

Utani relationships in Tanzania: Reflections on ethnic creativity

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Abstract

This article looks at 'joking relationships'—or *Utani* in Kiswahili—that exists between and among different ethnic groups in Tanzania. Though teasing or joking is abundant in these relationships, *Utani* serves as a veil around intense and obliging messages. These *Utani* expressions are widespread in the country. This article uses the Kiswahili term to examine the relationships beyond the joke-like verbal manifestations. Specifically, the article examines the circumstances under which *Utani* is expressed, the origins of inter-ethnic *Utani* in Tanzania and the way it is recreated and re-enacted. In conclusion, the article looks at the role *Utani* plays in Tanzania and lessons for it engenders for the rest of Africa.

Introduction

Utani is a Kiswahili word which, according to the Standard Kiswahili-English Dictionary, means "...kinship, clanship in tribe or race, also in a general way, familiar friendship". *Mtani* (pl. *watani*) is, according to the same source, "...one of a family, clan, or tribe, a kinsman, a relation, but not nearer than a cousin on the father's side. Often used in a loose way of a great friend, familiar friend, one with whom you can be on familiar terms; *watani* can abuse each other, or take each other's things without there being a quarrel." The important elements here are familiarity and/or a sense of belonging to the same group.

The term *Utani*, as applied in this article, refers to a manifestation or expression of the underlying relationship between individuals or groups. In other literatures these relationships are referred to as 'joking relationships' possibly for lack of a better term. Though in the varied manifestations of *Utani* there may be some teasing and what appears to be jokes, the reality is that these manifestations are far more intense and obliging than what is often associated with joking. Such expressions are open, sometimes ritualised, verbal or behavioural exchanges. Radcliffe-Brown (1952:91-2) describes *Utani* relationship thusly:

The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism. The behaviour is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility; but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is pretence of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it in another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect. ...Any serious hostility is prevented by the playful antagonism of teasing and this in its regular repetition which is one of the essential components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained by the friendliness that takes no offence at insult.

The institution of *Utani* is as peculiar as it is interesting. The most interesting and common form in Tanzania, for example, as will be pointed out later in this article, is one between two or more ethnic groups. Although *Utani* relationships between clans have been observed in many parts of Africa, *Utani* between two or more ethnic groups is apparently rare (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 94). In this form of *Utani* members of different ethnic groups that are *watani* engage in verbal exchanges and actions that cannot otherwise be tolerated by other people beyond those with such a relationship. This kind of relationship, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1952), does not merely recognise the separateness of the groups but also emphasises it:

The theory that is here put forward, therefore, is that both the joking relationship which constitutes an alliance between clans or tribes, and that between relatives by marriage, are modes of organising a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components, as I have called them, are maintained and combined (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 95).

The study of *Utani* relationships preoccupied many scholars from late 1930 to the mid-1970s (Peters, 1972; Gluckman, 1963; Fortes and Evens-Pritchard, 1940; Middletown and Winter, 1963, Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Lucas, 1973, 1974, 1975). These relationships were studied, in part, because they defied the normal etiquette in the cultures of the researchers. There have been many attempts to arrive at a general theory on these relationships on the basis of their structure or function. For example, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) sees a mother's brother as structurally external and, therefore, subject to *Utani* relations. On the contrary, Peters (1972, p.135) argues that the general sentiment of the mother's loving care for the children is so common that it cannot possibly be considered as basic to *Utani* partnership. He sees efforts to arrive at a general theory of *Utani* relationships as "...not feasible, and any suggestions of general worth which come from such a study are coincidental" (*ibid.* p.138). Peters also treats *Utani* relationships as

more than structures and the functions they serve:

Joking partners are never disinterested and detached intruders. A joking partnership does not arise merely so that a person or category of people can be called on to take action in a field of relationships where they have no interests (*ibid.* p. 123).

Peters argues that partners in any *Utani* relationship have an interest in the results of their intervention. Also, he maintains that *Utani* relationships have own contexts in which they operate. Of course, we cannot understand these relationships merely by looking at the structure or function of the societies in which they occur. However, by understanding the contexts in which *Utani* relationships are manifested we may have an idea of necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for *Utani* relationships to emerge.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) identified two types of joking relationships: those that are symmetrical and those that are asymmetrical. Under the asymmetrical type, person A jokes at the expense of person B and person B accepts the teasing well humoured without retaliating. Such standardised social relationships are extremely widespread not only in Africa but also in Asia, Oceania and North America. Another example of asymmetrical joking relationship is one between a child and a mother's brother. A child may speak with disrespect to a mother's brother, and the mother's brother will not retaliate. This relationship exemplifies privileged disrespect. This particular case "...does not merely annul the usual relation between the two generations, it reverses it" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, p. 98).

There has been a tendency of people condemning traditional institutions without considering the context in which they occur. Yet, it is becoming increasingly clear in development circles that solutions to some of the critical problems Tanzanians face can be found in some of the people's traditions and customs. Moreover, there is an urgent need to study those traditions and customs and identify aspects that may enhance development efforts in different fields. The strong message sent by case studies of *Utani* relationships in Tanzania is that these relationships constitute an important cultural resource that needs to be explored fully and effectively sustained.

Premises of *Utani*

Occasions at which *Utani* may be expressed are many and varied; however, the following appear to be the most common in Tanzania: burial ceremonies/

mourning gatherings, inter-clan ritual proceedings, communication between members of alternate generations (such as between grandchildren and grandparents), marriage ceremonies, and contact between members of different but intimate groups. This article focuses more on the significance of *Utani* in the socio-cultural environment of Tanzania and the surrounding region.

The custom and ritual practices of *Utani* are deep-rooted in the histories of the peoples of Tanzania and have little to do with the coming of Arabs. However, it is difficult to explain why *Utani* exists in certain situations and not in others. As there are so many variations of *Utani*, it is not easy to come up with a comprehensive answer. *Utani*, as pointed out by Lucas (1974, p. 10), is not confined to inter-ethnic relationships; in fact, it is a deeply-rooted principal of social organisation which directs interaction between alternating generations, some lineages and clans in relation to others, certain categories of cousins and, in areas where centralised political structures were emerging, as in Unyamwezi, between certain chiefdoms. For structuralists, *Utani* poses some problems because it is anti-structure in comparison with established social structure (*ibid.*, p. 12). Lucas (1973, p.15) articulates the problems of premising *Utani* as follows:

The diversity of *Utani* coupled with its practice in locally-determined situations appears to present an insurmountable methodological difficulty. For on the one hand, simply to record the instances of *Utani* would require dozens of researchers with access to all parts of the country. And given the importance of the linguistic element in *Utani*, these researchers must necessarily be able to speak and understand the local languages through which media *Utani* communication takes place (when, of course, Swahili is not being used).

Despite the existing problems, circumstances in which *Utani* is likely to develop are contact between an outside group and a local group through war, trade, migration, and ethnic intermarriage. Differences, which *Utani* seeks to maintain, are expressed through verbal or behavioural ritualised abuse or permitted disrespect. Much as such expressions emphasise difference and separateness they also recognise relationship and familiarity. What would otherwise constitute ridicule (Kiswahili, *kubezana*) and intolerable becomes accepted and tolerated under *Utani*. Here, again, the type of *Utani* that could emerge, following contact between two or more groups, would depend on whether the contact was premised on equality or inequality. For

example, the social interaction between the Bondei and Wanyika migrant-workers is, according to Lucas (1974, p.11):

[One]...largely guided by the *Utani* premise of irregularity, with identity *vis-à-vis* the other. The overall socio-economic conditions were such that both groups were under the domination of foreign capitalist interests whose immediate impact in the Muheza area resulted in the creation of sisal plantation system.

The relationships between the two groups were symmetrical. This is similar to *Utani* between the Hehe and the Ngoni, which is premised on equality in military prowess.

It should be pointed out that not all contacts between groups lead to *Utani*. Moreover, *Utani* does not necessarily develop between ethnic groups that were previously at war. This point is hammered home by Doriye (1974) in his work on the Iraqw of northern Tanzania, who points out that no inter-ethnic *Utani* exists between the Iraqw and their neighbours:

There is nothing that can be said to resemble the Ngoni-Hehe *Utani* relationship between the Iraqw and the surrounding tribes. The reason is that Iraqw have always been the subjugated, unlike the Hehe and the Ngoni who were matched in strength (*ibid.* 264; emphasis added).

Doriye (*ibid.*) emphasises the premise of equality and traces it to the development of personal relationships:

Sometimes after a quarrel or a fight, some people become *watani* and allies. *Utani* indicates that they have ceased to be enemies and are now on new terms. The tendency of such people is that they ultimately become friends and go together to 'pombe'¹ places. When one of them say, is involved in a fight with another person, the other will come to his aid. Here *Utani* has two functions. First it dissipates the old quarrel between previously hostile individuals and secondly it establishes new relationship between them (Doriye, 1974, pp. 269-270).

The premise of inequality, on the other hand, provides another form of *Utani* characterised by domination and submission. Those in a dominant position take responsibility over their *watani*. Such responsibilities include the burial of an individual who dies in another person's country. *Utani* partnerships along the caravan route such as those between the Nyamwezi and the Zaramo ethnic groups are based on this premise. When a member

1 *Pombe* is a Swahili word meaning alcohol especially local brews made from grains.

of the Zaramo ethnic group of coastal Tanzania dies upcountry among the Nyamwezi people, the burial responsibilities will rest with the Nyamwezi, and vice-versa. Domination, in this case, goes with responsibility. Those who are "at home" and dominant in numbers over the visitors take responsibility for the welfare of the visitors. Those who submit to the domination of others also expect care from those others. *Utani* characterised by domination and submission is sustained by the exchange reciprocity of responsibilities between *Utani* partners, and the feeling among *watani* of possibly finding oneself in the other person's country.

Another form of *Utani* is one characterised by aggression and co-operation. The language of *Utani* in this case is rich with highly insulting and aggressive terminology. Lucas (1998, p. 15) observes that aggression in many such cases appears to take the form of an over-emphasised intimacy, which is normally unwarranted. Furthermore, this type of *Utani* develops in areas where a certain level of co-operation between *Utani* partners is required or demanded, as is the case between the Bondei and Nyamwezi, Ha and Makonde (*ibid.*). To this category one might add the *Utani* between the Luo of Tanzania and the Haya. In all these cases the intimacy that is over-emphasised by *Utani* is a result of an economic system created and controlled by people other than themselves.

Utani may serve to bring under control people, who are beyond the reach of other members of the community. The Kaguru people, for example, have ritualised one aspect of their relations with those over whom they have relatively little control, and one detail of such relations provides some insight into the nature of witchcraft belief. Each Kaguru clan has certain joking partners (*mutani* pl. *watani*), who may freely abuse their partners. These are persons towards whom the usual social etiquette does not apply. When a *mutani* approaches, a Kaguru may explain in a jovial but significant insult, "Here comes a witch" (Beidelman, 1963). This way the difference between the two groups is emphasised while displaying the prevailing familiarity. If the so-called witch was bent on doing something harmful he is verbally "disarmed" and brought under control.

Utani between grandchildren and grandparents

Utani between grandchildren and grand parents exists in many parts of the world. In Tanzania, this form of *Utani* exists in almost all ethnic communities.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) saw *Utani* relationship between grandchildren and grandparents as a method of ordering a relation, which combines social conjunction and disjunction. Grand children are children of one's children. To the grand children, grand parents are parents of their own parents. A strong attachment exists between them because of the parental bond that links them. The generational difference, however, separates grandchildren from their grandparents. The potential contradiction posed by conjunction and disjunction between the two groups is mediated by *Utani* relationship.

In all the cases described in literature, no case cites the *Utani* relationship between children and their parents. Gluckman (1963) tries to explain this situation from his work among the Tallensi people, where he observes that people who are too close as well as those that are distant do not practice *Utani*: "As the Tallensi themselves see, nearness of relationship as well as distance excludes a joking relationship: teasing cuts too near the bone" (1963, p.78). In this regard, parents are too close to their children. The second reason for children not having *Utani* relationship with their parents is the role of parents in maintaining tradition which is handed down from one generation to the next, which requires, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1952), the authority behind it be maintained. This authority is held by those of senior generation—fathers and mothers. As such, *Utani* relationship between children and parents would undermine this authority.

Utani between men and women

Hehe	Pangwa
Luguru	Pogoro
Ha	Sangu
Makonde	Vinza
Mwera	Yao
Ndengereko	Zaramo
Ngindo	
Nyakyusa	

Radcliffe-Brown (1952, p.114) argues that human beings are born endowed with both principles of *masculine* and *feminine* and that "it is by operation of circumcision and clitoridectomy that they become truly male and female, so that there is again a Heraclitean union of opposites in the sexual union of

husband and wife". Here we see social disjunction in childhood that forms the basis for social conjunction in adult life. Marriage mediates the disjunction of the sexes and eliminates the need for *Utani* relationship between spouses. To the best of my knowledge, teasing and jokes may prevail between spouses but not *Utani* relationships. On several occasions I have witnessed people telling their spouses angrily, "*Acha, Mimi siyo mtani wako!*" (Stop it; I am not your joking partner!). On all those occasions the respective spouses had sensed disrespect which is only permitted to *watani*.

Warfare and *Utani*

War has been mentioned, more often than not, wherever *Utani* between ethnic groups in Tanzania is discussed. Yet, as we have already pointed out, there need not be war for *Utani* to develop. Moreover, *Utani* may not necessarily develop between groups that were previously engaged in warfare. How come, then, that the largest *Utani* networks (ethnic groups with *Utani* relationships with each other) are those spearheaded by the Ngoni and Nyamwezi who fought many wars? Lucas (1974) tries to answer this question by looking beyond war. He suggests that war must be part of a sustained long-term interaction for *Utani* to develop between warring or previously warring parties. Lucas (*ibid.*) argues that much as the Ngoni people practice *Utani* with ethnic groups with whom they fought wars, the relationship developed because there was deliberate effort by the Ngoni to assimilate and intermarry with those they conquered. The ethnic groups that fought with the Ngoni and are now their *Watani* include the following:

As for the Nyamwezi people, it is suggested that they needed to push through locally-governed territories to get their goods from up-country to the markets on the seaboard where they would then pick goods up for the return trip to Nyamweziland. *Utani* provided that *modus vivendi* (Lucas, 1973 vol. IV, p.13). The Nyamwezi *Utani* is a result or trade, war and intermarriage. The strategy of Mirambo, the Nyamwezi ruler, was to wage war when it was the only means to push his goods through a given territory. He used war and intermarriage as tools for ensuring that the Nyamwezi retained a share of the long-distance trade. The *Utani* partners of the Nyamwezi include the following ethnic groups in Tanzania:

Chagga	Mbunga
Doe	Meru
Fipa	Ngindo
Hehe	Ngulu
Kaguru	Nyasa
Kwere	Rangi
Longo	Rufiji
Luguru	Sutu-Ngoni
Lungu	Ngoni
Manda-Ngoni	

The *Utani* networks that emerged in pre-colonial and colonial times consolidated after the country gained independence. Factors leading to that consolidation and the impact of the latter will be examined later.

Before colonisation of what is now Tanzania many ethnic groups fought each other. Yet, it is true that even before colonisation many of the feuding groups made peace and developed friendly relations. Case studies of several ethnic groups in Tanzania suggest that the *Utani* relationships that exist between many of them developed after several wars, feuds and open aggression against each other. This is explained in part by Gluckman (1963, p. 67) who says that “when friends are also potential foes a conflict exists” the “conflict is mediated by or expressed in joking relationship of privileged aggression”. The *Utani* relationship between the Hehe and Ngoni of southern Tanzania exemplifies this privileged aggression that mediates the conflict. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) arrives at a similar conclusion. Based on his comparative analysis of different cases of *Utani* relationship, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) he concludes:

...the assertion ‘friendship’ means an obligation for the two persons not to enter into open quarrel or conflict with each other. It is sufficiently evident that one way of obviating open conflict between two persons is for them to avoid one another or treat each other with marked respect. I think it is also fairly evident that a relationship in which insults are exchanged and there is an obligation not to take them seriously, is one in which, by means of sham conflicts, avoids real ones (p. 107).

Friendship is maintained by privileged aggression or permitted disrespect instituted by *Utani*. In this sense, *Utani* plays the role of conflict resolution. However, more studies are needed to determine why these relationships have developed between

various ethnic groups in Tanzania and not between those of other countries.

The power of language

Tanzanians constituting more than 120 ethnic groups enjoy peace and relative harmony and see themselves as members of one nation. Nation-building may have benefited from inter-ethnic *Utani* relationships. For example, the wide *Utani* networks of the Ngoni and Nyamwezi may have made it easier for the nationalist leaders to forge unity among and between the disparate ethnic groups to rise against colonialism. This view is supported by Chalamila (1974, p. 261) in his work on the Hehe:

Utani is practiced by all tribes in Tanzania: Chagga with Pare, Nyamwezi with Luguru, Hehe with Zaramo, Ngoni, Nyamwezi, Pogoro, Luguru, etc. This type of interlocking relationship created some unity which could easily be mobilised and canalised into a political force.

The forging of national unity and the development of interlocking *Utani* relationships was greatly enhanced by Kiswahili language. The best verbal expressions of *Utani* result from one’s mastery of the language of *Utani*. Therefore, *Utani* partners should have a common language or should speak each other’s language. The promotion and spread of Kiswahili, as a national language of Tanzania, gave *Utani* a new impetus. The practices could no longer be confined to their previous boundaries. In fact, the *Utani* networks expanded to include groups that were previously outsiders, for example, the *Utani* between the Luo of Mara Region, east of Lake Victoria, and the Haya of Kagera Region west of the Lake. Up to the early 1970s only these two groups were *Watani* in the two regions. However, by the 1980s most ethnic groups of Mara Region saw the Haya people as their *Watani*. Today, almost all the people of the two regions treat each other as *Watani*. In other words, the permissible disrespect and its attendant responsibilities have extended beyond the confines of the Luo and Haya to embraces other groups. Increased interaction between the peoples through trade and other avenues facilitated by Kiswahili has also made this possible.

Utani transcends many levels, bridges many gaps and mediates many forms of inequalities. Language plays an important role in *Utani* because its manifestations are primarily verbal. It is no accident that current and earlier studies on *Utani* relationships in Tanzania are closely linked

to language programmes. The studies that were carried out by the students of the University of Dar es Salaam in the early 1970s were supported financially from the Survey of Language Use and Language Teaching in Eastern Africa. More case studies were undertaken in the 1990s partly out of the desire to publish books on ethnic languages as expressed in the *Culture Policy* of Tanzania. On the whole, languages are vehicles that carry *Utani* through the terrain of space and time.

Using the right words at the right moment is very crucial in *Utani* relationships for it creates the desired effect. A strong message should not be conveyed dryly if it is to gain maximum attention of the intended audience. The speaker(s) should be creative in packaging the message and artistic in presenting it. These qualities are acquired mainly through practice accorded by the different occasions at which members of different groups come together. For *Utani* to play an even greater role in sustaining peace and national unity in Tanzania the linguistic gems still locked up in the different ethnic languages, which made *Utani* effective and relevant at intra-ethnic level, should be unleashed and put into Kiswahili which has become the dominant language at the national level.

Lessons for Africa

Lack of peace on the African continent is a problem which international peacekeeping efforts have, so far, not been able to solve. Many countries are still locked in civil wars while those that have emerged out of them recently have yet to lay foundations for lasting peace. Africa, particularly those countries that have had civil wars, must embark on peace-building. This peace building requires tolerance between different groups and individuals. How can groups that were or are at war develop tolerance for each other? This is a big question but which is not impossible to find a solution to. Several ethnic groups in Tanzania that enjoy *Utani* between today were once at war. They can now haul insults at each other without breaking into fist-fights. Though different, they enjoy familiarity between themselves because they are *Watani*.

The Great Lakes Region is a hot spot. How can tolerance and respect for each other get established between, say, the Hutu and Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi? Somalia was, until recently, torn apart between different warlords. How can the different warlords in Somalia and their respective clans build

peace and eventually become *Watani*? War was never a pre-condition for *Utani* between any of the ethnic groups in Tanzania. However, once the wars were over there were demands and strategies that gave rise to *Utani*. For the Ngoni the strategy was the assimilation of as well as intermarriage with the conquered. Whereas war created hatred and misgivings, assimilation and intermarriage created familiarity and respect between the conquered and the conquerors. For the Nyamwezi, war and intermarriage were means for enhancing trade. How can familiarity and respect replace hatred between warring parties in different countries? Can strategies similar to those adopted by the Ngoni and Nyamwezi to forge friendship with enemies be replicated?

The peacekeeping forces and leaders of the different factions, if they are interested in peace building, should create enabling environments or grab opportunities for greater interaction between the different ethnic groups. Such opportunities include trade and intermarriage. The resultant familiarity may give rise to *Utani* which would, in turn, allay and dissipate hostility arising from structural strain in group relations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1949; Lucas, 1973). This is because when individuals are under considerable tension due to their conflicting group memberships, as was the case with the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi, *Utani* provides an avenue for open verbal expiation of the potential conflict (Lucas, 1973, p. 8). Maybe this is time for African nations to look for solutions to their various problems from within their own continent. Cultural institutions that have the potential to bring laughter where there is sorrow; tolerance where there is rejection should be explored with a view to utilising these cultural institutions.

The fact that Kiswahili is spoken in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) provides possibilities for the expansion of Tanzanian *Utani* networks into these countries. Many people from these countries spent many years in Tanzania as refugees. Thus, it would be useful to study the extent to which the interaction between Tanzanians and members of the different ethnic groups that were or are hosted as refugees has forged a social seedbed for the growth of *Utani*. Further research is also needed to establish the extent to which *Utani* can be accelerated by economic, social and political actions. Whatever the results, inter-ethnic *Utani* stands out as an important pillar for peace building

and peacekeeping in Tanzania. It is an important heritage that needs to be nurtured and promoted. Time will tell whether this type of *Utani*, the product of inter-ethnic creativity in Tanzania, may develop in other African countries.

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