

Matukio: Biographical Poems



FIGURE 19 Ustadh Mahmoud Mau sitting in front of the oven in his bakery in 1988

1 *Hafi asiye timiwa* (“No One Dies before His Time Is Up”)

Ustadh Mau composed this poem in 1999 as a kind of diary entry to remind himself of an incident in which he almost died. He first read it to his mother. He had traveled to Mombasa to visit his child who was studying there. At that time, during an El Niño phase after a long rainy period, the rain had caused the Tana River to swell so large that it destroyed the road in Gharseni. Thus, all the passengers had to get off the bus and board canoes that would take them to the other side of the large current. On the other side, another bus waited to take them to Mombasa. As one of the people on board the canoe tried to stretch his leg, he moved too much and the boat overturned. One man who could not swim grabbed Ustadh by the shoulder to find some support. He was so heavy that he almost made Ustadh Mau drown. Ustadh Mau lost his bag with the school fees for his child inside it. This story is effectively depicted in a dramatic crescendo, but with a happy ending: all six people on the boat survived. After the incident, Mahmoud began fast-

ing every Monday and Thursday to thank God for saving him from drowning on that day.

1. *Nataka wapa hikaya, ya mambo yalonipata
Kwa utungo tawambiya, kismwache' kilichopita
Mungu kunijaaliya, salimini kunieta
Hafi asiye¹¹ timiwa*

I want to tell you a story of what happened to me.
In verse, I will tell you about a particular incident
When God protected and saved me.
No one dies before his time is up.

¹ *kismwache* contracted form of *kisa chake* "its story." | ¹¹ The poet uses the Kimvita (Mv.) and Kiunguja (Kiung.) form *asiye* instead of the Lamu *aso*.

2. *Ni mwaoni twalingiya, kwa idadi watu sita
Na mifuko yetu piya, kila mtu kapakata
Nahuza akatwambiya, hadhari kufurukuta
Hafi asiye timiwa*

We got into a canoe; we were six in number,
Everyone holding their bags in their laps.
The captain told us, "Be careful, do not move too much!"
No one dies before his time is up.

3. *Tukaketi hangaliya, kamba alipoiwata
Na mtoni kikangiya, na mai kikaifuata
Katika sisi mmoya, guu hawezi kukuta
Hafi asiye timiwa*

We sat and watched how they untied the rope,
And the canoe went into the deep water, following the current.
One of us could not stretch his leg.
No one dies before his time is up.

4. *Akitaka kusongeya, hutambaa tatatata
Ni yeo! Metwatiliya, maini huparapata
Hata fahamu kitiya, mzigo nimebingita'
Hafi asiye timiwa*

And when he wanted to move, he could only do it like a toddler.
Suddenly, we found ourselves in the water, struggling to stay on the surface.

Before I even realized what happened, I was supporting a heavy load.

No one dies before his time is up.

I -*bingita* "to carry."

5. *Jibaba la kilo miya, maungoni meikita*
Kwa dhati meniemya, mabegani menambata
Kesa' kuisaidiya, kutaka kumkukuta¹¹
Hafi asiye timiwa

I was carrying a colossus of one hundred kilos on my back;
He weighed heavily on me, leaning on my shoulders.
I tried everything to help myself and shake him off.
No one dies before his time is up.

I *kesa* < *ka-isa* "to finish." | 11 *-kukuta* "to shake off."

6. *Nami mkono mmoya, mkoba nimekamata*
Lakini ukanemeya, sina budi kauwata
Kauona hupoteya, kashindwa kuufuwata
Hafi asiye timiwa

I held my bag in one hand,
But it became so heavy, I had to let it go.
I watched it sink, unable to retrieve it.
No one dies before his time is up.

7. *Hali yangu changaliya, pumzi siwezi vuta*
Jamaa meniziwiya, mai kwa kasi hupita
Shahada kaijiya, na tamaa muhukata'
Hafi asiye timiwa

When I found myself in a situation in which I could not breathe—
The fellow prevented me from doing so, and there was a strong current—

I pronounced the last creed and was about to give up.
No one dies before his time is up.

1 *muhukata tamaa* Am. "I was about to give up hope," a verb with the locative subject prefix (*mu-*), used in Kiamu to express "to be about to." See also *Wasiya wa mabanati*, stz. 88.

8. *Kashopoka mara moya, kwa kuwana na kuteta*
Kitwa nde katokeya, na pumzini nikavuta
Kawahi yowe kutiya, baba likaniburuta
Hafi asiye timiwa

For a moment, I managed to surface by fighting and struggling.
My head emerged from the water, and I could inhale;
I managed to shout before the heavy man pulled me down again.
No one dies before his time is up.

9. *Tukazama kwa pamoya, mai kasi husokota*
Mungu kanijaaliya, penyenye¹ tena kapata
Kanena nisaidiya, ukee kaukukuta
Hafi asiye timiwa

We sank together; the water was swirling quickly.
God granted me another chance to pierce through the surface.
I shouted loudly, "Help me!"
No one dies before his time is up.

1 *penyenye* "loophole."

10. *Kaiyona naregeya na ziungo huniwata*
Mwenyewe kashuhudiya ulimwengu hunipita
Fahamu zikapoteya kisa kwa muda kapata
Hafi asiye timiwa

I was getting weak, and my joints were failing me.
I could see myself how the world left me behind,
And I lost consciousness, which I regained after a while.
No one dies before his time is up.

11. *Fahamu zikiningiya, kijana hunikokota
Na kwa mbali hunambiya, jiveni hela ambata
Kifumbua changaliya, kwenye jive meniwata
Hafi asiye timiwa*

When my consciousness came back, I found a young man pulling me,
Telling me from afar, "Hold fast to this rock!"
When I opened my eyes, I saw that he had pulled me toward a rock.
No one dies before his time is up.

12. *Kamshukuru Jaliya, uhai tena kupata
Naye alosaidiya, maini kuniburuta
Tamlipa Maulaya, kwa dua sitomuata
Hafi asiye timiwa*

I thanked the Magnificent one for bringing me back to life,
And the one who helped and pulled me out of the water.
God will reward him, and I won't abandon him in my prayers.
No one dies before his time is up.

13. *Baadhi ya abiriya, walikuya nifuata
Ili kunisaidiya, mkoba kuutafuta
Uwapi umepoteya, hata ndiya ulopita
Hafi asiye timiwa*

Some of the passengers came to me
To help me look for my bag:
"Where is it? I do not even know where it was lost."
No one dies before his time is up.

14. *Hapa kikomo tatiya, kushukuru sitowata
Nna na faida moya, ambayo nimeipata
Mauti kuyakimbiya, si dawa hukufuata
Hafi asiye timiwa*

I will finish the poem here, but never stop being grateful.
And there is one lesson that I have learned from it:
Running from death is not a solution—it still follows you.
No one dies before his time is up.

2 *Mlango* (“The Door”)

Ustadh Mau composed this poem around 2003 or 2004, when he almost had to close down his bakery. The economy was not doing well (see also the poem *Jahazi*), and prices had been rising since the 1990s. His income was not enough to cover his expenses; he had debts of 1,500,000 shillings. Three of his children were at university, which added additional costs to his expenses. So he decided to close the shop for some time, since he no longer had any capital to invest. It was a difficult period for him, since, first of all, no one believed him; secondly, he did not know what to do.

For as long as he could remember, he had worked in the bakery, even when he was just a child and the bakery was run by his uncle. He helped out at the bakery after school until, at the beginning of the 1980s, he took it over from his uncle, to whom he provided some money for his daily provisions. His uncle had taken over the bakery from an Indian (at the time, the bakery was called Amir Bakery), who had ultimately moved away from Lamu, seeking greener pastures.

In 2005, Ustadh Mau retired and handed the bakery over to his firstborn son, Fati, who managed to obtain loans from the bank and to steer the bakery out of its crisis. He could even pay back his debts, but later went bankrupt with a second bakery that he had opened in Malindi. After that, he sold the Lamu bakery to his younger brother, Yassir. The bakery plays a central role in the family: Ustadh Mau calls it “the source of our life”; it earns an income for the whole family, and Yassir still runs the bakery, providing Ustadh Mau with money for his daily expenditures.

1. *Sitoshunduwa mlango, taushindika' wa duka*
Kwani mambo henda jongo, hayaekei kunyoka
Nimemaliza mipango, siyoni kurakibika

I will not open but close the shop's door,
Because things are going wrong; they don't seem to be going right.
I have tried everything; I do not see any improvement.

1 -*shindika* “to close a door without locking it.”

2. *Ni uwamuzi thakili, na wala sikuutaka*
Mimi kwenye duka hili, ndipo nilipoinuka
Siisi kazi ya pili, illa mikate kuwoka

It is a very hard decision, and I did not want it.
 This shop is the place where I grew up.
 I never learned any other profession except baking bread.

3. *Na adhabu ya kaburi, aiyuwao hakika¹*
Zinganga¹¹ zinazojiri, ni ndani tulomzika
Wa nde hata khabari, hamba hunena huteka

The only one who really knows the suffering of the grave,
 Is one who is buried.
 Outside of it, people have no idea; they just gossip, talk, and laugh.

¹ The poem makes reference to a proverb that suggests that only someone who has gone through the same experience can understand the one suffering: *Adhabu ya kaburi aiyuwao ni maiti* “the punishment of the grave, the dead person is the one who knows it.” | ¹¹ *zinganga* Am. “trouble” (Std. *dharubu, taabu*)

4. *Na waja mukikutana, usitani¹ hukushika*
Hufai kunena sina, na sina ukitamka
Umwambiyao huwona, humfanyiya dhikaha

And when you meet people on the street, they stop you and beg;
 You are not supposed to say, “I don’t have anything.”
 When you tell them no, they think you are joking.

¹ *usita* “street,” a noun derived from *-pita* “to pass by” (Std. *njia*)

5. *Aswilani hawakiri, hawataki kuridhika*
Hunena ni ujauri, na twabiya kugeuka
Ya nyuma yote mazuri, huwata kuyakumbuka

They do not want to accept your answer;
 They say it is arrogance and that you have changed in character.
 They remember none of your previous favors.

6. *Hata wako wa karibu, huwa nawe wana shaka*
Wangawa hawakujibu, kwa siri hunungunika
Hawaziyoni dharubu, ambazo hukuzunguka

Even your close relatives don't believe you;
 Though they do not tell you directly, they talk behind your back.
 They do not see the problems that have befallen you.

7. *Imekuwa ndake kazi, mtu kitu akitaka*
Humwambiya siku hizi, mambo yameharibika
Hushindana na mkizi, kwa hasira na kuruka

"It has become his habit; when someone begs him,
 He says, 'Nowadays, things have gone wrong.'
 He is worse than a *mkizi* fish, jumping out of anger."¹

¹ *mkizi* is a kind of fish (like a mullet) that jumps from the sea and that people consider to be very moody and choleric (*mwenye hasira*). Mau: *Ukimwambia kitu ataruka* ("If you tell him something, he will jump"). Mau also refers to a proverb: *Hasira ya mkizi, furaha/tijara ya mvuzi* ("The anger of the *mkizi* is the joy of the fisherman"). In this stanza, which consists of direct speech, Ustadh Mau lets the voices of his neighbors and friends speak about him; they compare him to a *mkizi* fish.

8. *Hayo ndiyo wanenayo, uchenda kuwadirika*
Ulonalo wayo wayo¹, na kwingi kusunoneka
Hamba ni kisingiziyo, cha jukumu kuepuka

That is how you find them, talking behind your back.
 They say the anxiety and worries you have
 Are just an excuse to avoid your responsibility.

¹ *wayo wayo* "laments" | ¹¹ *kisingizi* "excuse"

9. *Henda kapata salama, labuda kapumzika*
Zikapunguwa lawama, za wenye kunizunguka
Na utune¹ ukakoma, mlango kiushindika

Perhaps I can get some peace and a bit of rest,
 And the reproaches and provocations of those surrounding me
 Will stop if I close the shop's door.

¹ *utune* "grudges," syn.: *malalamiko*.

10. *Hakuna dhiki wa dhiki, mwisio kiza hutanduka*
Ni yeye pweke Khallaki, atuwao na kutweka
Makini sibabaiki, kamba yake nimeshika

There is not just distress after distress¹; light will do away with the darkness.

It is only the Creator who can lift the burden or put it on our shoulders;

That is why I stay calm, holding fast to His rope.

¹ This refers to the saying *Hakuna dhiki wa dhiki, baada ya dhiki faraja*, "There is not mischief after mischief; after mischief there will be delight."

11. *Naamini kwa yakini, kwa hili tafaidika*
Tamtambuwa ni nyani, mwema wa kuibandika
Na wa kweli muhisani¹, naye atabainika

I believe I will certainly benefit from this experience.

I will recognize the ones who are only pretending to be good,

And it will be obvious who my true friend is.

¹ *muhisani* Ar. "friend" (Std. *rafiki*)

12. *Mola amenisitiri, tangu nalipoinuka*
Katika wangu umri, mpaka nilipofika
Sasa hatoniaziri, inshaallah sitoumbuka

God has safeguarded me since my childhood,

Throughout my life, until where I am now.

Now he will not disgrace me, *inshaallah*; I will not be ashamed.

13. *Tammati yangu kauli, kalamu hapa naweka*
Afuwa haiko mbali, nataraji kuafika
Na koja la idhilali, shingoni hatonawika

This is the end of my talk; I put my pen aside.

Relief is not far; I expect to have it soon.

He will not put a wreath of misery around my neck.