique, French ed. (Saarbrücken: paf, 2013).

18 Ustadh Mau, personal communication, March 2020.

vya Uhd ("The Poem of the Battle of Uhd"), meant to be told without any concrete instructive precepts.19

Returning to the languages used in didactic poetry, on a more contemporary note, the newspaper *Sauti ya haki*, founded by Sheikh Muhammad Kasim in 1972, was another attempt to use a dialect of the coast, namely Kimvita, the dialect of Mombasa, to address his readers—as Kresse notes, the appropriate local variety for a journal published in Mombasa, "a more genuine Swahili idiom lending itself to Islamic discourse."20 The abovementioned traditional literary examples, along with contemporary ones from news media, show that if the language used in the didactic genre is a so-called "popular language," this is done as a means of making Islamic discourse more accessible to ordinary local Swahili Muslim communities. It is also worth recalling that Ustadh Mau was the first imam on Lamu to make the reformist choice to deliver the Friday sermon in Swahili; this choice, as explained by Timammy, "put Mahmoud in a difficult position, as he now had to negotiate between the reformist ideas he shared with his fellow youth and the respect he owed to his teachers who opposed them."21 Yet he considered this a challenge worth taking up, as he realized how his community, unable to understand Arabic, was at risk of allowing particularly the younger generation lose their own religious path.

From poetry to journals, passing through khutbah, it seems evident that across coastal Kenya, language is revealed to be the foremost medium used to convey ideas and precepts. The *Wasiya* is an experiment in line with the initiative, dear to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, of decolonizing the minds of previously subjugated countries in order to avoid the self-colonization of language, as it is

19 In this category of historical poems—reflecting colonial times—Saavedra Casco includes the following examples of *tendi*: the *Utendi wa Vita vya Maji Maji*, composed by Abdul Karim Jamaliddini in 1908; the *Utenzi wa Swifa ya Nguvumali*, composed by Hasan bin Ismail around 1962; and the *Utenzi wa Vita vya Kagera*, composed by Henri Muhanika in 1980. See José Arturo Saavedra Casco, *Utenzi, War Poems, and the German Conquest of East Africa: Swahili Poetry as Historical Source* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 26. Contrary to what Saavedra Casco states but as Vierke asserts, one could argue that the classical epics were also meant to provide society with role models and moral teachings.

20 Mazrui 2007, 102, quoted in Kresse, *Swahili Muslim Publics and Postcolonial Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 106. Along the same lines, it is worth referring to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's efforts to establish the first journal in the Kikuyu language, despite the hesitations that Prof. Mazrui shared with him. See *Matata Leo*, "Ali Mazrui, Ngugi, Kiswahili, Kikikuyu (African Languages)," last accessed January 15, 2021, YouTube clip, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrSc9OWpU3s.

21 Timammy Rayya, "Shaykh Mahmoud Abdulkadir 'Mau': A Reformist Preacher in Lamu," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 12, no. 2 (2015): 87.

not merely a medium of communication, but also a medium of culture.22 This attention and care for local African languages comes out particularly clearly in Ustadh Mau's poem *Kiswahili*, where he depicts the Swahili language as a mother who has born bright sons, i.e., poets like Muyaka, Zahidi Mngumi, Nabahany, and Chiraghdin—all native speakers of their own Swahili dialects, which have since been forgotten, precisely when the standardization of the language began and the first dictionaries of standard Swahili came into being (see stanzas 4 to 6 of *Kiswahili*).

Besides the language—which must be regarded as an important vehicle for addressing the masses—one should consider that didactic poems, by definition, are normally addressed to a particular individual who is seen as the primary object of instruction and acts as a model for the reader.23 It is striking to see how much both the *Wasiya* as well as the Arabic *Ya-bintī* enact and entwine in their texts with vivid characters, dialogues, and biographies mirroring social drama. This shows that for both writers, being reformist means not only adopting the language best understood by their people, mainly the youth representing the new generation, but also styling their texts as closely as possible to their lifeworlds, depicting realistic conversations and credible, everyday characters.

We shall explore this by focusing on some excerpts from both the Arabic pamphlet and the *Wasiya*.

Beginning from the end, al-Ṭanṭawi's pamphlet dedicated to his daughter concludes on the following lines:

> This is my advice, my daughter. And this is the truth; don't listen to any other. Mind that it is in your hands and not in ours, the men's, hands: in your hands lies the key to change. If you want, you will correct yourself, and by correcting yourself, you will correct the entire community.24

22 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986).

23 Schiesaro, "Didactic Poetry."

24 Translation mine; adapted from the Swahili of Ustadh Mau: *Huu ndio ushairi wangu kwako, binti yangu. Nahuundioukweli usisikilize mengine. Naujuekwambanikatikamkono wakowewenasikatikamkonowetuwanaume: katika mkonowakopanaufunguowamlango wa marekebisho. Ukitaka utajirekebisha wewe na kwa kurakibika wewe utarakibisha umma wote.*

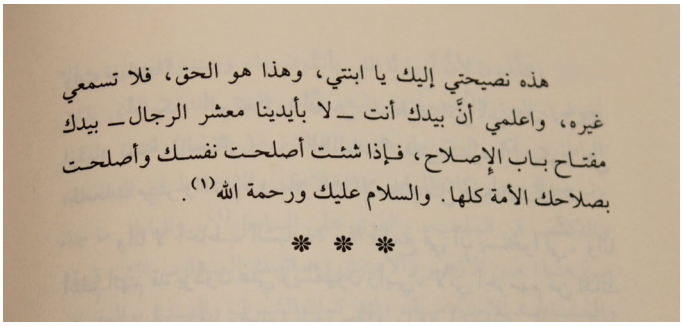
هذه نصيحتي إليك يا ابنتي، وهذا هو الحق، فلا تسمعي
غيره، واعلمي أنَّ بيدك أنت ــ لا بأيدينا معشر الرجال ــ بيدك
مفتاح باب الإصلاح، فإذا شئت أصلحت نفسك وأصلحت
بصلاحك الأمة كلها. والسلام عليك ورحمة الله[1].
* * *

figure 9 Excerpt from the Yā-bintī by al-Ṭanṭawi, eg 1406/ad 1985, 28

In his text, al-Ṭanṭawi is proclaiming his truth (*al-ḥaq*), admonishing his daughter (*ya-bintī*, lit. "oh my daughter") not to listen to anything else but his own sincere words. The final passage continues with an exhortation to be self-confident and know (Ar. imperative *ʿalamī*) that the key to any change lies in her hands (*bi-yadika* "in your hands"); more precisely, al-Ṭanṭawi stresses that she holds in her hand "the key to the door of change" (*al-miftāḥa bāb al-ʿiṣlāḥ*). The nominal derivative *iṣlāḥ* used here plays a crucial role in this final moral message. The author concludes by solemnly claiming that the changes one makes on his own consequently affect the whole community (*al-ʿummat kulluhā*).

It is certainly far from the strain of Islamic feminist thought interested in transformation and engagement within society, as encouraged by prominent Islamic woman such as Huda Sharawi and Nawal Sadawi, who stimulated the feminist movement via printed pamphlets, articles, and debates on authority, relationships, and sexual abuse in the '70s, an epoch when the feminist movement was growing in the Islamic world.25 What does emerge from this message, however, is that al-Tantawi's pamphlet was aligned with the author's own agenda of the '50s, calling for good morals, righteousness, and virtue, as the collection of pamphlets *Fi sabil al-Iṣlāḥ* ("Along the Path of Reform"), composed in 1347 eg/1928 ad, amply illustrate.26

25 Fatima Mernissi, "Women's Song: Destination Freedom," in *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Perseus Books Group and Basic Books, 2002), 189.

26 Another example of printed didactic and cautionary texts from West Africa can be identified in *The Life Story of Me, Seligola*, which began being published as series of letters in Yoruba (July 1929 to March 1930), allegedly ascribed to an old prostitute, Segilola, who was recounting her life story from her deathbed. The series—published in the *Akede Eko* ("The Lagos Herald")—greatly resonated with Yoruba readers and was collected and repub-

From this excerpt alone, one can hardly avoid drawing comparisons with the reform ideas that drove Ustadh Mau to plead for change (*mabadiliko*) in his own community (*jamii* or *mujatamai*), as he does in stanza 131, where he equates the potential for progress with the girls' ability to refrain from harmful customs and continue progressing on a Muslim path.

131. *Ni sisi banati* *wazi tawambiya*
Tujengao nti *na kuvunda piya*
Tukijidhibiti *nakujiziwiya*
Ni hono wakati *wakuendeleya*

It is we, the girls, I am openly telling you,
Who build the country, and we destroy it too.
If we are firm and restrain ourselves,
Only then, we can progress

142. *Hapa nimekoma* *kuwapa wasiya*
Kwa hini nudhuma *nilowandikiya*
Ilahi karima *tatuonya ndiya*
Yakuiyandama *ilo sawasiya*

Here I conclude, giving you advice
Through this composition I have written for you.
God the Most Gracious will show us the way,
The one that is straight and must be followed.

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lished as a small, ninety-page book, with copies distributed among newspaper editors. As Barber says, "Segilola's letters looked real […] They overflowed with emotion, mixing pious exhortations with knowing and nostalgic allusions to the shared popular culture of Lagos, past and present"; Karin Barber, *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel: I.B. Thomas's Life Story of Me, Segilola and Other Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2012, 5). And as the fictional author expresses in the preface to the stories, "My prayer is that God in his infinite mercy will go with this story of my life all over the world, and that book will be able to change many people for the better." The editor, Isaac Babalola Thomas, who concelead his authorial role, also used to say: "To sum up, our prayer is that this little book may do blessed work of redemption among those of our people, male and female, who rejoice in promiscuity and prostitution in their lives. Anyone who has ears to hear warnings, let them hear" (Barber, *Print Culture*, 79, 83). This extraordinary Yoruba experiment with genre and addressivity and the editor's capacity to write dramatic speech in the voice of an imagined character can be regarded similarly to what Ustadh Mau as an author has done with his imagined character in the *Wasiya*.

In the penultimate stanza (stz. 142), the poet announces that he has finished giving advice (*wasiya*), the same way al-Ṭanṭawi explicitly wraps up his work by uttering "this is my advice, my daughter." In this stanza, Ustadh Mau seems to pass the last word to God, the Most Generous, who is the only one with the power to show them all the right path (*ndiya*), the poet included. The concept of the "path" echoes al-Ṭanṭawi's emphasis on truth (*al-ḥaq*), access to which is possible only with the right keys (*al-miftāḥa*), and how one must begin with oneself and not rely on anybody else. Each conclusion highlights the evident dialogism between the writer, a fatherly figure and dispenser of advice, and the unnamed daughters of Eve, whom each author is addressing. In this way, anyone listening to or reading the text can immediately identify herself in its plea for change and progress, as if its advice, warnings, and story were precisely for and about the would-be reader.

On the other hand, the *Wasiya*, composed two decades later than the *Yabintī*, builds on a tradition of admonitory Swahili Islamic didactic poetry. Roughly a century earlier, another admonition in the form a didactic poem, namely the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*—which later became one of the most venerated of all classical Swahili *utendi* compositions—was composed and addressed to the daughter of the author, Mwana Kupona. The poetess Mwana Kupona, who was born in Siu but spent her adulthood in Lamu,27 her mother's hometown,28 used the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*29 to impart advice on wifely duties and social behavior with the aim of preserving moral values such as those Ustadh Mau recalls in the *Wasiya*.

However, the *Wasiya* is also said to be inspired by a tragic incident leading to further calamity: a young woman from his own island had lost her honor "after being seduced by a male companion who befriended her but turned out not to care about her as a person. Having lost all hope of parental and social support and belonging after giving birth to a little baby—her parents die of shock upon the news—her attempt at suicide (and infanticide) fails as an alert fisherman saves her and the baby after she throws herself into the sea."30 This

27 The plaque affixed outside her house, in in the Mta Muini area of Lamu, reads as follows: "Above here, in about 1880, Mwana Kupona wrote her *utendi*." Ustadh Mau kindly provided me with a photo of the plaque, which allowed me to reread it and to quote it here.

28 Patricia W. Romero, Lamu. History, Society, and Family in an East African Port City (Princeton, NJ: Wiener, 1997), 32.

29 Alice Werner and William Hichens, *The Advice of Mwana Kupona upon the Wifely Duty*, The Azanian Classics 2 (Medstead: Azania Press, 1934); J.W.T. Allen, *Tendi. Six Examples of a Swahili Classical Verse Form with Translations & Notes* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1971).

30 Kresse, "Enduring Relevance," 157.

specific and dramatic event illustrates an important element of Ustadh Mau's approach to poetry: the event supplies the inspiring and meaningful catalyst that drives the poet to compose a poem in order to immortalize it and as a way to spell the drama out for others. Hence, one could wonder if the poet should be considered a liar? In reply to this question, which I addressed to Ustadh Mau in July 2019, he smiled and said, *Wasiya, kufikiria hali ya wasichana, ni jambo ambalo lazima uhisi moyoni*, "*Wayisa* (implies) reflecting on the situation of girls. This is something one has to feel in his heart." He continued, "The problem of a lie (*uwongo*) is that it can hurt someone else, but if the main aim is a good purpose, there is nothing wrong; you can invent things."31 The *Wasiya* indeed shows Ustadh Mau's capacity to creatively experiment in a genre that was new to him, the *utendi*, and to write dramatic speech in the voice of an imagined character and based on imagined events.

3 How to Make Advice Spread: Mediated Poetry

> Even if only a minority of the population read books, a much larger number hear them spoken about.32

Ustadh Mau's *Wasiya* further differs from al-Ṭanṭawi's booklet when it comes to the medium through which these similar didactic texts have traveled so widely. Whereas the text of al-Ṭanṭawi's printed booklet in Arabic script was very popular—to the point of having been reprinted several times, and now being freely available on the Internet—for the *Wasiya*, it is as if print media was never the most popular vehicle through which the poem reached nor resonated with its Swahili Muslim audience. When I visited Ustadh Mau's library in 2018, he showed me the tiny corner where his poems were piled up, collec-

31 See also Vierke's contribution "Born on The Island" in this volume. In this respect, Ustadh Mau also highlights the Swahili saying *mashairi matamu ni yale yenye uwongo zahidi*, which relates to the Arabic saying اعدب الشعر اكدب (*adabu ushiri akdabu*). His reflections on lying find some echos in the thought of Dostoyevsky, who once argued: "In Russia, truth almost always assumes an entirely fantastic character. In fact people have finally succeeded in converting all that the human mind may lie about and belie into something more comprehensible than truth, and such a view prevails all over the world" (*Dostoyevsky, "Something about Lying," in Diary of a Writer 1873* (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois 1994), 119; quoted in Malcom V. Jones, *Dostoyevsky after Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2). Such makes me think of Plato: "all poets lie."

32 Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media*, 35.

ted in dusty A3 envelopes. The majority of his poems are written in his own handwriting, with a ballpoint pen on loose sheets of paper. When these poems were typed in Roman letters with a standard keyboard, it was not done by the poet himself, but by a local typist. Ustadh Mau himself uses Arabic script for writing, because this is the script he has been used to since he was a pupil at the madrassa. Yet his first poem, the *Wasiya*, is an exception, as it was first composed in Roman script, differently from all his other compositions, which were first composed in Arabic script. Furthermore, the *Wasiya* also differs from the poems he composed later in his life because, within this poem, Kiamu features are not as abundant as in his other compositions. The poet surely meant to address this poem to a wider Swahili Muslim audience, not exclusively the Lamuan community, hence the reason for adopting a more widely known script and a more standard Swahili than the local variety. This further explains why, rather than a plethora of Kiamu forms, the poem features a mosaic of Swahili dialects (like Kimvita words, e.g. *jiaswiya*, stz. 3), while also including words from both Arabic (*kalbi* "heart," *ummu* "mother") and standard Swahili (e.g., *miyaka* rather than Kiamu *nyaka*; *michinjo* rather than Kiamu *mitindo*).

The ad-hoc writing process through which the *Wasiya* was crafted already clearly points to a unique feature of the new adaptation: the *Wasiya*—a poem handwritten in Arabic script, inspired by a preexisting Arabic prose booklet, has bypassed print media straight to oral: why?

In his speech on the benefits of knowledge,[33] Ustadh Mau shares an interesting reflection on the reason he has never decided to publish his own poetry:

> *Na mimi tendi zangu ama tungo zangu nyingi hazikuandikwa kwenye vitabu na sababu moja nilofanya nisitie bidii kwenye kitabu ni kwa kuwa kwa bahati mbaya jamii yetu si jamii ya kusoma na ni jambo la sikitisha sana; sisi ni watu tukitaka tuwe misitari mbele kabisa kwa sabau dini yetu msingi yake ni misingi ya kusoma, misingi ya elimu lakini kwa bahati mbaya jamii yetu hivi sasa imekuwa hatuwajulikani ni kwamba ni watu hatuna kile kitu wazungu wanakiita "reading culture." Sisi zaidi twapendele kusikiliza kuliko kusoma, kwa hivo tungo zanguzimewekwakatikacds, katika santuri hizi, zamani zilikuwa zile cassetti sasa hivi ni mambo za cd; hii insahilisha ule ujumbe kufika kwa watu wengi, kwa sababu kusikiliza haina kazi na cd moja kwa wakati mmoja za kusikiliza watu kadhaa kuliko kitabu; kitabu ingekuwa wakati moja husikiliza mtu mmoja lakini cd waweza kusikiliza watu tanu kumi zaidi kwa wakati moja kwa hiyo ujumbe wangu hupitisha*

33 Discussed at length in the article "Seeking *'ilm*" in this volume.

> *kupitia zombo kama hizo za cds na hivi sasa nina kama cd sita ambazo zinagumzia mada tofauti tofauti za kimaisha*.34
>
> As for myself, the majority of my own compositions, they have never been printed in books. One of the reasons I have not made any efforts in (publishing) a book is because unfortunately, our society is not a reading society, and this is something very sad. If we wanted to, we could be much more advanced, since the foundation of our religion is based on reading, the pillar of education, but unfortunately, our society nowadays is not well known for this. People do not have what Westerners call a "reading culture." We prefer listening rather than reading, which is why my compositions have been recorded on cd. With regard to recordings, in the past, there were those tapes, but now it is cds. This makes it easy for the message to reach many people, because listening does not require any effort, and a single cd can be consumed by more people at the same time than a book. If it were a book, only a single person could consume it at a time, but a cd can be listened to by five, ten, or even more people at once. Therefore, my message can arrive through such media, like cds. And as of now, I have six cds in which I speak of various life topics.

It is worth citing Ustadh Mau's reflections in this regard, as they supply us with a good entry point into the notion of multimodality involving his message (*ujumbe*) and the medium chosen to deliver it, called *zombo* in Kiamu (Sw. *vyombo*, sg. *chombo*), which literally denotes the "media, vehicles, tools."

The practice of recording his poetry on cd—the digital technology that replaced the cassette tape (Sw. *kanda or kaseti*) from the late 1990s and even earlier—deserves attention, as it should not be seen as a stand-alone practice; on the contrary, it is quite popular among Muslim publics. To begin with, his first compositions (as he says, *tungo zangu*), which began by being recorded on tape, was the poetic trilogy *Kimwondo*, which was issued as a series consisting of *Kimwondo i, Kimwondo ii*, and *Kimwondo iii*. The *Kimwondo* songs, a term coined by Ustadh Mau, meaning "Shooting Star"/"The Devil's Torch,"35 were poems in *shairi* form meant to deliver political propaganda in support of his favorite political candidate, Mzamil, versus Aboubakar Madhbuti, whom he considered a less able and even corrupt ruler.36

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34 *Me on tv*, "Mahmoud Mau 1," posted September 18, 2016, YouTube clip, 23:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5l8LhET8G0E.

35 Assibi Amidu, *Kimwondo: A Kiswahili Electoral Contest*, Beiträge zur Afrikanistik 39 (Vienna: Afro-Pub, 1990).

36 Amidu, *Kimwondo*, 83. See also Kresse in this volume.

In 1975, at the time of the elections in Kenya, Ustadh Mau composed these poems in Arabic script, and they were recorded by Muhamad Abdalla Bakathir (henceforth "Kadara"). In these poems, he combines politics and ethics by reminding his community (*umma*) of the significance of the duty of voting (*kupiga kura*) and its importance to the democractic rule of their own country (*nchi ya Demokrasi/kama hini yetu sisi*, "a democratic country like ours here," stz. 9).37 These *Kimwondo* poems migrated to audio cassettes soon after the written composition came into being, and they began being distributed by Bwana Radio Station, located in the Kibokoni area of Mombasa.38 From there, people would listen to these tapes everywhere, as Ustadh Mau recalls: *miga-hawani, madukani, majumbani; hata magarini* "in restaurants, stores, houses; even in buses."39

After the *Kimwondo* poems, the *Wasiya* was the first poem produced as several solo recordings, as it is worth shortly recounting here. During my research on the *Wasiya*, which began in 2017 and was followed by a field trip in 2018, the poem had already been recorded by Abdallah el-Shatry of Mombasa—who died prematurely of hiv—and by Kadara, the same singer who recorded *Kimwondo* and many other poems by Ustadh Mau. As noted elsewhere,40 the request to have the *Wasiya* recorded was not made by the poet himself, but rather by a man from Lamu named Swaleh Aredy, who wanted his children to listen to it, and thus he asked Kadara to record the poem. Afterward, this recording began being shared and copied among the community, and in this way it spread widely and started becoming known. The second singer, Abdallah el-Shatry, was also not contacted by Ustadh Mau personally, but rather by the owner of a cd kiosk, Ghalib Muhadhari, who asked el-Shatry to sing it. Kadara's audio recording is available in shops in Lamu (Al-Hussein Original Shop) and Mombasa (Mbwana Radio Station) to this day. Since 2017, el-Shatry's vocal recording can also be found on SoundCloud, split in three parts ("Wasiya #1," "Wasiya #2," "Wasiya #3"), and easy to access and to listen to.41

37 Amidu, *Kimwondo*, 83.

38 For some biographical info on Kadara and his role as singer of Ustadh Mau's poems, see Raia, "Texts, Voices and Tapes." For some excerpts from my interview with him on his role of reenacting, by "giving voice" to, even classical *utendi* poems, see Raia, "A Network of Copies. The *Utendi wa Yusuf* Manuscript Traditions from the J.W.T. Allen Collection (Dar es Salaam)," in "One Text: Many Copies," edited by Clarissa Vierke & Ridder Samsom, special issue, *Journal of Manuscript Cultures* (forthcoming): 69–98. The shop owner of Bwana Radio Station has sadly passed away on the 5th of August 2022. Ustadh Mau attened his funeral in Mombasa.

39 Ustadh Mau, personal communication, April 2020.

40 Raia, "Texts, Voices and Tapes."

41 "Wasiya #1" is 59:59 in duration; "Wasiya #2," 22:33; "Wasiya #3" is 24:56. See Mashairi,

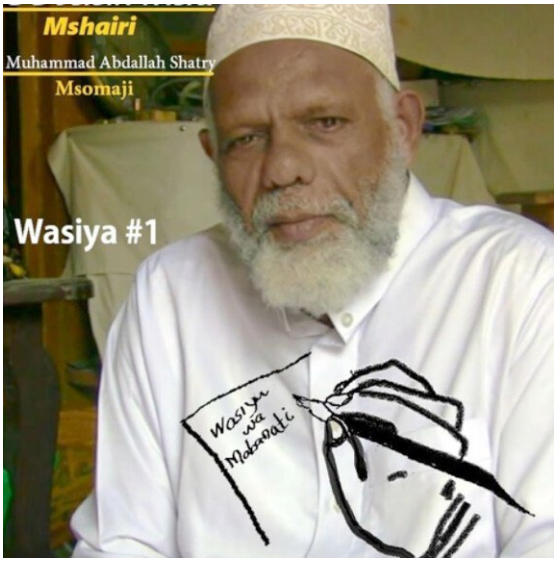

figure 10
The cover art for the three *Wasiya* tracks available on SoundCloud

Besides the poetic examples, like the *Kimwondo*, *Wasiya*, and many other compositions recorded on cd, the message, guidelines, and warnings that Ustadh Mau delivers to his community via his sermons (*hotuba*, or khutbah) are recorded and sent off through external hard drives across his online network. This listening practice—be it for poetry (*mashairi*) or sermons (*khutba*)—is similar to that of sermon tapes among the Cairene Muslim public. Within this distant yet similar context, Charles Hirschkind has noticed what follows:

> [S]ermons are listened to as a disciplinary practice geared to ethical self-improvement: a technique for the cultivation and training of certain forms of will, desire, emotion, and reason, conceived of as intellectual and bodily aptitudes or virtues that enable Muslims to act correctly as Muslims in accord with orthodox standards of Islamic piety.42

What is shown here and can be viewed in parallel between the Arabic pamphlet *Ya-bintī* and the recording of the *Wasiya* is that prescriptions on how to "act

"Wasiya wa mabanati," SoundCloud, last accessed April 4, 2020, https://soundcloud.com/user-157462073/wasiya-wa-mabanati. Superimposed on the portrait on the cover, we find the name of the poet ("Mshairi") together with the name of the reciter ("Msomaji"). The illustration of a hand holding a pen seems to refer to the written composition and reveals the work's entire title, namely *Wasiya wa mabanati*.

42 Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 36.

correctly as Muslim" (ibid.) have, in the digital era, found more and more new broadcasting channels, which are less expensive and easy to access, share with friends and acquaintances, and travel with; hence, they are "portable media." This holds true for the tiny booklet of al-Ṭanṭawi, which was reprinted several times, as well as for the unbound sheets of the *Wasiya*, which have found their success and popularity through vocal recordings.

It is indeed known how well booklets and pamphlets lend themselves to allowing ideas to spread widely, being more portable and also more durable across time; in Isabel Hofmeyr's words, for instance, "Periodicals are not tied to one place and are driven by the temporality of circulation."43 To add an example of this genre from East Africa, in Anne Bang's preliminary remarks on the circulation of Islamic texts in Zanzibar, she mentions a short treatise by Aḥmad b. Zayn al-Ḥibshī on how to live a Muslim life, titled *Risālat al-Jāmiyya*, which traveled widely and was repeatedly reprinted for *daʿwa* purposes on opposite sides of the Indian Ocean for Malay and Swahili pupils who needed to be instructed in Muslim piety.44 Bang's case study further illustrates how specific media—oral and/or print media—can be chosen to craft certain models of civility and piety.

Along these lines of how to circulate ideas more widely and easily and have them reprinted repeatedly, the role of audio media also occupies a relevant place among Muslim publics. As pointed out by Dale Eickelman, print media were first replaced with audio cassettes, which offer some advantages: "inexpensive, easy to smuggle, and readily reproduced, they may be played in the home, automobile, mosques, or other meeting places."45 As noted elsewhere, the term "voiced Islam," coined by Dale F. Eickelmann vis-à-vis "print Islam,"46 is an emergent topic that has not yet been adequately researched amid the contemporary literary landscape of the Swahili Muslim coast.

As a matter of fact, broadcast media and cassettes/cds have become an important medium of mass communication amid the daily activities of Swahili Muslims. Kai Kresse, for instance, recalls how much he was struck by the *Wasiya*'s sound "in passing, when walking through the narrow streets of Mombasa's Old Town, as it was emanating from one of the houses on the side."47

43 See Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 14.

44 Anne Bang, "Authority and Piety, Writing and Print. A Preliminary Study of the Circulation of Islamic Texts in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Zanzibar," *Journal of the International African Institute* 81, no. 1 (2011): 97.

45 Eickelman, and Anderson, *New Media*, 40.

46 Ibid.

47 Kresse, "Enduring Relevance," 47.

Brian Larkin talks of the mediality of loudspeaker as it more widely spreads the call to prayer in Jos, northern Nigeria;48 Debora Kapchan describes "how sound and practices of listening can become vehicles for Sufis to create a sacred place in a secular country such as France […] and how the practitioners become transmitters not just of sound but of knowledge as well."49 Taken together, this shows the changing nature of religious and political discourse, as well as how voice has an extreme impact on people's psychology and reflexivity, with the ultimate effect of either deep understanding or distortion based on the clarity of the voiced message; furthermore, and more generally, the spread of new media also shows how much technology reinforces and reconnects plural Islamic transnational networks, because they enact what Andrew Eisenberg calls "public reflexivity" and what Eickelman is also referring to when he says that "small media make it easier for Muslims to keep abreast of developments elsewhere in the Muslim world and to feel as if they participate in them."50

Indeed, it has been shown the transit and impact of a pamphlet like *Ya-bintī* by an author like al-Ṭanṭawi—who was born in Damascus and spent almost 40 years of his life in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia—which managed to reach all the way to the shores of Lamu in Kenya.51 The act of reading inspired the new writing which, in turn, was recorded cds and is also now broadcast on Internet now.52

To conclude, returning to Ustadh Mau's statement about his people not belonging to a reading culture, but rather eager to listen, I can thus assume that all his poems—which have now mostly been collected in this first comprehensive volume on his poetry—were written down by him only as an aid to memory and oral delivery. It indeed seems as if his texts have been composed for being read aloud and shared among his community. This recalls what Robinson succinctly points out with regard to oral knowledge and transmission in the Muslim world: as already expressed in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*,

48 Brian Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 989–1015.

49 Deborah Kapchan, "Listening Acts, Secular and Sacred: Sound Knowledge among Sufi Muslims in Secular France," in *Islam and Popular Culture*, edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine, and Martine Stokes (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 21.

50 Andrew J. Eisenberg, "The Swahili Art of Indian Taarab: A Poetics of Vocality and Ethnicity on the Kenyan Coast," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 40.

51 Adil Salahi, "Scholar of Renown Sheikh Ali Al-Tantawi," *Arab News*, June 19, 2001, https://www.arabnews.com/node/212775.

52 More precisely, Ustadh Mau has at his disposal two copies of the *Ya-bintī*, the first one published in Kuwait, and the second, which was sent to him, published in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

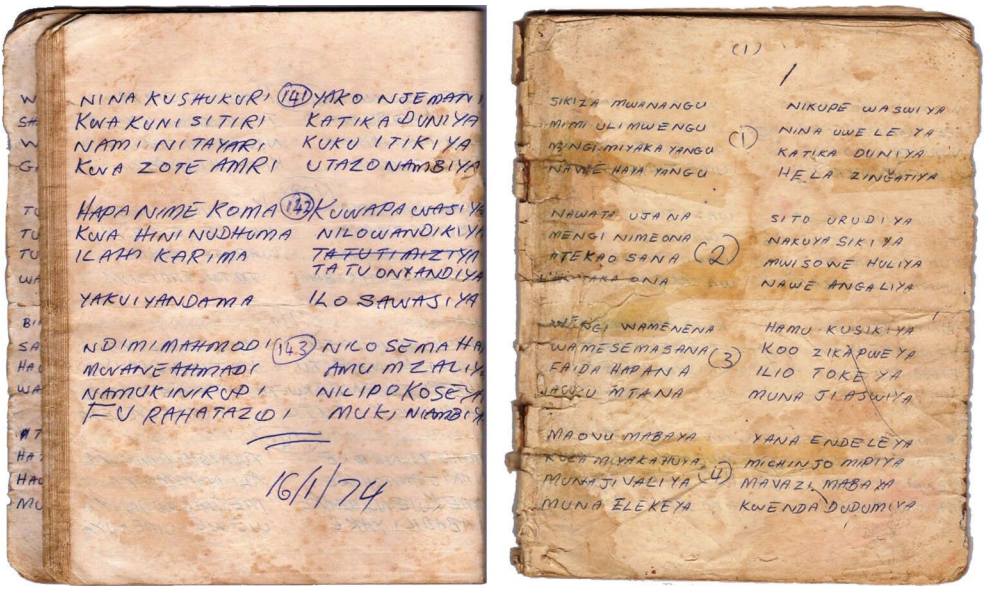

figure 11 Original first (right) and last (left) page of Ustadh Mau's *Wasiya wa mabanati*, composed and handwritten in Roman script in a notebook

Robinson explains that the skepticism toward and distance from "the academic printed book" vs. the spoken word in the Muslim world are due to the fact that "person to person transmission was at the heart of the transmission of Islamic knowledge. The best way of getting at the truth was to listen to the author himself."53 Thus, in this contemporary case of the audio recording of the *Wasiya*, it seems that through the voice (*sauti*) of the author (*mtungaji* "the composer" or *mshairi* "the poet")—who assumes the role of an imagined character—or that of the reader (*msomaji*) who rereads the dramatic story aloud, Swahili Muslim people can imbibe the truth, the advice, and the admonition contained in the poems, as they are *listening* to these words instead of passively reading them line by line.54

I shall now delve into the vocality and polyphonic threads weaving together the content of this beautiful *Wasiya*, with the support of the Tony melody transcription program and while drawing from Dostoyevsky's and Pirandello's works.

53 Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,"*Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 237.

54 The request that people listen to Ustadh Mau's advice comes out clearly from the very first verse of the *Wasiya*, where the lyrical "I" uses the imperative form (*sikiza*) to invite the listener: *sikiza mwanangu*, "listen, my daughter."

4 Listening to Advice

Musicality and empathy: These can be considered the two major features that have made the poem *Wasiya* so extremely popular. The first feature, namely the poem's musicality (*muziki*), draws from Ustadh Mau's own idea of poetry, which to him "is made of words that are written are uttered in a syllabic meter in a specific prosodic pattern, and the reader or listener is affected by the words because of the music deriving from that structure."55 Thus, Ustadh Mau gives the reason why the *Wasiya* has enjoyed such great popularity on Lamu and, beyond the archipelago, in Mombasa:

> *Wasiya wa mabanati husikitisha wengi na watu hupenda kusikiza kwa kuwa ni kiswa cha kusisimuwa na ni mambo yameshawapata baadhi ya watu*. (Mau, 2017)
>
> The *Wasiya na mabanati* makes many people sad, and people like to listen to it because it is a exciting/touching/moving story, and these are things that some people have already experienced.

That said, it becomes clear that the joy of listening to the *Wasiya* comes precisely from the deep sadness imbued in its verse, while its popularity comes from the shared experience of the common—but concealed—drama of neglected women. This brings us squarely back to the idea of empathy: if a young girl has gone through a calamity that others will also face, this encourages solidarity and makes the Muslim women feel less lonely in their own family dramas.

Where does the musicality stem from? When Ustadh Mau composed the *Wasiya*, he didn't know anything about the so-called *sheria za kutunga mashairi* ("rules for composing poems"56).

When he began composing the poem, he followed a prosodic pattern that resembles the *dhura al-mandhuma* meter, based on four bicolons (*mishororo*), each of which features a variable internal rhyme, and with six syllables (*mizani*) per verse (*kipande*). The rhyme form for the true line ends is retained; in

55 *Ushairi ni maneno yalio andikwa au kusemwa kwa mizani na mpangiliyo maalum—na msomaji au msikilizaji huathirika kwa maneno hayo kwa sababu ya muziki unao tokana na mpangilio wake* (Ustadh Mau, personal communication, 2017).

56 See K. Amri Abedi, *Sheria za kutunga mashairi na diwani ya Amri. The Poems of Amri with an Essay on Swahili Poetry and the Rules of Versification* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1954).

the *Wasiya*, this is always -ya.57 Hence, the *Wasiya* is cast in a meter that can be represented as follows, where – represents un unaccented and ’ an accented syllable:

Scansion
First stanza

	First 6-syllable verse (*kipande*)						**Second 6-syllable verse (*kipande*)**					
1st 12-syllable	–	’	–	–	’	–	–	’	–	’	–	’
mshororo	Si	ki	za	mwa	na	ngu	Ni	ku	pe	wa	si	ya
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
2nd 12-syllable	–	’	–	–	’	–	–	’	–	’	–	’
mshororo	mi	mi	u	li	mwe	ngu	ni	na	u	e	le	ya
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
3rd 12-syllable	–	’	–	–	’	–	–	’	–	’	–	’
mshororo	ni	ngi	nya	ka	ya	ngu	ka	ti	ka	du	ni	ya
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
4th 12-syllable	–	’	–	–	’	–	–	’	–	’	–	’
mshororo	na	we	ha	ya	ya	ngu	he	la	zin	ga	ti	ya
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6

As the chart shows, whereas the first internal rhyme, *-ngu*, is always unaccented, the final rhyme of each line ends is indeed accented, and also lengthened to be more salient to the ear. When Ustadh Mau’s mother, Barka Aboud, heard the poem for her first time, she did not believe that it was a poem written by her son, since up to that time, she was unaware of his son’s poetic talent.

57 According to Ibrahim Noor Shariff (*Tungo zetu*, 45), thirteen metrical patterns exist in Swahili poetry: 1. *wimbo*, 2. *shairi*, 3. *zivindo*, 4. *utenzi* of *utendi*, 5. *utumbuizo*, 6. *hamziya*, 7. *dura mandhuma*/*inkishafi*, 8. *ukawafi*, 9. *wajiwaji*, 10. *tiyani fatiha*, 11. *wawe*, 12. *kimai*, and 13. *sama*, *mahadhi* or *sauti*. *Dhura al-mandhuma*, which is الدرة المنظومة in Arabic and translates to “the composed pearl,” is also and better known by the name of one of the most famous compositions in this meter, namely the *Inkishafi*.

Other people may share in Ustadh Mau's mother's surprise, as the *Wasiya* features a very complex prosodic pattern. At that time, the poet would have paid lot of attention to arranging the poem so that it would always contain the same number of syllables in each stanza: as mentioned above, six *mizani* in each *kipande*. If the *Wasiya* had not stuck to this pattern, the line would have been considered *guni* "defective," and besides that, the poem would not have fit the tune and could not have been sung correctly. This shows the dependence of the music on the text (or the text on the prosody), as stressed by Beverly Parker in an analysis of *tendi* meter as sung in performance.58

Based on these parameters, Ustadh Mau claims that "giving voice" to a poem is definitely an art (*fani*), and this is the reason while not all poets are also able to chant their own poems: you must have the *sauti ya mahadhi* ("melodic voice") for it. Conversely, good singers may not be able to compose a single poetic line because they don't possess the poet's talent or art.

In almost all the solo vocal recordings available on cd or as mp3 files nowadays, the intro includes details about the composer of the poem and the process of how the poem is sung and voiced, called *kuimbwa* and *kutiwa sauti*; the soloist can be referred to as *mwimbaji* ("the singer") or *msomaji* ("the reader"), and the recording and selling activities are known as *kurecordiwa* and *kuuzwa*. One fact that the *Wasiya* meter has in common with the *utendi* is that like with *tendi*, the *Wasiya* can be read (*kusoma*) or voiced (*kutia sauti*), but has never been sung in a Western style.

The *Wasiya* has been sung three times by three different African Muslim soloists: Kadara and el-Shatry from the Riadah area, both singers from Lamu, and Mrs. Ridhai, a soloist from Siu. One spoken rendition, read by Ustadh Mau himself, has also been made available to me for comparison. Each time, the *Wasiya* has been infused with a *sauti ya mahadhi* "melodic voice," and it has been performed only in the form of a solo vocal recording, without any musical accompaniment. What causes this single dynamic to vary is when a singer stresses and lengthens a single syllable that would normally be stressed in a speech as well. What J.W.T. Allen has stated with regard to the very exaggerated accentuation of *tendi* in performance—namely, "it sounds to me exactly like the speech of a person desperately anxious to convince me of a story—probably untrue"59—can be paraphrased for the *Wasiya* by saying that each of its solo renditions sounds to me exactly like a sad and mournful conversation between an elderly man and a young lady.

58 Allen, *Tendi*, 29 ff.
59 Allen, *Tendi*, 35.

5 The Polyphonic Narrative of the *Wasiya*

> Granted that this is a fantastic tale, but when all is said and done the fantastic in art has its own limits and rules. The fantastic must be contiguous with the real to the point that you must almost believe in it.60
>
> They call me a psychologist: this is not true. I am just a realist in a higher sense, i.e., I depict all the depths of the human soul.61

The *Wasiya* contains a powerful polyphony that expresses itself not only through its melodic voices (*sauti za mahadhi*), but also via its narrative voices. Generally, polyphony is a concept found in literary theory, speech act theory, and linguistics to refer to the simultaneity of points of view, perspectives, and voices on a particular narrative plane. The concept was introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin and applied to Dostoyevsky's dramatic novels, where, according to the Russian scholar, conflicting views and characters are left to develop unevenly.62 In an in-depth analysis of Abdilatif Abdalla's poetic anthology *Sauti ya dhiki* ("Voice of Agony"), Ken Walibora also makes use of the term polyphony to describe how "[The poet Abdilatif Abdalla's] *sauti*, or voice, is hence a synthesis of many voices—not a cacophony, but a polyphony through which we vicariously hear the unspoken agonies of the silent fellow sufferers or unspeaking others."63 Just as the Kenyan poet Abdalla uses his *Sauti* to speak for the downtrodden in post-independence Africa, Ustadh Mau's *Wasiya* speaks to young ladies and uses several characters' voices to tell us about how the drama experienced by the main protagonist also affected her loved ones and the entire community. One should also keep in mind that the poet Ustadh Mau has clearly

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60 Dostoyevsky's letter to Yu. Abaza, 15 June *1880, A*. 30(i) (pp. 191–192) p. 192. Quoted in Malcom V. Jones, *Dostoyevsky after Bakhtin: Readings in Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2, 201.

61 Dostoyewsky's Notebooks for 1880–1881, A 27, p. 65. Quoted in ibid.

62 See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Speaking of Dostoyevsky's fantastic realism, Malcom V. Jones rightly points out something that also holds true for Ustadh Mau: "The author of the polyphonic novel does not fix and define his characters once and for all but himself enters into dialogue with them. The hero, then, interests Dostoyevsky not as a fixed character that can be defined, finalized and closed off from without, but as a point-of view on the world […] The truth about the world is inseparable from the truth about the personality and, according to Dostoyevsky, an idea can and must be not only understood but also 'felt' " (Jones, *Dostoyevsky's Fantastic Realism*, 13).

63 K. Waliaula Walibora, "Prison, Poetry, and Polyphony in Abdilatif Abdalla's 'Sauti ya Dhiki,' " *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 3 (2009): 132.

expressed how committed he feels, as a poet, to speak not merely to the Swahili community, but more precisely to his own Lamuan community: *Lamu ni jamii ambapo sauti yangu inaweza kusikiwa na kufika*, "Lamu is a community within which my voice can be heard and where it arrives."64 The *Wasiya* reflects a microcosm consisting of a poet and his community facing familiar dramas that speak of bigger societal issues.

The *Wasiya* is not a poem where we will find a monologue in the voice of a young girl recounting her experiences, but is very much dialogic and mimetically powerful. Furthermore, its plot does not consist of just one thread, but many, entangled with each other and brought together by the poet in a single night.

The poem unfolds along the lines of a mimetic conversation between an elderly man and an ingenuous young girl, and digresses into subscenes where other characters perform, such as the girl's relatives and the careless boy who abandoned the girl. The *fil rouge* running through the whole poem is the tragedy, called *mswiba* "mourning," that is depicted in all its facets through the wisdom of the poet-narrator, who zooms in and out of several scenarios focusing on the girl, her pregnancy, and her desperation, as well as on the girl's mother and her great sorrow, on the "good" or "evil" boys who either abandoned the girl or came to propose marriage and console her, on neighbors and passersby who consoled the girl's mother, and eventually on the figure of a mysterious old man who rescued the girl from committing suicide. Intentionally or not, the poet has not named his characters, likely as a tool to allow his readers and listeners—be they victims or perpetrators—to relate to and imagine themselves in that story and character.

The narrative and its human dynamism shape the stanzas, which are linked by verbs such as *kwenda kumwangaliya* ("go and look after him/her"), depicting a sort of back-and-forth visit to every single character's inward drama, to which the reader is conducted by the poet's guidance. To name but a few examples, in stanza 51, the narrator announcing he will stop (*koma*) with his account of the pregnant girl in order to return (*kurudi*) to some new narratives about the girl's mother—implying that he had already spent some stanzas on them.

Furthermore, the presence of reported speech contributes to showing that it is not simply a young girl recounting her story. In stanza 67, for instance, the mother is talking to a man who has asked to marry her daughter. The scene is full of interjections like *hebu*, which contributes to making the stanza as dialogical as possible. Interrogative particles like *wapi* ("where?") and *lini* ("when?")

64 Ustadh Mau, personal communication, Mombasa, July 2019.

are also used to reenact a realistic dialogue between the characters, and also evokes a sense of confusion, as the mother simply utters *sijakueleya* ("I have not understood") and wants things to be explained to her *nelezeya* ("explain to me").

Mama katamka	*Akamuambiya*
Wewe ulofika	*sijakueleya*
Wapi umetoka	*hebu nelezeya*
Lini ulitaka	*mambo kama haya*

The mother spoke, asking him,
"You who have just arrived; I don't understand.
Where are you from? Please explain to me,
When did you make this request?"

6 Zooming Into the Drama

The choice to begin his poem using the verb *-sikiza* shows that Ustadh Mau, rather than suggesting that his audience read his guidelines, is inviting them to listen to his advice as if his own daughter(s), drawing "physically close to him."65 This plea to come close to pay attention recalls the incipit of the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, the admonitory poem representing one of the first gems of classical Swahili *utendi* compositions, which reads as follows: *negema mwanangu binti*, "come closer my daughter," where the verb *-egema* means precisely "to come closer."66 By uttering, "Come closer" (*egema*) and "listen" (*sikiza*), the poet instructs, as the composition unfurls from its beginning, enacting a scenario in which the characters seem as if they are on stage and the audience (in this case personified in the daughter) is in attendance to draw near and pay attention (*hela zingatiya*). Differently from the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, however, where the recipient of the advice is never invited to speak or interact within the poem, as already noted above, *Wasiya* unfolds like a polyphonic narration in which even the young girl who is invited to listen (*sikiza*

65 As the poet himself declares, at that time he already had the feeling that he would have had more daughters than sons. As it happened in reality, Ustadh Mau has seven daughters, four sons, and thirty-four grandchildren.

66 In Werner and Hichens's translation, the first line of the *Mwana Kupona* poem—*negema, wangu binti*—is translated as follows: "attend to me, my daughter" (Werner and Hichens, *The Advice of Mwana Kupona*, 36–37).

mwanangu)—as well as other characters, like the girl's mother—will also take the narrative stage at some point in the poem.

Although the identity of the young girl's family is not revealed, the poet is said to have composed this poem inspired by an actual event that occurred in Mombasa. Soon after the poem had spread all along the coast, curious people began betting on who was the young man to be blamed. Thus it seems that in this poem, enacted like a play, rather than having characters without an author and looking for one—as in Pirandello's famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*[67]—in the *Wasiya*, the author, in the guise of an elderly man who has weathered the injustices of the world, creates characters whose stories want to be voiced, as if they need to be put on stage for show. Still, the poet thought up and searched for the invented characters (*wahusika wa kibuni*) whom he wanted to perform this drama by observing his own lifeworld and the people around him. Indeed, the poet's talent is evident in the way he has made his story and characters come alive as realistic characters. In other words, he achieved the poetic aim—unconsciously, in only his 20s—to make this poem more than just feasible, but credible: listeners considered the characters to be part of the real world, to the point of sparking their curiosity to meet the victim and the antagonist of the poetic drama in the streets of Mombasa. In other words, it was as if the realism had overcome the fiction.

The story starts by considering rumors told by people from Mombasa to Lamu, which is depicted still as a protected island, different from the coast, where bad and cruel things continue to happen (*maovu mabaya yanaendeleya*, stz. 4). The first ten stanzas indeed echo a lament over and reproach for the decay of the Muslim customs on the coast. A feeling of nostalgia for the past can be perceived through images of books that are no longer read and mothers who are worried about their daughters.

The topic of teenage pregnancy, outside marriage, is straightforwardly addressed from the beginning. The poet, in a very cynical way, mimicks what the "evil" boy falsely promised to the ingenuous girl: "Don't worry, we will be together/When you have the baby, I will be there to help" (stz. 9). The boy is compared to a *nyoka* "snake" (see stz. 32), but is also described in the poem as *fahali*, which metaphorically alludes to a man who does not care about others; in a stricter sense, it symbolizes strength, male sexual prowess, and unchecked masculinity. The story proceeds to show how the so-called *fahali* has gone off

67 In Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the characters are also not named, but simply called the Father, the Mother, and four children; see Domenico Vittorini, "Pirandello's Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore," *The Modern Language Journal* 7, no. 6 (1923): 347–349.

to find new girls to sleep with, and the poet intervenes with some dialogue between the disappointed and desperate lady and the brute and arrogant guy. The dialogue does not refrain from either rude or quite elusive expressions, alluding to the brutal masculinity of the boy and the rather passive status of the girl—who is blamed by the boy as the one who, in fact, enjoyed having sexual intercourse with him and who had had other affairs prior to theirs.68

However, as things are more complicated in reality than they might appear from the harsh perspective of the boy—who refuses to admit his role and take on fatherly responsibilities—the poet delves into the girl's subsequent psychological and physical problems, after being fooled and abandoned with her own pregnancy. The plot zeros in on the inner world of the girl once she is alone and pregnant. In stanza 48, she is depicted in her room with a vivid realism evoked through descriptive scenes:

Uko kitandani *mzazi huliya*
Zilo matumboni *zampa udhiya*
Mwake akilini *hayajamngiya*
Msiba nyumbani *uliotokeya*

The mother-to-be was on the bed, crying;
What was retained in the uterus was causing her harm
She had yet to comprehend in her mind
The sad events that had befallen their home.

In this stanza, the poet-narrator shows a certain sensitivity in expressing the state of the pregnant woman, called *mzazi*, which means "parent" as well as "fertile woman, woman in childbirth." He writes and describes realistic feelings and scenes by zooming into private psychological realms, already highlighted by the locative classes *-ni*, *-ko*, and *mw-*: *kitandani*, *matumboni*, *mwake akilini*, *nyumbani*. The drama imbued in the stanza is reflected in a plethora of elements: the image of the future mother weeping, expressed by the verb *-liya*; the noun *udhiya*, which in itself already entails the negative feelings of being disturbed,

68 Female characters whose lives are ruined by cunning and careless man and who have to face their past are quite a frequent trope in Swahili narrative. Compare, for instance, some similarities with Kajubi D. Mukajanga's *Kitanda cha Mauti* ("Death's Bed") (1982), which is regarded as an educational story framed as a thriller: like Kezilahabi's *Rosa Mistika* almost ten years earlier, it is a moving account of the consequences of an overly rigid upbringing. See E. Bertoncini-Zúbková *Vamps and Victims: Women in Modern Swahili Literature* (Cologne: Köppe, 1996), 93–105.

vexed, annoyed. These feelings become even more "disturbing" when considering the notion of them occurring in one's own stomach, belly. In addition to the verb *-liya* and the noun *udhiya*, the noun *msiba*, meaning "bereavement, misfortune, sorrow," is certainly a term that encapsulates the entire tragedy borne by the girl.69 In this specific line, *msiba* is referring to the death of her father, who dies of shock on hearing the news of his daughter's pregnancy. Broadly speaking, *msiba* captures the tragedy of the whole event: the boy abandoning the young girl after she gave birth, the girl's beloved parents dying of shock or becoming deeply upset, and ultimately, the miserable girl's lonely and sobering decision to commit suicide and infanticide because of the fatherless child, namely *mja haramu*, she had carried in her womb and then given birth.

The palpable tone of sadness throughout this tragedy is expressed through the unhappiness experienced by the woman. How can one make the feeling of depression palpable and commit this form of self-harassment to verse? As the following excerpt from the *Wasiya* shows, the poet sheds light on the girl's behavior and how she began treating and mistreating herself. This becomes evident in stanza 78, with the use of the reflexive pronoun *-ji-* infixed in causative and applicative verbs such as *hajifurahishi, hajilishi, akijishibiya*, and *amejitatiya*.

Ingawa aishi	*hataki duniya*
Hajifurahishi	*hata siku moya*
Wala hajilishi	*akajishibiya*
Kama kifurushi	amejitatiya

Even while she is alive, she rejects the world.
She doesn't enjoy herself, not even for a day.
Nor does she eat to satisfaction;
Like a bundle, she has tied herself.

The poet's choice of verbs sheds light on the mood and behavior of the girl and the lack of care she is exhibiting toward herself. Her decision to attempt suicide may already be hinted at in the first line of the stanza, where the verb *kuisihi* "to live," used in the first *kipande*, stands in contrast to her lack of will to live, as expressed by *hataki duniya*, where *duniya*, a recurrent word in this poem, stands for "life, world." The stanza ends with the metonymy of the lady compared to an object, a *kifurushi* "bundle" that is falling apart.

69 The noun *Msiba* also refers to a tragedy such as people dying (see, for instance, the poem "Amu," where the *msiba* the poet is recalling to concerns woman and children who passed away on the sea).

In addition to mimetic scenes, the poem is also replete with an abundance of metaphors (*mafumbo*), particularly linked to the woman's pregnancy (*mimba*) and her loss of virginity (*hali yakupoteza usichana*).70 If we look at the very beginning of the poem, the poet is referring to the baby in the lady's womb with term *mzigo* (stanza 10), which literally means "burden, heavy load, bag." It is via *sitiari*/*isitiara* ("metaphor") that the poet stresses the girl's state of desperation and regret; the most recurrent metaphor concerns the woman's virginity, symbolized by her hymen, which is referred to firstly in stanza 26, *kipai cha jaha kimekupoteya* ("You have lost your sense of worth"), and as *ukuta* "wall" in the stanza 27 that follows.

Kipai cha jaha *kimekupoteya*
Huna la furaha *katika duniya*
Na mambo ya raha *hutaki sikiya*
Kwa mola ilaha *sasa wajutiya*

You have lost your sense of worth.
You are unhappy in this world.
And have lost interest in all joyful things.
You now direct your regrets to the Lord.

Sana unajuta *na kuzingatiya*
Umekwishapita *wakati wa haya*
Na wako ukuta *ulijivundiya*
Ni mwezi wa sita *sasa yatimiya*

You now regret and continue to ponder;
The time for this is now long gone,
You tore down your own wall.
It is now completing its sixth month.

Ukuta, which literally means "wall," is the woman's qualification as a good candidate for marriage, which, in the girl's case, has now been invalidated as she enters her seventh month of pregnancy. In the last stanza of this narrative analysis, the female protagonist of the drama will make the decision to tell her mother about her loss of virginity. Again, the poet has the girl speak up about having infringed the Islamic injunction that Muslim women remain virgins (*bikira*) through metaphors (stz. 32):

70 See also Mahazi's and Vierke's contributions in this volume.

Mama nipulika *nitalo kwambiya*
***Yai** uloweka* *ukaniusiya*
Amekuja nyoka *amenidomeya*
*Limebaki **kaka*** *sasa laoleya*

"Mom, please pay attention to what I am about to tell you:
The egg that you bestowed upon me to protect,
A snake came and bit it.
All that is left now is an empty floating shell."

As the stanza shows, new terms are used to allude to the woman's virginity here: *yai*, which literally means "egg," and its exterior, namely *kaka*, which is used in the meaning of "eggshell," symbolizing the emptiness of the woman's "egg" once her walls have been breached.

7 *Dulcis in fundo*: The Metanarration within the Muslim Drama

Kamwambia Babu *ukitaka haya*
Kiswa ukutubu *kipate eneya*
Tafuta kitabu *na kalamu piya*
Kisije wasibu *wano inukiya*

She told him, "Oh grandfather, if you are interested in this,
Go find a book and a pen.
Then write the story so that it may spread,
So that the same thing doesn't befall those who are still growing up".

This is stanza 92 of the *Wasiya*, and the reader might wonder, who is speaking here and what is the girl doing? Clearly, she is asking the elderly man to grab a pen and a book and to write down her story. She is thus asking that the spoken mode be turned into a written mode that may circulate further.

Despite the tragic events related in the *Wasiya*, in the second part of the poem, hints of hope and positivity slowly emerge. A first clue of hope and acceptance can be already found in stanza 53, when the concerned voice of a friend tells the girl's mother: *kamwambiya nana / ndio kidunya watu hupambana / na zaidi haya*, "I told her, 'Lady, such is life. People are faced with tougher challenges than these.'" Here and there, the poet-narrator inserts verses meant to instruct the girl on her destiny (*mamboyakadari*, stz. 62) and thus relieve her

from the heavy load (*mzigo*) of feeling responsible for her father's death and her mother's mourning and sorrow (*mswiba*). This reflection becomes even more evident in stanza 75, when uttered by a good man who was supposed to marry the girl, and who tries to console the girl by reminding her that death is part of life: *hini ndiyo hali ya hini duniya / mauti ni kweli meumba Jaliya / wake na rijali watakafikia*, "This is the way of this world / death is a reality created by God / it will befall both men and women." The turning point that opens a window of hope onto the drama is related in stanza 83, which can be regarded as the most vividly dramatic scene, depicting the major protagonist's act of committing suicide and infanticide, as the narrator says, with the support of the devil (*shetwani*). Soon afterward, the poem introduces an elderly man (*kuhuli*, stz. 86) who, while walking, sees something floating in the sea; he jumps into the water with his clothes on and witnesses, with his own eyes, that there is a person about to die: *ruhu muhotoka / kuwaga daunia*, "Her soul was about to leave her and abandon this world" (stz. 87). Indeed, from stanza 91, a metastory begins: the elderly man asks the girl about her sorrows, and the girl invites him to take a pen and a book and start writing her own story so that it may be disseminated.

From stanza 93 on, a flashback begins telling us about the life of the young girl before the tragedy. The girl herself thus becomes the narrator of her own childhood and youth, and the elderly man becomes like her grandfather, namely *Babu*. From this stanza, the girl becomes both the "speaking subject," i.e. the narrator, and the "subject of speech" of her own life experience. "Life experiences" (*mambo ya kidunya*) are indeed at the core of many of Ustadh Mau's other written compositions, as previous contributions in this volume have also shown.

In the *Wasiya*, the girl recounts her story from the time she was born: how she was brought up by her parents, her father's refusal to let her study, and the temptations of the world she experienced through bad friends; at that point, her biography reaches precisely the occasion when she falls in love with the wrong boy and is seduced. This is a very creative section, embedding a flashback within the poem while switching the narrator and focus of the narrative. Furthermore, it lends veracity to the entire story, as if that very same victim of tragedy then finds the courage to speak out about what happened—as if she is taking the microphone and coming on the stage. The figure of the grandfather, in turn, becomes that of the listener and the writer who will record and rewrite her story. Again, returning to Pirandello's characters in search of an author, here it seems that the girl is rather in search of a poet-narrator, as she wants her drama to be written—as the verb *kutubu* and the reference to writing tools, like a pen and book, in the above-quoted stanza show—told,

and spread—actions implied in terms like *kiswa* and the related verb *enea* "to spread"—among her peers, along the lines of what Pirandello's characters do when they "appear before troupe of players and insist on performing their drama."71

To conclude, when we read this part of the poem together with Ustadh Mau, I dared to ask him who was this old man who rescued the lady from committing suicide, and if we could even imagine it was Ustadh Mau in person. Interestingly, the narrator and this savior figure are indeed the same character, depicted as an elderly man. So the poet-narrator, the giver of advice, as the *Wasiya* incipit relates, also becomes the rescuer who by giving the lady the chance to speak about her own story, becomes her first listener and the storyteller of her drama for a wider audience. Eventually, he will enable this story to spread and help the girl go on with her life by offering her a place to stay from that moment on. His house thus signals a fresh start for both her child and herself.

The beauty of the poem indeed resides in the unexpected happy ending that the entire tragedy finally reaches, in which the reader can perceive the poet's own hopes for the progress and improvement of every human life. The *Wasiya wa mabanati* is a great example of Eric Bentley, in his work "The Play of the Century," describes: "a fantasy based on the notion that characters are not created by an author but preternatural people who seek an author to write their biographies or at least their family drama."72

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71 Vittorini, "Pirandello's Sei personaggi," 348.

72 Eric Bentley, "The Play of the Century," *The Yale Review* 86, no. 3 (1998): 72.

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figure 12 Barka Aboud, Ustadh Mahmoud Mau's mother, in 1968