

# PRAISES OF SOBHUZA II

Posted in *Praise-Poetry* and tagged *Sobhuza II, Swaziland*.

Sobhuza II (1899-1982), one of the most remarkable Africans of the last century, was king of Swaziland for 61 years. Educated at the Lovedale Institution in South Africa and an early member of the African National Congress, he was at the same time a passionate traditionalist, pledged as he once put it “to extricate Africa from this idea of one man one vote”.

The kingdom he inherited was in a disastrous state, and he recognised from the start the monarchy was his best asset in combating colonial rule. He played the part with consummate skill, persuading anthropologists like Max Goodman and Hilda Kuper that the Swazis were an ancient nation with ancient customs, and dispatching two regiments, the Emasotja and the Sikonyane, to serve with British forces in World war 2, “stabbing and killing” like traditional Swazi warriors, in the Middle East, Tobruk and Anzio.

A feature of his court was his promotion of *imbongi*, or praise singers. Men like Ndinda Mavuso, Mutsi Dlamini, Mcoosha Dlamini, Makhosini Dlamini, Mabutane Mdluli, and the most prolific of all, Maboya Fakudze, were all connected to the royal house, by family or as members of Sobhuza’s own Balandolozu regiment. Between them they crafted a royal lineage, each ancestral king with his praise

poems, that constituted an official history, recorded for use by the Swaziland Broadcasting service and printed to be read in schools. The following *tibongo* are by Mabuntane Mdluli, descended from one of the most famous of King Mswati’s warriors. They hint at how inauspiciously Sobhuza II’s reign began.

Dancer on black shields of *jojo* (1)

You played on shields of *shikane*

Black bewildering widow bird

You grew plumes in winter

When other widow birds are bare.

Where you build

Stubborn black one of Hhili, (2)

Only he who perseveres survives

He who does not persevere must flee.

Claw of the lion that is heavy

You trod the ocean, (3)

The ocean surged

The ocean built its waves,

The ocean swirled in currents.

They said Sobhuza would not clasp the hand of George King of England (4)

But he clasped the hand with lightning of heaven

Twice the heavens flashed

Within the palace of the English

They praised you with wonder

“This manhood, so great, whence did it come?”

Rock-thrush of Ngwane, of Mahlokohla, (5)  
 You said, you inherited it from the navel,  
 Here, from Ndvungunye,  
 Here from Somhlolo.  
 Strength of the leopard  
 Strength of the lion  
 Eater of the fruit of the gourd of our country of Ngwane, (6)  
 Here at our home, Lobamba,  
 It encircled the palace,  
 You proved yourself calf of the eater of the fruit of the gourd,  
 Player upon black shields.  
 They are calling you, they are giving you a message, (7)  
 King of the inner circle.  
 They were not calling you for nothing,  
 They were calling you to a war of nations, stabbing and killing.  
 Again you entered battle,  
 You gave the fighting to the Sikhonyane,  
 The Balondolozzi remained to protect the orphan, (8)  
 You, yourself orphan born,  
 Feared one, brother of Ntfoli, brother of Mnengwase, (9)  
 Who does not lie with one who moves in sleep,  
 Who until dawn disturbs the peace of rest.  
 Bushy tail of the bull, it is dark it is fearsome,  
 Bushy tail of the bull, it is dark by Banganoma's place (10)  
 Royal plume,  
 Circling the ridge of Lancabane (11)  
 Devouring herds of men

Bhuza play with water,  
 That the waters of Ngwane  
 Reflect their admiration.  
 You of the inner circle  
 Male elephant of the Swazi  
 Old one whom age does not diminish (12)  
 Old one of the rountry of Ngwane!  
 Bayethe your Majesty.

Translated by Thoko Ginindza,  
 and printed in *Sobhuza II: Ngwenyana & King of Swaziland*  
 by Hilda Kuper

### Footnotes

1. *Jojo* is the male widow bird and *shikane* (1.2) the female. Normally, the widow bird grows its beautiful long plumage in summer, but *Sobhuza* (1.4) grew his in winter. Another *tibongo* by Makosini Dlamini, begins more explicitly: "They are full of threats / They threaten you / It is the enemies and those at home".
2. One of the names of Sobhuza's father. When Sobhuza built his palace at Lobamba in 1925, he named it *Lozithehlezi*, "sitting surrounded by enemies".
3. Sobhuza sailed to England in 1922, to plead the case for Swazi independence.
4. There was speculation in Swaziland about what electrical powers would be generated if Sobhuza shook hands with George V. In the event, both kings survived the handshake.

5. These four lines name the ancestors from whom Sobhuza inherited his manhood (“from the navel”).
6. Ngwane III, who ruled 1745-1780, is considered the first king of modern Swaziland. Ngwane V, who ruled 1895- 1899, was Sobhuza’s father.
7. Responding to a request from Britain, Sobhuza dispatched two regiments to fight in north Africa and Italy, the *Sikonyane* (as stated here) and the *Emasotja*. The soldiers were addressed by the king, wearing the costume of a Swazi warrior, and were presented with “national flag” which later became the flag of independent Swaziland.
8. The *Balondoloz*i regiment, Sobhuza’s own and the one he most trusted, was not dispatched. “To protect the orphan”, is another pointed reminder of Sobhuza’s vulnerability, Sobhuza himself having been orphaned at birth.
9. Members of Sobhuza’s extended family.
10. *Banganoma*, a settlement of Swazi exiles in Zululand.
11. Where Sobhuza built his palace, *Lozithelezi*.
12. Sobhuza was 78 when this praise was performed.

## NDLELA, SON OF SOMPISI

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [South Africa](#), [Zulu](#).

The praises of Ndlela kaSompisi, a key general in the Zulu army, who rose to power after defeating the Ndwandwe on Shaka’s behalf (see also [Shaka’s Praises](#)). Despite his non-Zulu origins, he was rapidly promoted. Shaka is said to have commented, “Any man who joins the army becomes a Zulu. He would promote a man, regardless of the road (*ndlela*) he came by”. A fierce traditionalist and opponent of the missionaries, he was executed by Dingane, Shaka’s successor, after failing to win the Battle of Blood River against the Boers in 1840. A monument to him was unveiled in KwaZulu by President Jacob Zuma in 2004.

As with all Zulu *izibongo*, each line is a separate praise, often referring to specific incidents, not always understood today.

Rattler of spears!

He who is unable to lie down, one side being red with wounds,  
He whose wounds are as numerous as the huts of a large kraal.  
Hornbill that is reluctant to set out. [\(1\)](#)

Long-tailed leaper like a leopard.

Reedbuck that escapes again and again.

Daily they stab the rattler but he retaliates.

How many of them come back again?

Who come back again when a person acts so deliberately?

He who crosses over to the other side,

Who crosses over and the whole Ntolela regiment crosses, [\(2\)](#)

Stout stick that points to the Ngwane people. [\(3\)](#)

He who attacks people with fury, he of the Rattlers.  
In the daybreak Ndlela was left. (4)  
When the army returned  
At dawn, Ndlela remained.  
Feeble I remain behind,  
Paltry strength equal to a child's.  
Body of which the Nkayiya regiment sits,  
The Nkayiyas of Zwide. (5)  
He who is always wounded in the face like a prince.  
Great branch, turn back the Ntolela regiment.  
News that came first to Shaka at the Mbelelele krall.  
Have you a piece of gut long enough  
To sew up Ndlela's wounds?  
He who crosses over to the other side,  
He who is embroiled against the Thukela. (6)

from *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems* (1968),  
Trevor Cope (ed.).

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### Footnotes

1. It was believed that when the Ground Hornbill croaks, thunder and heavy rain will follow, making it a bad time to set out. This praise, and the lines that follow, are taken to refer to the army's reluctance to accept a general not of Zulu origin.
2. Reference obscure. Ntolela is not included in the list of Shaka's or Dingane's regiments.
3. *The Ngwane people*: The followers of Ngwane IV, King of Swaziland 1780-1836, more commonly known as Sobhuza 1.
4. Possibly referring to Ndlela's defeat at the hands of the Boers.
5. *The Nkayiyas of Zwide*: Zwide was king of the Ndwandwe, the first to be defeated by Ndlela. The reference to the Nkayiya regiment is obscure.
6. *The Thukela*: The clans living in the Thukela river valley.

# WOMEN'S SELF-PRAISES

*Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Women's Songs](#), [Zulu](#).*

Two Zulu women's Praise-Poems. In Zulu society, women often compose their own praises which are performed whenever groups of women are together with no men present. The Praise-Poems are descriptions of a woman's personality and achievements, though they are often used to express complaints. No. I describes the girl's courage (she 'cuts across the game reserve'), her determination and her strong sense of pride and independence.

## I

I am she who cuts across the game reserve  
That no girl crosses.  
I am the boldest of the bold, outfacer of wizards.  
Obstinate perseverer,  
The nation swore at me and ate their words.  
She cold-shoulders kings and despises mere commoners.

No. II is more relaxed and humorous, being the self-praise of an older woman. Her praise-name is Bitter Tobacco leaf, and the humour of the poem is that the ants want her to die so that they may feed on her body while the cockroaches, which live in the rafters of her house, want her to live so that they can continue licking her spoons after she has eaten.

## II

The Bitter Tobacco leaf,  
Ground and powdered by men and women.  
The ants want her down;  
The cockroaches refuse, they say, 'Oh Royal Madam,  
What will we eat when we're left alone? When you say,  
"I've finished,"  
You take your spoon and stick it up in the rafters,  
Then we cockroaches can have a lick.'  
Comforter of the baby, and the mother is content.

# SHAKA

*Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Shaka](#), [War Poems](#), [Zulu](#).*

Three extracts from the long Zulu Praise-Poem about Shaka, the Zulu king. Shaka succeeded Dingiswayo as head of the Zulu clan in 1818: by the time of his assassination by Dingane in 1828, he had become King of the Zulu nation. This transformation was brought about by his military genius and, in particular, by his defeat and incorporation into his kingdom of two rival clans, the Qwabe under Phakathwayo and the Ndwandwe under Zwide. Zwide had earlier defeated Dingiswayo when Shaka was living under Dingiswayo's protection, so this victory was a revenge as well as a triumph and is celebrated in the Praise-Poem with special pleasure.

The first extract consists of the opening lines of the Praise-Poem, describing Shaka in general terms. This is followed by an account of Shaka's amazing catalogue of victories, culminating in the two defeats of Zwide in 1818 and 1819. The final extract is the Praise-Poem's concluding lines.

*Shaka* is a poem of amazing power and energy. It bursts the bounds of the ordinary Praise-Poem to give a narrative account of historical events. It is not so much concerned with the character of an individual ruler as with the emergence of a nation under a leader of genius. The victories and destructions are described in detail. The images are of lions, leopards, elephants, fires, furnaces, axes and spears, hawks and vipers, and so on. The qualities praised are bravery, ferocity, vigour and strength, and the tone is confident and aggressive, Shaka setting his own stamp on the nation.

Dlungwana son of Ndaba! (1)  
Feroocious one of the Mbelebele brigade, (2)  
Who raged among the large kraals,  
So that until dawn the huts were being turned upside down.  
He who is famous without effort, son of Menzi, (3)  
He who beats but is not beaten, unlike water,  
Axe that surpasses other axes in sharpness;  
Shaka, I fear to say he is Shaka,  
Shaka, he is the chief of the Mashobas. (4)  
He of the shrill whistle, the lion;

He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,  
The madman who is in full view of the men.  
He who trudged wearily the plain going to Mfene;  
The voracious one of Senzangakhona,  
Spear that is red even on the handle...  
The attacker has been long attacking them: (5)  
He attacked Phungashe of the Buthelezi clan,  
He attacked Sondaba of Mthanda as he sat in council,  
He attacked Macingwane at Ngonyameni,  
He attacked Mangcengeza of the Mbatha clan,  
He attacked Dladlama of the Majolas,  
He attacked Nxaba son of Mbhekane,  
He attacked Gambushe in Pondoland,  
He attacked Faku in Pondoland.  
The young viper grows as it sits, (6)  
Always in a great rage  
With a shield on its knees.  
He who while devouring some devoured others  
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
He who while devouring some devoured others  
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
He who while devouring some devoured others  
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
He who while devouring some devoured others  
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
He who while devouring some devoured others  
And as he devoured others he devoured some more.

Painful stabber, they will exhort one another, (7)  
Those who are with the enemy and those who are at home.  
He who is dark as the bile of a goat.  
Butterfly of Phunga (8)  
With colours in circles as if they had been painted on; (9)  
He who is hazy as the shadows of the mountains,  
When it is dark the evil-doers move about.  
The rival of Phunga and Mageba  
Which looked at me until I got accustomed to it.

Powerful limbs, calf of a beast,  
The kicking of this beast puzzled me, (10)  
It kicked the milker and left the one holding it.  
Hawk that I saw descending from the hills of Mangoengaza, (11)  
And from those of Phungashe he disappeared;  
They said, 'Hawk, here he is, there he is',  
Whereas he was silent in the forests like the leopards and lions.  
Shaka went and erected temporary huts  
Between the Nsuze and the Thukela,  
In the country of Nyanya son of Manzawane;  
He ate up Mantondo son of Tayi,  
He felt him tasteless and spat him out,  
He devoured Sihayo.

He who came dancing on the hillsides of the Phuthiles,  
And overcame Msikazi among the Ndimoshes.

He met a long line of ibises  
When he was going to raid the foolish Pondos;  
Shaka did not raid herds of cattle,  
He raided herds of buck. (12)  
The one who gets stiff! (13)  
The one who was cooked in the deep pot of Ntombazi,  
He was cooked and got stiff.  
The one who goes along making fires and leaving behind  
conflagrations,  
Who when he was rubbed flared up like a fire;  
There was no longer a beast lowing at little Ntombazi's,  
It was now lowing at our place at Bulawayo. (14)  
Our own bringer of poverty at Bulawayo,  
Who made Zwide destitute by great strides.

The sky that rumbled, the sky of Mageba, (15)  
That thundered above Nomangci mountain,  
It thundered behind the kraal at Kuqhobekeni and struck,  
It took the shields of the Maphela and Mankayiya,  
And the head decorations of the Zimpaka were left in the bushes;  
He devoured Nomahlanjana son of Zwide of the Maphelas, (16)  
He devoured Mphepha son of Zwide of the Maphelas,  
He devoured Nombengula son of Zwide of the Maphelas,  
He devoured Dayingubo son of Zwide of the Maphelas,  
He devoured Sonsukwana son of Zwide of the Maphelas,  
He devoured the chief's wife, daughter of Lubongo,  
He devoured Mtimona son of Gaqa of the Maphelas,

He devoured Mpondo-phumela-kwezinde of the Maphelas,  
He devoured Ndengezi-mashumi of the Maphelas,  
He devoured Sihla- mthini-munye of Zwide's people,  
He devoured Nqwangube son of Lundiyane,  
He belonged to our side, having turned round his shield.  
Return, Trickster, indeed you have finished this matter,  
As for Zwide, you have made him into a homeless criminal,  
And now today you have done the same to the son... (17)  
Young raging one of Nbaba!  
He lives in a great rage,  
And his shield he keeps on his knees;  
He has not let them settle down, he keeps them in a state of  
excitement,  
Those among the enemy and those at home.

Mandla kaNgome! (18)

He crossed over and founded the Ntontela regiment,  
They said he would not found it and he founded it.  
He who attempted the ocean without crossing it, (19)  
It was crossed by swallows and white people.  
He who sets out at midday, son of Ndaba, or even afternoon;  
Pursuer of a person and he pursues him persistently,  
For he pursued Mbemba born among the Gozas,  
He pursued him until he put him at Silutshana...

Axe of Senzangakhona,  
Which when it was chopping worked very energetically,

He who saw the cattle right on top of the hill,  
And brought them down by means of long spears and they came  
down...  
Little leopard that goes about preventing other little leopards at  
the fords.(20)  
Finisher off! Black finisher off!

from *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*  
collected by J. Stuart

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### Footnotes

1. **Dlungwana:** a praise-name meaning 'the One who Rages'.  
See [Ndaba](#).
2. **Mbelebele brigade:** Mbelebelebeni was one of Shaka's military barracks.
3. **Menzi:** the word means 'Creator' and is a praise-name of Senzangakhona, Shaka's father.
4. **The Mashobas:** the name of the village where Shaka first became prominent.
5. **The attacker:** the people listed in these lines were all rival clan-leaders whom Shaka defeated.
6. **The Young Viper:** one of [Ndaba's](#) praises, here used also of Shaka. The five-fold repetition in the lines which follow is overwhelmingly impressive in performance.
7. **Painful stabber:** one of Senzangakhona's praises here applied also to Shaka and emphasising the breadth of his military reputation.

8. **Phunga and Mugeba:** the names of ancestors.
9. **The colours** may refer to Shaka's bloody appearance in battle.
10. **The kicking of this beast:** this is striking as the only praise in the whole poem which implies criticism of Shaka's restlessness.
11. **Hawk that I saw:** the following lines refer once again to rival clan leaders whom Shaka defeated.
12. **Herds of buck:** the implication is that Shaka was fast enough to capture buck.
13. **He who gets stiff:** the reference is to Zwide, whose mother was Ntombazi. This line introduces the section of 30 lines dealing with the defeat of Zwide.
14. **Bulawayo:** Shaka's capital.
15. **The sky that rumbled:** the Praise-Poet sets the scene for the battle, describing the storm breaking over the battle site as an image of Shaka's army.
16. The following long list of names is of the sons of Zwide who were killed.
17. **The same to the son:** Shaka defeated the remnant of the Ndwandwe clan at a further battle in 1826.
18. **Mandla kaNgome:** a praise-name which may mean Mighty Power.
19. **He who attempted the ocean:** Shaka despatched a diplomatic mission to King George IV of Britain in 1827.
20. **Other little leopards at the fords:** the meaning is that Shaka controlled the whole country, river passages being key strategic points in Zululand.

## IN PRAISE OF SORGHUM

*Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Bakiga](#), [Farming](#), [Rwanda](#), [Uganda](#).*

A Rukiga farmers' song in praise of sorghum, one of their staple crops, from the Bakiga "people of the mountains", who straddle the border between northern Ruanda and southern Uganda. Sorghum is a drought-resistant and heat-tolerant grain, used for food, animal fodder, the production of alcoholic beverages, and more recently, biofuels.

Sorghum, sorghum, O sorghum,  
sorghum and Kiga are one. [\(1\)](#)  
When you have a guest  
you give him sorghum beer.  
Through the upturned soil  
two shoots first show themselves.  
During the rains  
the tiny plant swells and trembles.  
More shoots emerge  
to peer at sun and moon.

The farmer watches keenly  
this life-giving plant, mother of people,  
from whose juice grows the dark blood  
that nourishes young and old.

As the rains endure and weeds multiply,  
he must clean his plot,  
toiling through torrents,  
resting only in the torrid night,  
till the plant begins to flower  
and a crown of berries,  
iridescent green to copper,  
forms its spear head (2)  
over grass and pollen-grain.  
The season's march brings birds, so many birds.  
They soar, dive, perch and peck.  
They plunder the lovely sorghum fruit.  
They sing in discords and in chorus  
"O happy season of harvest time".  
Cuckoos, weavers, crows and partridges –  
they fly, they mate, they feed.  
O merry time, O sorghum!"  
Then with his curved blade,  
singing and whistling among the stalks,  
the farmer fells the sorghum.  
Fat, happy women chop off the berry, (3)  
youths carry it home.  
When the brew is ready  
men suck the juice through tubes.  
They sing, shout, groan and howl,  
they stoop, dance and lie down,  
they collapse under the heavy, powerful weight.

Who cares? "It's harvest time,"  
sing women in the inner room, dancing in praise.  
from *Pulsations, an East African Anthology of Poetry*,  
Arthur Kemoli (ed),  
(Nairobi, 1969)

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### Footnotes

1. The Bakiga people.
2. The sorghum stands like a spear planted in the soil, high above other grasses and flowers.
3. Being fat is a sign of prosperity.

# SONG OF THE ZAKKAMA TO THE SULTAN OF BORNO

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Bornu](#), [Kanuri](#), [Nigeria](#).

An extract from a Kanuri Praise-Poem from the ancient kingdom of Bornu in northern Nigeria (c.f., [The Sultan of Bornu](#), [Queen Gumsu](#), [The Yerima Mohamadu](#), [In Praise of Yerima Aji](#), and [The Song Sung to Kaigama Anterashi, son of Lima](#)). The Sultan had three official praise singers, who walked beside him procession, or stood before him in audience. Their titles, in order of precedence, were Ngijima, Babuma and Zakkama. The praises are addressed by the Zakkama to Sultan Aman Alimi, who reigned 1793-1810.

You, son of Gumsu, Gumsu Amina, daughter of Talba, you Ibrahim,  
Have attained to your father's place among the great.  
One rainy season gives seven harvests, [\(1\)](#)  
A he-goat gives milk and an oxen gives milk.  
Because of his power, you men of his set forth to war,  
Because of his good fortune, you set forth to war.  
You, son of Haji, who are the owner of Ngeleru,  
whose mother was Gumsu, [\(2\)](#)  
Gumsu Amina, Talba's daughter,  
You have attained to the greatness of your father Arri, son of Umar,  
And Amadu was Arri's son;

You have attained to your father's greatness,  
And Ibrahim was Amadu's son,  
You have attained to your father's greatness,  
Son of Dalatu, Mai Arri of Minarge town,  
You have every attribute of power.  
To the East, we look to worship, pray, give alms and sit in congregation, [\(3\)](#)  
Today, you hold it with a rod of gold.  
The West, the world's back,  
You hold with a rod of gold.  
The North, the world's foot,  
You hold with a rod of gold.  
The South, the world's head,  
Today you hold with a rod of gold.  
May Allah put a future of health before you,  
May Allah leave a memory of happiness behind you:  
Reign in heath, the health of Fusam, [\(4\)](#)  
Long life, good fortune, perfect health be yours,  
Reign amidst happiness.

Here is the poem in the original Kanuri:

Gunsumi, Gumsu Amina  
Talbarambe Brem,  
Kumbi abanembe mbulumi.  
Ningeli tilowa, kembigelanze tulurwa,  
Dallan chamwa, dalolan chamwa  
Kermainzero safurnogobe,

Kentabonzero safurnogobe.  
Hajigana Ngeleruma, Gumsumi,  
Gumsum Amina, Talbarambe  
Abanem Arri Umarmibe kumbiga yikumbulumi,  
Amadu Arrugana;  
Ananembe kumbiga mbulumi,  
Burra Amadumi,  
Ananembe kumbiga mbulumi,  
Dalatumi, Mai Arri Minargema,  
Kumbi kanduluro mbulumi.  
Gidi, addinam, sallaram, sadagaram, kutubaram,  
Kusketu wazila dinarben tunnomi.  
Fute, ngabo duniabega,  
Wazila dinarben tunnomi.  
Yela, shi duniabega,  
Wazila dinarben tunnomi.  
Anum, kela duniabega,  
Kusketu wazila dinarben tunnomi.  
Allah fugunemye lafiya,  
Allah kadugunemye lafiya  
Lafiyaga, lafiyala Fusamlam degai,  
Kabun, kentabon, lafiyala degai,  
Lafiyala lafiyala degai.

from *Kanuri Songs* 30-31,  
(Lagos, 1926),  
J.R. Patterson

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### Footnotes

1. These formal praises could be absurdly flattering. This, and the following, are obviously impossible, but are meant to suggest the productiveness of the Sultan's reign.
2. Gumsu was the title given to the Sultan's senior wife. This, though, is the same Gumsu as in the praises addressed to "Queen Gumsu", as the lineage makes clear.
3. That is, to Mecca.
4. Fusam was the daughter of Umar (mentioned in the lineage), who became Sultan at the age of 60 and is said to have reigned for 60 years, his long life attributed to the care taken of him by his daughter.

# INCANTATION TO GAIN POPULARITY

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Ijala](#), [Nigeria](#), [Yoruba](#).

This is another Yoruba *ijalá* that was first translated into English in Ulli Beier's *Black Orpheus* magazine. Ulli Beier was a German-Jewish scholar who moved to Nigeria in 1950 to teach Phonetics at the University of Ibadan. In 1957 he founded the magazine *Black Orpheus*, the name inspired by "Orphée Noir", an essay that he had read by the French intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre. *Black Orpheus* was the first African literary journal in English, publishing contemporary authors such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe as well as oral poetry from Nigeria. This Yoruba *ijalá* poem appeared in issue 19 of *Black Orpheus*.

You cannot dispute the forest with a rat.

You cannot dispute the savannah with the buffalo.

You cannot dispute his father's title with Olukere. (1)

You cannot play with a snake.

You cannot dance with a praying mantis.

A small child cannot beat his mother.

An old man cannot get annoyed with his own shit.

A woman cannot look at the penis, without being glad.

Look at me, then, and be glad!

The children are enjoying themselves with the birds.

Children of the house, elders of the house,

Men, women, old and young,

You cannot see a new-born babe without happiness.

I am now a new-born babe.  
Come and dance with me.

from *Black Orpheus* 19

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## Footnotes

1. The paramount ruler.

## THE BRIDE'S ARRIVAL

Posted in [Relationships](#) and tagged [Swaziland](#), [Wedding-Songs](#), [Zulu](#).

Three Zulu songs, very commonly sung by members of the bridegroom's family, welcoming the bride in teasing terms to her new home.

I

You have reached the place of weariness,

You have arrived and you will get weary!

You have left your father's house,

You have deserted the hut of your mother.

## II

You will need a rope to tether him!

*I-yo-i tshi-tshi-tshi!*

You will have to tie him up!

If you want to call him husband

You will have to tie him up!

## III

Hey, young bride!

Yes?

Let's go and draw water.

I'm not going, I'm ill.

Hey, young bride! You're wanted in the bridal chamber!

*Lazy little lump goes toddling off!*

*Little bandy-legs goes toddling off!*

Hey, young bride!

Yes?

Let's go and cultivate.

I'm not going, I'm ill.

Hey, young bride! You're wanted in the bridal chamber!

*Lazy little lump goes toddling off!*

*Little bandy-legs goes toddling off!*

# THE BRIDE'S DEPARTURE (KAMBA)

*Posted in Relationships and tagged Kamba, Kenya, Wedding-Songs.*

A Kamba girls' song from Kenya, danced at weddings when the bride is being escorted to her new home. The singer, little Kitanga, tells the bride Mulau and all her friends that it is time to stop grieving over Mulau's departure.

Good-day Mulau, Nzungi's daughter

Change heart,

we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!

Even if you had been born in my house

I would have let you go now you are carrying a child.

Change heart,

we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!

It is I, Kitanga, Mumo's daughter, don't despise me  
for being so small,

I will soon be as big as Ngulumbu.

Change heart,

we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!

Good-day Kitemu, Mbunza's daughter,

You who should be called a stone.

Change heart,

we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!

Good-day Kakwasi, Mumo's daughter.

Change heart,  
we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!  
Start the dance.  
Change heart,  
we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!  
Good-day Mutile, Ndunga's daughter, just answer me,  
Don't despise me for being so small,  
It is I, I will soon be as big as Ngulumbu.  
Change heart,  
we have wept enough over losing you, ee you!

## THE BRIDE'S DEPARTURE (HAUSA)

Posted in [Relationships](#) and tagged [Hausa](#), [Nigeria](#), [Wedding-Songs](#).

A Hausa wedding song from northern Nigeria, sung by the bride's girl friends as she leaves her father's house in tears for her new husband's compound. The 'Great hunt' (in [No. III](#)) refers metaphorically to the successful search for a suitable husband.

### I

From this year, you won't go dancing,  
From this year, you won't go to the dance,  
From this year, you won't go dancing,  
You'll dance only on the path to the river.

*From where you're tossing cowrie-shells,  
From where you're tossing cowrie-shells,  
From your compound you'll hear our drumming under  
the silk-cotton tree,  
But you won't be able to come.*

### II

The lucky one, the favourite,  
The lucky one of the kin,  
The lucky one was betrothed,  
The lucky one got her!  
Resign yourself, patient girl!  
Marriage is an ill you can't revenge,  
Only death will bring relief!

### III

You have had your gifts,  
Get to your house,  
Go and taste the chickens of your husband's house!  
*The great hunt was a good hunt,  
The great hunt brought meat:  
In the great hunt we caught,  
(The great hunt was a good hunt),  
We caught, we caught,  
Ten hares, ten ground squirrels,  
Ten buffaloes, ten gazelles,*

*Ten elephants, ten antelopes,  
And ten hyenas! We caught them!  
The great hunt was good!*

## IN PRAISE OF CATTLE

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Cattle](#), [Uganda](#), [Women's Songs](#).

**NOTE:** A more detailed version of this poem, including the vernacular, can be found [here](#).

A Bahima women's Praise-Poem from Uganda. The chorus is repeated after each praise. The first five praises (Lines 1-12) refer to the whole herd of cattle, after which the singer proceeds to praise each animal separately. Many of them have their own praise-names (e.g. 'She Whose Horns Encircle Like Handcuffs'), and the general description in this Praise-Poem is marvellously vivid.

They are as greedy as Ishe-Katabazi; [\(1\)](#)

I want them to graze in the newly burnt grass of Rwanda.

*When they stampede they are as loud as the morning rain;  
They are searching for the progeny of the spotted bull.*

They stand still, graceful with their encircling horns  
Like queens preparing their curls.

They are dressed in spotted cloth;

They are well-behaved as they play in the rain.

The light rain has given them shade;  
They have kept secret the new grass in the valleys.

They have spent the day at the muziizi trees of Katooma;  
When they come home loneliness vanishes.

She Who Wears The Bell and She Whose Horns Encircle Like  
Handcuffs

Thanked him for bringing them from an evil country.

How straight are the horns of the daughter of The One Who  
Excels All Others!

The horns of The One Who Gambols are spotless.

The reed-like horns of the daughter of The Spotted One stand  
erect;

There is no dust on the horns of The One Who is Made Forgetful  
By Dancing.

She stretches out her horns till they reach to the Pleiades; [\(2\)](#)  
When she draws them back we can see Rumaranku.

She Whose Horns Reach To The Stars is graceful in her circlet;  
She Whose Horns Are Too Wide For The Watering Trough has  
departed.

To long for a thing and to see it

Is as though you had seen Kihondwa and Rukari. [\(3\)](#)

I used to long for an active cow;  
Now I am blessed by the daughter of Karanga's beast.

At Bijinja which faces Mukande,  
She Who Drives All Cattle Before Her walks in Kiganda style.

She Who Goes At Speed To Her Shed, the brown cow, the  
daughter of the spotted one,  
Is like a new bark cloth, soft as though smoked.

Do not cut the tips of her horns and thus spoil them;  
The Fighter tyrannises over her neighbours.

When they were gambolling in the hills,  
Those who were cold whistled.

At little Nshwere which faces Mpabura,  
They took themselves to the troughs of others when their water  
was gone.

Here you are, you trouble makers, the insignificant ones;  
You have begun again upsetting your neighbours.

You should give them a second bell;  
Those with few cattle should separate.

She Who Seeks No Quarrel lows like the palace harp  
As she stays in the sheds.

She who plays the harp first praises herself,  
Why then have I forgotten The One Who Dries Her White Horn?

When they started running to Kanyanya,  
They left behind the old men with their shelters.  
*When they stampede they are as loud as the morning  
rain;*  
*They are searching for the progeny of the spotted bull.*

by H.F. Morris 'The Praise Poems of Bahima Women'  
from *African Language Studies* VI (1965);

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#### Footnotes

1. **Ishe-Katabazi** is the hero of many Bahima stories, a man who comes to grief through his own greed.
2. **The Pleiades** and **Rumaranku** are the names of stars.
3. **Kihondwa and Rukari** were the clan's ancestors, who lived in the early eighteenth century.

# SHAVA MUSEYAMWA

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Shona](#), [Zimbabwe](#).

Another version of the praises of the Shava clan of the Shona people of Zimbabwe (see also [Thank You, Shava](#)). Clan Praises are addressed not to specific kings as in the Zulu tradition, but to the whole lineage. At the heart of the praise is the totem associated with the clan, in this case the Eland. Museyamwa is one of the dynasties within the clan.

Thank you, my Support!

Thank you eland, my dear tawny one.

Bless you, Mutekedza, the honoured dead who are in Buhera. (1)

Thank you, you of the bracelet of white beads, bull eland; (2)

Going with power and grace as the noise when your knees bend reveals like a region full of wasps; (3)

Bless you, great beast, those of the tails that protect the whole body in their sweep.

When you cross the river. the water climbs the hills in its excitement.

Those who are hunted by those with horns of evil intent.

When they turn a ridge, hoeing while running, the very soil is amazed. (4)

Who cry even for those who have insulted and provoked them, ready to negotiate.

Their tears never fall openly on the ground revealing their real feelings;

But if they do fall, they will have to be requited in human blood.

We acknowledge gratefully you owners of the new saplings,  
parents who have given the young such good manners;  
Who bear white horns, white as the moon, a sign of your kind  
hearts;  
So the things you have done for me have been seen, not only by  
me,  
but by all my people whom you have served in me.  
You hunters of good things;  
Indeed, this is what has been done, Sarirambi, the one who  
remains firm. (5)

from *Mambo Book of Zimbabwean Verse in English*,

Colin & O-lan Style,  
(Mambo Press, 1986).

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## Footnotes

1. Places the Shona inhabited on their migration to their present home, and where ancestors are buried. As always, the praise of the totem is intertwined with the clan's history.
2. Elands have white markings like bangles on their legs.
3. Elands move accompanied by a loud clicking or buzzing sound. It is speculated the animal's weight causes the two halves of its hooves to splay apart, snapping together when the animal raises its leg.
4. When elands run, their weight turns up the soil as though they were hoeing.

5. *Sarirambi*: An ancestor's name.

## THANK YOU, SHAVA

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Shona](#), [Zimbabwe](#).

Praises of the Shava clan of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Clan Praises are addressed not to specific kings, as in the Zulu tradition, but to the whole lineage. Every member of the clan deserves praise after rendering some important service. At the heart of the praise, and providing many of its metaphors, is the totem associated with the clan, in this case the Eland antelope, so the poem becomes, in part, the praises of the animal.

We'd like to thank Dr Mickias T. Musiyiwa, who teaches in the Dept of African Languages at the University of Zimbabwe, and also the website of the [Poetry International Foundation](#) in the Netherlands where we found this poem.

Thank you, Shava,

The Great Eland bull, The Runaway. [\(1\)](#)

Thank you very much The-one-who-carries heavy-loads. [\(2\)](#)

Those who challenged each other at Janga, [\(3\)](#)

Those who were given wives in the country of the Njanja people.

Thank you my dear Mutekedza, those in uHera Mukonde.

It has been done Great Animal,

those with tails that are intimate with body, [\(4\)](#)

One with sounding feet, one who combs wasps. [\(5\)](#)

Those who chase those who portend death, as compensation for a corpse.

One-who-likes-men, hunted only by those who do so with caution.

Those who do not wrap women with lies,

Those who embrace and bend women,

Those who yearn for the original one,

Those with tears that are too sacred fall to the ground,

But if they fall, they must be accompanied with human blood.

We are so thankful those in Matenhere, [\(6\)](#)

Those who lie in the hills of Mbwenya,

Thank you those those of White Bangles, Great Eland Bull, [\(7\)](#)

Crossing the river after the waters have ascended the mountains.

We are so thankful those in Muchimbare, those of Guruuswa, [\(8\)](#)

Those with white settlements that resemble the whiteness of the full moon.

It is your custom to be kind, Shava Mukonde, those in Gombe

Your kindness has been seen, great hunter, it has been done,

Mbiru. [\(9\)](#)

No, your kindness has been seen, Sarirambi, it has been done

Nyashanu.

Here is the Shona version, *Shava – Museyamwa*, Museyamwa is one of the Shava dynasties.

Maita Shava,

Mhofu yomukono, Ziwewera

Hekani Mutekedza

Vakatekedzana paJanga  
Vakapiwa vakadzi munyika yavaNjanja  
Hekani Mutekedza, vari uHera Mukonde  
Zvaitwa Mhukahuru,  
vemiswe inochenga miviri  
Ziendanetyaka, mutunhu une mago  
Vanovangira vashura vhu, kutsivira mutumbi  
Chidavarume, vanovhimwa navanonyanga  
Vasakamonera vakadzi dzenhema  
Vanomonera vakadzi dzamangondi  
Vanochemera wavatanga  
Vane misodzi inodonha pasi  
Kuti yadonha yoda nhevedzo yeromunhu ropa  
Tonotenda vari Matenhere  
Vari pazvikomo zveMbwenya  
Maita veTsambochena, Mhofu yomukono  
Kuyambuka rwizi mvura yakwira makomo  
Totenda voMuchimbare, veGuruuswa  
Vane nzangachena kunge mwedzi wejenachena  
Kuziva zvenyu VaShava Mukonde, vari Gombe  
Zvaonekwa vahombarume, zvaitwa Mbiru  
Aiwa, zvaonekwa Sarirambi, zvaitwa Nyashanu.

from *Shona Praise Poetry*,  
Hodza, A.C and Fortune, G.,  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

### Footnotes

1. Elands can far outrun hunters.
2. Elands are heavy-built, with a long mane.
3. These three lines record places the Shona inhabited on their migration to their present home, and where ancestors are buried. As always, the praise of the totem is intertwined with the clan's history.
4. An eland's tail looks like a continuation of its backbone.
5. Eland herds are accompanied by a loud clicking or buzzing sound. It is speculated the animal's weight causes the two halves of its hooves to splay apart, snapping together when the animal raises its leg.
6. The names in the following lines mark places where the Shona have lived and where ancestors lie.
7. Elands have white markings like bangles on their legs.
8. **Guruuswa**, meaning 'land of high grass', traditional ancestral home of the Shona from which they migrated to Zimbabwe.
9. **Mbiru**: The name of an ancestor, as in the following line.

# THE SONG SUNG TO KAIGAMA ANTERASHI, SON OF LIMA

*Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Bornu](#), [Kanuri](#), [Nigeria](#).*

A Kanuri Praise-Poem from the ancient kingdom of Bornu in northern Nigeria (see also [The Sultan of Bornu](#), [Queen Gumsu](#), [The Yerima Mohamadu](#), and [In Praise of Yerima Aji](#)). Kaigama was the title of the Sultan's chief slave, commander in chief of the army and responsible for the defence and general administration of the southern part of the Bornu kingdom.

Kaigama Anterashi,  
Star of the morning;  
Chief slave, the rallying point of the spearmen, the hub of war. (1)  
His town Chirami, his character that of a Sultan:  
Morning and evening he is in the midst of the noise of war;  
A chieftain, the flowing embers of the Sultan's Council;  
His friendship a deathtrap, his friend short-lived; (2)  
If a hawk snatches up a chicken,  
Following its tracks devolves upon the Kaigama,  
Holder of the first of the Sultan's Offices,  
less than a Sultan, but greater than all the prosperous men. (3)  
If the chief slave wages war, he does not do it in vain,  
If he does not engage in war, his idleness is not useless.  
Chief Slave, if I call you slave,  
I mean the slave of the Sultan; (4)

Chief slave, if I call you bush cow, (5)  
You are a man with the heart of a bush cow among men;  
Chief slave, if I say your town is Ngumfane, I mean you are the forehead of all the slaves;  
Chief slave, patience is your attribute,  
Patience like that of the dromedary. (6)  
Chief slave, in your hand is a large-headed spear:  
Chief slave, you practice witchcraft but its source is the palm of your hand:  
Chief slave, my master, war is your hobby,  
Your play, play with a shining spear.  
You, owner of the town of Zarara, your attributes those of a Sultan, (7)  
You and a Sultan do not eat from one calabash,  
Neither do you eat what a Sultan leaves. (8)  
Sun of greatness, seat of power,  
Embers of the Sultan's assembly.  
If the Sultan counts as ten large whole kola-nuts,  
The Kaigama counts as twenty halves: (9)  
If he and the Sultan are sitting together and their horses are fighting,  
He will not catch the Sultan's horse,  
Nor will the Sultan catch his: (10)  
Some other men will catch them.  
These are the privileges of a chief slave.

Here is the original in Kanuri:

Kaigama Anterashi,  
Wajiro shite shilogo fajarbe;  
Dagum, kazaga njuomaramma,  
Njuroma kabumbe.  
Chiramima, kenjugunem maibe:  
Shiri burguwa, kajiriye burguwa;  
Gongurshi, kentuful kendegeibe;  
Maskete kirmube, soba kam kabu ganawabe;  
Tata kugwibe damgaye gojiyaye,  
Kadutu kela Kaigamaben,  
Tamu tamogata kagelabe,  
Mairo ganago, galibuwa sammaro kurago.  
Dagumte gerjiyaye, butu bago,  
Gerziniyaye, butu bago.  
Dagum, niro kaliya gulngiyaye  
Kaliya maibo gulngo;  
Dagum, niro ngaran gulngiyaye  
Ni ngaran kongowabe;  
Dagum, Ngumfanema, nite ngum kaliawabede gulngo;  
Dagum, ni kanadiwa,  
Kanadinem karigimu kutungubewa.  
Dagum, nite rum muskonwa:  
Dagum, nite kara karadinwa:  
Dagumni, kabumnte bikenem.  
Bikenemte biske kazaga bulbe,

Kema Zararama, kamanze maibe,  
Niwa maiwa kumo tilon buwu bago,  
Kalwadi maibeye bum bago.  
Shemsu, kursiyu,  
Kentuful kendegeibe.  
Maite goriya megugaiya,  
Kaigamate fali findi:  
Shiwa maiwa neptsanaga, furwanza zagadinyaye,  
Fur maibe tsettai bago,  
Maiye kaguze tsettai bago:  
Kam gede kentamago.  
Atemade dangungo.

from *Kanuri Songs* (Lagos, 1926), 14-15,  
J.R. Patterson

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### Footnotes

1. As army commander.
2. Because the Kaigama's friends would be expected to follow him in war.
3. Much of this praise is devoted to making fine distinctions or rank between the Sultan and the Kaigama.
4. The Sultan's slave is no ordinary slave.
5. The much feared short-horned buffalo.
6. Although he is the chief slave, he is, after all, a slave.

7. He is like a Sultan in his authority over towns like Ngumfane and Zarara.
8. A neat distinction. He does not eat with the Sultan, but nor (like other men) does he eat the Sultan's leftovers.
9. Another neat distinction. Two halves of a kola nut, the nut which marks hospitality, are less than a whole. The guest is presented with a whole one, and it is for him to divide it, and distribute the two halves.
10. When it comes to horsemanship, a military attribute, they are equals.

## IN PRAISE OF AREOGUN

*Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Nigeria](#), [Ogun](#), [Yoruba](#).*

An Oríkì in praise of Dada Areogun, one of the most famous Yoruba carvers in wood (1880-1954). Born in the village of Osi, now known as Osi-Ilorin in Ekiti state. See the [Ere-Yoruba](#) site for more information about Dada Areogun. We'd also like to thank the [Yoruba-Culture](#) website where we first came across this oríkì. The artist's real name was Dada, a traditional name Yoruba peoples reserve for a new born with abundant curly or knotted hair. Àrẹ̀ògún is a shortened form of Àrẹ̀ògún-yànnà, and means 'one who makes money with the tools of Ogun, and spends it liberally'. Ogun is the Yoruba deity of iron, and thus the patron god of all professions that

employ the use of metal tools, including blacksmiths, warriors, hunters, carvers, etc. See also the poem, [Ogun, God of War](#).

Dada, who has Ogun's money to spend. (1)

The end of his cloth is knotted like an infant's umbilical cord.

One who awakens to a comfortable life in Igbeyin. (2)

Son of those who possess palm oil.

The expert, whose sculptures dazzle the beholder.

He made his reputation in Ijero.

He confronts the wicked bravely.

He carved and was given a horse.

Dada, who knows how to dance.

He carves hard wood as though he were carving a soft calabash.

He fed his younger children as though he were feeding an older person.

The fear of death does not make having a goiter pleasant.

The fear of death makes the removal of the goiter frightening. (3)

If one wants to remove it, he must cut himself and risk death.

Iremogun [Ogun], who turns wood into money.

Iremogun consulted divination at Ire.

Iremogun, native of the town where people are well fed.

Oye Olufadi. Obesity does not befit a man. (4)

The senior chieftaincy title was sold to them at Ire.

Son of those who came early. (5)

Natives of Ilagbede. (6)

Iremogun consulted Odu at Ire.

It was a quarrel that took Ogun to Iresa.

What has happened to the Ogun house of the blacksmiths?  
Iremogun, native of the town where people are well fed. (7)  
It is not good for a man to wake up in the morning and remain at home.  
But it is appropriate for Olufadi to do it. (8)  
Son of those who prosper from little.  
Son of those who cough like elephants. (9)  
Iremogun, native of the town where people are well fed.  
One whose mother lived to see his greatness.  
One who knows how to carve appropriately for kings,  
Who carved for the Owa and gained favor. (10)  
Son of those who are wily.  
Son of those who worship Oyegbe and do not worship falsely. (11)  
As in a favorable divination, he has nothing to hide.

2. *Igbeyin* and *Ijero* (line 6) are towns in Ekiti state.
3. A *goiter* is a swelling of the neck or larynx resulting from enlargement of the thyroid gland. The metaphor here expresses the risks a carver takes with his art, whether to cut or not to cut.
4. *Oye Olufadi*: A title
5. i.e., whose ancestors were the first settlers.
6. *Ilagbede*: The traditional home of blacksmiths.
7. *Iremogun*: Ire in Ekiti state, dedicated to Ogun because it is a town of blacksmiths.
8. *Olufadi*: Because he is a carver.
9. Who speak with great authority.
10. *Owa*: The title of the ruler of Ekiti state.
11. *Oyegbe*: A hill, home of a local deity.

From Rowland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal, and John Pemberton III,  
eds.,  
*The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African  
Arts*,  
(The Smithsonian Institution, 1994)

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### Footnotes

1. *Ogun*: He is blessed by Ogun because his craft makes use of metal tools.

## LIYONGO'S SELF-PRAISES

Posted in [Praise-Poetry](#) and tagged [Kenya](#), [Liyongo](#), [Swahili](#).

The nineteenth century Swahili poet Sheik Abdallah (d. 1820), wrote a poem called 'Song of Liyongo', in five-line stanzas, in which the first three lines of each stanza were his own work, while the closing two lines were by Liyongo, as recorded in the oral tradition. In the version presented here, the closing lines of each stanza are presented separately, without Sheik Abdallah's additions.

They are coherent and eloquent on their own, and are probably the oldest 'text' presented on this website. There are other poems referring to ancient rulers and events, and transmitted orally. But they were not recorded before the late 19C.

The reference to fetters in lines 21-22 suggest the poem dates from when Liyongo was imprisoned. For Liyongo, the legendary Swahili hero, see [‘The Legend of Liyongo’](#).

Oh ! much, much, I begin with many, as well as going forward to finish, child of good things. (1)

Child, do you see your goat in the pathway, its horns held and a milker milking it?

My child, do you see his vileness standing, without his consenting to die, and the regrets that follow?

He who strives for his rank, having rank, strives against wrong after wrong, until his soul meets its fate.

I melt like wax when I am held, I melt exceedingly, I am bad like war when I hear evil speaking.

I am bold, and love the acceptance of death, for fear of disgrace and of the enemy's speaking ill of me.

I am a young lion who loves the acceptance of death, for fear of disgrace and of the enemies seeing me retreat.

I am a young falcon, I am not seen when I pounce, (2)  
the evil bird that preys upon the flock.

I am like a young vulture, who shares with the wild beasts, (3)  
and they that eat grass in the valleys and hills.

Would that I were an eagle flying in the air, eating small animals, even to the lion, chief of the beasts.

But both my feet are in fetters, and on my neck I wear a chain of iron.

The boiling of the water roars in the deep sea, you cannot stand where the wave dashes over Ungama. (4)

Let not your heart hesitate to surprise your victim, and if you kill not your enemies they will eat flesh. (5)

Then when you perceive the fire of war roaring, la Allah! it is I who light as well as extinguish it.

I draw myself together and cast myself among the bad, and I slaughter a slaughtering and satiate my heart.

Fear not their arrow nor their shining spears, there are many who strike down, and turn and come back again.

How many that feared in war have fallen, and those that stood firm have got through safely.

He meets with destitution and confusion and vileness by fearing for his life, and his end comes to remove him.

The lion cries with a cry, roaring out a great cry which brings pity home to a man.

The great male lion strives for his object and his rank, he strives for his object till his eyes are closed. (6)

I fear not their bows and spears that shine, many are they who are cast down, and who flee and go backward.

I fear not their thousands, I alone it is who am myself a thousand by being brave.

I make my breast my shield; where they are pressed together I

divide them,  
without fearing the thorns or prickles to prick me.  
Dying is of God, and the snare that takes him, not of the men of  
this world,  
though a thousand arrows should pierce you.  
They are not lions with tails, and hair growing on the neck and  
back,  
but lions are heroes, who have nothing to do with the skins of  
beasts.  
He will get a reward, which the bountiful Lord will pay him  
when the days are accomplished for repaying bad and good.

Here is the Swahili text, *Liyongo sifa Mwenyewe*. Note that the  
final word of each line rhymes throughout.

Ai wanji wanji nazawanji kisiza wanji; ma kadiliza kasiliza,  
mwanangwa mema.  
Mwanangwa mbonaye mbuzi wako katika mwendo; uki-metwa  
pembe na mkami akimkamaa.  
Mwanangwa mbonaje muhakara wakwe wiimile; asirathi kufa  
na mayuto yakaya nyuma.  
Mtetea cheo mwenyi cheo ateteapo; hambiji ni nawi hatta roho  
nengakoma.  
Ni mwofu wa ta nishikapo na oa mno; ni mui wa kondo sikiapo  
mbi kalima.  
Ni mwana shajighi mpendeza nyemi za kufa; kwa kucha mpeo  
na adui wa kunisema.

Ni mwana asadi mpendeza nyemi za kufa; kwa kucha mpeo na  
adui kumbuya nyuma.  
Ninga mana kozi sioneki niwakuapo; ni mui wa nyuni naakua  
katika jama.  
Ninga mana taya shiriken na mana tope; na mlisha yani lenyi  
tani na zingulima.  
Ningali kipungu niushile katika anga; kila nyama toto hatta  
simba mkuu nyama.  
Bali muu yangu yu mawili kuwa pinguni; na shingoni mwangu  
nawishiwa peto la chuma.  
Tufutufu mayi kizimbwini yawanguruma; ha'mwezi kwima  
luishapo wimbi Ungama.  
Sipepese moyo kupepesa kwa uuwayo; mtawapoua aduizo  
wakula nyama.  
Pindi uonapo moto zita ukinguruma; la Allah, ni mimi niwashao  
maa kazima.  
Naikutakuta kayatia katika wawi; katinda kitinda ari-thisha  
wangu mtima.  
Siche mata yao na mafumo yanganawiri; mangi mafumati na  
magao maoya nyuma.  
Wangapi wachao utamboni wangamiao; na wazimbiao utamboni  
wakisiamu.  
Akuta mpeo na hizaya na muhakara; kwa kuche roho na  
mwisoe yaja kutama.  
Simba uwalia kwa kilio akivumiza; kilio kikuu kifishacho mtu  
huruma.  
Simba bora ndume watetea jaha na cheo; watetea jaha hatta

mato yakafunama.

Sichi mata zao na mafumo yanganawiri; mangi mafumati na magao mawi ya nyuma.

Sichi kikwi chao nami ume ndio nilio moyo wangu kikwi kwa ajili ya kushagama.

Kifa tenda ngao paziwapo kipazua; nisikhofu miwa wala tome za kunitoma.

Kufa kwa Muungu na shabuka limkutao; si kwa wali-mwengu mivi kikwi ingakufuma.

Si simba mikia wameao vuzi na singa; simba mashujaa wasabili ngozi na nyama.

Wapata ajira kumlipa Mola karimu; siku ya majaza wali-pwapo wawi na wema.

adapted from Edward Steere,  
*Swahili Tales* (London, 1871), 456-464

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### Footnotes

1. The poem is addressed to a child, probably his son, and the meaning of the opening words is that he is overwhelmed by how much he has to say.
2. A falcon in stoop seems to appear from nowhere.
3. The vulture eats carcasses, as do jackals and other creatures.
4. *Ungama*: A bay on the Kenyan coast, between Malindi and Lamu.

5. They will kill you in turn. Victory, in African poems, is often expressed as “devouring the enemy”, which has given rise to many misunderstandings.
6. Until death.