Uwaridi kwani? ('Why 'Uwaridi'?') Digital Literary Networks and the App-Propriation of Swahili Popular Novels

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Introduction

"Mnh! Hii ni nini sasa Inspekta…inakuwa kama *Science Fiction*…? […]
"Tatizo ni kwamba kinatokea kweli afande … na […] sisi wenyewe hatuna ufafanuzi sahihi juu ya kinachotokea…"

"Mnh! Now what is this, Inspector … is it like *Science Fiction*…? […]
"The problem is that it is really happening, Sir … and […] we ourselves do not have a correct explanation for what is happening…" (*Utata wa 9/12*, p. 157)

Publishing Swahili popular literature has changed rather drastically in the last fifteen years. In 2002, the idea that by 2017 popular novels would be accessed on individual smartphones by using an app might have provoked a reaction similar to that of two police officers in a fictional dialogue set in 1962, four decades earlier, confronted with a series of mysterious murders. In this essay, I will discuss one of the most recent innovations in digital literary publishing which might have appeared as "Science Fiction" only one and a half decade ago: a smartphone app called *Uwaridi*, run by a homonymous collective of writers. Responding to Mikhail Gromov's assessment in 2008 that Kenyan writers and publishers seemed to have taken the lead in both so-called 'serious' and 'popular' Swahili literature (cf. Gromov 2008: 6), I will show that Swahili literary activity – in the popular literature section – still remains a stronghold of Tanzanian writers and publishers.

Given that this new literature app has only been existing since March 2017, this essay presents first findings and hypotheses which seek to discuss the main opportunities and challenges for writers and readers of Swahili fiction arising from this innovation. In a 'rough ride' through the development of publishing Swahili popular literature since 1975, I will

present a periodization which suggests that the "app-ization" of Swahili popular literature arguably deserves to be seen as a new phase of publishing altogether. However, I will argue that so far it is not likely to outstage printed books. The main opportunities and challenges I will consider concern gender, cross-border relevance, and the repercussions of this app on the tenacious dichotomy of so-called "popular" versus "serious" literature. I will discuss an example of readers' reactions to the app on the web, and the way Hussein Tuwa, a highly acclaimed crime fiction writer and co-founder of the literary association behind the app, assesses this innovation roughly one year after its inception. More general questions to be tackled are: What could be the consequences of such an app on the reading habits, the "culture" of reading, the reading experience? In addition to these questions concerning the sociology and the mediality of popular literature, I will provide a reading of one of the novels included in the app, as one case study to start with. This particular case study will also make reference to the fact that the essay at hand is published in this particular journal, *Postcolonial Text*. In my discussion of Hussein Tuwa's novel *Utata wa 9/12* ('The Obscurity of 9/12'; 2013), which had a 'multimedial' publishing career before it was inserted into the app, I will argue that it can be read as a paradigmatic *postcolonial* text. However, the main focus of the article remains to investigate the prospects of smartphone publishing in the realm of Swahili creative fiction which can be perceived as "Science Fiction come true."

Of briefcases, gilded letters and fugaciousness

Printed newspaper serials have for a long time dominated the realm of publishing Swahili popular literature (see Reuster-Jahn 2008b). Apart from this mode of publication which continues to be widespread, I suggest periodizing Swahili popular literature into at least three phases until the inception of literary apps in 2017: the phase of "briefcase publishers", the phase of neoliberalisation of form and content associated with one particular writer, and the phase of Facebook publishing which exposes traits of fugaciousness.

The phase of "briefcase publishers" – a phrase I borrow from Emily Callaci's study – started in the 1970s, with a boom until the mid-1980s, when Swahili popular novels were increasingly printed as soft-cover books. These books were sold in the streets, mostly at newspaper stalls, and published by what Emily Callaci calls a "literary movement" of "briefcase publishers" who created a "street archive" of Dar es Salaam (cf. Callaci 2017). Writers like Hammie Rajab (1940-2011), and later Ben Rashidi Mtobwa (1958-2008), still the most highly acclaimed author of Swahili crime fiction, wrote, published, and distributed their work

themselves. Until the mid-1980s, this popular fiction market boomed and brought about considerable economic success. Ironically, the gradual neoliberalisation of the Tanzanian economy after 1985 did not have a positive effect on publishing popular literature (cf. Callaci 2015: 177). In fact, the whole publishing sector experienced a disastrous crisis which began around 1987, and which lasted more than a decade until around 1999. Apart from Ndanda Mission Press, very few publishers could continue their work with an output as significant as before, and after the year 2000, even their activity faded out (cf. Reuster-Jahn 2008a: 108). At around the same time, self-made writer, publisher and public orator Eric Shigongo (born 1969) initiated a veritable "revolution" in the realm of publishing popular fiction. His voluminous bilingual page-turners published both in newspapers and as hard copies (soft-cover books) made him popular in only a few years. Through his own company Global Publishers, started in 1998, he has built a media consortium which comprises five weekly tabloids which have also become available online. As a creative writer, he usually writes five novels at one time, each published in one of his tabloids (see Reuster-Jahn 2008b). His printed books – four so far – are usually about 500 pages long, and bear supposedly compelling, if not gonzo, titles like *Rais Anampenda Mke Wangu – The President Loves My Wife* (2003).

Typical features of Shigongo's novels are their unusual length of approximately 500 pages and their covers printed with fancy and glowing gilded letters. Much of the dialogues between the "aspiring" characters in these Swahili-language novels are given in English, with the Swahili translation within brackets (cf. Reuster-Jahn 2015). Shigongo's novels seem to mainly target the new middle class, which emerged after the neoliberal reforms in Tanzania, and all members of society who aspire to be part of the middle class. The underlying 'agenda' of these novels seems to be to impress the Tanzanian readership by the frequent use and peculiar usage of English, international settings and contexts, and romance in middle- and upper-class settings. Given the great economic success of this strategy, I call this tendency the "Shigongoization" of Swahili popular literature as the second phase to be sketched out here. The third phase is the trend of Facebook publishing, exemplified by the activities of one particular group of writers formed in the 2010s. This group started the website *Kona ya Riwaya* (Novel Corner) in 2012, and, after being hacked in September 2013, re-started it in the very same month as *Kona ya Riwaya Reloaded* (cf. Reuster-Jahn 2017: 276). This re-launched website provided three pieces per day, i.e. portions of a novel, with fixed publication times. This stringent publishing policy ceased on 17 September 2016 for reasons which will be explained below. The most renowned writers of this group were Ibrahim Gama, Beka Mfaume,

George Mosenya, and Hussein Tuwa. The main common strategy of this type of publishing was to publish some ten to twenty portions or pieces of a given novel, one piece per day, at a very specific time of the day (three times per day at 7 a.m., 12 a.m. and 6 p.m., each time a different novel), and then offer the whole novel as a printed book (cf. Reuster-Jahn 2017: ibid.). Sometimes the Facebook part comprises about half of the novel, sometimes almost the whole novel except for the last ten pages to make readers curious to know how the story ends. This publishing method, of course, as in the case of printed serials, led to a 'cliff-hanger-ization' of possibly each and every piece. In many cases writers made use of this and 'cut' their pieces strategically to increase suspense. At the very end of the Facebook series, they made use of a climax, a cliff-hanger of cliff-hangers, in order to encourage their readers to purchase the hard copy book. From September 2016 to February 2017, there were no posts on the website, and after that the website only rather sporadically continued to offer parts of new titles, or just advertised new titles. Though Facebook publishing is ongoing, it seems that it has recently lost much of its immediate appeal, thus for now, I suggest to call it a phase of "fugaciousness."

From analogue to digital networking

In August 2016, members of the *Kona ya Riwaya* collective of writers joined hands with other colleagues and formed the new literary association UWARIDI which stands for ***U****moja wa* ***WA****andishi wa* ***RI****waya wenye* ***DI****ra*, 'Union of Novelists with a Compass/Direction/Stance.' Apart from this explanation as an acronym, the word *uwaridi* is derived from *waridi*, i.e. rose. It can be rendered as 'roseness', 'roseity', or 'the state of being a rose'. In my reading, this neologism can be read as a metaphor which, among other things, alludes to the novelists' focus on not just crime, but also love stories.

This new literary Association, *Uwaridi*, mostly aims at making a difference by offering popular novels with a 'true cause' of entertainment, which supposedly dispenses with the neoliberal agenda of teaching materialistic success to its readers. The association has more than 30 members. Renowned writers associated with the 'serious novel' section of Swahili literature, Adam Shafi and William Mkufya, have been invited as *wanajumuiya wa heshima*, as members of honor of the new association. The writers Hussein Tuwa, Ibrahim Gama and Suleiman Kijogoo were elected, respectively, to be President, Secretary General and Publicity Secretary of the association; in the meantime, Maundu Mwingizi has taken over Suleiman Kijogoo's position (Hussein Tuwa, email communication).

Interestingly, one major project of this association was to conceive and implement the next step in their digital networking activities: a

homonymous smartphone app. As mentioned above, the Facebook site *Kona ya Riwaya Reloaded* stopped its regular mode of publishing portions of novels in September 2016, and finally, on 6 March 2017, announced the launch of the smartphone app *Uwaridi*. Three months after its inception, on 8 June 2017, thirty-two novels and two children's stories by eighteen writers had been offered in this app, with two female and sixteen male writers. As of 8 March 2018, one year after its inception, sixteen new entries have been listed, and the app now comprises forty-four novels, two children stories, two biographies, and two guidebooks. There are six new writers, all of them male. Five writers whose work had already been published on the app added further titles to it, most significantly Innocent Ndayanse who added four new titles and now, with seven titles, has more titles on the app than all his fellow writers. Further examples are Suleiman Kijogoo and Halfani Sudy who have added one novel each.

A considerable number of these titles have been printed and are being sold as conventional soft-cover books through the association's own bookshop in Kinondoni, Block 41 in Dar es Salaam. Once you have installed the app on your smart phone – it is readily available through well-known international app stores – the app works as follows: You can read a "sample" of about 15 pages, and then decide to buy the book by downloading it onto your device. Prices range between 2,000 TSh (0.88 US-$/0.72 €) and 8,000 TSh (3.53 US-$/2.87 €), most titles are offered for between 4,000 TSh (1.77 US-$/1.43 €) and 6,000 Tsh (2.65 US-$/2.15 €; children's stories 1,500/5,000 TSh). The most expensive novels, for example *Wimbo wa Gaidi* (The Terrorist's Song) by Hussein Tuwa, are sold for 8,000 TSh which equals to 3.53 US dollars or 2.87 €. These prices are remarkably lower than those of hard copies sold in the bookshop which range between 5,000 TSh (2.21 US-$/1.79 €) and 12,000 TSh (5.30 US-$/4.30 €). The layout of the app was completely redesigned on 11 March 2018, with the icons for each novel appearing more than twice as large as they did before.

So far, there seem to be thirty-two thrillers/crime fiction and twelve love stories (though, of course, these two categories may overlap and are subject to further classification). The number of female writers has not increased; there are only two female and now twenty-two male writers. This gross misrepresentation might hopefully be mitigated considerably when more writers of the UWARIDI association join the app in the future. Hussein Tuwa, co-founder and President of the association, mentioned seven female writers who are members of the UWARIDI association (Tuwa, email conversation).

Coming back to my reading of the metaphor *uwaridi* by considering both the association and the app, I argue that it can be read as standing for a new tool to access popular novels which is as attractive as the scent of a

rose, but contains numerous hard-boiled thrillers which are characterized by crime and brutality as spiny and hurtful as a rose's thorns. Furthermore, one can read *Uwaridi* as a metaphor for providing popular novels of high aesthetic quality (in line with the notion of 'the beauty of art') which nevertheless stick and stitch their readers by crime and tragedy, by creating an especially sensual kind of suspense, be it in the genre of thriller or romance.

Motives, policies and acceptance of the app among writers

Several factors led the *wanajumuiya* (association members) of Uwaridi to the development of this app. One main factor was to avoid piracy, and to generate more income out of their writing. The message posted on 6 March 2017 on the Facebook page of *Kona ya Riwaya Reloaded* is straight-forward (capital letters as in the original):

> "TUMEKUWA TUKITOA BURUDANI BURE HAPA KWA MIAKA MITANO, nadhani sasa ni wakati wenu wa kuanza kuwaunga mkono watunzi wetu kwa kununua riwaya zao kupitia kwenye UWARIDI APP."
>
> "WE HAVE BEEN OFFERING ENTERTAINMENT HERE FOR FREE FOR FIVE YEARS, I think now it's your time to start to support our writers by purchasing their novels through the UWARIDI APP."

As becomes clear from this quote, the main stimulus to start the app has been to avoid piracy which affected the two subsequent *Kona ya Riwaya* websites. Obviously, writers felt that the strategy of offering a large portion, mostly half or more of the entire novel, for free, as a Facebook serial, and then hope to make people curious enough to buy the book, did not pay off anymore. Or they experienced that it had never paid off, and it was time for something new which would generate more income. Apart from the obvious judicial and economic reasons, the announcement also emphasizes the advantage of the app from the perspective of the consumer. S/he can access the novels now at any given time and is no longer dependent on the schedule of only parts of the novels being published three times a day on the Facebook site. And finally, apart from the reasons given by the *Uwaridi* association itself, it is worthwhile to take into consideration that given the tremendous speed with which smooth mobile phone network connections have been installed in recent years in Tanzania, such an app makes the readers more independent of the frequent electricity cuts in almost all areas of metropolitan Dar es Salaam.

The exercise of matching the titles offered by Uwaridi in their bookstore in Kinondoni, Dar es Salaam, with the ones offered in the app reveals that a number of titles were published as hard copies but have not

been included as soft copies in the app. Apparently, certain renowned writers rather reluctantly joined the app, and it seems as if the 'big names' are only willing to make a certain proportion of their oeuvre available on this app. Probably they prefer to wait and see how successful the app is going to be in the future. Apart from this, it seems that the level of attachment to the new literary association as such, and, independently from that, to the app, also plays a role in the writers' willingness and choice to join the app. In principle, membership in the association is sufficient in order for a writer's novels to be included in the app (Tuwa, personal communication). Between the first (June 2017) and the second time (March 2018) I had an intensive email communication with Hussein Tuwa; there was a significant change as to the increased participation of the most renowned writers, which will presumably attract others from the Uwaridi collective to join in. Nevertheless, Tuwa emphasised the fact that forming a literary association like this – which brings together writers with different levels of experience (my comment) – is a tedious process which cannot be accomplished overnight (Tuwa, personal communication).

Challenges and potentials of the app

In an overall picture of Swahili literature, the genre of the novel has always shown a particular gender diversity problem with a heavy bias towards male writers. This is still true today: out of a work-in-progress research list of eighty-two Swahili novels published between 2000 and 2010, with a focus on so-called 'serious' novels, there are seventy-seven novels by fifty-seven male authors, and only five novels by four women authors, including the well-known writers Zainab Burhani and Clara Momanyi. This means that only six percent of all the novels were written by women writers. It has been argued that the genre of the novel is particularly problematic because it is the dominant genre in conventional print-publishing, and print-publishing is clearly dominated by male publishers. As only a minute number of Swahili fiction writers are able to live from their pen, it seems to be particularly difficult for women to invest time in creative writing of long(er) genres, given the fact that apart from earning their living through other jobs (as most male writers do), they tend to devote much more of their time to family work and care than men do. From this point of departure, a hypothesis concerning women and digital publishing would suggest that the easier it is to access publishing, the more women writers get the chance and/or manage to be published. However, as shown above, this is not the case yet. Out of seven *wanajumuiya wa Uwaridi* – members of the literary association of *Uwaridi* – only two female writers, Laura Pettie and Tatu Kiondo have

each contributed one novel to the app; others, including Elizabeth Mramba, have not yet entered the app. Therefore, so far the statistics do not indicate the slightest change in favor of a more balanced representation. Actually, do they rather show the opposite? Is the app domain so far probably even more male-biased than the conventional hard-copy one?

The reception and success of different writers and their novels in the app so far suggests that especially *waandishi chipukizi* (upcoming writers) still have a difficult stand in the app, and as the few female writers that are there all fall into this group, this situation will probably not change rapidly. Arguably, if a renowned female writer who enjoys a reputation like, for instance, Zainab Mwanga joined the app as both a writer and a mentor to younger writers, this would lead to more participation, visibility and success for female writers.

Another challenge, or rather potential, of this app is its cross-border availability and acceptance. Are these digital 'revolutions' and 'reforms' likely to bridge the gap between Tanzanian and Kenyan Swahilophone literatures? There are no signs of a development in this direction yet. Nevertheless, I would hold that it might very well be possible that popular literature by phone will also develop into an 'export hit' from Dar es Salaam to Nairobi, in the same way Bongo Fleva triggered the evolution and popularity of Genge in popular music. However, a smoother exchange between the book markets of Kenya and Tanzania is a very slow affair, and the reading habits still seem to be quite different on both sides of the border. Since pop lit pioneers like David Maillu, Charles Mangua and Meja Mwangi started to publish their works in the 1970s, popular literature fans in Kenya favor English-language titles. Even though the technical part of a smoother exchange seems to be very easy, different payment systems on both sides of the border may also constitute an obstacle to such an exchange, depending on one's mobile phone provider.

Possible effects of this app and other apps

The main possible effects of this app I will discuss here are its consequences for the conventional printed book sector, disorientation on the part of the reader if apps continue to mushroom, and a tendency towards social seclusion and the decline of communal reading.
The first effect concerns the following question: Are the recent innovations in publishing Swahili novels, on the web and through a smartphone app, likely to work towards the end of Swahili-language book-publishing in Tanzania, and possibly even in Kenya?

The answer so far is no, at least not for now. The school-market orientation of both markets almost excludes this scenario, at least until the

time when everyday digital practice and feasibility will become possible in schools. Nevertheless, the market of conventional e-books has already had an impressive start, with the inception of *Ekitabu* ('e-book'; see their comprehensive website <ekitabu.com>) in September 2015 (founded in 2012, sponsored by UNICEF). Interestingly, this e-book domain is chronologically only slightly younger as an innovation for the East African market as the app phenomenon. Co-founded by two American business and technology experts in 2012, it became increasingly active after 2015. It is so far focused on the Kenyan market, but is also active on the Rwandan, Ugandan and Ghanaian markets – not on the Tanzanian one.

Apart from the school book market, popular literature via app is definitely more likely to chip away at the dominant status of printed books. Nevertheless, actors in the field like Hussein Tuwa believe that there is no 'danger' of printed books becoming out of date:

> "Mimi binafsi naona bado nakala ngumu zina nguvu sana kiuchumi na kisanii hapa nchini... Nakala za APP ni kwa ajili ya kuziba pengo la nakala ngumu pale zinapokosekana kwa aidha msomaji (kutokana na changamoto za usambazaji wa vitabu sehemu mbali mbali nchini na nje ya nchi), au kwa mwandishi (kutokana na kutokuwa tayari kiuchumi kumudu gharama za kuchapa kitabu cha nakala ngumu).
>
> "Personally, I opine that hard copies are still economically and artistically powerful here in the country… The app copies serve to fill in the gap of hard copies when they are lacking, either for the reader (due to the challenges of distributing books to different parts inside the country and outside of the country), or for the writer (due to not being economically prepared to afford the costs of having a hard copy printed)."
>
> (Hussein Tuwa, email conversation, 12 March 2018)

As one of the co-founders of *Uwaridi*, Tuwa prefers to take a modest stance as to what to expect from this digital innovation. In just a few words, he pointedly addresses the main challenges which both readers and writers of Swahili popular literature have been confronted with for as long as only the conventional printing sector has existed. If the new app can stand in when the printed book market fails to function, he suggests, this is already enough of a success to be content with.

The second effect I would like to discuss is whether new apps like *Uwaridi* cause disorientation among the readers, because there are too many of them. For instance, one reader, writing on the the *Kona* website, laments the mushrooming of similar apps in the following way:

> **Douser Rashid** Knn muctengeneze APP moja mukawa munatumia watunz wote? Ss tutakua app ngap ktk cm za riwaya! Molito anayake, jamvi wanayao, kona tn yao na wengine wanakuja,kina man'sai nao wameweka yao mwisho cm mzma itajaa ma APP ya hadith tuu, hebu lifikilien hlo muweze kutumia APP moja ili iwe rahc kwetu watumiaj, mkifanya hvi bac mnatuaminisha ima hamuaminian au mnaogopana, mnajua wengine mtafunikwa vby vby, lkn km mkitumia APP moja hata ubora wa kz zenu utaongezeka, n hayo tuu[.]

> **Douser Rashid** Why don't you produce one APP and all of you writers use it? How many novel apps will we have in our phones! [Hussein] Molito has his, Jamvi [la Simulizi] they have theirs, Kona [ya Riwaya] we have theirs, and others come up, the likes of Man'sai [Frank Masai; Hadithi app] have put on theirs, too, in the end the whole phone will be full only with apps, come on think about that, you can use one APP so that it will be easy for us users, if you behave like that you make us believe that you don't trust each other or you're afraid of each other, you know you will be shut down badly by some, but if you use one APP then even the quality of your works will increase, it is just that [what I wanted to say.]
> (8 March 2017, 6:20 hours)

The reader "Douser Rashid" points to the fact that similar apps like *Hadithi* (Stories), *Molito* (named after the writer Hussein Molito), *Jamvi la Simulizi* (Carpet/Floor of Narratives; all mentioned by him) as well as *Simulizi na Hadithi* (Narratives and Stories) and *Riwaya* (Novels) have created a good deal of competition, but also confusion and chagrin among his fellow readers. As he points out, the problem is not only the dilemma of choice which is likely to give readers the impression that writers of popular fiction do not trust each other enough to join hands in one or two common apps. The main and very understandable source of annoyance is that a multitude of apps brings even technically potent smartphones to their limit of RAM capacity and storage space. If the innovation of these apps overstretches the technical limits of common smartphone models by their sheer multitude, ironically, readers might get so overwhelmed that they 'return' to conventional printed books.

One year after the launch of the app, Hussein Tuwa comments on competition in the following way:

> Ushindani wa kisoko kweli upo tena mkubwa sana. Na si mara moja nimesikia wasomaji wakilalamika kuwa hizi App zimekuwa nyingi siku hizi. Naweza kusema kuwa na sisi tunatoa ushindani sokoni. Tuliweka UWARIDI App kama njia moja wapo ya kuliondoa hili kwa kuwa kimsingi ndani ya UWARIDI kuna waaandishi kadhaa wenye uwezo wa kumiliki App zao wenyewe, ila wameamua kujiweka mahala pamoja ili kuwa kama "supermarket" ya riwaya. Na pia kwenye uwaridi kuna waandishi kama mimi, Gama na Maundu, ambao riwaya zetu hazipatikani kwenye App nyingine yoyote zaidi ya UWARIDI... na hili tunaamini linatuweka kwenye nafasi nzuri sana ya kuweza kukabiliana na ushindani uliopo.
>
> The competition on the market is there indeed, it is very intense. And it's not only one time that I hear readers complaining that these apps are many these days. I can say that we, too, create competition on the market. We have put up the UWARIDI App as one way of changing this situation as basically inside of UWARIDI there are several writers who have the means to own their own apps, but they have decided to be put on *[sic]* together in the same place in order to be like a "supermarket" of novels. And also, in Uwaridi, there are writers like me, Gama and Maundu whose novels are not available on any other app apart from UWARIDI… and this, we believe, puts us in a very good position of being able to face the competition that is there.
> (Email communication with Hussein Tuwa, 12 March 2018)

Although Tuwa uses the term "supermarket" for *Uwaridi*, in my assessment, there are two main points that differentiate this app from its competitors (as far as my tentative appraisal of the former is concerned). First, it is rooted in a literary association of writers who form a collective driven by a sense of artistic community and thus are more than a club of businessmen with economic interests. In this, *Uwaridi* has inherited a major feature of the Kona ya Riwaya group, who according to Uta Reuster-Jahn, formed "a writers' self-help project" with "completely different intentions and strategies" than Global Publishers (Reuster-Jahn 2017: 276). Secondly, in connection with that, the aim of the app and the association is to build and maintain standards of artistic quality, as they do not call themselves just "writers" or "novelists," but *waandishi wa riwaya wenye dira* – "novelists with a compass," a target, a stance – which in my reading goes beyond pursuing economic success.

The third possible effect I will discuss here is whether the app-propriation will turn the reading of Swahili popular novels more and more into a middle-class phenomenon, and will contribute to the decline of the habit of communal reading in the Tanzanian context. Inasmuch as an app like *Uwaridi* has the potential to contribute to an easier access to publishing, which can favor the representation of women writers, and of *waandishi chipukizi* (upcoming writers) in general, it can also turn the reading and enjoyment of 'popular' literature into a predominantly middle-class/elite phenomenon, and thus undermine its 'democratizing' and diversifying effects. First of all, it requires the possession of a smartphone, or better a tablet, because it is only (more or less) enjoyable through this expensive type of phone. Secondly, even though it is quite independent of a stable supply of electricity – the main advantage over the Facebook publishing sector discussed above – it requires a regular and stable internet connection. These requirements constitute major obstacles for a wide(r) readership and thus do exclude many readers, either because they might not be attached to or acquainted with new technology to a sufficient extent, or because they are economically deprived, which is the harsh condition in which many Tanzanians live their daily lives. Thus, the realm of 'pop lit' would detach itself more and more from broader readership, and develop more and more into a middle-class phenomenon. Besides the perspective of class, there is another aspect which deserves scholarly attention. Walter Bgoya and other experts in the field have corroborated repeatedly that each and every single copy of a newspaper or a book usually goes through many hands, i.e. is usually read by four to six readers, or even more (cf. Bgoya 2008: 90). This is not only relevant in terms of market and quantitative readership analysis, but it also means that readers are likely to discuss what they read with each other, and that reading is an activity which shapes and sharpens a sense of community

among readers. To a certain extent, this function (which can be traced back to oral literature, as Uta Reuster-Jahn has convincingly shown, see Reuster-Jahn 2016a: 82f), was taken over and up by Facebook publishing, with the section devoted to comments – although, of course, a face-to-face discussion of what you read is something entirely different from the possibility of rather impersonally, by using a pseudonym, adding an individual comment to other individual comments in writing (see also Reuster-Jahn 2016a: 95). In the *Uwaridi* app, there is no section for comments. Thus, this new way of consuming literature makes reading an individual and private affair which is not as easily shared with others as it was the case in former days.

Case study: *Utata wa 9/12* as a paradigmatic *postcolonial* text

In this section, I suggest a reading of the novel *Utata wa 9/12* ('The Obscurity of 9/12'; 2013) by Hussein Tuwa. The text was first written in 2005/2006, and simultaneously published as a serial in the tabloid *Kiu ya Jibu* ('Thirst for an Answer'). In 2013, it was published as a hard-copy book in two volumes ("books"), before being inserted into the *Uwaridi* app in 2017, as one volume of 475 pages. The following reading serves as a case study of one of the novels in the app written by one of the more prominent writers, in order to provide some insight into the nature of these texts, without a specific focus on their 'mediality'. In other words, I will not look into whether and how reading this novel on the smartphone might be different from reading it as a newspaper serial, a Facebook series, or a hardcopy book. Rather, I have selected it as an example of a novel that the writer himself has chosen to be part of this new app because he considers it as one of his major works, and even despite its rather unhandy voluminosity, provides it as a single volume in this new format.

The temporal setting of the first volume starts within a fortnight of the independence of Tanganyika, today's *Tanzania Bara* (continental Tanzania), on 9 December 1961, and lasts for some months until about mid-1962. The second volume is situated in 2004, forty-three years later. The novel starts by narrating three simultaneous events which all take place during the night of independence: the independence celebration with the lowering of the British flag and the hoisting of the Tanganyikan one, the crashing advent of an extraterrestrial secret agent who comes to earth like an asteroid plummeting into the sea, and a gruesome ritual of seven zombie-like creatures (who turn out to be extraterrestrials themselves) who seek to be reborn in the body of a young woman. In the course of the novel, police officers investigate mysterious murder cases which, as the reader is told later, always happen on independence day, and all follow the same pattern: the victim is left with a strange sign on the breast which

turns out to be the way the numbers '9/12' are written on the planet where both the zombies mentioned above and the secret agent come from. Although the reader is led to believe that the main struggle in the novel is about two teams of investigators – one historical, one contemporary – who strive to take the extraterrestrial solitary rogue into custody, it turns out that the true villains are his compatriots from outer space who perform the gruesome ritual every year, and whom he has come to earth to kill.

Reading the novel against the backdrop of historical and contemporary colonialism, the choice of characters and their names in the novel provide significant food for thought. In the first part of the novel, the colonial/postcolonial continuities are portrayed by British characters who still occupy high positions in the police and in the healthcare system – in the latter, the position of doctors of Indian descent is also a prominent feature. Whereas the highest-ranking police officer bears the name 'Tibbedeux Haggard' – an ironic allusion to both a US-American wrestling star and the British writer J. Rider Haggard, an icon of so-called adventure novels and a symbol for the failed decolonisation of Tanzanian syllabi after independence – and prepares to leave Tanganyika, the extraterrestrial villain the whole country is after has been given the name of "John Smith." The text suggests that the villain cannot be a fellow countryman, and gives him a stereotypical British name – which to Tanzanian ears is likely to conjure up Ian Smith, the former white racist ruler of Zimbabwe, called Southern Rhodesia at the time. However, as mentioned above, "John Smith" turns out not to be the prime villain in the novel, but is in fact the only one who can fight the other extraterrestrials successfully. Like "John Smith"'s real name Mxanda, the "real" names of the seven "terrorists from outer space" are all spelled with the click sound orthographically represented by 'x' which is a typical feature of Southern African Bantu languages. The fact that they still live in the country in 2004 can be read as an allegory of colonial/postcolonial continuities: the colonizers of today's Tanzania would be the South Africans who control key businesses and whole sectors of the Tanzanian economy. From the perspective of the genre of Swahili crime fiction, the topos of the South African villain, a racist white Apartheid agent, visible in the crime fiction of the 1980s, has now been turned into a black South African with a secret agenda, hiding in the bodies of ordinary Tanzanians. Apart from the South African strand of reading, in the second volume another image is used to problematize the continuities of colonialism in contemporary times: the character of Captain Lin Ping, who rapes an African prostitute, can be read as a prosopopoeia of Chinese neocolonialism exploiting Tanzania.

The asteroid which is supposed to have fallen from the sky into the sea (in fact it is the advent of the extraterrestrial secret agent) can be read as a symbol of independence and the way it was witnessed by

Tanganyikans. Contrary to many other examples in Africa, including that of neighboring Kenya, Tanganyika gained independence without a violent struggle. Although the absence of violence at that time is impressive, and still something to be proud of today, there is a common topos in public discourse of attributing a certain 'weakness' to the Tanganyikan people because "they did not have to [physically] fight for independence [like other nations had to], they just got it with little effort." In this context, the image conveyed by the asteroid can be read as the way independence "suddenly" dropped into the lap of Tanganyikans, and for which both the colonized and the colonizers were – supposedly – not sufficiently prepared.

The title of the novel, *Utata wa 9/12* ('The Obscurity of 9/12'), heavily plays on the analogy to "9/11," which was more obvious in 2005/2006 than today, depending on the readership. In the text, "*closed but unsolved*," in this English-language wording, is the common attribute given to the mysterious murder cases. I read this title in the following way: from a Tanzanian perspective, independence is still "unsolved." Is colonialism really over, given the South African and Chinese dominance in the economic sector (apart from the obvious continuities of Global Northern dominance in this regard)? Apart from the translation 'obscurity,' which I have chosen for the benefit of a literary translation of such a title of popular fiction, the most common translations of the Swahili word *utata* (Pl. *tata*) are 'difficulty, complexity, ambiguity'; I would add 'opaqueness' here. In this reading, independence is on the one hand obscure and opaque and difficult to "access," and on the other hand it is *ambiguous*: Is Tanzania really an independent country? To what extent is it independent?

My reading of the title is that it employs irony in order to puzzle the reader in a variety of ways. Apart from creating suspense in a crime story with elements of Sci-Fi, the title and main motif of the case "Utata wa 9/12" ironically makes the reader ponder the meaning, existence and extent of independence forty years after its formal inception. Along these lines of thought, the formal or judiciary question of independence is "closed," but the real meaning and sufficient extent of independence remains "unsolved." Therefore, I suggest calling this novel a paradigmatic *postcolonial text* in a Tanzanian setting.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have argued that the recent innovation of smartphone publishing is likely to be seen as the inception of a new phase in Swahili literary historiography, at least from the perspective of the medium.

However, this new phenomenon of an app providing access to popular literature does not entail the swan song of the conventional printed book as an outmoded medium of publication. In my assessment, the app-ization trend can actually also trigger an opposite effect towards reading in general: it has the potential to attract new readers, to convince habitual readers, and to win back former readers, by stimulating reading as an activity besides the consumption of music and films. In my view, the prestige of possessing a physical book is still high enough to make it attractive for readers to browse through an app in order to choose the most appealing title they wish to purchase as a hard copy.

However, if ever a new culture of smartphone literature reading emerges, the consequences would be a move away from the 'communal reading' habits of sharing newspapers and books, and exchanging views on social media. A development toward a culture of rather isolated 'individual reading' can be easily triggered by apps which lack interactive elements, and therefore using these apps is likely to be experienced as a lack or loss of the possibility to communicate and exchange ideas about literature.

Further challenges the app-ization has to tackle are whether it will be able to bridge the gaps of gender, cross-border relevance and the dichotomy of 'serious' versus 'popular' literature. After having shown that there are no signs yet in the direction of bridging one of these gaps, one could raise the question whether Swahili literature readers should welcome and cherish this technological innovation, or should be rather reluctant to do so.

> "Neno muafaka hilo Inspekta…"
> "Nini…?" […]
> "Utata…nadhani hilo ni neno muafaka kwa kesi hii…utata…"
>
> "That is the right word, Inspector…"
> "What…?" […]
> "Obscurity…I think that is the right word for this case…obscurity…"
> (*Utata wa 9/12,* p. 124)

Coming back to the different meanings of "utata" as discussed in relation to the above case study, rather than 'obscurity,' I would say that 'ambiguity' is the right word. Despite the state of affairs to date, I would hold that the "app-propriation" of Swahili literary texts has a considerable potential of bridging the gaps of gender – to provide better access for women writers to be published, age – to attract young readers and provide better access for *waandishi chipukizi* (upcoming writers) in general, and education – to promote reading independently of school syllabi. As regards the cross-border relevance, I think *Uwaridi* and similar apps could actually be quite successful on the Kenyan market, too, as there is much

less popular literature in Swahili by Kenyan writers so far (cf. Gromov 2016), and economically, the Kenyan book market is thriving. Finally, in my view, this innovation could also contribute to bridge the gap between the 'popular' and the 'serious.' It could promote the school-book sector as well as help writers of so-called avant-garde literature that goes against established norms and conventions of form, content and style to get their works more easily published and received by a larger audience. In this way, the innovation of publishing literary texts through a smartphone app could actually promote diversity in the production, mediation and reception of Swahili fiction.

NOTES

1. All translations are mine.

2. This section is based on several works by Joshua Madumulla, Mikhail Gromov, and Uta Reuster-Jahn, especially Madumulla 2009, Gromov 2008 & 2016, and Reuster-Jahn 2008, 2016a&b, 2017. Nathalie Carré provides a comparative perspective on digital publishing in Africa including the Tanzanian example (Carré 2016). From the perspective of a social historian, Emily Callaci has worked out the popular literature scene in Dar es Salaam from 1975-1985 in an inspiringly brilliant manner (Callaci 2017a & 2017b).

3. The average price of a printed daily newspaper of the 'serious' type is TSh 1,000, and of a beer in a bar is 2,500 TSh (as of August 2017).

4. This refers to the fact that the inception of Facebook publishing by then was much more linked to personal computers or laptops, and access via internet cafés, than nowadays when the new device of smartphones allows the user to use the World Wide Web much more comfortably than in the past. Thus, today the difference lies more in the level of comfort when reading literature, where the app has an advantage over a Facebook page.

5. "Douser Rashid"'s assessment is freely available on the Internet, which means it can be accessed publicly, without being a member of the respective social media platform: <https://de-de.facebook.com/KONA-YA-Riwaya-Reloaded-162439457293280/>. Note the specific orthography and colloquial language he uses which is very common in social media and new technology devices in general.

6. Most estimates of current smartphone adoption and usage in Tanzania range around 10 percent; internet usage is estimated at around 20 percent.

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