The first time I became fully cognizant of the political potency of Abdilatif Abdalla’s poetry was in 1982 when I had just begun my teaching career at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. That was the year I was arrested and initially held in police custody for some ten days or so under intense interrogation. And it was under these circumstances that Abdilatif’s name first surfaced.

Given the ethnicized nature of Kenyan politics, my first group of interrogators was entirely Swahili. And these ethnic compatriots of mine used the ethnic card to try and cajole me into taking them into confidence with promises of helping me out of my arrest and even of impending charges of sedition. It was clear from their line of interrogation that these Swahili officers were charged with the responsibility of unearthing a broader Swahili connection in what were regarded as my clandestine activities. And, invariably, Abdilatif became the point of departure. By then, of course, Abdilatif was in Britain working for the BBC. Do you know him? How dare you claim not to know him well enough? What are you hiding? Wasn’t he the one who seduced you to this seditious path? Has he been in touch with you? What about you -- have you been in touch with him in recent months? Etc, etc.
Then one morning one of the Swahili officers walked in with a copy of Abdilatif’s *Sauti ya Dhiki*. It turned out to be my copy of the book which the police had taken from my office. Why do you have a copy of Abdilatif’s book? Is it banned?, I asked. No, but why do you have it? Because I teach some of his poems in my class on textual analysis, I responded. Why? But why not? The officer then shows me a photocopy of the poem “Nshishiyelo N’lilo” (Holding fast to what I believe in). Again, it was my photocopy with extensive markings on it. Why do you have a photocopy of this poem? It was the poem I was teaching last week and the photocopy allowed me to make more detailed notes about the poem. Why this particular poem – a *kichwa ngumu* (strong-headed) poem? Well, I was exploring the theme of “truth” with my students – especially comparing the notion of *kweli* and that of *haki* (which combines truth and justice)...And I also wanted my students to think critically about whether there is, in fact, one kind of truth....And so on and on we danced around Abdilatif and his poetry. It was after this Abdilatif phase of my interrogation by fellow Waswahili that the process moved to a more brutal phase with some senior non-Swahili officers taking over the process.

After several days in special branch police custody I was hooded and transferred to the Kamiti Maximum Prison, all in the dark of the night. As the doors opened to the cell block where I would spend the next couple of years in solitary confinement, my attention was immediately drawn to a middle-aged warden whose name I later came to learn was Kariuki because of his first words, expressed in a tone of surprise: “Ee! Muthwairi mwingine!” I immediately knew that my fellow Mswahili, the leftist-leaning Professor Ahmed Muhiddin (Taji) had also been arrested and was now detained at Kamiti. It was not until about two days later, during my one hour-a-day out of
my cell, that I saw Kariuki again. And in conversation with him I understood that, in fact, by
“Muthwairi mwingine,” he meant the Mswahili following Abdilatif.

Kariuki’s seeming astonishment at seeing me at Kamiti had to do with the fact that, like
many other Kenyans at that time, he held a view of the Swahili that was somewhat in accord with
Abdilatif’s own opinion of his ethnic compatriots, expressed in his poem “Zindukani” (Wake up,
folks!). For Kariuki, as a rule, the Waswahili were a timid, subdued and complacent lot. He
regarded Abdilatif as an exception to the rule. And even in his wildest imagination he could not
fathom that there would be more than one exception to that ethnic rule, that he would see yet
another Muthwairi brought to Kamiti for political reasons during the tenure of his service.

More remarkable to me, however, was the fact that Kariuki still remembered Abdilatif even
though it had been some ten years or so since he left Kamiti. And in my continued conversation
with Kariuki over the course of the next few months, it was clear why: Abdilatif had left one hell of
a record, a record of an activist who completed his prison term unbroken, unrepentant –
embodying an inspirational force of political defiance – and all in his special polite and humble
demeanor! Perhaps that is why the special branch police was so suspicious of my interest in
Abdilatif’s poem, “Nshishiyelo N’lilo” – afraid of the very the idea of unwavering commitment to
one’s beliefs and principles.

After my release from Kamiti I discovered that I had lost my job at the university and no
one was willing to employ me without written permission from the office of the president, which I
was unwilling to seek. Nonetheless there were sympathetic individuals who were prepared to take
the risk of engaging my services on short contract, but all behind the scenes. One of these was a
certain Abdallah Ismaily who was then the Managing Director of Oxford University Press of
Nairobi, Kenya, a position previously held by Abdilatif’s own elder brother, Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir. Abdallah Ismaily had sent me a message through a third party requesting to meet with me in his office on a specified day and time. And so I went.

When I arrived, Abdallah Ismaily was escorting someone—I believe his marketing manager -- out of his office. Abdallah then introduced me to the gentleman in Kiswahili: “This is Alamin Mazrui.” And quickly the man added: “Oh yes, the author of Sauti ya Dhiki (Voice of Agony).” “No, of Kilio cha Haki (Cry for Justice) actually,” Abdallah quickly corrected him. And without acknowledging his mistake, the gentleman continued, “That’s right. First there was the voice of agony. Then the voice of agony became a cry for justice.” Sivyo?!

It is true, of course, that my Kilio cha Haki came after Abdilatif’s Sauti ya Dhiki. Sauti ya Dhiki was published in 1973, the year after Abdilatif’s release from prison. My Kilio cha Haki was published in 1981, the year before my imprisonment. And if Abdilatif’s Sauti ya Dhiki was a product of his confinement, my Kilio cha Haki is widely believed to have been among the causes of my own incarceration. So, perhaps the marketing manager was not altogether wrong to suggest that Sauti ya Dhiki and Kilio cha Haki were texts that were somehow in dialogue with each other.

But, like Abdilatif, I too ended up producing a collection of poems in prison, entitled Chembe cha Moyo (Arrow in my heart). That was published in 1988, I believe. The remarkable thing, however, is that I never took another look at this collection of my poems again until early this year – that is, after a period of almost thirty years!! In April of 2017 a certain Maryram Hamadi, a graduate student at the University of Dodoma, Tanzania, contacted me by email, indicating that she was writing her thesis on Kiswahili prison literature, focusing exclusively on Abdilatif’s Sauti ya Dhiki and my Chembe cha Moyo. Hamadi lamented that she was able to find a
wealth of information about Abdilatif and his life on the Internet, but found virtually nothing about me! So she wondered if there was any way she could interview me about my personal history. As luck would have it, I had to make an unexpected trip to Kenya in May 2017, and Maryam travelled to Mombasa to interview me.

As it turned out, Maryam Hamadi had numerous questions not only about my life, but also about many of the poems in my *Chembe cha Moyo*. In a way, then, she forced me to re-read my poems in a way that I had never done before, after a lapse of some thirty years. And because of the comparative frame of her own thesis topic, and the fact that I was then well familiar with *Sauti ya Dhiki*, I could not help looking at *Chembe cha Moyo* in light of *Sauti ya Dhiki*.

At the artistic level, obviously, no modern collection of Swahili poetry can be placed in the same league with *Sauti ya Dhiki*. After all, Abdilatif’s mastery of Swahili poetic diction and idiom is one that is unmatched and sets him apart from all his contemporaries. His poetry is truly unique in that it is classical, but also inventive and creative, without being stilted.

At the thematic level, on the other hand, there were some convergent arenas between the two collections. For one, both include poems that reveal the agony of imprisonment, sometimes leading the poets to reflect on the idea of political exile once out of prison. And here I have to say that Abdilatif spoke for both of us in his poem “Naja” when he suggested “Kaa kwingine anapi, ela kwenye lakwe gando?” – Where else can a crab run to, save in its own shell?

But what I found particularly striking in the contrast between the two collections was the extent to which a number of my poems betray a sense of alienation from the Swahili existential self in a way that Abdilatif’s poems do not. For example, Islam is virtually an accompanying attribute of Swahili culture and identity. Throughout *Sauti ya Dhiki* Abdilatif expresses his political
radicalism and leftist leanings in ways that are not in conflict with his Islamic faith and identity. He has even been able to translate radical ideas from the West to a mode that somehow makes them organic to the African body politic. In my Chembe cha Moyo, however, I could see a clear disconnect between my political position and my religious background, even questioning whether God cares at all to intervene to alleviate the suffering of the wretched of the earth. That sense of Islamic belonging in terms other than identitarian, has certainly receded both in my writings and personal life.

This contrast between Abdilatif and I may appear surprising given the similarities in our backgrounds -- both Mombasa, Old Town boys of the trans-colonial generation. Our respective families are well known for being deeply religious and politically radical at the same time. Indeed, Abdilatif’s brother, Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir, and my father, Sheikh Muhammad Kasim, were comrades-in-arms, fully devoted to each other in the campaign for a reformed Islam. And the two met periodically to discuss possible political strategies in dealing with the government of Jomo Kenyatta and later of Daniel Arap Moi in matters affecting the Muslims of Kenya.

With this background in mind, it is possible to argue that, from the beginning, Abdilatif was inspired by both the religious and the political experiences of his background, and to this day continues to embody this family tradition to varying degrees in his life, thinking and writing. Though Abdilatif is by no means your typical Mswahili, perhaps the fact that he did not get the opportunity to pursue higher education in Africa -- super brilliant as the man is -- may have shielded him from its alienating effects. As Ali Mazrui once put it, by design the African academy has been the greatest purveyor of cultural alienation and intellectual dependency partly because it has been planted in the African space with few, if any, concessions to African cultures. It is true, of
course, that Abdilatif was introduced to the likes of Che Guevara in a European language, English. But that entire process of learning about these revolutionaries and their revolutionary ideas took place outside the confines of the Western-style academy and within the cultural and epistemological milieu of his Swahili-Islamic society.

In my case, on the other hand, I seem to have been inspired by neither the religious nor the political orientation of my family history, even though I continued to be a devoted practicing Muslim well into my early adulthood. In fact, my interest in politics did not begin until the mid-1970s when I was in my mid-twenties and, coincidentally, it all started right here at Princeton University. Two of my closest friends at that time, Apollo Njonjo of Kenya and Waldon Bello of the Philippines, were die-hard Marxists struggling to complete their PhD dissertations in Political Science at Princeton. In time, I was drawn to many hours of discussing and debating the political goings-on in the world with the two, a process that set in quick motion my own politicization and radicalization which ultimately led me to Kamiti Maximum Prison some seven years later.

The point here is that even though my process of learning about Marxist ideas was somewhat informal, I think the fact it was part of my long intellectual expedition within the structures of the Western academy, it had a more profound alienating effect on me than I had realized before rereading *Chembe cha Moyo*. And, the more I came to appreciate Marxism, the more I became estranged from Islam as an integral part of my Swahiliness! My journey here could be compared quite closely with that of Samba Diallo, the main character in Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*.

In the final analysis, then, some of the contrasts between *Sauti ya Dhiki* and *Chembe cha Moyo* raise once again the problematic role of Western-style formal education in Africa as one of
the primary agents of cultural alienation. The pressure now is for some readjustment towards a
greater balance between the continuities of African cultures and new forces that have developed
on the continent. And I believe Abdilatif is one superb example of the possibility of this balance in
some of its articulations. The challenge now is to discover a systemic formula towards that end.