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Aniceti Kitereza Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka na Ntulanalwo na Bulihwali. Tanzania Publishing House, Dar es Salaam, 1980 pp. 618 (In two volumes) H/cover: T.Shs.115.00; S/cover T.Shs.70.00.

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When Mzee Aniceti Kitereza died on 20 April, 1981 at the age of 85, few people in Tanzania, and fewer still outside Tanzania, had ever heard of him. The local mass media did not even mention the incident. He had lived, and died, an ordinary man. On the surface, his life had been no different from that of hundreds of other German educated contemporaries: He had been a teacher, catechist, petty trader, building clerk, cooperative officer and, finally, in his old age, peasant.

Yet this apparent "ordinariness" was deceptive. The practical matter-of-fact worker was also a passionate thinker, educator, philosopher and scholar. He was a walking encyclopedia of the ways and customs of the Bakerebe, and, above all, a lively, unique, confident, and highly talented novelist.

Aniceti Kitereza was born in 1896 in Sukumaland, where his father, Bw. Malindima, a Kerebe prince, was then in exile. Upon the death of his father in 1901, Kitereza and his mother returned to Ukerewe. For some years Kitereza lived in the palace of his uncle, who was then Omukama (king) of Ukerewe. In 1905 he joined the mission school at Kagunguli in Ukerewe. Upon graduation in 1909, he was sent to Bukoba for further training in languages and theology. He graduated in 1919 to become a teacher and catechist at Kagunguli.

After the first World War the Germans were thrown out of the then Tanganyika. Kitereza, who was already fluent in the German language, began to teach himself, using a dictionary, the language of the new masters - English. Unsatisfied with the meagre wages offered by the mission, he resigned from the mission job and became an assistant to a Greek businessman until 1939, when he

quit the job because of the war. He again worked for the mission, largely as a translator of religious material until 1955, when he relinquished his job to become one of the leaders of the then powerful Victoria Federation of Cooperative Unions. In 1956, however, he was forced to retire to his village because of rheumatoid arthritis. In the early seventies, during the villageization drive, he moved to Kagunguli Ujamaa village, where he lived with his wife, Anna Katura.

When Anna, whom he had married in 1919, died on 7 February, 1980, it was clear that her husband would not outlive her for long. An infirm arthritic, Kitereza had become too dependent on his wife to survive without her. The couple had had four children, but they had all died. This was a big blow to Kitereza, and its impact is discernible in his writings.

In a way, Kitereza, like his hero Myombekere, considered himself a failure for not being able to leave behind an off-spring to carry on his name and his deeds. As he once remarked to the present writer: "Among us, the Bakerebe, the childless man is a very poor person indeed; only sorrow and disgrace is his eternal lot."

Kitereza probably hardly realized what an inestimable "offspring" he has bequeathed mankind in the form of his 618 page, 2-volume novel, Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka na Ntulanalwo na Bulihwali (henceforth Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka...).

First written in his mother tongue, Kikerebe, and completed in February 1945, this novel, for thirty years, suffered the fate of many similar "vernacular" writings. No publisher could be found anywhere for it. For who, indeed, was interested in investing money in a novel, however great, written in a language with a limited number of speakers and, hence, an insignificant reading audience!

Thus all the "local" publishers turned it down. Undaunted, Kitereza had the manuscript typed, and gave a copy to a Canadian friend, Fr. Simard, who promised to find a publisher for it overseas. He never did, and never returned the typescript to Kitereza, for he died in Canada a few years later.

There the matter rested until 1968, when some publishers advised him through professor Gerald Hartwig,

to have the manuscript translated into Kiswahili to improve its chances of getting published. At once Kitereza set to work, and within a year 874 pages, beautifully written in German longhand, in lively and unique Kiswahili, were ready for the press. But still no publisher was forthcoming.

Kitereza entrusted the handwritten copy of the translation to Prof. Gerald Hartwig, who promised to find a publisher. It was from him, through the Ford Foundation and Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., that the late J.W.T. Allen got a photocopy of the work. From the copy, Allen prepared an English version (not yet published) and a second photocopy, which he forwarded to the General Manager of Tanzania Publishing House (TPH), Mr. Walter Bgoya, in 1975. That is how TPH came into possession of this valuable work.

TPH at once set to work to have the novel published. Agreement was reached with the author, and some money advanced to him, for he was completely penniless. Editing the bulky manuscript proved an herculean task indeed, and the author had to be constantly consulted to clarify certain points. In the end, the work was done, and the typescript went to press.

Briefly, this is the background history of this novel and its author. Clearly, the prospects for a Third World author are very grim indeed. Kitereza's "adventures with a pen" would be a worthy subject for a full length novel in their own right; so would his lifelong quest for livelihood, recognition and, of course, offspring. In his long life, Kitereza had more than his rightful share of life's tragedies. In many ways, the tragic streak in his life is paralleled in the lives of his major characters, Bwana Myombekere and his wife, Bibi Bugonoka. They, like Kitereza, are obsessed by a desire for offspring. It is true that they do get two children. But the first child is prematurely stillborn, and the second child, also born prematurely, lives for only one day. Thereafter, Bugonoka has no more pregnancies, and as a result becomes increasingly despised and alienated by her husband's relatives. Only Myombekere loves and tolerates her, all the while struggling to find a cure for her "barrenness."

Matters reach a head when Bugonoka's parents, Namwero and his wife, Nkwanzi, hearing of their daughter's



maltreatment, decide to take her back, leaving Myombekere without a wife. Thus to the shame of barrenness (for a shame it is in this pre-colonial Kerebe society) is added that of bachelorhood and the accompanying loneliness and distress. Myombekere has to decide whether to marry another woman or to bring back Bugonoka. His half-hearted attempts to woo another woman prove futile. He ends up prostrating again before his father in law, begging for forgiveness and the return of his wife.

Thus begins the story of the adventures of this unhappy Kerebe family that is supposed to have lived sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. It revolves around the twin poles of production and reproduction, creation and procreation. Through production, within the framework of his clan, his village, his kingdom, and the accompanying traditions, beliefs, customs and taboos. Kerebe man produces wealth in order to build his eka (i.e. Kaya or household) and hence realize his humanity and his manhood. This he can achieve by interacting and cooperating with fellow humans, obeying the common law, not daring to go beyond the limits sanctioned by society in whatever he does.

Society in turn protects and helps him to realize his possibilities, to build his eka. Man is not only a social animal.

Yet work, labour, is only one leg of the Myombekere (the hows, means and conditions of building and consolidating the eka). In order for the household to stand on its two feet, production ought to be accompanied with reproduction. For man is both the agency and the purpose of Myombekere. Man builds for man, the older generation builds for the younger generation, the old ones wither away so that the young ones may flower. By their death, they achieve immortality through the lives of their living offsprings for generations, to come. Hence Myombekere's kinsmen tell him:

Wewe ni ndugu yetu, sasa unakubali kweli kukaa na mke wako huyu akiwa mgumba hivi, uzuri wako huu wote uishie chini!! Hivi wewe unadhani kufufuka kwa watu hapa duniani ni nini? Si kuzaa na kuacha mbegu yako ikiwa hai ndiyo maendeleo ya ukoo wetu? (page 1).

The purpose of labour is to build the eka, the purpose of marriage is to consolidate that eka by supplying

it with offsprings who will both protect and perpetuate the eka and, through the eka, the clan and, ultimately, the species. Hence the need for interaction and exchange, both human and material, between different eka, different clans.

Here then is the central problem of this story, for Myombekere and Bugonoka fail to get children. Without children, what basis is there for him and Bugonoka to remain united in marriage? Can love alone sustain marriage in a society where offsprings come before everything else, where barrenness is a social stigma? More seriously, can Myombekere and Bugonoka build their eka without offsprings? How, and what for? Can life have any meaning without children?

A modern reader, living in a highly competitive urbanized society, schooled in the best UMATI (Family Planning Association in Tanzania) traditions, may see these issues differently. Indeed, he might consider barrenness a non-tragedy, if not a blessing in disguise. But not so for the Kerebe "peasant" society in this novel, for whom abundance of manpower is the precondition for material abundance, security of life and, indeed, survival itself. Hence Myombekere must get back his wife, and what's more, he must get her to conceive and bear living children.

Detailed descriptions of his endeavours to this end take up the best part of Volume I. They include successive trips to his in-laws to retrieve his wife, his efforts to get the fine (which includes six pots of banana beer) to pay for her return, his perennial search for a mganga who can cure his wife's "barrenness," and finally, the treatment itself and how his struggles are eventually crowned with some success.

Volume II begins with the birth of Myombekere's son, Ntulanalwo. He survives, but at great cost to his parents, for he is constantly in need of medicants, protective charms, close care and attention. As one misfortune after another assails him, we are reminded that (Obunaku) bugonoka "misfortune comes unexpectedly, without warning." It has befallen the family through Bugonoka's failure to have children. Now, misfortune's twin brother, death, seems to be bent on wiping out the family. The reader cannot but feel, like Myombekere,

that (Olufu) ntulanalwo "I always live with death." It is only after he is transferred to his maternal grandfather's house that Ntulanalwo begins to enjoy some health.

While wondering whether their sorrow and suffering will ever come to an end, Myombekere and Bugonoka are blessed with another child, this time a daughter. In sceptical optimism, they name her Bulihwali "when will sorrow end in this world?" hoping that their sorrow would now cease. Life for them now begins to have some meaning.

The rest of Volume I is, really, the story of Ntulanalwo and Bulihwali: How they grew up, married, had numerous offsprings and, after the death of their parents, became quite prosperous. The story ends with their death.

The story is of course, much richer than the above skeleton may lead one to believe. It is not only confined to the lives of Myombekere and Bugonoka and their children, but deals, rather with the life of the Kerebe society of the time, seen through the life, actions, problems and aspirations of the family of Myombekere. Myombekere represents Kerebe manhood just as Bugonoka represents Kerebe womanhood. Their quest is the perennial quest of their society; for they are expressing and enacting the dominant values of that society. As their lives unfold before us, we are gradually introduced to a tapestry of the Kerebe world - the culture, customs, beliefs, practices, human relations, productive activities; the geographical environment, the flora and fauna, the months and the seasons; the sciences, the oral literature, the arts and the crafts.

The story takes place against a background of the rich flora and fauna that is the feature of the island of Bukerebe. This land, situated in Lake Victoria some few miles from Mwanza, is a beautiful, evergreen island, very fertile, heavily populated and potentially very wealthy. Its forests and grasslands had, until early this century, plenty of useful trees and wild animals, which were hunted for their meat and fur. The trees were felled for house building and boat construction (Ntulanalwo is in fact a great hunter and a carver of canoes).

Along the extensive coastline fishing is a regular preoccupation of some men, so is the hunting of hippo-



potamuses. Indeed the life and culture of the Bakerebe, as depicted in this book, is to a large extent based on fishing and agriculture. The lake is the second shamba to the Bakerebe, its products supplement their agricultural diet. Its waters form a natural highway in addition to serving for most domestic needs. No wonder the lake looms large in this novel, and numerous types of fish are mentioned and their properties minutely described.

Beyond the coastline, agriculture is predominant. All typical tropical crops - cassava, millet, bananas, beans, sweet potatoes, etc. grow effortlessly. The wealthier families have in addition, some cattle from which they get milk, meat and manure. Cultivation is sometimes done individually and sometimes collectively (obuyobe). There is enough land for everybody, and apparently everybody except the omukama (king) and the aristocrats, works or is expected to work.

This is precolonial Kerebe land and society as it was and as is depicted in Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka. It is an apparently healthy, peaceful, hardworking society. True, it is superstitious and technologically not much developed, but it is far from being "savage" or "primitive" - as many anthropological works on pre-colonial Africa have led us to believe. While not defending its shortcomings, Kitereza, like Achebe (in Things Fall Apart) re-asserts the values and achievements of his people.

This novel is, in short, a mine of ethnographical, historical and scientific information about pre-colonial Bukerebe and its people. Yet it is not history, nor is it, strictly speaking, a historical novel. All the characters are imaginary, all the incidents fictitious. There is no mention of the reigning kings or appraisal of their historically known actions. There is very little about the political feuds and upheavals that characterized the Kerebe Kingdom in the 18th and 19th centuries. All this is beyond Kitereza's intentions. His primary objective is to preserve the language, customs, practices and cultural traditions of the Bakerebe, seen from the point of view of the ordinary eighteenth century Kerebe, for the benefit of future generations. Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka na Ntulanalwo na Bulihwali is primarily and deliberately a cultural novel.

It is not autobiographical, although anyone familiar with Kitereza's own life cannot fail to see parallels

between his personal problems and those of his protagonist, Myombekere. Like Myombekere, he lost all his children in childhood, yet, unlike Myombekere, he never tried to look for another wife and, apparently, never went to consult the traditional Waganga. Kitereza, born at the cross-roads between the past era and the present (colonial) era, is satisfied with merely serving as a bridge between the two eras, revealing the past to the youth of today, without much praise or censure, while personally remaining staunchly modern and progressive in outlook and in practice.

This novel is a great work indeed, not only because of its wealth of cultural information, but because Kitereza has put his whole personality, linguistic and artistic talent, knowledge, experience and meticulous care, into its execution. This is much more obvious in the original unpublished Kerebe version. In the present Kiswahili translation something of the original is inevitably lost. One hopes that the Kerebe original will also one day find a publisher.

In the meantime, this work remains a classic of Kiswahili literature. It is the longest Kiswahili novel ever published, the most racy, and the richest culturally. Without question, it establishes Kitereza as a leading Kiswahili - nay - African novelist, and the first and last one of his kind. For as there was only one Thomas Mofolo, one Shakespeare, and one Tutuola, there can only be one Kitereza. Kitereza represents his age and his generation, and these two can never come back.

Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka... is not only Kitereza's masterpiece, it is his eka. Childless and penniless, (at the time of his death he was living a very poor man in a single-room hut built for him by the Kangunguli Ujamaa villagers), Kitereza's greatest desire, as he admitted to the present author, was to see his book in print before his death. How tragic that even this small wish never materialized, for he died while the advance copies of his novel (which was printed in China) were awaiting collection at the post office in Dar es Salaam!



## REFERENCES

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