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Beez, Jigal

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# **THE SWAHILI-TITANIC: THE TANZANIAN APPROPRIATION OF A GLOBAL TRAGEDY**

by  
Jigal Beez

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## **Introduction**

It was one of the biggest tragedies of modern times when in 1912 RMS Titanic collided with an iceberg and submerged. What was meant to be a triumph of technology became a synonym for disaster. The most famous maritime catastrophe in peace times claimed more than 1500 victims. Such a tragedy is made for legends and narrations. It is no wonder that many publications described the Titanic misfortune in detail; novels were written and musicals were composed, and at least nine different movies were shot using the Titanic theme. The most remarkable was Cameron's Hollywood movie from 1998. Just like the steamer was the most expensive one built, Cameron's film as well aimed at superlatives. It had the highest budget of any Hollywood production up to that date, it made use of the most sophisticated film technology, became the highest grossing film in history, and won eleven Oscars. Cameron's production became a global event, a symbol of the worldwide flow of images. The film was shown world wide and made it from air conditioned state of the art Dolby surround theatres of Times Square to backyard open air video shows in Africa where the audience appreciated an old worn out pirated video copy while sipping a cold beer and chasing mosquitoes. This is how the Titanic narration conquered the African continent. According to Matthias Krings the Titanic plot inspired various African artists (Krings 2006). Besides being popular in local advertisement design the Titanic plot became the theme of various songs and videos. In Nigeria, a Hausa video director produced a video called Masoyiyata (Behrend 2005, Krings 2006) in which a Hausa couple portrays Cameron's love story and uses the original wide angle positions of Cameron's film to depict the sinking of the ship. The

Nigerian director translated the story into the Hausa context of Northern Nigeria, which is quite remarkable as the traditional Hausa area has no access to sea.

Another example of an Africanization of Cameron's film comes from East Africa. Inspired by the Titanic video and the title song („Sound Truck [sic]“, 3) *My Heart will go on* sung by Celine Dion the Tanzanian artist Joshua Amandus Ludovic Mtani drew the graphic novel *Mkasa wa Mapenzi ndani ya Titanic* (The love story in Titanic).<sup>1</sup>

### **The Swahili Titanic Comic**

Mtani started to translate the Titanic narration into a graphic novel in the year 1998, while he was a student of political sciences at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He earned his living by drawing illustrations and cartoons for Tanzanian papers like *Alasiri*, *Nipashe* and *Komesha*. Mtani's first encounter with Titanic happened by accident. He visited a friend to watch music videos. Before watching music videos his friend wanted to finish a video he had started watching the previous day: Cameron's Titanic. Mtani saw the last half an hour of the tragedy and was greatly impressed. Everybody who saw the movie had tears in their eyes, convincing the artist that he encountered a very special story. Initially Mtani considered the narration to be pure fiction. But as he learned the disaster's historical facts, he was more affected. Mtani browsed the internet to collect more information on the catastrophe and thought about using the Titanic narration in his own field of profession: as a comic. Mtani's motivation was double fold. First he saw a great commercial potential in narrating this story as a graphic novel. Second he also wanted to make the readers familiar with the historical background of the narration. His first works on Titanic were published in strip format in the evening paper *Alasiri* in which Mtani told short episodes of the movie. The positive feedback towards these works encouraged the artist to start the ambitious project of drawing the whole movie as a comic. Mtani developed a

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<sup>1</sup> The information on Mtani and his works were obtained during a talk with Amandus Mtani in June 2006.

concept of telling Cameron's Titanic story in a series of 15 booklets, each consisting of 32 black and white pages and a coloured cover in A 5 format. It took around eight months of hard work to draw the story with black Rotring ink on normal A 4 photocopy paper. Mtani's work is quite close to the movie as he examined key scenes by pressing pause on his deck and scribbled them down in as sketches for his comic version.<sup>2</sup> The printing of the final result was financed by Mtani himself. He distributed the 3000 copies of the first issue with the help of local agents in the bigger towns of the country. The biggest turnover was achieved in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza. Arusha and Moshi also proved to be a good market. It was Mtani's hope to establish an own comic publishing company and to make a living by drawing and selling his own comics. However he made little profit after the publication of the first issue, lost confidence, and did not publish any of the following volumes. Today he regrets this decision. After being active in the Tanzanian media industry for nearly a decade, he realizes that a small profit from the first volume of a new series is actually a success and that he could have received bigger returns once the series became known. Meanwhile Mtani became editor in chief for the weekly tabloid *Maisha* and does not have any time to draw comics. Nevertheless, he has many ideas for graphic novels. The ideas all focus on real stories such as the attacks of 9/11 or the life of Osama bin Laden. The erotic comic magazines, which are the most popular ones in Tanzania are not appreciated by Mtani. He says: „Katuni hizi zinahamazisha ngono kuliko kueleemisha“ (These comics cause only sexual desires instead of educating). According to Mtani Comics are not meant for pure entertainment only but to educate the readers as well. It is interesting to note, that Mtani started to publish the continuation of his Titanic comic in his *Maisha* paper as a weekly series in September 2006, after a break of nearly eight years. The interest shown by foreign scholars encouraged him to use his material. This article will however focus on the comic magazine edition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mtani calls this „pause and sketch technique“.

<sup>3</sup> Also many other Tanzanian comic artists are of the opinion that comics are not mere entertainment but should contain an educational meaning as well, see Kipanya Masoud (Kipanya 2001: 6), Chris Katembo (Beez 2003) or Ka-Batembo (worldcomics 2001). For further information on Swahili comics see Beck (1999), Beez (2006, 2004, forthcoming), Beez and Kolbusa (2003), Graebner (1995) and Packalen (2001)



**Picture 1:** The continuation of the Titanic series after 6 years in the Tanzanian weekly *Maisha* 11.10.2006. It starts with Rose's suicide attempt.

The narration which was published in the first issue of *Mkasa wa Mapenzi ndani ya Titanic* ends shortly after the vessel has left the harbour and Jack starts drawing the passengers. Thereby it comprises approximately the first 34 minutes of Cameron's movie. The final box of this issue reads „usikose kitabu namba 2“ (Don't miss the book number 2).

But this volume does not comprise of the Titanic-comic only. The first page of the magazine displays bibliographical information, title, ISBN, address of the publishers and an oval photo of the comic artist himself wearing a polo shirt with the steering of the Titanic. The second page carries the foreword in which the author thanks his family and friends who helped him realising his goals as well as his artistic idols: famous Tanzanian cartoonists.<sup>4</sup> The third page is dominated by a photo of the singer Celin Dion who sang the Titanic title track. On the following page the song text is printed. As in nearly every Tanzanian comic magazine there is a forum where readers can greet their friends. Therefore Mtani established the feature *Ndivyo Wasemavyo* (What they say) on page five. As Mtani does not have any reactions of the readers for his first issue he printed five passport size pictures of friends of his and their comments on the Titanic comic project. The first Titanic comic starts on page seven. As a prelude it tells the story of how M.S. Titanic crashed into the iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic.

The following seven pages long essay (p. 18-24) explains the historical background of the Titanic-tragedy and the circumstances which led to the

<sup>4</sup> During the interview Mtani said that he is especially impressed by the humorous works of John Kaduma and Nathan Mpangala, as well as the realistic style of Chris Katembo. He is not familiar with foreign comics like Asterix or Tintin

discovery of the ship wreck. In this feature, which is called *Ukweli kuhusu Titanic* (The truth about Titanic) Mtani realises his ambition of not only entertaining his readers, but also of educating them. He had planned this feature for every issue of his Titanic cycle. On the back cover there is a coloured photo of Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet, the main actors of the Cameron film.

### **Hybrid 1: From Movie to Comic**

This Swahili version of the Titanic narration reveals many different hybrid aspects. Already the medium which was chosen by the artist has the reputation of being a hybrid in itself. Giulio Cuccolini labels comics quite drastically as “Bastard out of word and picture “ (Cuccolini 2002). This aspect is also emphasised by R. C. Harvey, when he characterises comics as „verbal visual art“ (Harvey 1994, 1996). When Mtani translated Cameron’s movie into the medium of comic he stopped the movement of the pictures by pressing the pause switch of his video and scribbled key scenes of the film. Moreover he added Swahili text. This text is not a direct translation of the film dialogues, but its his creation to explain what is happening to the Tanzanian audience. The addition of text to the narration makes use of the typical comic tool of the speech balloon. As Mtani had to greatly shorten the narration his graphic novel contains only few sequences which spread the action and dialogue over various panels. Small text frames in the top of the panels contain explanations of the drawings and make the change from scene to the next understandable. As one panel does not make much sense on its own, the reader has to be able to combine the single pictures into a whole sequence. Therefore s/he has to grasp what is happening between the panel borders. This process is called “closure” by McCloud (McCloud 1994). Mtani stopped Cameron’s moving pictures and had to choose significant scenes in such a way that the readers of the comic were enabled to perform the “closure”. As the drawings alone would make it a difficult task, Mtani supports the “closure” by text frames. Out of the 49 panels of the story only one has no text frame. For nearly every of Mtani’s drawings an equivalent screenshot can be found. As a result Mtani’s

work displays spectacular perspectives which are otherwise not to be found in Tanzanian comics, including extreme frog perspective in a helicopter drawing (16, 4) and the drawing of people from an extraordinary bird's eye view (25, 2).



**Picture 2:** The cover of Mtani's Titanic comic.

**Picture 3:** The movie poster of Cameron's Titanic.



## Hybrid 2: Swahili in North Atlantic

Another hybrid aspect of Mtani's Swahili adoption is that all protagonists of the narration become Africans. The cartoonist not only translates the language of Cameron's American narration into Swahili, but also the actors. The result is a Swahilization of the whole story. The most spectacular example is the cover of the magazine which was drawn with water colors. It is obviously close to the original movie poster as the portraits of Jack and Rose hover above the Titanic. However looking at the details, a reversion of the tension can be noted. Cameron's poster displays the majestic bow of the ship, which evokes the impression that the luxury liner is unstoppable. Mtani, on the other hand, chose the image of the sinking ship with her stern rising into the sky while her front is already under water. The portraits of the Swahili cover heroes are close to each other, but spare a small distance; as well mannered Swahili lovers do not touch each other in public. On contrast, the American actors Leonardo DiCaprio hugs Kate Winslet in a very melodramatic way and presses his chin on her neck. This pose is too intimidating for a Swahili audience, therefore it was changed for the Swahili version. Mtani depicts the tragic on his cover with the spectacular submerge of the vessel and a careful arrangement of the main characters, which expresses their feelings in a very subtle way. The movie poster on the other hand creates suspension by the exhibition of the big ship's bow, which evokes a subtle threat whereas the sad hug of the two lovers transmits more obviously the drama of the narration. It is striking that the Swahili-Rose resembles Winsley by the direction of her look, her face and her hairdo. But the strong Swahili-Jack has nothing in common with the small built (schmaechtig) blonde and beardless DiCaprio. Moreover the Swahili-Jack resembles in hair and beard style its creator the comic artist Mtani whose picture is displayed on the first page.

Although the ethnicity of protagonists of the Swahili-narration differ from Cameron's film the locations („North Atlantic“ 29, 2, „New York“ 30, 2) and the time do not. Also the surrounding plot of an old lady, who was a witness of the disaster and tells her story of the tragedy, is used by Mtani. Only now she is an African, just as the population of the harbor town of the Titanic, the sailors on board of Titanic and all passengers. All actors may have become Swahili

but they still contain the names which were given to them by Cameron like Rose, Jack, Aristo, and Captain Smith. Mtani states that he chose Swahili-protagonists, to please his readers. He thinks that the Tanzanian audience greatly appreciates stories with African figures because Tanzanians can better identify with them than with European looking characters. The times and locations of the plot remain the same as Mtani also wants to disseminate information about the Titanic disaster. The appearance of Swahili in the icy North Atlantic is certainly the most obvious hybrid aspect of this Tanzanian Titanic version.



**Picture 4:** Rose in historical dress gets out of a vintage car. In the background waving people wear modern shirts: „I got out of the luxery car. At this time we were together with my fiancée Aristo and my parents (my mother and my aunt). –Rose, turn around and have a look at the big wonderful ship, the Titanic. – Mh“(Mtani 2000: 27, 2).

### Hybrid 3: Mix of Time

Together with the Swahilization of the protagonists comes a mix of time. Already Cameron's movie had time shifts as Cameron lets an old contemporary witness tell the story. Also Mtani made use of the style device as mentioned. For his adoption he also uses the historical dresses for the main characters. The Swahili Jack wears a pair of worker's trousers held by wide suspenders and the Swahili-Rose sports a striped costume and a ballroom dress. Somewhere else Mtani drew an old ladies hat from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (29, 1) or a car in vintage style (27, 2). But apart from that there are many details from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to be found though it is supposed to happen in 1912. For the Swahilization of side characters Mtani chose a modern contemporary outfit, which was common in Tanzania at the time he drew the comic. On page 30, panel 2 a passenger wears a baseball cap and a casual shirt with a FILA label while he is having fun in Titanic's saloon. Other recent fashion influences can be spotted in the panel which shows the poker gamble in which Jack won the Titanic ticket, where his friends wear sun glasses and a hair cut in rasta style (28, 1). As a result the comic depicts a mixture of fashion styles from various epochs. Mtani modernized his narration consciously to make it more palatable for his audience. Comic heroes in designer clothes are to be found in many Tanzanian comics. But Mtani also limited his modernization as he does not include mobile phones in his narration though they were the craze in many Tanzanian comics at the turn of the millennium. Furthermore he did not change the dress of the main characters.



**Picture 5:** Jack wins his ticket by playing poker. He is wearing historical clothes while his friends have modern rasta-hairstyle and wear shades. “He was smoking a cigarette. The poor youth Jack was gambling with his friends while we were waiting on the ship...” (Mtani 2000: 28, 1).

### **The attraction of the Titanic narration for a Tanzanian audience**

The Tanzanian Titanic narration is not only attractive to the audience because of its dramatic love story but also because the Tanzanians had recently experienced the submission of a ferry in their own country. In May 1996 the vessel MV Bukoba sank in Lake Victoria as she was on her way from Bukoba to Mwanza, the latter city being Mtani’s birthplace. The reason for this catastrophe was that the ship was said to be overloaded. As there are no exact passenger lists available it can only be estimated that this tragedy claimed around 1000 lives. Only 120 people survived. For weeks rescue team tried at least to recover the bodies and dramatic scenes happened as the dead victims were displayed at the local stadium for identification. This tragedy left its traces in the Tanzanian consciousness. Tanzanian papers were full of *mashari* (poems) in which the writers expressed their grief. The Tanzanian Reggae musician Justin Kalikawe wrote the song “MV Bukoba” to complain about greedy corrupt officials who do not care about the security of

the passengers while overloading the ship and pocketing the profit of illegally sold tickets. Mtani makes a reference to the MV Bukoba disaster in his Titanic magazine. On page 9 he advertises another comic project, the graphic novel, *Usiku wa Mwisho wa MV Bukoba* (the last night of MV Bukoba, 9) which narrates the tragedy of the Bukoba submission.<sup>5</sup>

Mtani sees clear parallels between the officials of Titanic and Bukoba. Just as the captain of MV Bukoba did not care for the safety of the passengers by overloading, the captain of the

Titanic risked the lives of passengers because he was looking for the fame as he tried to win the record for the fastest Atlantic crossing. He chose the shortest route instead of avoiding the iceberg region and sailing a more southerly course. In both cases greed was made responsible for the disasters.<sup>6</sup>

That the MV Bukoba disaster happened only a year before the release of Cameron's blockbuster explains why the Titanic narration caught special interest in Tanzania. The Bukoba catastrophe can be interpreted as a modern Tanzanian Titanic tragedy. Under the impression of the Bukoba disaster the Tanzanian comic artist Mtani created an African version of the Titanic narration which has a hybrid character in many aspects, like the interpretation of the narration from the film medium into the comic medium or the interpretation of an American narration into a Swahili environment. Therefore Mtani is appropriating the Titanic narration for the Tanzanian audience who prefer a tragic love story with African protagonists to Hollywood actors.

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<sup>5</sup> Mtani had already developed first story boards for this project. The plot was that somebody travels to Mwanza to identify a body and finds a notebook in his pocket in which the deceased had described the tragedy in detail.

<sup>6</sup> But for the comic artist the move had another attraction. The main character Jack was like Mtani at the time of the comic production, a young man searching to make a decent living, who knew to draw. Therefore Mtani could easily identify with Jack.

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### *Jigal Beez*

Anthropologist, studied, worked and did research in Tanzania and Uganda. He published to various aspects of East Africa, e.g. They are Crazy the Swahili: Komredi Kipepe in the Footsteps of Asterix; Globalization in East African Comics. In: *International Journal of Comic Art* 5,1: 95-114, 2003. He was a member of the collaborative research programme „local agency in Africa in the context of global influences“ at the University of Bayreuth, Germany and is currently working for German Development Service in Tanzania.