NJAS
NORDIC JOURNAL OF AFRICAN STUDIES

Memories of Failed Futures: The Autobiography of Nicco ye Mbajo (1950–2021), a Popular Artist in Tanzania

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Abstract

The autobiography of Nicco ye Mbajo (1950–2021) provides insight into the life of an artist and his experiences as a cultural producer in Tanzania from independence to recent times. Belonging to the first generation of modern cultural producers, Mbajo contributed significantly to popular culture in Tanzania as a writer, magazine editor, illustrator, cartoonist, and choirmaster. In his autobiography, published in 2020, he reflects on his artistic career, which, as the title *Laiti Ningelijua* ('If Only I Had Known') signals, ultimately fell short of the potential he thought possible. The text offers Mbajo's subjective view of the various, often contradictory cultural currents and social struggles related to the political project of decolonization, socialism, and "national culture" in post-independence Tanzania. Through reading Mbajo's autobiography and relating it to his other works, as well as drawing on interviews with the author, this article explores how he imagined his future as an artist in a society where there was neither a pre-established nor a legitimate place for independent artists. The informal production modes of popular culture in Tanzania allowed Mbajo to use diverse approaches and experimentation, while political restraints, financial hardships, lack of training opportunities, and breaches of trust inhibited his artistic progress and economic success. With his autobiography, the author leaves a legacy for future generations of artists in Tanzania to learn from and a rich source for the country's cultural history.

Keywords: autobiography; Nicco ye Mbajo; Swahili popular literature; Kwaya music; Ujamaa socialism; cultural history of Tanzania

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v33i2.1220

About the author

*Uta Reuster-Jahn***,** Ph.D, has been working as a lecturer of Swahili at the Asien-Afrika-Institut of Hamburg University, Germany. She has co-authored *Lugha ya Mitaani in Tanzania – The Poetics and Sociology of a Young Urban Style of Speaking* (2006) and co-edited *Bongo Media Worlds. Producing and Consuming Popular Culture in Dar es Salaam* (2014), *Beyond the Language Issue. The Production, Reception and Mediation of Creative Writing in African Languages* (2008), and *Swahili Literature in Global Exchange: Translations, Translators and Trends* (2018). Her articles and chapters on Swahili literature and print culture, youth language, Bongo Flava music, and storytelling practices have appeared in edited volumes and journals. She has also translated Swahili literature into German and English (see Orcid link for details).

By examining the autobiography of Nicco ye Mbajo (1950–2021), this article aims to contribute to an understanding of the self-perception, goals, opportunities, and challenges of the first generation of producers of popular culture in Tanzania. Published in 2020, Mbajo's autobiography encompasses significant political and social changes, from the colonial period (until 1961), to the immediate years of post-independence (1961–1967), to *Ujamaa* socialism (1967–1985), and to the era of liberalization (since 1985). It is thus an important first-person narrative that complements the growing scholarly literature on the cultural history of Tanzania.[1] The historical periods through which Mbajo lived created specific opportunities and constraints that conditioned his ideas, expectations, hopes, and plans for his future, which for him was inextricably linked to the future of his country. He contributed significantly to popular culture in post-independence Tanzania as a writer, magazine editor, illustrator, cartoonist, and choirmaster. In the 1970s and 80s, he was part of the famous network of fiction writers and magazine editors that included Hammie Rajab, Kajubi Mukajanga, S.A.M. Kitogo, and Ben Mtobwa (Mtobwa 1990, 26). This generation of cultural producers emerged at a time of profound societal change and engaged with it in their works (Barber 1987, 14). The Tanzanian African-socialist *Ujamaa* ideology informed their thinking and provided them with "a kind of rhetorical blueprint for speaking about the Tanzanian society, and for framing the individual's experiences in it" (Blommaert 1999, 148). They expressed themselves in Swahili, the new national language, and addressed national audiences rather than seeking recognition internationally.

As significant as nationalist policies were for Mbajo and the other cultural producers, they were also inspired by internationally distributed thrillers, particularly those by the pseudonymous British author James Hadley Chase. Another source of inspiration was the South African photo novel magazine *African Film* (Krings 2010; Reuster-Jahn 2016, 226–227). These texts helped the Tanzanian writers to find an idiom with which to address the social conflicts associated with modernization, as well as the effects of Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. They also criticized, often indirectly, the abuse of power and corruption among the new political elite (Garnier 2006, 159–176). In addition to his engagement with Swahili popular literature, Mbajo was a reputed choirmaster, *kwaya* ('choir') music being a constant throughout his life. This strand of creative production was influenced by his affiliation with the Lutheran church, and his religious faith shaped his moral values as significantly as did the *Ujamaa* ideology. Mbajo titled his autobiography *Laiti Ningelijua: Maisha na Usanii* ('If Only I Had Known: Life and Art'), employing the past irrealis mood of the Swahili verb construction, which expresses an unrealized past potentiality.[2] In this way, he sets the reader up to read the text as a narrative of regret. And indeed, despite many successes and achievements, regret runs like a thread through the text. Mbajo refers to past opportunities that were not realized and to certain decisions that he regrets. Often, however, political, economic, or moral constraints left him with no choice at all.

Writing his autobiography was Mbajo's response to a failed film project and a recent physical impairment. When we first met in 2010 for an interview about his history as a popular fiction writer (see Reuster-Jahn 2016), he told me that he dreamed about producing a film about drug-trafficking in Tanzania, for which he intended to recruit the actors from his *kwaya*, and counted on *kwaya* members as its buyers. The plan seemed good, and I helped with funding the film. Unfortunately, near the end of filming, a chronic illness worsened

[1] For example, Sturmer 1998; Blommaert 1999; Askew 2002; Burton 2005; Brennan et al. 2007; Ivaska 2011; Aminzade 2013; Reuster-Jahn 2016.

[2] The past irrealis marker is *-ngali-*/*-ngeli-*.

and Mbajo had to have his lower leg amputated. Nevertheless, after the completion of the film in July 2016, he organized a launching ceremony at the Lutheran Church in Temeke, which was attended by two diocesan bishops and six *kwaya* groups to honour him. Unfortunately, the film sold poorly because it did not feature any famous actors. Deeply disappointed, Mbajo gave up the sales campaign.

After the failure of the film, and seeing that he had reached the end of his career, Mbajo decided to write his autobiography to reclaim his name and fame from the past and preserve them for the future. Written between November 2016 and August 2017 and published by Tuwakadabra Productions in Dar es Salaam,[3] it provides a gripping account of the author's life experiences from colonial times to the age of globalization and digitalization. It is also notable for its confessional character. This kind of personal writing, where the author exposes personal weaknesses, is uncommon in Swahili life narratives.[4] The first four chapters follow the author's life in chronological order from his childhood to his first job. The following chapters are devoted to Mbajo's history as a writer (chapter 5) and choirmaster (chapter 6). The final chapter pays tribute to people who played an important role in his life and artistic career, emphasizing the importance of networks beyond the family.

Mbajo' text is not a teleological narrative but tries to put together, and find meaning in, a fragmented life. This was clearly a cathartic exercise and at the same time an attempt to present the past events of his life, including his failures and mistakes, as a valuable source of wisdom for the coming generations. In the prologue, he offers the "autobiographical pact" to the reader (Lejeune 1975), promising to present a true account of his life:

> Everything I have done, everything I remember, I have written down in this book. It is the pure truth. (…) Some may not like me telling it, but I have told it because I am truthful. (...) I want society to realize that I was no angel. I have caused some to stumble, but I have made many happy. (…) I believe that when this book appears, much of it will be a lesson for the lives of future generations. Whether by imitating the good or criticizing the bad, it will be a benefit to society.[5]

In the following, I will analyse how Mbajo narrates his past imagined future as an artist in Tanzania and its (non-)realization in Tanzanian society from the 1960s to the 2010s, in which there was initially no established place for independent artists. He therefore had to try to find ways around obstacles, seize unexpected opportunities, and repeatedly reinvent himself after setbacks. This essay thus opens new perspectives on the negotiation of cultural life in Tanzania since the 1960s, exemplified by the life of an important representative of the country's first generation of cultural producers. This starts with his identity formation during his childhood and youth and proceeds through the different stages of his adult life, when he engaged in cultural production and tried to make it a source of income. The analysis will address the role of Tanzanian politics and the church in his life experiences and endeavours. In addition to the autobiography, I have used data from interviews, personal communication, and from Mbajo's fictional texts.[6]

[3] The publication of the autobiography was supported by a grant from the Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung (Hamburg Scientific Foundation), Germany.

[4] Two other recent autobiographies by Swahili authors focus on short periods in the authors' lives: childhood and growing up (Walibora 2014); and a year spent travelling as a young man after secretly leaving home to gain new experiences and a better education (Shafi 2013). Both emphasize the achievement of goals.

[5] All translations from Swahili are mine.

[6] Interviews were conducted in 2010, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 in Dar es Salaam.

Family, school, and church: Hybrid cultural identity formation and a progressive outlook

Mbajo begins his autobiography by emphasizing his collective identity as a member of a Bena lineage from the southern highlands of present-day Tanzania. However, he portrays his immediate family as distinct from other villagers. His father, Yehoswa Mbajo, had worked as a contract labourer (*manamba*) on the sisal plantations on the coast, about 800 km from his home, which had broadened his horizons.[7] After his return, Yehoswa adopted the Christian faith and acquired Western knowledge in a school run by German Lutheran missionaries. After getting married, he was posted as a catechist to a village in his home area, where Nikodemu Mbajo, who later took on the pen name Nicco ye Mbajo, was born in 1950, the second of ten children.[8] His father saw education as a way to a better life and was the only one in the village to send his children to school more than ten kilometres away. This focus on progress set Mbajo and his siblings apart from other children in the village:

> I remember with pride that I was brought up by parents who were aware of progress although it was hard for them. In Isimike village we were the only ones to wear shirts and shorts while the children around us wore *rubega*, that is cloths tied at the neck. (5)[9]

The Lutheran church was also important for Mbajo's identity formation and in addition provided him with artistic experiences. His whole family was involved in the church choir and in religious performances. They were guided in these activities by Mbajo's father, who was "a real artist, a carver, actor and author of plays (especially for Christmas and Easter), a director, composer and reciter of book songs" (8). Mbajo believes that he inherited his artistic talent (*kipaji*) from his father, but his idea of inheritance includes active appropriation:

> The talent to understand music has been in my blood, I have inherited it from my father (…) It is true that I have not attended any class or seminar to learn music. Just by imitation or by contracting it from some singers and teachers I was able to understand music, and, moreover, to master it. (78)

The author describes culture in the village as a contested field, in which the local and traditional competed with the Christian and the foreign. The Mbajo children did not take part in traditional *ngoma* (complex performances combining drumming, dancing, and singing), which their father considered to be "pagan". Instead, they had a Christian *ngoma*, to which adults and young people danced and to which they composed new songs (7). They were also fascinated by secular cultural influences from outside. Mbajo's brothers and cousins brought songs from other Tanzanian ethnic groups, as well as South African jive music, when they came home on school vacations. They learned the dance moves and composed their own songs (9). They also danced to Kenyan music, which they were allowed to play on the gramophone of a businessman in the village (16). The prevailing pattern in Mbajo's artistic career of using foreign materials for creative appropriation is rooted in these early experiences. Such "mimetic interpretations" can enable the inhabitation of other possible lives, as Matthias Krings (2015) has argued.

Mbajo describes himself as a sensitive but also rebellious child, who repeatedly ran away from school because he felt picked on by

[7] On the *manamba* as a field of knowledge production among workers, see Sabea (2010).
[8] *ye* is derived from Yehoswa, Mbajo's father's name.
[9] Unless specified otherwise, references to Mbajo's work refer to his autobiography and are identified by a page number only.

older pupils. In retrospect, he is grateful to his parents, who believed in his abilities and tirelessly pushed him to continue his school education. When he entered upper primary school in 1962, Mbajo's artistic talent was recognized and quickly employed for political ends in the context of the newly independent nation. For the visit of a minister, Mbajo drew his portrait and conducted the school choir. Here, the idea of culture as *chombo cha maendeleo* ('an instrument for progressive change'), started to be formed. It remained a strong motivation for artistic activities throughout Mbajo's life and structured most of his writing.

Mbajo qualified for secondary education, for which he had to travel to Dar es Salaam. When he arrived there late, the son of a politician from his home region had already enrolled under his name. Thanks to the intervention of the police, Mbajo received his right to enrol, while the other boy was expelled from the school. This was an early encounter with the abuse of power and corruption by some of the new socialist political functionaries, which he later denounced in his works (22).

With Mbajo's move to Dar es Salaam, his childhood ended. It had instilled in him a positive attitude towards progress, and education as a means for achieving it. Moreover, he had experienced cultural eclecticism and appropriation as a normal practice. He had recognized his artistic talents and developed them at home, in church, and at school. Finally, the foundations of his Christian faith, which would carry him through difficult times in his life, were laid during these years. This was expressed in the first song he composed for his choir at the age of 13: "Jesus, I trust in you, only in you. In you I find salvation and comfort. My hope is in you" (18). In Dar es Salaam, he would now live far away from his family and no longer be dependent on his father, as the government paid for his schooling. Open and curious, he would become fascinated by the urban and, at the time, politically charged environment of Dar es Salaam.

New prospects through education, urban culture, and political involvement (Dar es Salaam, 1966–69)

Mbajo was 16 years old when he began his secondary school education, which was to open new prospects for his future. The years he spent in the city were politically and culturally formative for him. In early 1967, President Julius Nyerere's Arusha Declaration outlined Tanzania's policy of socialism and self-reliance, envisioning a socialist future for the country and its people. It emphasized human rights, equality, dignity, and freedom of expression and religion, and gave the power to implement these principles to the government and the ruling party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). Mbajo proudly embraced the Arusha Declaration and became a member of TANU's youth wing, the TANU Youth League (TYL).[10] He writes, "I was very enthusiastic after my country gained independence and tried to follow a unique trajectory regarding politics and society" (2). The first decade after independence, however, saw intense cultural and social struggles in urban areas over issues of gender, generation, and wealth (Ivaska 2011, 2). These conflicts and contradictions are reflected in Mbajo's subjective experience and his choices during that time. He was most fascinated by jazz music, a transnational and urban cultural form:

> We 'absconded' from the hostel to listen to music in the various halls of Dar es Salaam. As we couldn't pay the entrance fee, we stayed outside peeping through the holes in the walls (...). We watched the white sailors having fun with Tanzanian prostitutes. There is no place we have not been to, everywhere where music could be heard: Kilwa Jazz,

[10] TANU was the ruling party from independence onwards. Its merger with the Zanzibari Afro-Shirazi Party in 1977 created the Chama cha Mapinduzi (Party of the Revolution, CCM).

> Western Jazz, Dar Jazz, even bands such as Safari Trippers, in which fellow students played (...). (24)

However, when, in 1968, TANU organized repressive campaigns known as *Operesheni Vijana* ('Operation Youth') against so-called decadent forms of urban youth culture (Ivaska 2011, 86–123), Mbajo initially took part. This brought him into conflict with his moral principles:

> In 1968, he [Vincent Swai, chair of Mbajo's TYL group] brought us Operation Vijana, which was about preventing moral erosion. (...) Vincent was our commander. He guided us through bars and clubs – despite we were students – to hunt down girls wearing miniskirts and even male youths wearing tight outfits. I only participated for one day, then I put it off. I felt that it was not right, but just a humiliation. (26)

In retrospect, Mbajo explains that he had been politically "infected" (26), as if this were something that had happened to him passively, which can be read as an attempt to excuse himself. His political zeal was also evident in his school's drama club, led by a British teacher. Mbajo received much praise for his leading roles, but when he discovered a line in a drama script that criticized urban life in Dar es Salaam, he reported the teacher to the TYL, eventually causing his expulsion. Only later did Mbajo realize, with regret, that this meant the loss of artistic guidance for him (24). At his TYL group leader's suggestion, Mbajo then focused on composing political propaganda songs for the school, for which he received recognition and praise (28, 80–81).

Mbajo lived in the dormitory of the Muslim Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri community, consisting mainly of wealthy citizens of Indian origin, which had only recently accepted African students. There and at his school, he formed inter-ethnic friendships, especially with fellow African students from other parts of Tanzania, but also with some from the Khoja Shia community. These were useful to him many times in his later life, which he himself acknowledges as an achievement of the new Tanzania, with its emphasis on national unity (24, 121–137). Thus, by the end of his schooling, his experiences in Dar es Salaam had added an urban and a political layer to his identity. Here he saw opportunities for himself as a politically engaged artist. The next steps in his personal life, however, concerned his professional career and future, which proved to be more difficult than he had expected.

An impossible future in an imposed profession

Until 1980, when the Bagamoyo College of Arts was founded, there was no institution offering training or study programmes for artists. Mbajo was assigned by the authorities to train as an agricultural officer at the College of Agriculture in Ukiriguru near Mwanza (1970–72). Although he was unhappy with this prospect, he saw no way of refusing and hoped that he would be able to engage in cultural activities alongside his future profession. He saw room for this type of opportunity, because the government's policy of national culture, which was to build on African traditions while being progressive and development-oriented, required modern art forms produced locally and in Swahili. Even though the resources provided by the state for this purpose were very limited and the project of national culture was discontinuous (Ivaska 2011, 3, 39; Askew 2002, 184–189), this policy nevertheless created some legitimacy for the producers of modern art forms in Tanzanian society. Mbajo was keen to contribute to cultural production that would disseminate and further embed the values of *Ujamaa* among Tanzanians.

Mbajo's creative work is an example of

how the socialist *Ujamaa* ideology, with its goal of an egalitarian future, penetrated Tanzanian popular literature (Blommaert 1999, 138, 156). While still in secondary school, he wrote an agitprop play entitled *Ubepari ni Unyama* ('Capitalism is Savagery'), which he performed repeatedly with various groups in the following years, often in a TANU context. The title of the play references the political slogan "*Ujamaa ni utu, ubepari ni unyama*" ('*Ujamaa* is humanity, capitalism is savagery') (Oduor 2014, 77). During a field phase as part of his training as an agricultural officer, he staged the play in a remote village. His account of the event reveals how he tried to reconcile political propaganda with his own understanding of popular art:

> [I] was obsessed with art. After the youths in that village had accepted me, I started a theatre group. Using poles, we built a stage and performed a play, which I called *Ubepari ni Unyama*. Interspersing jive songs we made the audience enjoy. I was daringly inquisitive and inventive. You will be surprised that I went with those locals, whom I taught acting for the first time, to the district town Nzega where we performed the play for an entrance fee in the town hall. (33)

At the college, he was elected chairman of the TYL college group, which earned him some "*maslahi na heshima*" ('benefits and respect') for championing student causes. At this point, however, he was already somewhat disillusioned with the party. He was now thinking more of personal benefits through political involvement, but these never materialized for him.

As a self-taught guitarist, he played the solo guitar in the college band, wearing bell bottoms and a tight-fitting shirt, which was contrary to the edicts of *Operesheni Vijana*. Obviously, Mbajo was not prepared to conform completely to what was politically opportune. His fame as a musician and TYL representative made him attractive to female students, and he began a love affair with a girl of Arab descent from Dar es Salaam, who became his first, albeit unofficial, wife and mother of their two children. She was just as fascinated by jazz and soul as Mbajo and called herself Brandlee after the white American singer Brenda Lee (35–37). Together, they later named their son Brown as a tribute to James Brown, even though TANU considered this soul musician particularly decadent (Ivaska 2011, 68–85). Brandlee had to abandon her training due to pregnancy and lived with Mbajo's parents in their village until he found employment.

When Mbajo took up his first job as an agricultural officer in Tanga in 1972, his artistic urge prompted him to start various cultural groups and activities alongside his work. As choirmaster at the Lutheran Church in Tanga he won the diocesan *kwaya* competition with jive rhythms, a new element in *kwaya* performance, which many older *kwaya* experts rejected as too worldly (Barz 2000, 397–398). Together with some friends, he founded a regional theatre group that performed his play *Ubepari ni Unyama*, among others.[11] Furthermore, he started drawing cartoons, which were published in the Kenyan Swahili weekly *Baraza*, which enjoyed great popularity in Tanzania (Sturmer 1998, 60). Due to the apt use of Standard Swahili in his works, he was even appointed as the representative of Tanga region of the National Kiswahili Council (BAKITA). Finally, he wrote his first novel, encouraged to do so by Jumaa Mkabarah, who worked at the East African Literature Bureau (EALB) office in Tanzania. The EALB, established in 1948, promoted literature production in East Africa, particularly in Standard Swahili. It was one of the most important publishers of Swahili literature before the collapse of the East African Community in 1977.

[11] The group was called WAMIMTA (*Waigizaji wa Michezo Mkoani Tanga*, Theatre Actors in Tanga Region).

While searching for Swahili writers, Mkabarah had noticed Mbajo's cartoons in *Baraza*. Mbajo took this as an opportunity to write a political novel entitled *Haistahimiliki!* ('It is Unbearable!'). Mbajo remembers: "I wrote by hand until late at night. Then I took it to the typists, who charged me money. That was the life of a writer those days" (61).

In Tanga, Mbajo reunited with Brandlee. Although the couple soon had a second child, her parents made their consent to marriage conditional on Mbajo's conversion to Islam, which he refused. Brandlee suffered from the conflict with her parents and returned to them with her two children. Despite his love for Brandlee, Mbajo remembers feeling relieved of the burden of his family obligations. In his autobiography, however, he regrets that, in her, he lost a partner with great commitment and admiration for art and for him as an artist. In his book *Dhamana ya Mapenzi* ('The Pledge of Love', 1982c), the two lovers and their mothers tell the story from their different perspectives. This text, Mbajo claims in his autobiography, is "90 percent" true (63), and can thus be classified as autofiction. Moreover, he expresses lasting feelings of guilt towards his former partner and their children. The book, he writes, was his way of asking Brandlee for forgiveness and coming to terms with the separation. He hoped "above all" that she would read it (64).

Mbajo's cultural activities came at the expense of his professional work, and when the government laid off employees in 1975 because of the economic crisis brought on by a failed villagization programme and drought (Briggs 1979, he was fired. His dismissal from the civil service meant a loss of income for him. More than 40 years later, he still felt regret for missed opportunities due to the wrong vocational training having been imposed on him: "That's why I regret to this day that I was selected as agricultural officer because I loved all the arts, in all their breadth; it would have been better if I had become a teacher" (38). Despite not liking his job, Mbajo had felt comfortable with the situation in Tanga, where he could reconcile a secure income with the pursuit of his cultural interests. In the irrealis mood, he imagines an alternative future as an artist, in the past: "If I had continued to live in Tanga, I would certainly have developed my artistic abilities. Tanga stimulated my mind artistically very much. But they saw me as not suitable for the post of agricultural officer, and that was true. I am hundred percent an artist" (75). Mbajo accepted being laid off as a result of his artistic endeavours. Societal norms and expectations, as well as employment constraints, redirected his path away from the arts.

Without anything, Mbajo returned to Makambako in his home area, where his brother gave him refuge (44). Both professionally and privately, his life was in shambles. His career in agriculture, which had been imposed on him against his own inclinations, had proved to be unsustainable for him. His attempt to pursue an artistic career on the side had failed. He had also lost his family. At this stage, Mbajo no longer saw a future for himself.

In this rather hopeless situation, an unexpected stroke of luck befell Mbajo, which he owed to his cultural production while in Tanga. The EALB had accepted his manuscript *Haistahimiliki!* and he was entitled to an advance on the royalties.[12] His overwhelming joy and relief at getting rewarded for his creative endeavours are palpable in the memoir: "And then art paid me! I saw a miracle!" (44). Such unexpected changes, for better or for worse, are a typical feature of Mbajo's career and perhaps more generally of living conditions for artists in that historical period in Tanzania, where they were often subject to the vagaries of shifting policies and societal expectations. Moreover, economic instability and limited resources meant that pursuing artistic endeavours was not only a creative pursuit but also a gamble for survival amidst uncertainty and competing priorities. Investing resources in an

[12] The manuscript was never published and has been lost (62).

artistic career required a willingness to take risks, as is evident in Mbajo's autobiography.

Overconfidence and lack of expertise: The deceptive vision of a jazz band up-country

Mbajo received an advance of 10,000 Kenyan shillings for his manuscript, equivalent to about $1,400, which he exchanged for 20,000 Tanzanian shillings (45). Considering that the minimum wage in 1975 was 380 shillings (Valentine 1984, 248), this was a significant sum.[13] Mbajo saw opportunities as a cultural entrepreneur but, in retrospect, regrets the decisions he took, which he ascribes to arrogance due to his educational level:

> Bewildered by the unexpected wealth, quick ideas came to my mind. Without sense! But it was because I lacked sensible advice. In the first place, I told myself: Who would advise me, the 'first educated' in my family? I was very wrong. And my poor brothers did not interfere at all, perhaps out of fear, or just because they respected me, or both. God forbid! And so, I ended up doing what I did. (45)

Mbajo's vision was to start a jazz band in Njombe, the largest town in his home area. Without business know-how, he invested the money to buy instruments and electrical equipment and rent a room, convinced that his band would be profitable (46). Overconfident in himself and in Tanzania's economic development, he took the high risk that this decision entailed. He recruited musically talented young men from his family and village for his Sanarika Jazz Band.

Although he says nothing about it, his role model may have been Mbaraka Mwinshehe, one of the few private musicians and band owners of the time, whose Orchestra Super Volcano (1973–79) was popular throughout East Africa (Perullo 2011, 60–61). Otherwise, it was common for bands to be affiliated with the political or parastatal organizations that sponsored them. Sanarika Jazz performed mainly in political contexts and used the premises of TANU, but the band was not paid by the party. As there were insufficient audiences that would or could pay for entertainment, the band went bankrupt after less than a year (27). Yet again, Mbajo was saved by the EALB, when it paid him an advance for his second manuscript, *Mmempa Achume!* ('You Gave Him Work for Self-Enrichment!'), which he had submitted while still in Tanga.[14] Interestingly, Mbajo did not use the money for a new start, but to break up the band in a face-saving way. In a final act, they went to Dar es Salaam to record their songs in the studio of Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam (RTD), "to preserve the history of our band" (49). When, in 2017 the national radio did a programme on the band, playing tracks from the archive and interviewing Mbajo, he felt comforted that something from the band had lasted.

Under the chapter-heading "*Kutafuta Maisha*" ('Searching for a Livelihood'), Mbajo narrates his life between 1976 and 1977, where his goal centred on sustaining himself. He found work as an agricultural officer at the Kibena Wattle Company in his home region, but after suffering a serious work accident, he resigned. A job advertisement for a cultural officer revived his hopes for employment in the cultural sector. He was invited to an interview in Dar es Salaam but did not get the job. Ironically, the reason given was that he had previously been dismissed from the civil service in Tanga, although this had happened precisely because of his commitment to art. Again, Mbajo saw himself at a dead end. Already alienated from rural life, he could only imagine a possible future in the city. So,

[13] The sum indicates that the EALB expected to sell at least 25,000 copies.

[14] This manuscript was also not published by the EALB.

at the age of 27, he joined the mass of job-seeking migrants in Dar es Salaam: "Knowing neither in nor out, I was looking for a place to stay, wherever I would be taken in, because I intended to continue looking for employment in Dar es Salaam" (54).

Mbajo expresses gratitude that friends and relatives took turns giving him shelter or referring him to their friends, a form of mutual help in extended networks that was common at the time and critical for gaining a foothold in the city. Nevertheless, he often felt a burden to his hosts (54). While looking for employment opportunities, he wrote novels in the faint hope of eventually selling the manuscripts, even if he did not know where to publish them. The EALB was dissolved when the East African Community collapsed in 1977, and the book market shrank to the national level, where the parastatal publishers were not interested in popular literature.

Within a few years of graduating from college, Mbajo had experienced serious failures, both as an employee and as a cultural entrepreneur. He had partly himself to blame for this, but he had also learned that cultural work is sometimes rewarded late and indirectly. Through his membership of a Lutheran church *kwaya* in Dar es Salaam, he finally got one of the rare jobs in the state-controlled printing industry, which opened new, unexpected prospects for his future.

New imagined futures as a writer and publisher in socialist Tanzania

Mbajo found employment as a layout artist at Printpak, the large Tanzanian parastatal printing company. Located near the city centre, it was a hub for journalists and the writers and editors of the then popular private Swahili photo-novel magazines (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 227–232). By doing layouts and illustrations for them, Mbajo became part of their network. This revived his dream of success as a cultural entrepreneur, this time by appropriating the concept of the Kenyan English-language *Joe* magazine with its comics and cartoons (Frederiksen 1991) for the Tanzanian market:

> One day, while reading *Joe Magazine*, which was produced in Kenya, I decided to establish a similar magazine in Swahili myself. I spoke to my late friend Saidi Bawji, whom I had known since Tanga, where he worked at the National Bank of Commerce, because we both loved writing books. He too had since been transferred to Dar es Salaam. I pitched my idea to him, and he went along with it. He decided to take out a loan from his bank employees' savings and loan association to set up the magazine. That was our start-up capital. I started designing the magazine, with all my artistic skills. I wrote all the stories, jokes, news, and headlines. And I drew the illustrations for all the stories and the comics, *Ndumilakuwili, Fugamilumutima, Mzee Sani, Lodi Lofa* and so on. The biggest task was the cover-layout. (...) And we called our magazine SANI, an abbreviation of our names SAidi and NIcco. We registered it in November 1978. (56)

The two friends jointly established the publishing house WAMASA (*Watoaji wa Maandishi ya Sani*, 'Publishers of the writings of SANI'). Aiming for a Swahili version of *Joe*, Mbajo created a set of comic characters representing popular stereotypes, such as the crook, the city loafer, the backwoodsman, the elder, the womanizer, and the city girl, and, just like *Joe*, dedicated each issue to a certain theme.[15] *SANI* also featured short stories, readers' letters, and

[15] The appropriation of *Joe* magazine parallels that of *African Film* by F.H.H. Katalambulla (see Reuster-Jahn 2016, 226–230).

other content. It revolutionized Swahili magazine culture by ending the dominance of the photo-novels (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 226–239). It was enthusiastically received by an urban Tanzanian readership and became one of the leading leisure magazines.[16]

Soon Mbajo was told by Printpak to either do his work for *SANI* after working hours or quit his job. Full of confidence in *SANI*'s prospects, he opted against security and for a promising, albeit uncertain, future, as the second issue had already generated a good profit. From then on, Mbajo worked on the magazine in his rented room. After four issues, however, another disaster occurred in his life. As he reports, his partner used a ruse to get him out of the company (57–58). Mbajo had started going to bars and clubs with other writers and friends, and sometimes drank too much alcohol. On one such night in a bar, Bawji approached him with a blank document to sign in advance, which Mbajo did. However, when he next tried to withdraw money from their bank account, the bank clerk showed him a signed document in which Mbajo declared his withdrawal from WAMASA. Devastated, he confronted Bawji, who justified himself by saying that he had to repay his loan. He offered to employ Mbajo, which was unacceptable for him. Bawji then hired the artist Phillip Ndunguru to draw the cartoons; he developed new themes, created some new characters, and became famous for them. Thus, it is most often Ndunguru who is mentioned as the creator of the *SANI* characters (see for example Beck 1999; Beez 2003, 98). Mbajo had no legal recourse to claim his characters as his intellectual property. Although there was no agreement to this effect, all parties considered WAMASA as the owner of the characters. Awareness of intellectual property rights was generally very low at the time.

This case sheds new light on the social networks of writers and magazine editors that were so important to popular print culture at the time (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 236–237). While Mbajo's autobiography confirms that the mutual help between friends and in wider networks was essential for writers, it also points to rivalry, mistrust, and envy.[17] In this context, he hints at the use of magic, especially for protection, by writers and editors, which he resisted on religious grounds (58–60).

After his involuntary departure from WAMASA, Mbajo was again left with nothing. This time, however, he could use the name he had made for himself as cultural and social capital. With remarkable perseverance, he held onto his vision of himself as a cultural entrepreneur and again found a partner with whose financial support he started a new magazine. In 1980, the two of them registered Mcheshi Publications to publish *Mcheshi* ('The Humourist') magazine, which combined cartoons and comics with photo-novels (59; see also Reuster-Jahn 2016, 240).[18] While it did well, it never became as popular as *SANI*.

Once again, an unexpected opportunity arose, which Mbajo quickly seized:

> One day, I was called by an Indian who owned International Bookshop, a large bookstore and stationery on Independence Avenue (…). His name was Murtazar Alidina. He wanted to distribute my magazine. He was already distributing others, like *Film Azania*, *Bantu Film,* and the like. I accepted (…). With Alidina, I achieved prosperity. He became my sponsor for my books, almost five. He paid me ten percent

[16] The magazine changed over the years regarding content, format, and frequency of appearance (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 238–244). Due to recent developments in media use in Tanzania, and especially the rise of social media, it was discontinued in 2019.

[17] Envy was also a common phenomenon in music bands (Perullo 2011, 174–175).

[18] Mbajo explained that with this title he wanted to express that he had no grudge against Bawji (Mbajo, interview, August 20, 2010).

> of the sales of my publications. That was not little back then. It allowed me to enjoy the city to the fullest. (60)

Alidina was a Tanzanian publisher and bookseller of Asian descent, who had previously specialized in importing English language books and magazines and had established a wide distribution network. Due to import restrictions in the late 1970s, Alidina had turned to financing and distributing domestic Swahili-language print media. He was able to circulate average print runs of 15,000 copies (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 234–235).[19] In this way, Alidina contributed significantly to the boom in Swahili magazines and popular books even during a time of economic decline (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 234–236). Mbajo explains that even when he officially published his books through Mcheshi Publications, Alidina was the actual publisher who paid him royalties (63). During their cooperation, which lasted from 1982 to 1985, two of Mbajo's books were published by Alidina's International Publishers Agencies, while four books and his magazine were published by Mcheshi Publications. Mbajo's autobiography confirms the crucial role of the businessmen of Asian descent who, from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, acted in the background of so-called "briefcase publishers" (Bgoya n.d. [1985]; Chachage 1991), leading to the paradoxical situation that the production of popular Swahili literature flourished at a time of great economic crisis (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 239–242).

Mbajo's novels are characterized by patriotism and partisanship for the disadvantaged and the exploited. His heroes are young men who successfully act against the agents of imperialism, but also against corruption and the abuse of power in their own country (Bertoncini Zúbková 2009, 103–104). As they are victorious in the end, the novels convey the message of hope for a better future. This positive socialist attitude earned Mbajo praise from a prominent Tanzanian professor of Swahili literature (Mulokozi 1985, 174).

In the novels, Mbajo also shows a special attachment to his ethnic background by often using it as a setting, and occasionally having his characters, some of whom bear Bena names, speak his native Bena language.[20] He emphasizes the strong autobiographical character of his novels: "I have taken events from my life or from my social environment and turned them into fiction" (62). This for him was in line with his view of the artist as a mirror of society (prologue, 52). Mbajo is a skilled storyteller, whose plots are often original, well structured, and suspenseful. He uses Standard Kiswahili, with occasional colloquial or Bena expressions in dialogues. Most books contain carefully drawn illustrations by the author, which greatly enhanced their appeal at the time.

As the EALB ultimately did not publish Mbajo's manuscripts, for which it had paid him, he published his first book through his own Mcheshi Publications. Entitled *Ikibidi Kufa, Nife* ('If I Must Die, I Will Die', 1982a), this patriotic spy story is about a brave young Tanzanian prepared to sacrifice himself for his country. He wants to prevent a terrorist attack on the prestigious Tanzania Zambia Railway (TAZARA), an actual railroad that was built in 1970–76 with the support of the People's Republic of China. The hero hunts down the foreign agents of imperialism who have disguised themselves as Africans through plastic surgery. In this novel, Mbajo deals with the vulnerability of his country, whose future depends on the patriotic commitment of its citizens. The author wanted to emphasize President Nyerere's call that "the country will

[19] For comparison, today, popular Swahili fiction authors in Tanzania usually print (and sell) only 300 to 500 copies of their books. These figures are based on my own interviews with authors.

[20] Mbajo even named some of his cartoon characters in Bena, such as *Ndumilakuwili* ('the one who bites at two ends'), a two-faced person or hypocrite.

be guarded and built by the citizens themselves" (63). Mbajo financed the printing of the book but did not manage to distribute the print run of 3,500 copies, despite family members travelling through provincial towns for this purpose. After this negative experience, Mbajo only published under the sponsorship model (Mbajo, interview, March 8, 2014).

Mbajo's second book, *Mmempa Achume!* (1982b), whose manuscript he had originally submitted to the EALB, was published by Alidina's International Publishers Agencies. It is set in a fictitious African country resembling Tanzania and deals with an expert from abroad whose credentials are forged and whose unqualified work harms the nation. A young patriot sees through him and finds a way to convict him. The message of the story is summarized at the end: The country should not be too permissive in allowing foreigners to come and advise the locals because they might just be working for their own self-interest. The author thus provided a critical view of development experts in Tanzania.

Dhamana ya Mapenzi (1982c), Mbajo's autofictional narrative mentioned above, which he published as his third book, stands out among his more politically oriented works. He published it with Press and Publicity Centre, owned by Akberali Manji, whom he knew from his secondary school days.

In his fourth novel, *Manamba* (1983a), Mbajo memorializes his father, who had worked as a farm labourer on the sisal plantations in Tanga. This story is about the liberation of exploited workers in a rural environment. To avoid negative repercussions, the author set this socially critical novel, like *Mmempa Achume*, in a fictional country resembling Tanzania.

In Mbajo's next novel, *Mfadhili wa Dhiki* ('The Benefactor of Own Needs', 1983c), he satirically attacks the behaviour of "'nizers", a popular term for Tanzanians who attained positions of power through Africanization (Ivaska 2011, 191–205). The author calls them *wazungu weusi* ('Black Europeans'), who practice *ukoloni mambo leo* ('neo-colonialism') and have created an "enclave of colonialists within an independent country" (1983c, 80, 100). In the novel, Mbajo explains:

> *Mfadhili wa dhiki* refers to (...) that national who takes the place of the colonialist and whose subordinates immediately recognize that he treats them worse than the colonialist who left. The people expected the national to be their benefactor, but instead his goal is to use the leadership position to mitigate his own problems. (1983c, 80)

For this novel, Mbajo drew on his experiences as an agricultural officer with the Kibena Wattle Company. It is set on a large farm where workers are exploited in many ways. The hero of the story, a farm employee, risks his life to fight against the corrupt African farm manager and eventually frees the disenfranchized from their plight. Mbajo earned a reputation for advocating for the disadvantaged in Tanzania through his writing. Popular artist Hammie Rajab underscored this on the back cover of Mbajo's only short story collection (Mbajo 1983b): "Regarding novels that lament the plight of the wretched, I cannot keep up with you, Nicco ye Mbajo. No one is equal to you. Continue to console society."

In 1984, Mbajo published the novel *Sifi Mara Mbili* ('I Don't Die Twice'), about a young man, Habib, who in 1940 killed his wife after she had been seduced by his friend. Habib then took part in World War II as a soldier. He went missing and was declared dead; however, he then returns and kills his former friend. In the subsequent court case, he is able to avoid a conviction because he claims to be officially dead. This novel was financed by Akberali Manji, the owner of Press and Publicity Centre, and officially published by Mbajo's Mcheshi Publications. The author writes:

> He [Manji] heard about my writing and sought me out to do business with me. You know, I was like Ronaldo or Msuva back then, every team wants them. It was the same with my writing skills, they were very popular back then. (70)

Mbajo's remark not only highlights his popularity at the time, but also confirms the competition between the "sponsors" of Asian descent for writers and editors of leisure magazines (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 235). Given Mbajo's reputation as a writer, it is surprising that he did not keep copies of his books. The idea that they could be meaningful for posterity did not occur to him until much later in his life. When, in 2014, I provided him with scans of those of his books which were available at the Jahn Library of African Literatures at the University of Mainz, Germany, he was delighted (62–68).[21]

Mbajo felt comfortable with his symbiotic business relationship with Alidina. He told me that the "sponsors" never intervened in the content of the writers' works (Mbajo, interview, August 20, 2010).[22] However, in 1985, the "Economic Sabotage Act", decreed under Prime Minister Edward Sokoine, which particularly, though not overtly, targeted wealthy businessmen of Asian descent in Tanzania (Aminzade 2013, 208, 232–233), led to Alidina's emigration to Canada (Reuster-Jahn 2016, 242). His departure hit Mbajo hard and left him unprepared. One of the regrets he mentions in his autobiography is that he did not use his income from Alidina to build up capital (60). Other "briefcase publishers" had not done so either, which explains why they "fade[d] from existence" (Chachage 1991, xv).

In the same year, 1985, political and economic transformation was initiated in Tanzania. Due to the economic collapse and pressure from the International Monetary Fund, the country introduced multi-party democracy and economic liberalization. As a result of the privatization of the media in 1993, the media landscape became more diverse. The writer Ben Mtobwa, for example, published newspapers and popular novels through his publishing house Heko Publications. Mbajo does not comment on these changes and how they affected his vision of his future as a cultural producer. However, his silence on them can be interpreted as a lack of enthusiasm. The kind of novels he was known for no longer fit in with the neoliberal ideology, and this may explain why he ceased writing for many years.

Only much later, when HIV/AIDS triggered a social crisis and the problem of drug abuse became a major issue in Tanzania, did he pick up the pen again to write his last novel. The book, entitled *Sitathubutu Aslani!* ('I Will Never Dare!'), was published in 2003. He comments: "I reawakened in the 2000s, at the sunset of my life, to write this book. (…) It's a novel about the AIDS pandemic and the fight against drugs. And the sponsor was Press and Publicity Centre" (71). The quote shows that the system of "sponsors", despite economic changes through liberalization and privatization since the 1990s, still existed in the 2000s, indicating that the economic infrastructure of the popular literature sector had not changed. When Mbajo died, he left behind the manuscript of a novel for which he had been looking for a "sponsor".

After Alidina's emigration, Mbajo found himself once again deprived of his livelihood. He was now 35 years old and had to provide for a family, as he had married a Christian woman in 1981. He continued with his magazine *Mcheshi*, with many difficulties, "until it stopped running" (60).[23] Mbajo turned to working with church *kwayas*, even if this only earned him a small income. But he was able

[21] Seven of Mbajo's books are available at the Jahn Library.

[22] This differs from the practice of NGOs in artist-patron relationships in East Africa (Vierke 2019).

[23] According to Sturmer (1998, 235), the magazine still appeared in 1990.

to shine and make a name for himself on this stage with his musical talents. Moreover, the *kwayas* were communities where opportunities could emerge (Barz 2000, 380).

Despite his efforts to sustain himself through various means, Mbajo's experiences underscore the precarious nature of artistic livelihoods, where instability and setbacks often loom large. The cessation of *Mcheshi* magazine represented not just a loss of income but also a symbolic moment reflecting the challenges faced by independent artistic ventures in a fluctuating market. His decision to engage with the church *kwaya* for meagre earnings highlights the compromises artists often make to sustain themselves and their families, even if it means diverging from their original artistic pursuits. These struggles not only shape the present circumstances but also cast shadows over future prospects, as each setback and missed opportunity contributes to the accumulation of unrealized potential and unfulfilled dreams. Thus, the troubles of the past become reflections of the future, as Mbajo navigates the complexities of his artistic journey amidst adversity and uncertainty.

Post-*Ujamaa* prospects in *kwaya* and church

Kwaya music and performance was a continuous cultural activity in Mbajo's life. He began conducting and composing at the age of twelve and continued to do so until shortly before his death. In the chapter titled "*Kwaya*" (77–112), he gives an account of his work with a series of 19 *kwaya* groups (at some of them simultaneously) as their teacher and conductor. He also includes some of his self-composed songs written in the tonic solfa notation. *Kwaya* is an East African musical genre based on European, particularly German, choral traditions, which is practised in churches and in secular contexts. In his youth, Mbajo was involved in political *kwaya*.

In the culture of church *kwaya*, highly structured competitions are important. These competitions in choral singing and performance are "serious occasions, as the outcome (…) can determine a *Kwaya's* placement and reputation for several years to come" (Barz 2000, 381). Accordingly, the work of the choirmasters is important; this consists of composing songs, rehearsing them, and planning and carrying out the performances. Mbajo was a successful and sought-after choirmaster, and he was also experienced with church theatre performances. From 1978 to 1989 he worked with the *Kwaya ya Vijana Kariakoo* ('Kariakoo Youth Choir'). They won the diocesan competition several times and, beginning in 1985, they visited the Lutheran *kwaya* in Nairobi every year.

These visits to Nairobi, Mbajo tells his readers, eventually caused envy. As a result, he left the *kwaya* but was soon asked to become choirmaster of the Temeke Youth Choir. In 1990, Mbajo was called to Moshi by his friend Peter Mbaga, whom he knew from his theatre group in Tanga, to become choirmaster of the Lutheran *kwaya*. With Mbaga, he also tried one last time to start a private magazine, which they called PENI, but it did not last (61). At this point, Mbajo gave up his dream of having his own magazine.

His work as a choirmaster in Moshi brought him back to Dar es Salaam and to print culture when, in 1993, during the celebration of 100 years of the gospel in the Kilimanjaro area, the Lutheran bishop of Dar es Salaam offered him a job as editor of the church's long-established journal *Pwani na Bara* ('Coast and Hinterland'). For Mbajo, this was another God-given miracle (99). The Lutheran church remained Mbajo's spiritual home for the rest of his life, and he found comfort in recognizing God's will even in the bad things that happened to him. As the editor of *Pwani na Bara*, he got an office at the Luther House in Dar es Salaam, a regular income, and a relatively large measure of artistic freedom. As an innovation, he introduced entertaining content into *Pwani*

na Bara, most of which he wrote himself. In addition to his editorial work, he once again became choirmaster of the Temeke Youth Choir.

In 1999, Mbajo and select members of this *kwaya* travelled to the United States at the invitation of the Northern Great Lakes Synod. They performed in several cities, singing and jiving. Everywhere they went, their performances garnered large, enthusiastic audiences. In 2007, Mbajo retired as editor of the magazine. He continued with cultural work, however, for as long as his physical condition allowed. He worked with various *kwayas* until 2015 (111–112) and continued writing almost until his death in 2021. Portraying it as an urge, he claimed: "Creative writing is like hunger. Today you are full and tomorrow you are hungry again" (74).

In the final chapter, Mbajo pays tribute to friends, family, writers, colleagues, sponsors, *kwaya* members, and media people who played a positive role in his life. He expresses his gratitude to these people and wishes them God's blessing for the future. This chapter documents the contribution of interethnic friendship ties and networks to Mbajo's private life, as well as to his artistic career. School friends, work colleagues, fellow writers, church people, and *kwaya* members came from all parts of Tanzania and even from the US and Europe. They all helped Mbajo, in one way or another, to achieve his dreams and goals.

Conclusion

Reading Nicco ye Mbajo's autobiography reveals the complexities of being a first-generation modern artist in the changing sociopolitical landscape of post-colonial Tanzania. One interesting finding is that, for Mbajo, combining cultural elements of different origins to create hybrid forms through bricolage and appropriation was already a normal practice in his childhood. This attitude is evident in the introduction of jive movements in *kwaya* performance and in the conception of the magazine *SANI* as the Tanzanian version of the Kenyan *Joe* magazine. He perceived his role in society as that of a producer of aesthetically designed moral content combined with entertainment. His life story also shows how strongly artists were initially required to position themselves as propagandists of the *Ujamaa* ideology, even though the state did not pay them for their work. Mbajo tells us that he was initially happy to fulfil this requirement, in a mixture of enthusiasm and opportunism, although he defiantly inserted entertaining elements. The informality of private cultural production offered scope for innovation and experimentation. As the risk of failure was high, cultural practitioners had to be resilient. The unconditional belief in his artistic ability expressed by Mbajo, and the artistic drive he mentions, were essential for this.

Mbajo pursues several goals with his autobiography. First, he preserves his subjective history and his achievements for posterity. Admitting his wrong decisions and instances of injustice towards others brings him relief. In addition, by framing them as a warning for readers, particularly the country's youth, he gives his failures positive meaning. Most basically, however, he asserts his identity as an artist who is driven by a creative urge. Through the meticulous documentation of his life experiences, Mbajo not only constructs a narrative of personal significance but also contributes to the broader cultural and historical landscape of his community. By acknowledging his missteps and injustices, he not only seeks personal absolution but also offers a profound lesson in humility and self-reflection, inviting readers to confront their own shortcomings. Moreover, by using his autobiography as a platform to impart wisdom and provide a cautionary narrative to the younger generation, Mbajo embodies the role of a mentor and elder statesman, passing down valuable insights garnered from a lifetime of trials and tribulations.

Second, Mbajo's subjective life narrative

reveals the precariousness of cultural production in his time more generally. The lack of opportunities for artistic training with a formalized curriculum affected all first-generation cultural producers. Like Mbajo, they were often assigned training in completely different fields. For him, it was tragic that he was destined for an agricultural career. This heteronomy was the rule at the time, and it was almost impossible to escape it. As there were no established career paths for modern cultural workers, their first generation had to create their own place in society through informal channels. As Mbajo's autobiography exemplifies, artistic careers could not be planned, but depended on the willingness to take risks and the ability to quickly seize opportunities. Without these skills, no cultural career was possible. Security was not the top priority for these artists, as Mbajo's life narrative demonstrates. He presents his career as the result of personal abilities and failures, which he ultimately ascribes to God's plan for him. A critical assessment of larger social contexts can be found only between the lines in his narrative, at best. This deprives him of the opportunity to better understand what happened to him. At the end of the autobiography, he states that "if I had known" remains a question to which he has no answer. His sense of regret finds no resolution in the realization of what led to his wrong decisions. Instead, he sees himself as subject to a higher power.

Finally, with his creative works, Nicco ye Mbajo has inscribed himself in the history of Swahili print culture, in particular in leisure magazines and popular fiction, as well as in *kwaya* music in Tanzania. His autobiography gives a first-hand account of the production modes and conditions of the so-called "briefcase publishers" of the 1970s and 1980s in Tanzania, who were the forerunners of today's self-publishers. It also reveals the autofictional character of his novels. As a rich source for the history of popular cultural production, it contributes to a better understanding of Tanzanian culture. Cultural productions, such as novels, play a pivotal role in shaping collective imaginations and projecting visions of the future. Mbajo's works not only offer insights into past cultural practices and production methods but also serve as windows into potential futures. Through the autofictional lens of his novels, Mbajo extrapolates from his own experiences to speculate on the trajectories of Tanzanian society, providing readers with glimpses of possible tomorrows. By engaging with themes of social change, political upheaval, and cultural evolution, Mbajo's literary contributions become blueprints for envisioning alternative futures and navigating the complexities of a rapidly transforming world. In this way, cultural productions serve as both reflections of historical contexts and catalysts for imagining new horizons, bridging the past, present, and future in a continuous dialogue of creative expression and societal reflection.

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