

## WEB-PUBLICATION

### Note:

This is a web-publication. Please use as reference:

- Obure Morang'a, Mark and Inge Brinkman, 'Interview with Juma Rang'ombe, Kwale Arts Troupe, Kenya', (VLIR-UOS Team project 'Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia', August 2024) <https://www.ol4d.ugent.be/>.

For the Swahili-language play '*Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*', transcription/translation, please see the video and the other documents on our website.

### Interview data

Online interview with Juma Abdalla Rang'ombe (in Kwale, Kenya) by Mark Obure-Morang'a and Inge Brinkman (in Ghent, Belgium) on Tuesday 13 August 2024.

Juma Abdalla Rang'ombe is a man of 32 years old who describes himself as performing artist, narrator and carpenter. He was born in the Kwale region, Kenya and his mother tongue is the Digo language.

Juma joined Kwale Arts Troupe in 2016 after the group visited his high school in Kwale County, Kenya, making him one of the longstanding members. A few members are older than he is, but most are younger in age. Currently he functions as the programme coordinator for the group, and often functions as the narrator during the plays that the group performs.

Kwale Arts Troupe was established in 2000, with as founding member and director Mr. Wakili Mwatondo. Currently, Kwale Arts Troup has three cluster groups that normally are all called in to perform when they have a big performance. The main group has about 20 members that usually meets thrice a week. Their involvement is on a voluntary basis; they only receive compensation if a donor decides to offer them something.

Usually the group performs in the community, in primary and high schools. They also may perform when governments calls them in during *barazas* (public meetings with the traditional authorities). They perform various genres, such as sketches, plays, narrations, poetry, puppetry and other. Kwale Arts Troupe views aware creation as its core mission.

The play/narrative '*Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*' features in the VLIR-UOS OL4D-Team project: 'Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia'. In May 2023, the OL4D-Team members gathered for the first Annual Meeting in Diani/Kwale, Kenya. That is when Wakili Mwatondo organized Kwale Arts Troupe to perform the narrative in the form of a play. The play, transcription/translation are available on the project website. This interview was meant to listen to the view of one of the actors, namely narrator Juma Abdalla Rang'ombe, concerning the play '*Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*'.

### Interview

**Inge:** You performed this particular play '*Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*' in Kiswahili. Do you also use other languages for your performances, like do you also use the Digo language?

**Juma:** Yes, we often use Kiswahili. Sometimes we mix English and Swahili, but not often. For the bigger performances, it is mostly Kiswahili. But it depends on the audience that we are targeting. When we are going to the Digo community, we normally change the performance into

local language so that the community can understand better. Similarly, when we go to the Duruma community, we change the performance language to Duruma. So we use the language as it suits the community. For their better understanding.

**Mark:** As for '*Nzala na ndugu si mutu*', what are some of the occasions that this play was performed?

**Juma:** It was performed before or after a disaster like a drought. Or it can also be performed when other sorts of disasters are expected. The elders used to narrate such narrative so that the community will be prepared when the disaster hits the community. Indeed, for example during a *baraza*, when the elders and the people are gathered.

**Inge:** So have you performed it many times?

**Juma:** We performed it about ten times. In schools and for university students, from Zetech University and from Maasai Mara University.

**Mark:** So visitors that come to the cultural centre that you have established in Matuga sub-county in Kwale County.

**Juma:** Indeed.

**Inge:** Do you know where this story came from? Is it based on fieldwork or any other way you got to know about it?

**Juma:** This story '*Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*', I used to hear it from my grandfather and my grandmother. These two elders used to recall and tell us the history, how things had happened.

They were always competing (laughs). They would be trying to show off to us, trying to say who is the elder between the two, whether grandpa or grandma is the elder. So my grandpa used to laugh at grandma saying that she is younger than him. Then you could hear them asking each other: 'So did you meet this disaster? Were you there?' Especially when they were together they would compete like this. So this story I got it from my grandparents.

They would tell us how it happened. They have really experienced this disaster when they were growing up.

**Inge:** There are indeed some references to this famine called *Nzala ya ndugu si mutu*, in the 1930s...

**Juma:** Yes, there are different names for each *nzala* when there was no food. There was also one in which people had no food, except for green peas. They would only eat green peas. And yet another one known as *nzala ya wanga* [referring to a lack of wheat]. So there were different famines in the course of history. From what I heard from my grandparents, the disaster indeed occurred in the history of the region.

My grandmother used to say that she herself was not present yet, but that she was told about it when she was young. So it happened several times, famine.

**Inge:** Did you experience any hunger disaster during your lifetime?

**Juma:** When I grew up there was a time when we experienced many problems. My mom use to tell me that when I was born when there were many problems. We were then living far from any market, deep in the countryside. There was a time elephants came and destroyed all the crops in our farms. They had nothing, so people were suffering or hunger at that moment. And again, when I was about eight years, the situation was a bit challenging, but thank God I survived, and now there are so many changes that I can see.

**Inge:** For you as the narrator, how would you view the message of the story?

**Juma:** Some may view it as a fun story, but the story also has aspects of awareness creation. Such situations are really bitter. When people are harvesting nothing from their farms or only very little, it is so bitter. To be prepared and to overcome such disasters, I think the community must be informed. Climate change is seen year after year, like last year it rained a lot, this year few yields were harvested. Some did not harvest anything in their farms.

**Inge:** But what is the status of the play, does it help, because a play does not bring food?

**Juma:** I see it as a creation of awareness. People can understand better through seeing and hearing. When you are talking of written information to them and they never had the opportunity to go to school, how can they understand what you were trying to pass to them? But when they see such performances, hearing the information, I think the information can stick for a long time. Through performances like this play, they can understand their situation; they can come to a profound understanding.

**Inge:** That is interesting. Because academic work is geared towards obtaining a deeper understanding. So in a way you bring art and academia together with your explanation.

**Mark:** As for this particular play, what is the particular aspect of awareness you have in mind?

**Juma:** The awareness in this play is that people should help one another. Just like what happened to the two brothers in the story. They are brothers, but when one suffers, the other one neglects his brother because he does not want to offer any help. So for the people to learn is that people should love one another and assist one another during such situation. Otherwise, it will only add to more disaster.

So that is one of the lessons.

Also this play creates awareness on the preparations for disasters like this one. In the play, we can see that Mwangari had much food. He could cultivate a very big land, so accordingly during harvesting time, he also had a large quantity of food. Much more than those who only prepared a small piece of land.

So the play creates awareness about solidarity and helping each other, but also encourages people to think ahead. When people are preparing land for cultivation, they should prepare big farms so that we get much food. This will enable people to sell some products in the market for money or, alternatively, they can store it so that when a disaster comes, we are in the in better position.

**Mark:** Indeed also a matter of concern, in case a disaster comes it is better not to be too dependent. So I am assuming maybe these two brothers in the story were given the same amount of land to cultivate. Maybe it is now up to us to see: How did this one cultivate and get food enough for his family? And again: How did this other one was not manage?

**Juma:** So in such situation it could that this other one was lazy. He is a lazy: he has a farm, but he does not think much ahead. While the hardworking man is cultivating a very big portion of land. So you see, when the disaster comes, the lazy people normally suffer. Sometimes it is really up to you yourself to know how you are going to survive during such tough situations in life.

**Mark:** Thanks. You are referring to elephants, people, climate change, land.... So what role can then humans play in terms of safeguarding their surroundings?

**Juma:** In my view, one of the ways that they can do to protect the surroundings is by the planting of trees. Many trees, so as to make the rain to rain, you see. To plant trees and to avoid cutting down trees.

Another important matter in this respect is our culture. In my culture there are some things, when you do or you perform these, something like a curse will occur. So I think also people will have to know their culture to overcome such bad behaviours which would lead to a curse from God. Because there are some cultural aspects that warn us; like you are not supposed to do this because when you do this you will be cursed by God. So we avoid those things and ensure that we are in our proper way to go.

And the other one is that of planting many trees to the forest so that rain is seen beyond there.

**Mark:** Could you give an example of such behaviour?

**Juma:** This aspect of culture and being cursed by God? For example, we know very well that a father is not allowed to have sexual intercourse with his daughter or a mother is not allowed perform sexual intercourse to her son, you see? Or the uncle is prohibited, according to our culture, to have intercourse with a niece. Because when such behaviour happens then it is like we have gone beyond there. Beyond the law and the rules of the community, you see. So that is when people get cursed.

**Inge:** Do you have any final remarks that you may have you or any questions that you can ask us?

**Juma:** We shall plan to perform the story in Chidigo so that it can reach our community, and people can really see its origin. If I have anything else to add, I will write.

**Inge:** Thanks a lot, Juma. In May 2025 we will visit you again so kwa heri ya kuonana!

**Mark:** Asante sana.

**Juma:** You are welcome. Thank you too.