

MAKALA YETU-LEO
Deutsche Welle Swahili Service, broadcast on Abdilatif Abdalla,
By Othman Miraj, May 2011
(English translation, by Sara Weschler)

KEY:

- Time-stamp marked in **{blue}**
 - Speaker **bolded and underlined**
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{0:00}

Othman Miraji: In March 1969, at the age of twenty-two, Abdilatif Abdalla, who hails from Mombasa, became the first political prisoner in post-independence Kenya. He was imprisoned for three-and-a-half years, during which he was left in a cell in solitary confinement. The accusation [lodged against him] was that he had written and distributed a leaflet bearing the title “Kenya, Where Are We Heading?” protesting the way that opposition parties – one of which he was a member of – were persecuted and regarded by the government as criminal organizations.

Dear listeners, coming to you from the city of Bonn, Germany, this is *Makala Yetu – Leo* with me, Othman Miraji, in the studio. **{0:57}**

During that time, under the regime of its first president, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya witnessed a clash between the leaders who had replaced the British colonial administration and forgotten the promises they had made and the goals they had pursued in their the fight for independence – these being, social equality, rights, democracy, and freedom; and those who insisted that the fruits of independence should go to those who had been immersed in the Mau Mau War for liberation and the people who had taken up arms during that struggle. **{1:30}**

When he was young, Abdilatif Abdalla joined the KPU party under the leadership of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and became an opposition activist against Kenyatta’s regime, in the Kenyan coastal region.

Abdilatif Abdalla was born into an illustrious Mombasa family notable for its many famous poets, for instance his brother Ahmed Nassir, from whom he inherited his gift. While he was incarcerated in the infamous Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, he wrote down his thoughts on pieces of toilet paper he had, and hid them. **{2:05}** While in there he wrote poems and gathered them into a collection he titled “The Voice of Agony” (*Sauti ya Dhiki*). These poems, written in prison by a person put away under Jomo Kenyatta’s rule, amazingly won the Kenyatta Award for Literature [in 1974]. The name of the person imprisoned under Kenyatta’s rule? Abdilatif.

Speaking about his life before his struggles and the renown he later attained, Abdilatif told an audience of guests at Leipzig University: {2:35}

Abdilatif Abdalla (in English, via translator back into Swahili):

I think the reason I became known is because I dared to do something which – especially in those days in our country – was not fashionable. It was, to be sure, a matter of life and death. But because of my youth I dared to do something other people would not have dared to do. {3:03}

And I have been telling my students in class – because I don't just teach the Swahili language: sometimes we get into politics, we get into religion. Many times I told my students that if you reach the age of eighteen to twenty-two or twenty-five, and deep down you have no desire to question things, no desire to want to bring about change – well, you should know there's something that has withered inside you. Better see a doctor or psychologist. Because that is the age at which it behooves one to get involved with matters like that. {3:37}

Othman Miraji: And after being released in 1971, Abdilatif lived in exile as a journalist and also an activist fighting for genuine freedom {3:50} of his country. First over in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, he worked at the Institute of Kiswahili Research and was among the researchers who composed a now-famous dictionary of standard Swahili. {4:01} And finally, during the past fifteen years, he has worked as a lecturer in Swahili language studies and literature in African languages at Leipzig University here in Germany.

Abdilatif Abdalla does not think of himself as a poet, despite an outpouring of praise by people calling him the greatest Swahili poet alive today. He wrote “The Voice of Agony” in his local dialect of Kimvita, using an insider's ‘deep’ metaphorical language difficult for present-day readers to understand. {4:31} He used this type of language in order to conceal his message since he calculated that his guards at the prison, let alone the {4:38} politicians of that period – even Jomo Kenyatta himself – would not be able to know for sure what was contained within his poems. It was a dangerous time for any activist who opposed the Kenyatta's regime, and later that of President Daniel Arap Moi. Many oppositionists were killed or disappeared. {4:58}

In the city of London, Abdilatif together with his friend, another notable writer from Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and a few other Kenyans spearheaded an oppositional underground movement to alert the world to the suffering occurring in Kenya during the period of the Moi regime. {5:17}

In 1982 they assembled the so-called the *Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya* – and after 1987, the *United Movement for Democracy in Kenya*. Spies of the regime in Nairobi were even monitoring their progress over in London.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes Abdilatif Abdalla as follows: {5:42}

Ngugi: He is a writer of absolute first rank. You know, his books like “The Voice of Agony” – and even his pamphlets like “Kenya, Where Are We Heading?” – they pose questions which even until today we still need to ask, also in order to find a possibility for reconciliation. Because of this, his writings have a great significance, and will continue to have a great significance – being a major example that shows a person can write in an African language and still become renowned. And this is something very important. {6:16} These qualities have been recognized as reflecting the preferences – and the needs of – of the community. {6:23}

Othman Miraji: The poems of Abdilatif Abdalla in “The Voice of Agony” as well as others he has written represent Swahili culture, as it conceived itself during a period of struggle against oppression, through imploring ways of seeking solidarity with the world. And this condition is one that does not require translation into a foreign language. {6:40}

****{6:40-7:21} Abdilatif Abdalla reads a poem****

Kuno Kunena

Kuno kunena kwa nini, kukanikomeya kuno?
Kwani kunena kunani, kukashikwa kani vino?
Kani iso na kiini, na kuninuiya mno
Kanama nako kunena, kwaonekana ni kuwi

Kana na kuku kunena, kunenwa kakutakiwi
Kuna wanakukuona, kunena kwamba si kuwi
Kunena wakikuona, kukuita kawakawi
Kunena kana kwanuka, nikirome kukunena?

Speaking out

Why has speaking out provoked my imprisonment?
What therein compelled my confinement?
Invalid insistence incited anger against me
Apparently speaking out is viewed with contempt

Speaking out may be distasteful to some
Yet others do not regard it negatively
Encountering each other, they hesitate not to embrace
So if speaking out stinks, should I shut up?
(translation of poem
by Kelly Askew and A. Abdalla)

Othman Miraji: Last week, Abdilatif Abdalla reached sixty-five, the retirement age at Leipzig University. And to celebrate this event, the university organized an international conference comprised of {7:32} different African Studies scholars from different parts of the world – among them, Abdilatif’s friend Ngugi wa Thiong’o, as well as his German students who had studied Swahili under him. {7:44}

Besides teaching Swahili here in Germany, Abdilatif has also played a key role in building an intellectual partnership with Germans, concerned with improving the understanding of Swahili language and culture. Listen to Dr. Clarissa Dittmer of Bayreuth University. {8:01}

Clarissa Dittmer: An excellent scholar. He knows a great deal about the customs and traditions of the Swahili people. And he’s helped us so much with our research on Swahili poetry of the past.

Othman Miraji: Germans are often said to love diplomas – having a *degree*, having a *PhD*. But Abdilatif doesn’t have certificates like that. How did you Germans come to accept him so easily? {8:24}

Clarissa Dittmer: I think on the one hand that’s true: Germans do love their diplomas. But on the other hand, I think Germans also value people with a certain kind of knowledge. And he, Abdilatif – maybe we could call him an “organic intellectual.” He’s a person who doesn’t rely on papers, a person who has an impact upon people through his own particular way of behaviour, without papers or certificates. {8:48}

Othman Miraji: And so with that I conclude *Makala Yetu – Leo*, which has examined Abdilatif Abdalla – community rights activist, poet, and true Swahili gentleman (*mwuungwana*) from Mombasa.

This was *Makala Yetu – Leo* with me, Othman Miraji, coming to you from Deutsche Welle in the city of Bonn, Germany. Until next time! {8:59}