

SCHADENFREUDE, THE SWAHILI WAY

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INTRODUCTION

THE English people do not have a direct translation for the word *Schadenfreude*, a German vocabulary for a person's feeling happy about the misfortune of other (s). But the Swahili people have a word for it: *Husda*, meaning the same thing as its Germanic *doppelgänger*. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Swahili people, most of whom residing in the Eastern Coast of Africa, just enjoy other people's suffering. In songs and movies, in traditional African clothing's known as *khangas* (women wrappers for the waist or body) and in conversations through social media, it is easy to attest to how much *Schadenfreude* is real in this part of the continent.

In the late 1990s, there was a famous taarab song known as *Zumbukuku*. The term *Zumbukuku* describes a person who knows nothing; in fact, a stupid person, to be polite. The song, sang by the legendary Ali Star, was so popular that the following lyrics were of *Husda* were people's lips:

*Bahati ya kwangu huwezi kuziba
Amenipa Mungu wala sikuiba
Ewe Zumbukukuku,
Kama Unaweza, panda Ukazibe eenhe
Ukazibe na Oko...*

In translation, Ali Star is singing about a person who was not happy with his success. Thus he sings;
You cannot obstruct my luck
For it is God-given and I didn't steal it from anyone
And finally throws down the gauntlet to his unknown nemesis; If you can, find glue and block my blessings.

The song was a hit in Dar es Salaam and other coastal towns. It was a song sang almost at every celebratory event, be it a wedding or child christening ceremony or a *Haqeeqa* (hakika), a traditional Islamic Du'a (prayer) for the newborn.

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You see, in this part of the continent, life is like a zero sum game where when one woman is getting married or a man is promoted in his office. Those who have had no such luck have to be reminded continually of their failure to get married or get promoted. It is like rubbing salt in a wound.

The other indication of *Schadenfreude* among the Swahili people has to do with how people react to their successful counterparts. Leaders and celebrities have become a target of people who envy them for making it in life while their own lives remain miserable.

When a celebrity makes a mistake, sometimes a very innocent one, most of the time the reaction is too savagery. People will be on his case, especially on the social media, in a way that sometimes is too much to handle.

If the attacked person is mentally fragile, the venom from the people spilled out on social can cause serious psychological harm. It is not because people hate the victims so much; it is simply because his or her success has pissed them off. Simply put, they are full of envy and would like to drag him or her down to their level if they can.

Movie stars such as Wema Sepetu, Irene Uwoya and musicians such as Diamond and Ali Kiba have been victims of such rough treatment. To protect themselves, some of these stars have now employed people, in a non-contractual and friendly basis, to act as their shields on social media. They are known as Teams. So, if you hear Team Wema or Team Diamond, it means people who are ready to attack anyone to protect their man or woman.

WELCOME TO THE SWAHILI WORLD

In case you don't know, sometimes it is a mistake to buy a car when you are still renting a house belonging to a landlord/landlady who does not have one. My neighbour, a formidable woman, bought a new *khanga* with words written on it: 'Hakuna Mama Mwenye Gari, Ni Mama Mwenye Nyumba Tu', a day after one of her renters bought a car. In English, the *Khanga* reads: "There is only a landlady and not a car lady". In other words, having a house is more important than having a car. Make no mistake; the message was loud and clear for the new car owner.

How can I forget about politics? In the last few years, a new term has emerged in the political nomenclature of Tanzania. It says that people who were living like angels in the past have to now start living like devils.

The message comes from the highest political authority in the country and it seems everybody is taking a cue. If you go to Tanzania's prisons now, there are many rich men who are incarcerated relative to any time in our post-independence Tanzania history.

There are people who are happy that at least the affluent are now facing the music like their poor fellows. There is a joke in Kiswahili to the effect that if poor people were to be asked to choose between their being rich or the rich becoming poor, they would pick the latter.

A few years ago, there was a very popular TV Comedy Show in Tanzania. It was aired by a government-owned TV station known as TBC (Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation). The show featured some top comedians in the country such as Joti, Masanja and Mpoki.

Can you guess what the most popular segment in the show was? Yes you can. It was known as “Waliofulia”, which literary means those who have gone broke after blowing their riches.

The segment was looking for some famous musicians, footballers or actors who were so famous and, well, a little bit wealthy at the height of their power. But, because of different circumstances, they were, at that moment, really downtrodden.

So, the comedians would joke about them and how they now live pathetic lives of paupers. The show didn't tackle the issue of copyright for artist and how the wealthy became poor. That was not their intention. It seems, their intention was to laugh at their predecessor's troubles.

Unfortunately, one of those comedians is now living such a pathetic life because he didn't have a health insurance and the disease he contacted curtailed his short career. Well, I am not saying I am happy for his troubles but I honestly believe that *Karma* is real.

Have you ever read a Kiswahili newspaper? Well, here is a secret, only bad news sells. If you are an editor of a Kiswahili newspaper, that's the first lesson you are going to learn. People will read your paper when there are stories of people dying of a mysterious disease, government ministers sacked, students flanking their exams, and somebody getting a hefty sentence after his/her transgression with the law.

On the flip-side, if you write that all the students have passed their exams, people are more healthy and happy, or government is giving more allowances to its officials, you are sure to have a record number of newspaper returns. Nobody wants that kind of stuff.

People want something to feed their sorry souls. It is difficult to know what is the source of such sadistic behaviours but something is telling me that maybe this is all human. When I listen to President Donald Trump speeches and tweets, when I look at the lives of the Americans or European Superstars on

social media, I see a resemblance to what we are experiencing in our Swahili lives.

Maybe it is something American. Maybe it has something to do with human nature. Yes, the English people do not have a word for *Schadenfreude* but they are the ones who brought colonialism and slavery to the African. They were doing that at that time.

So, whether you have a word in your language or not, *Schadenfreude* is real. In Tanzania and across the Swahili world, we live it everyday.