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Olali, Tom

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## **Sniffing Oriental Aromatic Scents: The Perfumery Trope in Eroticized Swahili Odes**

*Tom Olali<sup>1</sup> and Ahmad Kipacha<sup>2</sup>*

### **Abstract**

Swahili poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have foregrounded adapted perfumery customs with great reverence in their works. It functions as a vital cue to trans-Indian Ocean commonalities and as a marker of the influence of Arabian-Manga civilisation and perfumery practices on the Swahili customs. This paper examines the culture of scent in selected poetic works attributed to Fumo Liyongo and Mwana Kuponu Mshamu. Interestingly, the geography of the female body parts is fused with oriental scents to excite consensual romantic intimacy. We argue, besides historically echoing the sensuousness of oriental perfumery in Swahili culture, that these two poets subliminally de-odorise body, mind and soul of their readers to experience imagery of passionate intimacy. Specifically, this article intends to focus on two prominent motifs of cross-cultural adornment: the use of Manga attar unguent, fragrance and perfume, and the scenting of genitalia. The article confronts these postulations concretised on an approach based on Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism. According to Carl Olson, Bataille was an influential French postmodern thinker and writer who argued that human life could best be understood by the interconnections and workings of eroticism (1994:231-250). He mixes philosophy and anthropology to talk about eroticism. According to Minguy, Bataille, through erotic transgressions, saw the possibility for true human freedom and communication. This theory, therefore, guides our arguments and counter-arguments, in the present article. It is the fulcrum upon which our discussions are premised.

### **1.0 Introduction**

In his autobiographical account of journeys between the Swahili coast and the East African mainland as part of the Western Indian Ocean mercantilism, Hammed bin Muhammed el Murjebi or Tippu Tip (1837-1905), an inter-territorial slave- and ivory-dealer, governor of Katanga, and agent of the Sultanate of Zanzibar furnishes his readers with the description of the gift he received prior to one of his many trips into the hinterland of the East Africa coast in the 1870s. He discloses that besides

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Kiswahili, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya.

Email: [tom.mboya@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:tom.mboya@uonbi.ac.ke) or [tom.olali@gmail.com](mailto:tom.olali@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer, School of Business and Humanities, The Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology, Arusha (NMAIST), Tanzania.

Email: [ahkipacha@gmail.com](mailto:ahkipacha@gmail.com)

being given cash by Tharia Topan<sup>1</sup>, the financier of the ivory and slave trade<sup>2</sup> and sponsor of his caravan safaris, he had also received:

*Bahasha zimo nguo, bushti na joho na deuli na shali na vitambi viwili na vikoi vine na kanzu sita na viatu ngozi mbili na vichupa viwili mafuta haliwardi na hali odi, kula kimoja yapata tola kumi na jambia na kitara dhahabu na kula kitu muthmin na pete almasi na saa ya dhahabu.*

A parcel of clothes, scarves, cloaks, sashes, two head-cloths and four loin-cloths, six gowns, two pairs of sandals and two bottles of oil, one of the essences of roses and the other of aloes, each of five ounces in weight, also a dagger and a golden scimitar, each valuable in itself, and a diamond ring and a gold watch. (1959: 110-111; emphasis added)

It is apparent that the gift of exotic oils, ‘essence of roses and of aloes’, and clothes were not only for adornment purposes but were meant to be worn by him or used as items for exchange during his long caravan trip. The gift of incense deeply symbolises wealth, social status, and ethnic belonging, as well as earthly and heavenly purity. Without doubt, wearing them distinguished him from the ‘others’ as Tippu Tip was a bonafide Manga-Arab.

Not surprisingly, in the Swahili folkloric arena, they were quick to take notice of the exquisite form of essence beautification as peculiarly adorned by immigrant Arabian-Manga citizen amidst them, by recording the essence of Manga-Arabian perfumery culture in its quintessential proverbial trope that aptly had it that, *Mfuatana na Mmanga Hunukato* ‘One who follows a Manga-Arab smells well’ (Wamitila, 2004: 207) to positively remind the public that once you come close to with the Manga-Arabs, you will be influenced by their exotic fragrance. Tippu Tip’s dressing style and his strange scents are an indication of intra-community belonging and unbelonging. It is precisely what Martin Manalansan notes in his article: “Immigrant Lives and the Politics of Olfaction in the Global City,” that “the sense of smell is the basis for recognition and misrecognition and that it provides an opportunity to affiliate, to belong as well as to disidentify and to ostracise” (2006:44). William Hichens also reports that Swahili adopted the culture of spraying their bodies or sprinkling their beds with rose water (*marashi*) and perfumes (*kaa, itiri or uturi*) from the Bahrain Islands in the Persian Gulf and from India (1938:75). By evoking the toponym ‘Manga’ in the Swahili proverb, the exclusivity of the influence of Oman and the Arabian Peninsula in East Africa is evoked. The Manga

<sup>1</sup> Tharia Topan was an Ismaili trader and financier of Tippu Tip’s slave and ivory caravans who also assumed his position as a collector of customs duties and a state banker during Sultan Bhargash ruling in 1870s (Sherriff, 1987:107-9).

<sup>2</sup> Goods were exchanged in both Indian-Arab and Afro-Asian overseas trade: utensils, furniture, cloth, perfumes, arms and other manufactured goods against treasures from the African hinterland: gold, ivory, rhinoceros horns, dry (mangrove wood) and precious wood (Adam, 2015:3).

customs gained popularity in the East African coastal life in the naming of locations (*Manga pwani*), food items (*komamanga*), clothes (*libasi za Manga*), and scents (*atari za Manga, nyudi za Arabuni*). Generally, 'Manga' stands for coastal communities affiliated with the Swahili Arabic culture.

In this article, we are particularly interested in the body scents adapted from Arabian-Manga culture into Swahili customs as described in classical Swahili poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among several poets, I have selected two of the most famous, Fumo Liyongo (1160-1204), and Mwana Kupona Mshamu (1810-1860) with references to their poems of *Utendi wa Mwanamanga*, 'In praise of Mwanamanga' by Liyongo (as in Mieke et al., 2006) and *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* 'the poetry of Mwanakupona' by Mwana Kupona (as in Mulokozi 1999). These two poems have been described in the preface of the edited anthology of *Tenzi Tatu za Kale* (1999) by Mugyabuso Mulokozi, 'as the most important poems in Swahili literature in terms of delineating the history of Swahili and its coastal societies' (1999:3). Striking similarities exist between Liyongo and Mwana Kupona, both aristocratic members of the upper class in Pate. Interestingly, they have both interspersed in their works the wearing of oriental fragrances for the beautification and purification of bodies, clothes and the domiciles of themselves and their close female family members. They have both demonstrated that the adapted *Manga* attar is a kind of ornament that disaggregates Swahili society by gender, religious beliefs and social status.

The perfumery trope in these poems is best captured in Peter Largey and David Watson's (1972)'s 'The Sociology of Odors' when they show that body scents are signs of different cultures, diets, and beliefs. In fact, they advance the idea that our bodies are constantly emitting and perceiving surrounding odours that play roles in various spheres of social interaction. Every sane individual abhors the malodorous. But culture plays a major part in determining what smells are pleasant and unpleasant to individuals, and they convincingly demonstrate that each culture has its own perception of what natural body odours secreted from the pores are pleasant or unpleasant.

Michel Adam argues in *Indian Africa Minorities of Indian –Pakistani Origin in Eastern Africa* (2015), that coastal communities have adopted the orient perfumery culture through the Indian Ocean trade linkage. Beatrice Nicolini remarks in 'The Western Indian Ocean as Cultural Corridor: Makran, Oman and Zanzibar through Nineteenth-Century European Accounts and Reports' 'that indeed 'the Swahili city-states along 1,500 kilometres of coastline was at the epicentre of the mercantile trade under the Oman-Arabs masters, resulting to the social-cultural and hybridised system based on both African and Arabian-Manga organisational principles' (2003:20). However, this is not the case when one examines global olfactory literature. The *magnum opus* of Eugene Rimmel, *Book of Perfumes* (1865) makes no reference to the inclusion of the East African coastline in transregional networks of perfumery. . He writes that 'Of perfumes, properly speaking there is a

very limited use (perfume) among these (Uncivilized Nations) people' (1865:168). It is clear from the available evidence that Rimmel's standpoint evidently reproduces the racist tropes of his time. His account of Oriental nations of Persians, Egyptians, Turkeys, and Arabia (1865:129) as formidable partners in exchanging perfumery civilisations with Asiatic nations, the Far East, the Romans and the Greek has skewed knowledge of the Western Indian Ocean rim by omitting sources from the East African coast itself. It is important to fill this lacuna. The East African coastline has a long familiarity with the culture of fragrance and has used perfumes such as camphire, spikenard, saffron, frankincense, musk, ambergris, myrrh, aloes and rose water (*marashi*) for centuries. This oversight gives the impression that the Swahili coast was an odourless terrain and, as part of what Rimmel connote as 'Uncivilized Nations', has not been sensitive to the peculiar odours of either the orient or the occident. Evidence to the contrary is abundant, for example, in the autobiographical Arabic scripts by Hammed bin Muhammed el Murjebi or Tippu Tip (1837-1905). This vividly signals that Zanzibar, as an entrepôt established by Oman-Arab rulers in the eighteenth century, was already a 'mecca' of exchange of tangible and intangible goods, including fancy Arabian-Manga perfumes.

In discussing the subject of adaptation of trans-regional intellectual history over the vast West Indian Ocean connection into Swahili poetry, Clarrisa Vierke, a Swahili literary critic, suggests in her 2016 article 'From across the ocean: considering travelling literary figurations as part of Swahili intellectual history, that:

...precolonial Swahili texts, most of which are poetry, have hardly been taken into consideration in recent debates on Indian Ocean connections. Still, one should not forget that there are a number of studies mostly dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, which focused on the historical influence of ideas, motifs, texts and prosodic models coming from Arabic traditions. (2016:225-226)

Vierke reiterates the need for her fellow literary critics to re-cast their gaze on what she terms as Swahili 'travelling figurations,' where literary motifs, texts and even forms are adapted from Arabic sources into Swahili poetic texts. Examples of cross-cultural adaptation of oriental materials and knowledge transfer in a non-literary field like cultural linguistics are found in Abdulaziz Lodhi 2000's '*Oriental Influences in Swahili. A Study in Language and Culture Contacts*'. This study has uncovered numerous perfumery terms in the Swahili lexicon that derive from Arabic-Indic sources. In his collection, he mentions camphor (*kafuri* or *karafuu maiti*), saffron (*zafarani*), rose (*waridi*), jasmine (*asumini*), ambergris (*ambari*), musk (*miski*), daffodil (*nargisi*), gum copal (*sandarusi*), and patchouli (*pachori*) as being of Arab-Indic origin (2000:197). Similarly, scenting of the body, dress and household and beds are highlighted by Rosabell Boswell (2008) in her 'Scents of Identity: Fragrance as Heritage in Zanzibar'. She portrays, in the postcolonial setting of Zanzibar—'the Spice Islands' of the Western Indian Ocean rim -- the spraying of the

house, clothing and body parts with a concoction of oriental attar (*itiri*) 'such as rose water (*marashi*), musk '*miski*', oud '*udi*', sandalwood '*kaa*', saffron '*zafarani*' and narcissus (*nargisi*). She further remarks that in Zanzibar, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both mature men and women still wear natural perfumes. Therefore, 'the grown woman must not only perfume her body as a way of ritually cleansing herself, she must also perfume her clothing, her house and the marital bed' with pleasant attar (301). Boswell makes it clear that:

Fragrance and other seemingly mundane heritages attract little attention in the preservation process, and yet these indicate important cultural continuities in the Indian Ocean region and form a vital part of the heritage and the harmonisation of cultures on the islands (2008:311).

Her remarks appear to suggest that Swahili perfumery customs are indeed an intangible cultural heritage that deserves attention for its 'important cultural continuities' with the vast Indian Ocean networks. The encompassing phrases such as 'Manga fragrance' (*Atari za Manga*) or 'Arabian ouds' (*nyudi za Arabuni*) (see Chiraghdin 1987:71, Abdallah 1973:103) draw attention to the cross-cultural exchange between the people of Africa, the Middle East and Asia across the Indian Ocean for almost two millennia.

## 2.0 Cross-cultural Adornment

A legendary classic Swahili poet from Pate, in the eighteenth century, Sayyid Abdalla bin Nasir (1720-1820) composed the famous poem, *Al-Inkishafi* (1972) at the height of the reign of Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar over the Swahili coast. In his poem, Nasir makes historical reference to the dynasty of Pate on the northern Swahili coast, and their grandiose palaces and the lavish decoration of their domiciles before the fall of the dynasty. There is mention of the custom of sprinkling their aristocratic beds with rose water (*marashi*), smearing their bodies and clothes with jasmine (*asumini*), sandalwood (*kaa*), ambergris (*ambari*) and other exotic Arabian-Manga perfumes:

<i>Misutu mipinde wakipindiwa,</i>	Rich fabrics, hanged in canopy o'erhead,
<i>Iyu la firasha kufunukiwa;</i>	curtain their couches, screen the fragrant bed
<i>Mai ya marashi wakikukiwa,</i>	Perfumed with rose-water and sandal-shred
<i>Itiri na kaa waipashiye</i>	and rarer attars from th' Arabian main. (1972:76).

This mention of attar of rose water, sandalwood, and others, similarly recurs in the poetic works of Liyongo and Mwana Kupona, together with references to their Arabian-Manga origins. Both are fascinated by rose water (*marashi*), oud (*udi*) and jasmine (*yasmini*) and others perfumes for not only deodorising both male and female body parts, dresses and their domiciles but also they have moved beyond bodies and this earth to target the spiritual and heavenly abode.

Discussing Fumo Liyongo as the composer of *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamanga* (In Praise of Mwanamanga), Vierke (2007) in her article ‘Of Plants and Women, A Working Edition of Two Swahili Plant Poems’ regards him as ‘the Swahili hero and master bard’ (2007:9). The group of experts, the Liyongo Working Group in 2006 (in Miehe et al.), regard Liyongo as a legendary Swahili literary maestro and declare that ‘Liyongo is one of the most impressive personalities in the oral and literary tradition of the Swahili Coast’(2006:5).

At this juncture, we find it useful to draw parallels between *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamanga* and the ‘Song of Solomon’ in the Old Testament. It is not a comparative study but vital in the sense that it may elicit considerable contestation. Fewer have noticed how closely *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamanga* resembles the Old Testament’s ‘Song of Solomon’ (chapter 4:1-5:1). The chapter is about a male author describing his lover’s physical beauty. Simple parallelism between these poems can strike a keen reader’s attention. The ‘Song of Solomon’ is presumed to be composed by King Solomon according to the Holy Bible. Likewise, Jan Knappert regards Fumo Liyongo<sup>3</sup> as a king himself when translating *Utenzi wa Fumo Liyongo* as ‘The Epic of King Liyongo’(1979:66-101).

In both poems, the audiences (women of Jerusalem in one case; the elegant ladies of Pate in another, stz, 12.4) are invited to gaze at the two lovers in their erotic encounters that have both begun with male poets praising their mistresses from the head downward using metaphorical images to disguise sexual intimacy and explicit references to their private parts.

Solomon describes his lover’s breasts as ‘twins of gazelle’, while Liyongo compares them with the fruit of ‘pomegranate’. In verse 10 of ‘Song of Solomon’, their erotic intimacy is described as more intoxicating than wine while, Liyongo tells readers that after his love-making ended, he found himself as if ‘possessed by a spirit’ (2006:12-48).

But the most remarkable similarity is when in ‘Song of Solomon’, the poet in verse 12 divulges the secret that his woman has ‘a garden locked’ and ‘a fountain sealed’. This is probably a reference to her chastity. Likewise, in verses 12-54, Liyongo reveals that his woman’s ‘boat was not leaking’. Therefore, both poets quash the stereotype that women’s bodies are ‘leaky vessels’. The metaphors of garden and boat, and fountain and sea, are used by these male poets to veil and euphemise erotic intimacy. This relationship speaks volumes: if the Song of Solomon is regarded as the most sublime song, ‘the holy of holies’, so too Liyongo’s poem. They both celebrate romance and physical intimacy between committed lovers.

While Solomon hints about the location of ‘Rose of Sharon’ in Israel, Liyongo points to ‘fragrance of Manga-Arabia or Makka’. The name ‘Manga’ recurs in *Utendi wa Mwanamanga* (56-65): the poet, Liyongo, is seen here praising his wife

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<sup>3</sup> The name Liyongo is mentioned in Stigand’s version of the Pate chronicle.

under the name of ‘Mwanamanga’, or in loose translation, ‘a daughter of Manga’, mentioned four times in the poem. It reverberates in the expressions, ‘kohl of Manga’ (*wanda wa Manga*), the light of Manga (*nuru iwaaao Manga*) *kungumanga* (nutmeg), and *makomamanga* (pomegranate). Manga and Makka are synonymously used by Liyongo in this poem, as in the interchangeable expressions ‘fragrance from Makka’ (12-47) and ‘the scent-producing oil of Manga’ (12-31). The persona of the lady described in the poem is also connected to Arabian-Manga. His love-making, the act of ‘sailing’, is also pushed by the wind towards Manga, or specifically to Makka, the spiritual city of Islam (12-44).

The composer of *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* is a female poetess, Mwana Kupona bint Mshamu (1810- 1860), who was also born on Pate Island in northern Swahili coast in what is now Kenya. She was the last wife of the then ruler of Siu, Sheikh Bwana Mataka (1799-1856). Between 1858 and 1860, Mwanakupona composed a 102-stanzas poem in the form of a ‘will’ (*waadhi* or *mausia*) to her 14-year old debutant daughter — the princess. Seeing that she won’t be able to recover from her ailment -- she died two years later -- she sees fit to use a poem as a special ‘amulet’ that her daughter should wear, expressing life’s tribulations and joys, including the secrets of marriage and happy life.

In praising *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, Papke (2008) praised the poem as ‘a beautiful sensual feminine piece of poetry about a mother’s love and pride’. She emphasises that the masterpiece ‘describes a relationship of women and men that was still unaffected by the claims of feminism’. In stanzas 37-55, Mwana Kupona coaches her daughter in the details of bodily hygiene, including bathing and massaging and herself and her husband with scented rose water. She also instructs her to smear her husband with ‘oud’ and strew her bed with bouquets of jasmine. She alerts her to the manner of sleeping, talking and caring or ‘cuddling’ her husband. Mwana Kupona is a god-fearing poetess, who follows Islamic rituals and ethos in all walks of life. She devotes stanzas 68-90 to supplicating herself to the God of Islam, whom she evokes as *Allah, Rabbi, Mola, Karim, Manani, Dayanu* and *Jalia*. Bodily and purity of soul are part of her Islamic ethos and teaching following the influence of Arabian Manga practice in the Swahili communities. The poem is used exactly as Clarissa Vierke points out: ‘poetry became an appreciated vehicle which transported religious concepts, hagiographies and moral guidelines to the wider Swahili speaking audiences’ (2016:228). Also of interest, however, the poem is among the very few of the nineteenth century female-authored Swahili texts in which women communicate their own feminine messages to other women without the intervention of their menfolk.

Mwana Kupona is seen in *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* to be extremely worried about the future of her only daughter, a ‘princess’ through King Mataka of Siu, as she regards her as still ignorant and naïve (*kijana muyinga*, stz. 138). But above all, she insists in verses 34, 38 and 40 that she has to perfume her body with



the pleasant oriental fragrance of rose water and scented powder in order to hide unpleasant body odour:

*Muli siwate mwengo*            leave no odour on your body  
*Kwa marashi na dalia*        by smearing rose water and fragrance powder  
(in Mulokozi, 1999:129)

And she ensures that she beautifies her neck and sprays both herself and her husband with ‘oud’ soon after completion of the routine bathing, massaging, and shaving of her man:

*Na udi umfukize*        And perfume him with oud incense  
*Bukurata wa ashia*    Morning and evening  
(in Mulokozi, 1999:128)

Scents are to be used as agents of beautification and sexual stimulation. Mwana Kupona is seen here imparting knowledge of the rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood to noble Swahili women, in line with what Rosabell Boswell described in her ethnographic study of Swahili Zanzibar. She notes that in modern Swahili households, an adult Swahili woman ‘must not only perfume her body as a way of ritually cleansing herself’. She also has to ‘perfume her clothing, her house and the marital bed’ to purify, as well as ward off any foul odour and malevolent spirits in order to sanctify the matrimonial union (2008:301). Likewise, in *Utendi wa Mwanamanga*, Liyongo, is seen repeatedly praising his wife under the name of ‘Mwanamanga’ or ‘a lady from Arabian–Manga’, as being meticulously scented with all the naturally odorous parts of her body smelling of pleasant Manga or Makka fragrance.

Interestingly, Liyongo is describing highly valued scents as ‘a pleasant fragrance from Makka’ (12-47) or ‘the scent–producing oil of Manga’ (12-31). Similarly, in the other related poem by Liyongo in the same volume, *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamnazi*, ‘Song of Lady Coconut’ (66-67), he speaks of a lavish dish of ‘*pilau ya hindi*’ (dish of Indian spiced rice) (13-23) and ‘*sinia ya Shirazi*’ (Shiraz tray) (13-24) to portray the linkage of India and Persia to the Swahili coastal society. Instead of referring to the ‘lady from Makka’ as in his praise of his wife in *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamanga*, in *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamnazi*, Liyongo praised his other lover as ‘the daughter of Hijaz’ (*Mwana wa Hijazi*), referring to the wider region in Saudi Arabia. Hijaz and Makka are spiritual epi-centers of Islam. Makka is in the region known as Hijaz. Spiritual localities such as Makka or Hijaz have exotic Arabian cosmetics and oriental perfumes. They are all connected in one way or another to ‘Arabian-Manga’, as is the lady described in the poem. The metaphor of intimacy, the ‘sailing’ trip, also takes us towards Manga and specifically to Makka (Mecca) (12-44), a place of nobility and honour related to the Prophet Muhammad’s birth.

Since Mwanamnazi and Mwanamanga are close relatives and wives of Liyongo, there is a message here that the poet wants his readers to share: that he has married wives from the noble lineage of the Prophet (*ukoo wa Sherifu*). The royal

adornment, ambergris, musk and embroidered cloth (*kisutu*) are their social class markers. Mia Wilson (2008), in "A Study of Body Scent as a Social Identifier among Members of the Arabic Culture", affirms the connection between the social symbolism of scents and the class of the wearer. She finds that 'The high quality and cost of a man's perfume signify the high class the wearer belongs. 'Lower classes smell [of] lower quality perfume'. She further points out that priests and high religious figures have special liquid oud that they wear in the mosque. The burning of wood oud is done in important buildings and offices as a welcoming gesture also as a way of providing the scented smoke of heaven for attendants (2008:52).

When used with reference to a range of other items, the term 'Manga' is associated with heavenly matters. Fruit of 'pomegranate' is physically not allegorically regarded as among the 'fruits of paradise' when the poet swears by God how delicious they are and by implication the breasts of his lover, an 'Arabian-lady' or *Mwanamanga* (12-13). To emphasise this oriental connection, Liyongo is seen in his other poem, "*Utumbuizo wa Liyongo Harusini*" (Liyongo at the Wedding), describing the wedding festivity of her royal sister. The feature of the society he is writing about is clearly indicated. It is a society divided into those of high rank (*watukufu wana wa zitengo*) (3-6) and the downtrodden - 'the overcrowded people' (*watu*) (3-8). The wedding ceremony is high class and displays Indian Ocean connections. By wearing expensive clothes (*zisutu zisizo zitango*) such as silk garments from China and lavish Indian armlets (*k'owa za Hindi*), the locals are transported into a hybrid domain. On top of their dresses, they are advised to wear oriental perfume such as a mixture of ambergris, aloe wood, rose water, patchouli, saffron, musk and camphor, so as to maintain their social status and class belonging (verses 3-9 to 3-15).

It is not only Liyongo and Mwana Kupona who pay attention to the exotic attar from Arabia-Manga, '*mafuta ya manga*' (the scent-producing oil of Manga) (Miehe et al. 2006:61). Mwalimu Sikujua (1810-1889), another classic Swahili poet, describes it as a 'high level' fragrance from Arabia or *Atari za Manga* (Arabian fragrance), while Abdilatif Abdallah calls it *nyudi za Arabuni* (Arabian incense) (1973:103). It is clear that classic poets all share the same sentiment that Arabian-Manga scents are marvellous and one of the positive influences of their migratory feudal masters from Arabia. Less happily, it also marks the sharp contrast with the lower classes, who smell of lower quality perfume. As noted, both Liyongo's and Mwana Kupona's poems evoke orient attar as a marker of their social class and wealth. Readers of both poems are invited to gaze at high-class characters such as Mwanamanga and Mwana Kupona with 'scented' eyes.

### 3.0 Scented Bodies, Olfactory Sensuality and Eroticism

Gustave Flaubert, in his Egypt travelogue, published as *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* (1972), wrote at length about his encounters with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian dancer and courtesan in Wadi Halfa in 1850 (113). He was

much captivated by her erotic dancing moves, but by far the most important element he describes was her scented body parts: “She had just come from the bath; her firm breasts had a fresh smell, something like that of sweetened turpentine; she began by perfuming her hands with rose water.” (1972:114).

The parts of her body that he foregrounds, as a Western gazer, were none other than her scented breasts and perfumed hands. There is a clear relationship between the oriental female body parts, olfactory sensuality and eroticism. Odourizing body parts, as Peter Largey and David Watson write, is “the presentation of the self with accreditable odours through cultural tendencies of the ‘art’ of perfuming” as part of ‘odour attraction’ ritual, by augmenting the body with pleasing scents (1972:1027). It is the act of “removal of socially discreditable odours” through frequent bathing and the cleaning of hands, teeth and intimate body parts in a fervent attempt to practise bad ‘odor avoidance’ (1972:1027). In most love poems praising women, the female body is presented as a collection of separate parts, a non-thinking, non-feeling object, as opposed to a whole person. Women in various poems are reduced to individual pieces “legs,” “breasts,” and “bottoms”, similar to à la carte items on a restaurant menu.

But most important are female genitalia. In his discussion of the symbolism of female genitalia, Rufus Camphausen says that it has many forms, including flowers, fruits, a triangle, and a double-pointed oval shape, casket and sailing ship. Flowers represent sexuality and sensuality for both sexes in courting and marriage, especially when strung together in garlands (1991:14).

Elsewhere, the idealised female body is described as “grotesque” by Gail Kern Paster in her critical article, ‘The body embarrassed: Drama and the discipline of shame in early modern England’. She paints the female body as “open, permeable, effluent, and leaky” as opposed to the masculine body—“whole, closed, opaque, self-contained”- (1993: 92). The idea that the female sexual anatomy is malodorous and like a leaky vessel is countered by the fact that smelly effluvia are not exclusive to women. Both men and women have sweat glands in the armpits and genitals.

In the *Utumbuizo wa Mwanamanga* and *Utendi wa Mwanakupona*, both poems exhibit inodorous and odorous parts of the body of males and females. Both sexes are subjected to bathing, massaging and smearing of fragrance. Liyongo completely rejects the ‘leaky vessels’ presumption by inviting readers into his marital bedroom, where he reveals that his wife’s private parts (“bilge”) are ‘not leaking’ any fetid fluid:

*Kangiya ngamani k’enda uziwani Niiyepo p’wani kapija mzinga.*

Down I went to the bilge to look at the water level and having checked it I found the boat was not leaking ( verse 12-45).

Liyongo uses the metaphor of bilge to refer to his beloved’s private parts, likening them to a sailing boat, her Noah’s ark (Yakwe *safina* in verse 12-41). His readers,

who are dwellers of the Indian Ocean rim, are familiar with the use of maritime metaphors to represent female body parts, especially genitals. During sexual intimacy, the man's sperm is normally merged with the woman's Aroma to create a sexual smell. Liyongo discloses to his readers (who thereby become voyeurs) that during and after intercourse, his spouse's private parts were 'oozing and producing pleasant scent, like a fragrance from Makka' (12-47). According to Allain Corbin, the presence of *odor mortis*, based on sex and sperm, could have created putrefied odour (1986:46). The Galenic belief that women's bodies are unruly and leaky vessels is also objected to by Mwanakupona, who urged her daughter to bathe, massage and apply 'oud' and other oriental fragrances to her husband and herself on a daily basis.

Mwana Kupona is reminding her daughter to be aware of her own position as a pious member of the noble family by emphasising the management of body odour from head to toe. She lays down the etiquette of handling her husband by 'taking care of his whole body' (*Na kumtunda muili*, stz 33), while 'rubbing and bathing his body' (*Kumsinga na kumwoa*, stz. 33) and ensuring that he is 'shaved' and his 'moustache trimmed' (*Mnyoe mpalilize, sharafa umetengeze*, stz.34). She is urged to contain her natural malodorous smell by applying oriental aromatic scents all the time:

*muili siwate mwengo* 'leave your body with no odour',  
*kwa marashi na dalia* 'smear rose water and fragrant powder' (stz.40).

To beautify herself, she is advised that she has to augment her body with necklaces and pendants on her neck. On her feet and wrists, she has to wear Indian anklets and bracelets, without forgetting rings on her fingers, henna on the feet and eyeliner around her eyes and her eyelashes. She is instructed to imagine herself like a bride. As for fragrance, 'perfuming her husband's body with oud in the morning and evening' is advised (*Na udi umfukize, bukurata wa ashia*, stz. 34). Once satisfied that he is clean and scented, she has to do the same for herself and ensure that she spreads and places jasmine flowers on their marital bed. (*Na asumini kutunga, na firashani kutia*, stz 38). Purification of the marital bed is vital to get rid of sexual and other malodorous impurities.

She is further told to be proactive in bed by leaning closer to him while caressing and seducing him into action (*Kilala siikukuse mwegeme umpapase*, stz. 31). This is a sure way for her to be crowned as a 'noble wife' '*mke shani*', stz. 9). Here we note that the galenic belief that the female body, by virtue of discharging fluids such as menses, blood, milk, and sweat, is inferior is not entertained by Liyongo and Mwana Kupona. Both poets revere 'adapted' attar as an exterminating agent of the fetid malodour, with what Victor Hugo in *Les Orientales* terms as "perfumes that inspire love" (2000:140). Body touching becomes essential for Mwana Kupona's daughter and Liyongo to share warmth with partners through pressing and rubbing of the skin, with scented oriental massaging unguents. We get

to know from these two classic poems that before lovers attain their sexual desires, there are numerous ritualised stages to be adhered to in Swahili custom. Body massaging with mixed attar oil, bathing with water mixed with rose water, and smearing the bodies of both lovers with oud are a prerequisite to sexual intimacy.

As for the ritual of (de)-odorising of body parts, downward from the navel to the genitalia, Liyongo in *Utendi wa Mwanamanga* is seen showcasing his sexual encounter with his royal spouse in their private scented room. Using the motif of a journey, he invites gazers to sail with him using ‘Noah’s ark’ (*safina*), representing his wife’s sexual body parts. What is particularly malodour body parts to him, the head, hair, ears, face, nose, eyebrows, cheeks, lips, teeth, tongue, chin, neck, collarbones, shoulders, ribs, belly, waist, thighs, knees, calves and soles are not scented in his poem. These parts were not associated with scents when erotically aroused. The breast and navel, which are normally inodorous body parts, are specifically engaged by Liyongo as pleasantly scented parts along with the mouth and the whole ‘sailing ship’, boat, or ‘*safina*’ (Noah’s ark), including its bilge. Breasts are likened by Liyongo to the fruit of pomegranate (*komamanga*, stz.12-33), as also noted by Vierke, who considers that ‘the female breasts are often associated with fruits, more, specifically with pomegranates, mangoes or apples’ as a way of depicting women’s beauty, sensuality and attractiveness in Swahili poetry as well as in world literature. Interestingly, she elucidates ‘that fruits and blossoms as representing women are consumed by the male’ who enjoys both tactile and olfactory sweetness (2007: 30-31). However, our contention is that pomegranates recur in classical Swahili poetry because of their connection to the knowledge of the Quran. Pomegranate is mentioned three times in the Quran as one of the fruits that will be found in Paradise:

“In both of them [gardens] are two springs, spouting [...] in both of them are fruits and palm trees and pomegranates” (Quran, 55:66-69).

We also noticed that Liyongo juxtaposes the mention of pomegranates between ‘God swearing’ and ‘the fruits of Paradise’.

*‘I swear by God. The Incomparable, I shall speak the truth about the pomegranates. I swear, I have not seen, nor have I witnessed, the fruits of Paradise as those of Mwana Manga’.* (verse 12-32-33)

This indicates that the choice of pomegranate is deliberately linked to heavenly scents. Once one applies the ‘pleasant fragrance from Makka’ or Manga scents, he or she is purifying the male or female body in order to attain heavenly Paradise. More signs of heavenly connection are expressed by the recurrence of the toponym Makka. The navel is compared to ‘a casket crafted by a skilled workman from Makka’ (verse 12-38). The navel is close to the female reproductive system. It is a reminder of our connection to the womb. A series of maritime symbols -- sailing vessels, bilge, mast, deep sea, shore, boat, cannon, water level, ropes, sea currents, water, Northerly wind and Noah’s ark (*safina*) -- are employed by the poet to veil explicit erotic intimacy.

Liyongo is not at all contented with the way female genitalia and their involvement in the act of sexual intimacy are negatively described. He specifically targets the natural sources of effluvia such as the teeth, mouth, armpits, navel and the whole groin areas in order to voice his opposition. To him, all these odorous parts emit pleasant odours throughout his sexual encounter with his wife. Liyongo describes the aromatic smell of the scented breath, 'Her mouth gives out the sweet scent of the screw pine or the pure musk of the civet and the wild dove' (*Kanwa huradidi nyoshi za mkadi au za zabadi ya ngawa na fungwa*, verse. 12-22). Liyongo describes the smell of his wife's armpits as:

'better than wild jasmine' or 'pleasant fragrance oil from Manga-Arab' (*zaidi ya afu, au matukufu mafuta ya Manga* (verse 12-31).

Reference to Manga-Arab is qualified with the positive modifier 'pleasant' (*matukufu*) to signal his approval of their excellence. His sniffing of his wife's armpit is so sensuous that it makes his 'manhood' bulge like 'like the seedling of the wormwood' (*mte mpakanga*, verse 12-30). Liyongo paints an image of how effective female body odour is in stimulating sexual arousal. But he warns observers that Mwanamanga's navel is out of bounds. No one should be close to smelling it because any inhaler runs the risk of 'his blood rushing to the tip of his nose' (*Mwenye kukinuk'a puwa damu henga*, stz.12-38). He boasts of his ability to endure her sexualised odour while 'sailing' (engaging in sexual intimacy). But upon reaching 'the shore' (attaining sexual climax with his lover), Liyongo says, 'I fired a cannon' (*kapija mzinga*, stz.12-46), to release rounds of 'bullets' (semen). Following his bombardment, she mesmerises the poet by 'oozing aromatic scent' that is likened to 'a pleasant Makka or Manga fragrance'. Again, readers are drawn back to the scents of Manga-Arabia.

In *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, we learn that brides-to-be are privately taught to cuddle their husbands like 'babies', or immature young men 'who are unable to talk' (*asiyojua kunena*, stz. 35). Mwanakupona hints to her daughter that men prefer tenderness and devotion. She suggests she should 'please' him by doing what he desires most. She is to let her body and scented odour speak for themselves. The woman has to make her presence felt through tactile, visual and olfactory sensations only -- silent talk. Her body decoration and scents have to 'bamboozle him' (*Mpumbaze apumbae*, stz.36). She has to ensure that he engulfs all his senses and feelings with her actions. The beauty and fragrance of jasmine blossoms, the invigorating smell of oud, and the aphrodisiac power of roses all gathered together soften her masculine rival into total submission. Rufis Camphausen speaks of 'the goddess of love and seduction in Greek (Aphrodite, Roman: Venus) as symbolically represented by several flowering plants, including the lily, rose, apple, pomegranate, myrtle, quince, opium poppy, and mandrake (1991: 18). "The oil from violet flowers was one such aphrodisiac, and Greek women used it to oil their entire bodies before entering into sexual union" (1991:23). Deborah Green, in her article 'The Aroma of daily life: Aromatics in Roman and Rabbinic Culture' describes the seductive usage

of Aroma to entice men when the women in Israel put myrrh and balsam in their shoes and would walk in the market places of Jerusalem to entice the young men of Israel, as they kicked the ground and splashed scent on them (2011:19-63).

Do oriental scents have the alluring power to bewitch men, countering the belief that women are leaky vessels and mere objects of pleasure—victims of male-power fantasies? In the context of gender inequality and the patriarchal system, do women conceal their inner vengeance by applying their secret weapon—olfactory fetishism? In *The Smell of Class* (2004), Janice Carlisle has argued that in Victorian literature, "the artificiality of perfume marks the women who are unfit to be wives of the middle-class men?". Liyongo and Mwanakupona have given the power of fragrance to Swahili women. They are free to use it as they wish.

The poetess Mwana Kupona, as she grooms her daughter to become a 'noble wife' (*Mke shani*, stz. 9), predicts that she will emerge victorious by winning the 'heart and mind' of her husband, just like her own experience with her father. Mwana Kupona's relationship with her late husband is said to have reached the zenith of love - *pumbao* 'excitement'(stz. 55). Men are considered by Mwana Kupona as naturally malodorous. Hence she advises her daughter to groom her husband's unruly hair, his moustache, armpit and puberty hair, which cannot be handled by a barber.

Despite being warned not to provoke argumentation with her husband, the daughter of Mwanakupona, Bint Hashima, is reminded by dearest mother, Mwana Kupona, to set her eyes and mind on, 'a thing that goes in and out' *kitu changalie sana, kitokacho na kuingia* (stz. 35).

While this might be innocent household advice, the 'thing that goes in and out' may be the same thing that can enter inside the 'bilge' 'the canon' that has the power to shoot 'bullets'.

This double entrance can be interpreted as a warning against rival women: she has to fight for her position as the only favourite woman in his life. But it might also be an admonition to take good care of the body part in question when they themselves are engaged in sexual intimacy. Since nowhere else do we see a direct reference to 'intimate sexual education', Mwana Kupona opts to use a subtler metaphor at this stage. She advises her daughter how to handle the sensitive body part of her man. It is her canonical marital duty to care for the 'thing' that centres their intimacy.

Liyongo and Mwana Kupona present seductive oriental scents where men are playing the role of the seduced and women are the seducers. Women in both poems are seen or urged to seductively erotise their male partners. They both use the power of scent to convey their status, wealth and sexuality. Mwana Kupona and Liyongo show little interest in political matters; rather, they remain indulged in luxuries – expensive foods, lavish dress and scented love relationships -- in what Mwanakupona regards as 'excitement' (*pumbao*, stz. 55) which still lingers in her memory. They teach us that female body parts, and especially intimate parts like

breasts and navels, are secrets not to be carelessly exposed. Interestingly, both Liyongo and Mwanakupona expose the power of female eroticism through the symbolism of exotic fragrances and maritime metaphors connected to the Indian Ocean world and, specifically, Arabia.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

This paper has responded to Clarissa Verke's call for a reinvigoration of the historical interlinkages between oriental and Swahili cultures through the representation of perfume and adornment practices. It has done this by examining the poems of two classical Swahili poets: the work attributed to Fumo Lyongo and that of Mwana Kupona Mshamu (1790-1860). Despite their gender differences, these poets both share the perfumery trope linked to oriental sources while steeped in a patriarchal mode of life and the feudal system of the Oman-Zanzibar sultanate. These two poets defied convention and directed attention to the innermost secrets of their family lives.

They highlighted the significance of the aesthetic of (de)odorizing and beautifying their bodies and souls using highly valued imported attar from Arabia-Manga. In a bid to stay healthy and pure to enjoy the best of married life, scent culture is brought to the fore, with smell as a primary sense. The study wishes to contest that (de) odorising custom is as important as any other heritage trope worth preserving.

What seemed to be the carefully guarded secret of marital bliss, of sexual gratification, is now in the public sphere, openly revealed by Mwana Kupona and Liyongo. What happens on the marital bed is laid bare by these two poets.

Both poets invite readers to imagine and, in some instances, gaze at sexual encounters: between Liyongo and his lover in *Ode to Mwanamanga*; while in Mwana Kupona's case, it is a form of training involving the maiden girl and her mother in *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* on how to become an accomplished woman in Swahili society. Liyongo surrendered to the whims of a woman's seductive scent and their bodily encounter. Mwanakupona has instructed her daughter to purify and scent her husband and herself in order to fulfil her marital obligation. This includes seductively massaging, perfuming and caressing him like a baby using the best available oriental attar.

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