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In Pursuit of Freedom and Dignity Through Creative Writing A Personal Account¹

Abstract

My areas in creative writing are poetry and drama. To date, I have published four anthologies of poetry and three plays. The plays are *Natala* (1997), *Kifo Kisimani* (2001) and *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* (2004). The four anthologies of poetry are *Mchezo wa Karata* (1997), *Bara Jingine* (2002), *Redio na Mwezi* (2005) and *Msimu wa Tisa* (2007). A fifth book of poetry, whose title has not been yet established, is expected to be published.

Keywords: Africa, dignity, freedom, poetry and drama

Let me take you through my journey and experience as a creative writer beginning at the furthest end.

I was born in Tharaka in the Republic of Kenya in 1955 (or maybe 1956). My parents, both long departed, were ordinary peasant farmers. At a young age, I would accompany my mother, and sometimes my mother and my father, to the family farm. At the time, Tharaka community practiced shifting cultivation and farms for some of the families were a long distance away from the homes. That was the case with our farm. When I was slightly older, I would look after the family cows and goats as my parents attended to other chores.

In 1963, I was enrolled in the nearest school, Karethani Primary School, five or six kilometres away from home. I would

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walk to the school in the morning and walk back home after the lessons, that ended at one o'clock. The school, which was run by the District Education Board, worshipped the Protestant way while other members of my family were Catholics. After only three years at Karethani Primary School, I transferred to Gatunga Full Primary School which was under a Consolata Catholic Mission. I stayed in the school for four years at the end of which I sat and passed Kenya Certificate of Primary Education.

I was admitted to Form One at the Chuka High School in 1970. During my first or second year in the school, one of the English teachers – I believe she was called Miss Morris – invited students interested in creative writing to attend a meeting one evening in one of the classrooms. The meeting was intended to start a students' creative writing club. Among other issues, it discussed how our creative works would be availed to the school. It was agreed that we start a school magazine for that purpose. I pleasantly recall that I am the one who proposed the name for the magazine. Since the school is at the foot of Mt. Kenya, I suggested that we call the magazine "The Mountain's Voice". The name was accepted with a modification. Miss Morris recommended that the magazine be called "The Voice of the Mountain". We started writing short stories, poems and probably some journalistic pieces too. The works were published in the first issue of the magazine.

My earliest attempts at creative writing were in the form of poems. A number of them appeared in the different issues of "The Voice of the Mountain". The content and the titles of most of what I wrote and published have long receded from my memory. However, I still remember the title of one of the poems and what inspired me to write it. The poem was titled "The Bell". In it, I looked at the power of the school bell. In those days, due to the excellent body metabolism of our youthful bodies, food digestion was extremely efficient. The result of the efficient digestion was biting hunger between meals.

During lunch, we would get crowded in front of the door to the school's dining hall. Sometimes, we would jostle and push each other as we tried to be as close as possible to the door. The hunger would

be so intense that one felt as though you had not eaten for days. And no matter how vicious the biting fangs of the hunger become, the door to the dining hall would not open until the bell rang. We would go through the ordeal all over again as we waited for supper.

Our breakfast consisted of bread, tea and maize flour porridge. The porridge was served in plates – the same plates that we used for lunch and for supper. It was adequate and, sometimes, we go for a second helping which would be a half plate or sometimes a full plate. We would then go for morning lessons. Because of the rapid digestion of the porridge, by the second lesson, our bladders would be so full that, quite often, the mental focus would be the wish to go for a short call rather than to understand what the teacher was teaching. That wish would not materialise until the bell for the break rang. Of course, it was possible to ask for permission to go to answer the call of nature as the lesson was going on. But to do so often would not only have been detrimental to learning but also embarrassing, not to mention the teacher becoming fed up with the requests if they became a habit. That is how “The Bell” was born. Unfortunately, neither do I have a copy of the poem nor have I seen it for last forty or so years!

I had a very strong ambition, maybe an obsession, of going to the university. To go to the university, one had first to go through Form Five and Form Six. To join Form Five, one had to get very good grades in Form Four. I did not want to take a risk of not getting admission to Form Five. So, sometimes in Form Three, I disengaged myself from creative writing to concentrate on my academic work. My hard work in Form Three and Form Four paid off. I passed my Form Four examinations very well and got admitted to Form Five at the Alliance High School. After one year in Form Five, I proceeded to Form Six, did the examination, and passed. The following year, my most precious dream became a reality: I was admitted to the University of Nairobi.

At the University of Nairobi, I pursued Bachelor of Arts and then Master of Arts in linguistics, graduating in 1979 and 1981 respectively. Besides my formal studies, I watched plays at the University and at other venues within Nairobi. Many of the plays I

watched were serious social commentaries, mostly by African playwrights. Besides interacting with the very informative theatre, I also read outside linguistics, attended public lectures and regularly watched news on the television and listened to the radio. That lifestyle, together with the general atmosphere at the university, substantially raised my awareness from that of a high school student to that of a person with a fairly clear picture of what was happening in Kenya, the rest of Africa and, indeed, in the cold war world.

I resumed my creative writing in 1982, a year after I graduated with an M.A. in linguistics. It was not merely resumption, but resumption with a difference. Whereas in my earlier attempts at creative writing I dealt with themes such as the power of the bell in the school system, my increased political and social awareness led me to interrogate themes of a more political nature. For instance, I had become acutely aware of the disparities that characterized (and still characterize) Kenyan society. Distribution of wealth in the country was skewed. There were those who were captives of want; those enslaved by hunger and indecent dwellings; those humiliated by the inability to feed and properly clothe themselves and their children. But in the same society, there were men and women who were swimming in wealth and wallowing in luxury; those who had so much to eat and drink that one of their major preoccupations was how to constantly and regularly restrain their bellies from bulging and their cheeks from surging. For some of them, how to control hangover, was an enduring challenge!

The disparity between the haves and the have-nots could not be explained by claiming that the poor were lazy and that the rich were hard-working. It could not be wished away by attributing it to God being benevolent to some and mean to others. Something was wrong with the way society had been configured after independence or, rather, the way we had failed to reconfigure society and instead carried over the colonial mode of production and distribution of wealth. People's dreams of freedom and dignity had been betrayed. As a writer, I decried that betrayal in several poems. I castigated the social imbalances as unacceptable. An example of a poem that I

wrote in that frame of mind in the early 1980's is titled *Ndoto* ('A dream')².

By the time of my resuming creative writing in 1982, not only had President Moi ascended to power in Kenya, he had already become a dictator. Needless to say, dictatorship curtails people's freedom to enjoy rights and liberties. It can bring about economic misery, social disorder, and sometimes, total collapse of the state. Any of the above scenarios results in people losing their dignity. Whereas in Kenya, the state remained intact and the economy surprisingly resilient until towards the end of the 80's, Kenyans' freedoms were so restricted that even writing a letter to a friend, having a conversation in a pub, or calling from a public telephone booth could not be taken for granted. The political situation in the country was so bad that talking about politics even with a friend did not necessarily feel secure.

Progressive people in the mass media, at universities, in non-governmental organisations and in the National Assembly were protesting. Moi's government responded with brutal force. People were thrown into jails, others were fired from their jobs, and yet others were put in detention without trial. A clandestine movement called Mwakenya was started in the country. Their members were met with all the brutality of a dictatorship. Some of its members would be taken to the law courts in the evening after working hours and quietly sentenced to jail. Some were tortured so much before being taken to court that they "admitted" to committing crimes for which they knew nothing about. They preferred to go to jail than to continue being tortured by the state security agents. I remained hopeful. The fall of dictators such as Anastasio Samoza Debayle in Nicaragua and Mohamad Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran reinforced that hope. I expressed that hope in poems such as *Dagaa na Papa* ('The sardines and the shark') in which through unity, sardines overpower a notorious shark!

² The poem was published in the anthology titled „Mchezo wa Karata” ('A game of cards').

On July 31, 1982, I had a poetry reading in my residence in Nairobi. Artists, especially those who patronized the Kenya National Theatre bar, were in attendance. I read my poems and people responded to them. A lot of the time was taken up discussing a poem titled *Mkia Hupinda Mbele na Pembe Hurudi Nyuma* ('The tail swings ahead and the horns take the back position'). The poetry session ended at about 6.30 and, whereas other participants decided to go to the Kenya National Theatre bar for the evening, I chose not to go there since it was late. The following morning, as I was going to buy a newspaper, I noticed that the environment outside was rather unusual. I asked a guard next to my residence what was happening. He curtly said: *Serikali imeenda!*, which is Kiswahili for "the government has been taken!" (lit. 'the government has gone').

It turned out that early that morning, the soldiers of the Kenya Air Force had launched a military coup. The information had been announced from the studios of the Voice of Kenya, the government-owned and by then the only radio and television broadcasting station in the country. As the day was breaking, the Kenya Army crashed the Kenya Air Force's attempt. Later that day, in the evening, President Moi was escorted back to Nairobi from his rural home by heavily armed contingent of the Kenya Army. I could see the convoy of the military vehicles from my kitchen.

In the meantime, there had been a lot of looting in the central business district of Nairobi. Shops, especially those dealing in electronic goods, had been stripped empty by the residents of the capital city. Many people had been killed by the Kenya Army personnel and several women had been violated.

Such is the result of bad governance and dictatorship. People lose their dignity through curtailment of liberties; through harassing by state security agents; through incarceration in jails, remand to prisons and detentions; and through other forms of humiliation. Ironically, in the process of trying to redress the situation or purporting to so, further atrocities such as loss of lives, violation of women, and destruction of property take place.

The coup did not succeed. However, something akin to what I had contemplated in the poem I recited in my residence on July 31,

1982, almost came to pass. Whether the take-over by the military would have ensured that “the horns” were overtaken by “the tail” is, of course, a matter of conjecture. I was craving for a change in Kenya and Africa but not a change that comes with the smell of gunpowder. The turn of events after the coups by Mobutu in Congo, Bokassa in the Central Africa, Amin in Uganda, and Doe in Liberia, had left an impression in my mind that coups were not the answer to Africa’s political and economic problems. Thus after the attempted military take-over in Kenya, I wrote a poem titled *Jumapili ya Damu* (‘Bloody Sunday’). In the poem, I painted a grim picture of what had taken place in Nairobi and made a case for civilian governments.

Bad governance has been a feature of many African countries. The consequences for the continent have been dire. The first fifty years of the continent’s independence, to a large extent, went to the drain. In many countries, misrule and economic mismanagement were the order of the day. The result was suffering of the ordinary people as the ruling elites amassed wealth and lived like kings and princes. The frustration brought about by this state of affairs triggered many military coups, attempted coups and counter coups. West Africa was particularly afflicted by the overthrow of governments in the sixties and the seventies. Consequently, bad governance has been a major target of creative writing on the continent. I have not been an exception regarding that trend.

In my play titled *Kifo Kisimani*, Bokono, the villain, is a feared despot who robs it over the people of Butangi. He uses security agents to intimidate people and maintain silence in Butangi. Mwelusi, the hero, takes him head on. Bokono’s agents unleash violence on him to no avail. The despot’s henchmen try to entice him with a title and property without success. It takes the greed and selfishness of Mwelusi’s brother, Gege, to kill Mwelusi. Gege is promised a hand in marriage to Bokono’s daughter if he gets rid of his brother. He kills Mwelusi but, to his chagrin, the marriage to Bokono’s daughter does not materialize. The promise of marriage was merely a trick to get Gege eliminate his brother. Meanwhile, Atega, a young woman who had worked hand in hand with Mwelusi, leads the over-charged crowds to over-run Bokono’s palace. Bokono

and his court poets are arrested without bloodshed after his agents join the agitated crowds. The people of Butangi reclaim their freedom from the misrule of Bokono.

The phenomenon of rulers trying to retain power at all cost has been a known fact throughout the ages and all over the world. Africa is no exception to this reality. The tendency towards clinging to power by hook or crook was the bane of many an African country over the last several decades since the continent emerged from European colonialism. Some presidents have been in power for more than thirty years. Where the clinging to power has been accompanied by poor economic policies, or the looting of the economy or both, citizens have remained deprived and in dire need of appropriate and adequate services. Such is the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where Mobutu Sese Seko ruled for decades. In spite of Congo having more known minerals than any other country in the world and in spite of its having the mighty River Congo which has the capacity to generate enough electricity for the whole of Africa and beyond, the Congolese still wallow in poverty.

In Kenya, Moi ruled for twenty four years in spite of being very unpopular among Kenyans. He used intimidation and all manner of tricks to sustain himself in power. The trickery included changing the National Constitution in 1982 to shift Kenya from a multi-party country to one-party state. With the help of intra-party dictatorship, he remained unchallenged at the elections. That was the situation from early eighties to July 1990 when Kenyans rose up and held massive demonstrations which were met with deadly force by the state security machinery. However, the fire that was ignited in 1990 eventually bore fruits in 1992 when multi-party democracy was re-established in the country.

With the coming back of multi-parties, Moi's political system devised new strategies to remain in power. In the general elections of 1992, for the first time, the country witnessed what came to be known as "tribal clashes" whereby, in some areas of the country the ethnic group in majority rose up in arms and attacked Kenyans from other ethnic groups, if they were perceived not to be supporting candidates favoured by the ruling party. The attackers looted and

burnt down property; they killed and maimed people; and they caused thousands of people to flee their homes and businesses. The result was massive suffering of innocent Kenyans. Some of the evictees ended up in camps for displaced persons. The dwellings in these camps consisted of structures made of polythene paper. There were no proper amenities such as appropriate toilets, running water or electricity. With their properties looted, burnt down or left behind, many parents were unable to pay school fees for their children. Many of the children dropped from school. Driven by want, some of the boys become petty criminals whereas some of the girls drifted into prostitution.

“Tribal clashes” as a method of retaining political power become an enduring feature of general elections under Moi’s rule. The madness of 1992 and which overflowed into 1993 was repeated during the general elections of 1997 and 2002.

I have tried to expose this evil practice for what it really is. The blood-letting during election years is anything but tribal. Anybody who calls the madness tribal should explain why it only occurs during general elections. Does Kenya have different ethnic groups only during elections? Of course, the answer is no. So then, if indeed, the blood-letting is caused by ethnic hatred and animosity, why does it not occur in-between the elections? The madness is not “ethnic clashes” as it is called; the violent incidences are political clashes. That is the message in my play titled *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi*. In the play, political agents – not ethnic groups – organize, arm and train the murderous gangs who drive thousands of people away from their homes and into indecent dwellings. That is how thousands of Kenyans are denied decent meals; pushed into desperation; and caused untold humiliation. In a nutshell, that is how innocent Kenyans are deprived of human dignity.

It is important to point out that not everything negative about Africa’s politics or its economies is of the continent’s making. Much of Africa’s suffering results from sinister and sometimes outright criminal intrigues of America and Europe. Let us, for illustration, return to the Democratic Republic of Congo. For the last sixty years the citizens of that country have had very little to celebrate. For

many years, the country was under the misrule of Mobutu Sese Seko. Under his watch, the country saw little economic development. Instead of developing, the country witnessed massive looting of its mineral wealth by Europe, America, and the local political elites, especially Mobutu himself. Even after Mobutu's ouster, the country continues to suffer. His misrule created so much discontent, anger and mistrust that subsequent governments have found it extremely difficult to pacify the people. Rebellion and armed conflict have become the order of the day.

The sad story of the Democratic Republic of Congo, to a very extent, has its genesis in the Congo crisis of 1960/1961. To prevent Patrice Lumumba and his progressive political movement from ascending to power at the time of the country's independence, Belgium and America went into over-drive. They tried all manner of intrigues including America sending poisoner to Congo to assassinate Lumumba. The plot did not succeed. Patrice Lumumba was finally elected the first Prime Minister of the country. Still, he did not survive the machinations of his enemies. With the use of stooges such as Tshombe, Kasavubu and Mobutu, Belgium succeeded in installing a puppet government in Congo. First, through Tshombe, they engineered a rebellion and declaration of independence in Congo's Katanga Province. Patrice Lumumba's appeal to the United Nations Organisation bore no fruits. Although the United Nations Organisation dispatched troops to Congo, their mission must have been anything but putting down the illegal and foreign-inspired declaration of independence in Katanga.

The rebellion and declaration of independence in Katanga Province was not the end of Lumumba's headache. The Belgium head of the Congolese military incited the soldiers to mutiny against Lumumba. The mutiny gave an excuse to Mobutu to move in and overthrow the Prime Minister and his democratically elected government. As if dislodging him from power was not enough, his enemies had him physically eliminated. Those who killed him went further than just getting rid of him. Investigations have shown that, after being killed, he was chopped into pieces and dissolved in sulphuric acid.

After the murder of Lumumba and the scuttling of authentic independence in the Congo, America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) went after other progressive African leaders, in particular Kwame Nkrumah, who happened to have been an ally of Patrice Lumumba. The easiest way for America and Europe to exploit Africa is for the continent to remain disunited. Kwame Nkrumah talked passionately about the need for African countries to unite. He tried to sell the idea of Pan-africanism as a means towards economic and political growth. After Lumumba's elimination, Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown. Many observers of African political scene are of the view that the CIA was behind his overthrow.

The overthrow and killing of Nkrumah was felt across West Africa and, indeed, the rest of the continent. The military coup that overthrew him became a model for several other coups in West and Central Africa. True, some of the presidents were despots. However, there is no gain saying that the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah gave a very bad example to the military in the emerging nations of Africa.

There was genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The incidence is used by some people to defend their prejudiced argument that Africans are incapable managing their affairs including politics. They forget or do not know that whereas, indeed, Rwandese killed each other in hundreds of thousands, the seed of the hatred that blew up like a massive bomb was nurtured by Belgians during the colonial days. To be fair to the Belgians, they did not create the original prejudices between the Tutsi and the Hutu. But their rule over Rwanda-Urundi, and the preferential treatment they accorded the Tutsi, certainly aggravated the problem. The Tutsi saw the preferential treatment they were given by the Belgians as confirmation of their perceived superiority over the Hutu. In turn, the "we-are-better-than-you" mind-set of the Tutsi created more resentment among the Hutu. It is this mistrust and resentment that informed the first coup in the region in 1959 and continued to spark other coups thereafter. That hatred which had been heating for generations in a super-pot eventually boiled over in 1994.

Another reason African countries have failed badly economically are current trade arrangements between the continent

on the one hand and Europe, America and some Asian countries on the other hand. The arrangements are highly exploitative of Africa. It is important that Africans learn how those trade arrangements contribute to their unhealthy political and economic situation. One channel through which to avail this information to them is through creative writing. Some of my poems in *Mchezo wa Karata* and *Bara Jingine* address these issues.

In many societies, both in Africa and elsewhere, women suffer not only from bad governance but also from patriarchy. In Kenya, there are societal practices that are harmful to girls and to women in general. Girl circumcision is one of them. Whereas there is medical evidence showing that male circumcision has certain medical benefits, nobody has as yet scientifically shown any benefits of female circumcision. On the contrary, it is disadvantageous to women. And yet, culturally, some communities have continued to defend the practice and carry it out on their daughters. The practice is one of those that I have fought through my poetry. It is the thematic concern of *Mbiu ya Mgambo* ('The clarion')³.

Another practice that undermines the independence and the dignity of women is the so-called widow inheritance. It entails a woman being taken over by a brother-in-law after losing her husband. Some people have defended it by saying that it provides support for the widow and her children. If, indeed, the widow has voluntarily consented to the arrangement, one might find it difficult to argue against it. Unfortunately, sometimes the widow is under cultural pressure to accept the arrangement against her good judgment and taste.

In my play titled *Natala* and which has been translated into English under the same title, Natala's husband is presumed dead. Her nightmare begins at the mortuary as she tries to retrieve her late husband's body. The mortuary attendant is not cooperative at all. He wants Natala to bribe him so as to assist her retrieve her husband's body which is among many others in a badly managed mortuary. Failing to get monetary bribe from her, the attendant suggests, in a

³ The poem was published in the anthology *Bara Jingine*.

subtle way, that he would not mind sexual favour. Natala will hear none of it.

After the mortuary experience, bigger challenges await Natala. After the burial of what are presumed to be her husband's remains, culture demands that she become her brother-in-law's wife. She refuses the demand. She is threatened with losing her property and being deprived of her two children if she refuses to "co-operate". Indeed, Wakene, the brother-in-law, takes away the title deed to her land. Not even going to a government officer helps her reclaim the deed. Fortunately, she is not the kind of a person to give up easily. Through immense courage and sheer intelligence, she manages to take back the deed from her brother-in-law. The play ends with the return of her husband. The body that she had buried was not his. As she was going through thick and thin, her husband was in prison for some minor offence.

Environment is another theme that interacts with the notions of freedom and dignity. Degradation of the environment can deprive people of food thereby compromising their freedom from hunger. Quite often, unhealthy environment brings about poverty. In turn, poor people further degrade the environment. They do this either through ignorance or for lack of alternative ways of sustaining themselves. A vicious circle sets in. Needless to say, such a poor community is deprived of their dignity. Imagine of a people who do not have enough to eat; do not dress well because they cannot afford it; do not have decent accommodation because they do not have the money to construct or buy good dwellings; a people who have to engage in all manner of vices to merely survive. Such community cannot be free and dignified. To prevent such a scenario, we must jealously guard against environmental degradation. We must cultivate a good relationship between ourselves and the environment. When we respect environment, the environment reciprocates by sustaining us. Several poems in *Bara Jingine* are in defence of healthy environment.

One issue that has pained me a lot over the last eight years or so is the horrendous suffering of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The armed conflicts that have been raging there have seen

women suffer to levels that are beyond imagination. The women are violated by both the militias and regular soldiers. The violations involve so many women and have gone on for such a long time that the thought of it is itself a harrowing experience. To make a bad situation worse, the United Nations forces sent to the country as a buffer between the country's combatants have also joined in the orgy. I have shed tears for the Congolese women in a poem titled *Wendawazimu Kongo* ('Madness in Congo')⁴.

As a creative writer, I am not always in a fighting mood. Contrary to how European and American mass media portray Africa, the continent is not all about negative happenings. There is a lot on the continent that is attractive. The all-negative African that oozes from certain non-African media is a product of the ignorance of Africa coupled with the fertile imagination of prejudiced minds. It is sheer wishful thinking. Thus, since there is plenty that is beautiful in Africa, as a creative writer I do not always lament, lambaste, cajole and admonish undesirable elements, bad leadership, embarrassing occurrences and under-performing institutions. I also celebrate. I celebrate what is attractive.

In some African countries such as Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, we have larger pools of skilled human-power than in many countries outside the continent. Some of the professionals are outstanding in their areas. The world's first heart transplant was performed in South Africa by Christian Barnard. In Kenya, carrying out complicated medical operation, such as open heart surgery, kidney transplant and in-vitro fertilization are the order of the day. Banks and other financial institutions are run professionally; five-star hotels are as meticulously run as any other in the world; and some of the research institutions are renowned in their fields of operation. To name a few such institutions in Kenya: The International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE), The International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and The Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), are globally recognised as centres of excellence.

⁴ The poem was published in the book *Msimu wa Tisa*.

Kenya is the first country in the world to use mobile telephones for money transfers. It takes a few minutes for someone in one part of the country to send money to someone else in another part of the country. Today, billions of Kenya shillings circulate in the economy through the technology. The technology has been so successful that the Harvard School of Business found it necessary to disperse a team of professors to the country to study how the system works.

Africa has produced some excellent leaders. Many of us are probably aware that Africa has won the Nobel Prize several times. Africans have won in the Peace and Literature categories. The winners of the Peace Prize have been: Walter Sisulu (1960), archbishop Desmond Tutu (1984), Kofi Annan (2001), Nelson Mandela and Frederic de Klerk (2003) and Wangari Maathai (2004). Those who have won the Literature Prize are: Wole Soyinka (1986), Naguib Mahfouz (1988), Nadine Gordimer (1991) and John Coetzee (2003).

Africa has produced some of the best athletes in the world. Kenya and Ethiopian are the undisputed leaders of the world in the long distance running. Although I am a great fan of athletics and I keep a keen eye on games such as the Olympics and the World Athletics, I have a problem keeping in memory Kenyans who have won gold medals in their respective events. Those who have accomplished the feat are just too many. The same is true for Ethiopian long distance athletes. My guess is that over the last thirty years, Kenya and Ethiopia have won more gold medals for Africa in the long distance races than the rest of the continents combined.

In sports Africa has shone brightly. Some of the finest footballers in Europe today are Africans. And they are not few. Back in Africa, we have world class football outfits. Some of the teams that come to mind are: Bafanabafana of South Africa, Indomitable Lions of Cameroon, Black Stars of Ghana and Chipolopolo of Zambia. In rugby, Springboks of South Africa are a world side. So is Kenya's Sevens Rugby Team.

In politics, Africa has produced acclaimed leaders. Whereas Tanzania's Ujamaa policy did not succeed and, indeed, kept Tanzania

poor for many years, the late President Mwalimu Julius Nyerere was a very good leader. He was willing to put his brains to work for the good of his country. Ujamaa policy did not succeed in bringing economic development and social progress to Tanzanians. However, in coming up with the policy and investing so much energy in it, Mwalimu Nyerere had the best intentions for Tanzania. Yes, Ujamaa did not succeed, but owing to Mwalimu Nyerere honest, thoughtful and impartial leadership, he managed to create a united and patriotic nation out of more than a hundred and twenty ethnic groups in the country. Today, thanks to the foundation put in place by Mwalimu Nyerere, Tanzanians do not perceive themselves as Chagas, Sukumas, Nyamwezis, Pares or Makondes; they consider themselves, think and behave Tanzanian. Mwalimu Nyerere assisted his countrymen and countrywomen to achieve the dignity that comes with nationhood. I celebrate him as a leader in a poem titled *Mwashiki* ('The builder').

Let us go back to Rwanda but, this time, on a positive note. The country, which barely twenty years ago went through one the worst bloodletting in recent times, has a booming economy, thanks to the meticulous leadership of President Paul Kagame. With a growth rate of more than seven per cent per annum, it is not only East Africa's fastest growing economy but it has also a much higher growth rate than most countries of the world. It has embraced information technology with much enthusiasm. Today, the country can claim to be in the forefront in the utilization of the technology for the transformation of the economy and for bringing about social progress. In terms of gender equity, the country is once again among world leaders. Its ratio of women to men in political leadership is higher than in most countries of the world. Furthermore, women in Rwanda do not merely occupy minor portfolios in the government. They run some of the most important ministries in the country.

The Rwandese are freeing themselves from the pain of economic scarcity; from the fog of ignorance; from being technological backwater; and from patriarchal mentality. They are cruising from being a relatively underdeveloped country into a modern society. Writing a poem, a play, a short story or a novel on

this kind of success story is a most worthwhile exercise. Such a piece of art can inspire a young woman or man to become another Paul Kagame. In such an eventuality, the young woman's or man's country will be the better for it in terms of creating a dignified society.

In the southern part of the continent, Nelson Mandela and South Africa have done Africa proud. After the white South Africans agreed to cede power to the black majority and after the holding of the first multi-party elections, the world waited with abated breath. People were not sure whether the black majority would not try to take revenge. If they did, of course, the white South Africans would not have taken it lying down; they would have defended themselves. The results would probably have been another bloodbath in Africa after the Rwanda nightmare. Fortunately, under the brilliant stewardship of Nelson Mandela, a man who for twenty seven years had been incarcerated by the apartheid leadership, South African never shed a single drop of blood. His leadership was simply exceptional. Today, he is seen not merely as an exemplary leader, but as a living legend. He features in one of my anthologies as a wonderful example worth emulating in creating tolerant and better societies.

I am attracted towards some aspects of African history. Some of these aspects have consciously or unconsciously been suppressed. We do not know whether or not that history will be availed to African children and youth through schools' curricula. As we wait, we should disseminate the important information through creative writing.

In school we were taught how Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas. It is claimed that he was the first person from outside the two Americas to see the twin continents. However, based on extensive research by scholars such as Ivan van Sentima in his book "They Came before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America", it has been shown that Africans from the Guinea region had sailed to the Americas long before Christopher Columbus. Van Sentima quotes that Christopher Columbus reported that there was evidence of fleets of ships with massive loads of gold having sailed to the Americas from the Gulf of Guinea.

Writers such as Martin Bernal in “Black Athena: The Afro-asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization” have credited Africa with a much more glorious past than many people are willing to accept. Moreover, egyptologists and especially the formidable Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop, have revealed the great achievements of Africa before the Modern Era. They have, for instance, shown that the Greco-Roman foundation on which the modern European civilization is based was largely influenced by the knowledge and civilization of the Nile valley and ancient Egypt. Availing this information on Africa’s glorious past through creative writing can contribute towards strengthening the self-esteem and confidence of the African thereby making him or her more innovative and productive.

Let me turn to the subject of language in creative writing in Africa. As the main medium through which culture is carried, the role of language in culture and society cannot be over-emphasized. If you are Polish, and you tell people that you are a writer, they will not ask you in which language you write. They will assume that you write in Polish. If you are an American, a Briton or an Australian, it will be assumed that you write in English. In countries that have multiple national/official languages such as Canada and Switzerland, the question will be asked to find out in which of the national/official languages you write.

In Africa, a continent that has very complex multilingualism, when people learn that you are a writer, they will assume that you write in the language of your country’s former colonial power. When you volunteer the information that you write in an African language, people look at you in a manner to suggest that they are probably putting into question your intelligence. This situation obtains in Africa because through colonial indoctrination – indoctrination that still continues to be nurtured today. Educated Africans were made to believe that creative writing is synonymous with writing in “a civilised language”; that is, in a European language. Thus, in the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries of Africa, it is considered natural for a writer to write in English, French and Portuguese respectively. That is why when you write in an African

language, irrespective how big the language is in terms of the number of speakers and its geographical spread, you are considered unusual.

In the upside down scheme of things in Africa, I am an unusual writer. I do the “unnatural”. I write not in English but in Kiswahili. But I continue to do it and to do it consciously. Since the “natural way” of doing things in creative writing in Kenya is to write in English, works in Kiswahili do not sell as much as those written in English. Still, I continue to write in Kiswahili.

I write in an African language because my heart desires Africa that is free from hunger; Africa that is free from massive slums; Africa that is free from controllable diseases; Africa that can complete meaningfully with other continents. In other words, my heart desires Africa characterized by economic development and social progress. In a nutshell, I desire Africa that has freedom and dignity.

What has writing in an African language, we may ask, got to do with economic development and social progress on the continent? The answer is: “A lot!” In my view, one impediment to Africa’s development is the low self-esteem and lack of confidence among some Africans. Without the two, creativity and innovativeness suffer. And yet, creativity and innovativeness are crucial in getting new ideas, trying out old ones and turning others on their head. The low self-esteem and lack of confidence among some Africans are products of the battery of the African mind and culture by the missionaries and the colonialists. These two groups described and treated African way of life as primitive. African dances, songs, rituals, material culture, medicine, shrines, entire belief systems, rites of passage, courtship and marriage, mythologies and legends, attire, and languages were dismissed by the two groups as attributes of an uncivilized people. Whereas the attitude of the missionaries and colonialists were vigorously opposed by Africans at the beginning, within decades of Christianity and colonialism many Africans came to believe and embrace in the Anti-African worldview.

Writing in an African language is an attempt to negate the view that African languages are not serious speech systems worth of disseminating worthwhile thought. It is a way of telling people: African culture, including languages, is worth our respect and promotion. In other words, writing in an African language is a way of urging people to be proud of things African and, by extension, themselves. If as Africans we respect what is African and are proud to be Africans, our self-esteem and confidence will be reinforced thereby making us more innovative and courageous as we pursue our destiny.

There is a second reason why I write my drama and poetry in an African language. Currently, much of the knowledge from African universities and other research institutions is looked up in English, French and Portuguese. It is rarely available in the appropriate form and in adequate quantity in the languages spoken by the majority of the ordinary Africans. Since the level of education of the ordinary people does not allow them to read and understand information in a European language, they are denied the power that comes with information and knowledge. African economies and societies are the worse for it. Promoting African languages through creative writing sends home the message that the languages should be taken seriously as media of modern communication. That way, the researchers and other experts on the one hand and the general population on the other hand will pull together for the benefit of all.

I have faith in Africa. The continent has a bright future. My guess is that, excepting something out of the ordinary, Africa will be a very fine continent in which to live in thirty or so years to come. But for that to happen, Africans and their well-wishers must persistently and devotedly work towards that possibility. Each of us, all of us in Africa, should strive to contribute towards the new continent. My little contribution comes in the form of rebuking what is negative; encouraging what is positive; and, where possible, making suggestions. One of those suggestions is a poem titled *Bara Jingine* ('Another continent'). In it, I propose a route to New Africa: Africa that is free from poverty; Africa that cherishes human rights;

Africa that is at peace with itself – in other words, a continent with the highest level of freedom and human dignity.

Another Continent

I

My dream
Is sweet
Like honey,
Green
Like the leaves of a cucumber,
Bright
Like the morning sun,
Lovely
Like a garden of roses,
A dream
Of a new continent
A continent where
Parliament
Shall not be a hall
Of a swarm of locusts,
An acacia tree
For the clattering of weaverbirds,
A platform
For formless sycophants
A continent where
'National security'
Will not be the hard skin
Guarding state house crocodiles;
A walking stick
Sustaining gods of the potter's clay;
A continent where
Detentions and prisons
Will not be mortars
For pounding humanity,

A door
For entering to the grave,
A continent where
Precious brains
Shall not get startled
And drop their tools
To hurriedly get to the border
For home
Has become a wilderness
Where the buffalo
Has been engulfed by fury,
Where wild dogs
Are roasted by rabies,
And the spitting cobra
Has its neck puffed up,
A continent where
Greed
And corruption
Shall not rain from the top
Like poison
From a helicopter
Being sprayed,
Official lies
Shall not rise in the air
And attack the nose
Like the stench of a skunk,
Tribal prejudice
Shall not be a mist
To attack eyes
Like tear gas;
A continent where
In state houses
There won't be black mambas coiled
But humans beings seated –
People with blood
And conscience

II

Like a sunbird
On a flower,
Like a heart
Under the canopy of love,
My dream
Has perched and stilled
On the new continent
A continent where
Information technology
Will not remain up in the sky
Far from our hand
But will be a spotlight in the palm
For lighting our road,
Sparks of science
Shall be fanned
Till they be an inferno,
The seedling of technology
Will be nurtured
Till it becomes a giant tree,
A continent where
Our researches
Our discoveries
Will be grenades
Against malaria and measles
Tanks
Against rinderpest and blight;
A continent where
Farmers
Will sing songs,
Poets
Recite poems,
In unabashed praise
Not only of tea and cocoa

Not only of coffee and tobacco
But potatoes
Bigger than hunger,
Pigeon peas
Growing without sulking,
Vegetables and fruits
Which deride enemies in the farm
Lovely glittering
Jewel of bio-technology;
A continent where
Theory and practice
Brains and hands
Blend fast
With the sun and rivers
And with sweet melodies
Sing a unique song
A song of electricity
For running machines
And dreams,
For lighting houses
And hearts

III

Oh, New Continent
Twinkling star
In the darkly season,
Glinting star
Like life throbbing,
Through this mist
Of vapour of tears,
Through this smoke
Of the fire of poverty,
Through this cloud
Of the poison of disunity,
With a steadfast voice

I call upon you
Come, oh, New Continent
Continent of tranquility
Continent of harmony
Continent of collaboration
And of hope,
Come, oh, New Continent
A continent where
Instead of the odour of suspicion
As Cameroon and Nigeria
Throw stomach gases at each other,
Instead of groaning
As Kenya and Tanzania
Gnaw at each other's nerves,
Instead of wailings
As Ethiopia and Eritrea
Fry each other in the desert,
Roads and rails
Shall cross borders
Like blood vessels
Leaving one organ
And entering the next,
Letters and telephone calls
Shall reach neighboring villages
Without passing through London
Without going via Paris,
Currency notes
Will not become worthless paper
After crossing Lwakhakha
Or Rufiji,
A continent where,
The jewels of research
With African colours,
Factory goods
With African emblems,
Will bypass each other

Like pistons
Running a machine

IV

I cry for you, oh, New Continent
A continent where
In the mind's eye
The black skin
Shall be gold,
In our ears
African languages
Shall be nightingale's songs,
African art
Shall be the compass
In the boat of culture,
A continent where
The core business
Shall not be strategizing
On how to tighten the knot
In the dangerous noose
Of Breton Woods
But fabricating the file
With which to cut the chains
Which bind our legs
On the life's highway