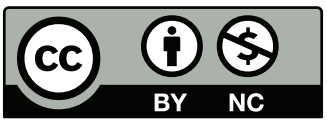
The Metrical Features of Old Swahili Dance Poems

Emiliano Minerba
University of Naples "l'Orientale"
Italy
University of Bayreuth
Germany
emi.nerba@gmail.com

Abstract?

This paper aims to describe the metrical features of *tumbuizo*, Swahili poems which, allegedly due to their antiquity, present very different stylistic elements from later compositions based on regular metres inspired from Arabic poetry. The particularity of *tumbuizo* poems has often led scholars to label them as unmetrical; I will demonstrate here that instead they do present a metre, yet very different from the later, syllabic, ones, and I will expose its main features, with a particular emphasis on the role of stress in its structuring. A study of metre and prosody in Swahili literature has rarely explored those domains of poetry which are outside the sphere of classical metres, whose constraints are well known by both scholars and Swahili composers; it is my hope, therefore, that this paper will contribute to a new focus on this field of literary studies, often neglected.

Keywords: tumbuizo, metrics, prosody, Swahili, poetry



Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to propose an introductory analysis of the metre of Swahili dance poems belonging to the genre of *tumbuizo*, one of the most ancient literary genres of Swahili literature (Harries 1962, 172) that have survived, albeit mostly in manuscript form, into the present. Evidence such as the highly archaic language and the scarcity of Arabo-Islamic influences (Miehe et al. 2005, 31) suggest that these compositions may date back to a period preceding the development of the "classical" metres of *utenzi*, *shairi*, *wimbo*, *ukawafi*, and *kisarambe* that have been so decisive for the further developments of poetry on the East African coast. Their metrical system, in particular, differs in many aspects from that of the later periods, and has been scarcely investigated by scholars: at the current stage of research, no prosodic analysis of *tumbuizo* seems to have been elaborated, and the metre of this genre is often described only in negative terms as lacking the isosyllabism and regular rhyme schema that are found in other Swahili metres (see for example Shariff 1988, 52). Analysing the metrical structures of the *tumbuizo* songs is not a simple issue, for several reasons connected to their history and the changes that have occurred during the course of their transmission. Such issues are not negligible and must be discussed before proceeding to the analysis. Another important theoretical element to deal with is the analytical approach, which in this paper will be based on comparison: the scarcity of examples of *tumbuizo* available, as well as the total absence of documents or oral traditions that describe or try to systematize their metrical canon, in fact, encourage a more formal and detached form of context analysis, not limited to the data available from the cultural environment. All such issues regarding the theoretical approach will be discussed in the first section of the article. The second section will focus on the analysis of some *tumbuizo* songs: the main source used as reference is the book *Nyimbo za Liyongo* (Miehe et al. 2005). In this section, several common features for all or most of the *tumbuizo* will be outlined, with the aim of isolating those patterns which were present before the period of classical metres.[1]

The work *Nyimbo za Liyongo* has been chosen as the main source for several reasons: it is the outcome of research focused on Fumo Liyongo, the most representative author of the *tumbuizo* genre. It contains a broad and systematic collection of compositions in this metre, whereas the other rare sources that mention *tumbuizo* often report on few and fragmentary texts. Moreover, the poems presented in *Nyimbo za Liyongo* are the result of reconstructing several *tumbuizo* from incomplete and often different sources, thus providing us with texts that are presumably very close to the original version, both linguistically and prosodically (Miehe et al. 2005, 1–8). It is, of course, unavoidable that this work of textual criticism should involve a certain degree of approximation. The fact that *tumbuizo* songs developed as oral texts does not prevent us, in my opinion, from seeking the original form: scholars such as Karin Barber (Barber 2005, 265–267) have shown that even oral texts are definable *per se*, independently of their performance and variations. The concept of entextualization, which is given a fundamental role in Barber's theory, means that in a concrete context, something, namely the text, is transferred, that is not *ab ovo* related to that context. Texts, therefore, are something that can appear and that can also adapt themselves through some variations to a certain context; but they can do this only because of their capacity for being decontextualized. I maintain that there is no reason why we should not analyse the same phenomenon in the domain of stylistics and prosody: therefore, if,

[1] Because of the high likelihood that the metrical system of *tumbuizo* preceded the classical metrical system, in this paper it will be referred to by the adjective "archaic". I hope, through this article, to offer further evidence for the hypothesis that *tumbuizo* poetry developed before the classical metres in Swahili literary history.

in oral literature, prosody can be entextualized, philology can help us to find the material that is the basis of that entextualization.

Approaching the metre of *tumbuizo*: theoretical considerations

As briefly mentioned above, a metrical analysis of *tumbuizo* needs a coherent theoretical approach in order to deal with several issues. The first of the two following subsections will explore the questions of the transmission and reception of the texts under examination; the second will deal with the theoretical basis chosen to investigate the metrical features in a comparative approach.

The transmission of the *tumbuizo*: preliminary considerations

The first question that needs to be discussed is whether it is possible to individuate and analyse the original elements of the archaic metrical patterns from the versions of the *tumbuizo* that have survived up to the present day. In all likelihood, in fact, these compositions have been modified over the course of history. Such modifications affect their metrical structures to a considerable extent: for example, the presence of end rhyme (though not necessarily following a regular schema) seems to be the result of later additions and editing (Miehe et al. 2005, 24).

Historically, it is highly probable that the classical metrical system, based on regular rhyme schemata – that are likely to be of Arabic origin – and isosyllabism, has imposed itself on the metre of *tumbuizo* (in fact Vierke (2011, 52) sees in the *utumbuizo* the predecessor of the *utenzi*); nevertheless, it is unlikely that such a substitution has been sudden and total. Rather, a more reasonable hypothesis would maintain that the two metrical traditions coexisted for a certain period before the employment of the old one decreased, and that the history of Swahili literature has known one or more generations of poets who knew both these canons and possibly tried to mix them. Thus, if it is assumed that the addition of features such as end rhymes and isosyllabism did not, at least in a first step, infringe the canon of *tumbuizo*, then one can suppose that these compositions still retain some metrical elements that predate classical metres, and therefore that an analysis of such elements is possible.

The lack of manuscript texts dating back to before the period of classical literature, and above all the lack of any formal systematization of the metrical structures of *tumbuizo* that has been preserved until now, prevent us from proving with direct evidence that a period of coexistence has actually existed[2]; however, some indirect evidence can be acquired by the metrical analysis of *tumbuizo* themselves.

As will be shown in the following section, a fundamental pattern found in *tumbuizo* verses is consonance, namely the repetition of one or more consonants along cola and verses. Here the term *colon* (pl. *cola*) never indicates a syntactic unity, but only that part of a verse that is delimited by one or more caesurae. This term is used in preference to the otherwise usual *half verse* or *hemistich*, since *tumbuizo* often present verses split into more than two parts by caesurae, so referring to them as "half verses" could be confusing.

[2] More specifically, that a period in which both the genres existed and were productive (in the sense that new compositions of this genre were still created) existed. *Tumbuizo* were written down in the manuscript available to us from the 19th century (Miehe et al. 2005, 8), but this does not prove that they were composed in the same period, only that they were transmitted.

Consonances are widely spread among all the poems analysed. Working with a statistical approach, one can define as *consonance ratio* (CR) of a poem the ratio between the number of its syllables that are involved in a consonance and the total number of all its syllables. It is therefore a statistically noticeable fact that in an *utumbuizo* the consonance ratio is generally higher than that of a composition in a classical metre, like *shairi* or *utenzi*. This supposition is confirmed by the analysis of the poems included in Miehe et al. (2005) in comparison with a *kisarambe* by Amri Abedi entitled *Wimbo wa Nai* (Abedi 1954, 31–35).[3] The following table shows the consonance ratios of such compositions:

Poem ID[4]	CR	CR percentage
15	31/40	77.5%
10	124/169	73.4%
8	40/57	70.2%
17	164/240	68.3%
12	835/1224	68.2%
9	106/156	68.0%
14	135/200	67.5%
7	112/168	66.7%
18	72/108	66.7%
5	26/41	63.4%
11	117/189	61.9%
3	441/724	61.0%
4	138/238	58.0%
13	359/641	56.0%
1	141/255	55.3%
2	142/286	49.7%
16	89/172	51.7%
6	39/89	43.8%
Wimbo wa Nai	494/1318	37.5%

The average consonance ratio of the *tumbuizo* is 62.6%, almost twice that of Amri Abedi's *kisarambe*. It is statistically noticeable, then, that even after undergoing metrical editing like

[3] The choice of the *kisarambe* as an element for comparison is due to the fact that this metre is in many ways similar to that of several *tumbuizo* verses. It is, in fact, composed of two cola, one of six syllables and one of five. Cola with these amounts of syllables occur frequently in the *tumbuizo* here examined. This similarity in the metrical structure helps to isolate other elements whose variation has to be investigated, that is the frequency of consonance. A *kisarambe* by Amri Abedi has been chosen because of the recognized eminence of this author in the field of classical metrics, and also because he lived in the 20th century, a period in which the knowledge of the principles of archaic metrics had probably already been lost among the poets of the time.

[4] In order to expose this analysis as clearly as possible, the compositions from *Nyimbo za Liyongo* examined will be referred to by an identifying number, as has been done in the collection itself. A table of the titles of all poems and their respective numbers is attached in an appendix to this paper. A second number written after this identifier and separated by a dot will indicate a particular verse, and, likewise, a third number added will indicate the colon referred to: for example, 7.1.2 refers to the second colon of the first verse of poem 7.

the insertion of rhyme, these poems conserve, at different levels, an ancient metrical feature, like consonance, in a considerably different amount than that found in a *kisarambe*. It is clear, therefore, that it is still possible to search and study the remains of the original metrical patterns of such compositions, and furthermore that it is possible to analyse their interaction with the classical elements introduced later.

The standard deviation of the CR of all the *tumbuizo* is of 8.5 percentage points. This indicates that there is a certain variability in the data considered: a possible interpretation of this is that it reflects the development these poems have undergone in different periods of the history of Swahili literature, by different copyists with their own poetic sensibilities. Consequently, the question of analysing these features both *per se* and in comparison with the new ones arises, and therefore it is necessary to discuss the theoretical basis of such an analysis.

Comparing metrical systems

Fowler's (1977) paper "Comparative Metrics and Comparative Literature*"* is an interesting reflection on the practice of comparison between different metrical systems during the 1970s, and on the likelihood that those isolated experiences of comparison in metre would give birth to a theoretically structured branch of comparative studies. In her article, Fowler (1977, 290), while trying to outline the premises of comparative metrics as an independent branch of research, points out above all that such a discipline should be totally different from comparative philology, in which the term *vergleichende Metrik* was used for the first time. The reason for such a distinction is that comparative metrics can work just as well on synchronic and non-genetically related metrical systems, as its task is not to reconstruct a common original one, as is the case in a philological perspective, but to compare two or more metres and outline the analogies and differences both in their formal structure and in the way they affect the reader/listener. On these premises, the author focuses on a third assumption, that of typology (Fowler 1977, 292–293). This term refers to the possibility of working on different metrical systems, grouping them into several types and categories. The problems connected with such a theory are related to an unavoidable degree of arbitrariness in categorizing metres in different types. Fowler (1977, 293– 294) mentions several types of categorization, each based on different assumptions. She also discusses the fact that such categorizations usually consider the structural elements of each metrical system (that is, the metrical constraints that must be respected for the composition to be considered metrically "correct"), but not the other non-structural, though important, features that belong to it, such as the frequent employment of a particular figure of speech or formula. Particularly interesting, and pivotal for the analysis presented in this paper, is the issue of the relationship between metrical and linguistic types: Fowler (1977, 294) notices that closer metrical systems do not always correspond to closely related languages, and at the same time criticizes a deterministic approach that would maintain that the metrical patterns of a literature are directly deducible from the phonological structure of its language.

The theoretical considerations for the comparisons presented in this paper start from the relationship between the phonology of language and the metres it develops. It is clear that, as mentioned above, determinism cannot be a successful approach; nevertheless, phonology is in most cases the base material for the construction of verses and metres, and therefore a comparison of the metrical systems of two different languages can receive crucial help from a phonological comparison between them (as also pointed out by Banti and Giannattasio 2004, 301). It is reasonable to think that when a metrical system affects the canon of another language such

influence is mediated and filtered by the phonological capabilities of the receiving language. The influence of Arabic on the birth of the classical Swahili metres is a good example. This Bantu language, characterized by vowel-final words, has easily received rhyme[5] and even some stanzaic schemas (Vierke 2011, 51); on the other hand, though, Swahili speakers have not used the systematic alternation of short and long syllables, which is the real base of the Arabic metres, to create new verses. Swahili, in fact, does not take vowel length as phonemically distinctive. The core rule of Swahili classical metre is instead isosyllabism (Abedi 1954, 1–3), which is not a linguistic feature in Arabic. Thus, the consequences of the Arabic influence on Swahili metres have derived ultimately – although not deterministically – from the phonological differences between the two languages. Starting from these considerations, comparing metrics will be intended in this paper as a joint analysis of how different languages have exploited identical or similar phonological features (not necessarily obtaining the same results) in order to create particular recurrences and dispositions of sounds with a particular aesthetic value.

The rejection of a deterministic approach is fundamental for an exact use of comparison in literary studies. The analysis of a literary text, if conducted from a literary perspective, necessarily starts from experiencing it from an aesthetic point of view (Gaudioso 2019, 100–101); this premise has recently entered the field of research on Swahili literature with Roberto Gaudioso's (2019) analysis of the work of Euphrase Kezilahabi. Gaudioso's (2019) comparison is based neither on cultural nor on contextual considerations, but on poetics. From this point of view, he compares verse in Swahili with verse in German and Italian. In literary studies, comparison is a way of expressing and conceptualizing knowledge of texts obtained through the experience of reading, receiving, and being face to face with them: its nature, thus, is necessarily heuristic (Gaudioso 2019:,102). The normative nature of the metrical systems analysed here makes it possible to go beyond the heuristic stage and to adopt other instruments closer to the domain of objectivity, like statistics; this, nevertheless, does not discard the importance of the heuristic moment in the investigation. The approach to investigation employed in this research, thus, has been based both on heuristic and statistical considerations: in the first stage of the analysis, a close reading of the text has indicated that these compositions share common metrical patterns; in the second stage, the occurrence and frequency of such patterns have been measured and confirmed by statistical analysis.

Features of the *tumbuizo* metric system

In this section, some of the most frequently occurring metrical features of the *tumbuizo* will be dealt with, relying both on statistical evidence and comparison in order to outline at least partially the list of the metrical requirements that *tumbuizo* satisfies. These features can be divided in three main conceptual domains: the construction of metric feet, the use of consonance, and syllable counting.

Since this work aims at being a preliminary study of the metrical system of *tumbuizo*, only two of the domains mentioned will be treated here, that is, the scansion of the verse into metric feet, and syllable counting. In the previous section it has been shown how widely consonance is employed in these compositions compared to the classical ones; the topic could, and should, be dealt with in far more depth, and I hope to do that in a future work. However, in my opinion,

[5] Amri Abedi's (1954, 4) definition of *kina* ('rhyme') as the identity of the last syllable of a verse or a colon corresponds closely to definitions of rhyme in the Arabic tradition (Capezio 2013, 199–202).

understanding the nature of the metrical feet in *tumbuizo*, as well as the role taken by syllable quantities in the metres, is a fundamental prerequisite to studying the occurrence of consonances in it; that is why I have chosen to focus on these two points in this work.

Building feet and verses

The main hypothesis, developed from the reading of the texts, is that the verses of *tumbuizo* are conceived as an ordered succession of metrical feet. The foot of the *tumbuizo* verse is built fundamentally on stress. An important rule of Swahili prosody is that stress is fixed on the penultimate syllable of every polysyllabic word: this leads, while building a verse, to the recurrence of a minimal structure along the line. This structure is composed of a stressed syllable and the following unstressed one, and can conclude the word as well as the verse itself. This disyllabic element, here called rhythmic core for its analogy with a similar structure found in the *utenzi* (Vierke 2011, 32), is intended as the base of the foot in *tumbuizo* metre; it can be extended to an unspecified number of additional syllables that are placed before it. An example of this division can be found in 6 (Miehe et al. 2005, 46–47; if not otherwise specified, translations are quoted from the same work):

6.1	***Si****fu* | *uta* ***wa****ngu* | *wa chi****tanzu*** | *cha m****pi****ngu*
	'Let me praise my bow, made from the supple twig of the ebony tree,'
6.2	*U****pa****kwe* | *ma****fu****ta* | *una****wi****ri* | *kama chi****yo****o*
	'let it be smeared with oil so that it may glitter like a mirror.'

The boundaries between feet are marked by a vertical slash. The stressed components of the disyllabic core of each foot are shown in bold type. As can be seen, not all the syllables with word stress build a foot: this does not happen, for example, in the case of *uta* ('bow', 6.1), or *kama* ('like', 6.2).

The division into feet seems to constitute the fundamental base pattern of *utumbuizo* verse. A close reading of the poems, with the help of statistical analysis, shows that this structure obeys three particular constraints:

1. In a foot, the number of additional syllables preceding the rhythmic core – here referred to as *auxiliary syllables* – must not be higher than three;
2. In a rhythmic core, the first syllable must be stressed, while the second one must not. This rule has a practical application in the fact that the boundaries between two feet must coincide with the boundaries between two different words;
3. The number of feet must be constant for each verse of the poem; if the verse is divided in more cola, each colon presents the same number of feet as the others in the same position (that is, all the first cola of all the lines of a composition share the same number of feet, and the same happens for all the second cola, all the third ones, etc.).

The verses from all the compositions respect these rules, with a limited number of exceptions. Some of the first lines of poem 2 may be used as an example:

2.3	*Pija mu**wi**wa k'umbuke **mwa**na wa sha**nga**zi*
	'Strike, you who owe a debt (of Kikowa), so that I may remember (my) cousin.'
2.4	*Yu wapi **sim**ba ezi li **k**ana m̲t̲e**mbe**zi*
	'Where is the mighty lion? He is an inveterate wanderer!'
2.5	*Fumo wa **Sha**nga, sikiya, **sha**mba mitaa **pwa**ni*
	'Fumo of Shanga, reckon well, (roams) the land and the coastal areas.'
2.6	*Fumo wa **Sha**nga, chambiya **Wa**t̲wa fungi**ya**ni*?
	'Fumo of Shanga asked the Watwa people: "Why are you putting me in fetters?"'
2.7	***Fu**mo a**cha**mba mfu**nge**ni*
	'Fumo (Mringwari) ordered: 'Tie him up!'

The rhythmic cores of the feet are indicated in bold type. Every verse is composed of three feet, and no foot has more than three unstressed syllables before its rhythmic core. Every rhythmic core falls upon a stressed syllable and the following one. In this poem, the syllabic length of the verses varies considerably, from nine (verse 2.7) to fifteen (2.1, 2.5). Thus, it cannot be taken as a normative element; the number of feet, by contrast, is unvaried. If isosyllabism was not a mandatory constraint, and if one assumes that the end rhyme was a later adoption due to Arabic influence, the constancy of the number of feet in verses is the only remaining element that can constitute the basic principle for verse building.

Having theorized a stress-based foot as a principle of the archaic verse, the question of how to carry out a correct scansion of the verse in feet arises. In the context of oral transmission, feet were probably easily recognizable because of an emphasis put on them in chanting, but distinguishing them without the help given by performance requires the analysis to rely on several metrical and stylistic considerations. A statistical approach is useful to analyse the relationship between the phonological stresses (that is, the stresses that words usually present because of their phonological structure) and metrical stresses (that is, the stress that a syllable is given to constitute the rhythmic core of a foot). Among all the compositions, 616 cola in total can be counted (parsing those lines without internal caesurae as if they were composed of just one colon). Each colon presents a certain quantity of syllables bearing a phonological stress and also a certain number of syllables bearing a metrical stress. In the following table, the first column shows the difference between these two quantities (that is, the number of phonologically stressed syllables minus the number of metrically stressed ones) and the second column how many cola present such a difference:

phonological stresses – metrical stresses	**number of cola**
-1	40
0	433
1	113
2	27
3	3

It is evident, then, that among the 616 cola taken into consideration, 433 (70.3%) present 0 as the value of this difference: that is, they have the same number of phonological stresses and metrical stresses. Of these 433 verses, seven must be excluded because they present some ir-

regularities that make it impossible to set a direct correspondence between phonological and metrical stresses: they will be dealt with when talking about irregularities in the construction of feet. The remaining 426 verses (69.2%) indicate that the most frequent pattern of an archaic verse is also the simplest: each phonological stress corresponds to a metrical stress. 40 cola (9.2%) present a difference of -1: that means that they contain one metrical stress more than their phonological stresses. Such cases are not frequent, and will be discussed later as irregularities. The second most frequent case is that of the 113 cola (25.9%) presenting one phonological stress more than the metrical stresses. It is worth noting that this case is much less frequent than that of a direct correspondence between metrical and phonological stresses; moreover, as the difference between phonological and metrical stresses increases, the number of verses which present it decreases rapidly: it seems, therefore, that a direct or quasi direct correspondence was the preferable structure for a colon.

When dealing with cola presenting more phonological stresses than required, there are several considerations that can be made to individuate the metrical stresses. One is that the last rhythmic core of a colon must fall upon its last two syllables; otherwise the colon would present some syllables that do not belong to any foot. One can, therefore, always individuate the last rhythmic core, and then proceed to identify the others by going from the end towards the beginning of the verse. A second consideration employed here for scansion is that of parallelism of structure: that is, the structure of a colon was probably meant to reproduce, both rhythmically and musically while performing, as exactly as possible one of the corresponding cola in the composition. Verses 3.1 and 3.2 may suffice as an example:

3.1	*Mri**ngwa**ri na T̲a**i**kha Vu**a**ye · nd̲ooni **hwi**twa na **Fu**mo Li**yo**ngo*
	‘Come! Mringwari, Taikha and Vuaye, you are called by Fumo Liyongo,’
3.2	*Nd̲ooni **hwit**wa na Li**yo**ngo **Fu**mo · na ndu**gu**ye **sha**ha Bwana **Mwe**ngo*
	‘you are called by Liyongo Fumo and his cousin, the master bard Bwana Mwengo.’

One could scan 3.1.2 both as “*nd̲ooni **hwi**twa na **Fu**mo Li**yo**ngo*” and “*nd̲o**o**ni hwitwa na **Fu**mo Li**yo**ngo*”; the first solution, nevertheless, is more similar to the scansion of the corresponding colon of the following verse, that is 3.2.2, since the first rhythmic core falls on the third and fourth syllables.[6]

Many other observations can be made about the scansion of the verse into feet. An important element, for example, is the syntactic structure of the sentence and the semantic value of the words which form the rhythmic cores. This correspondence can sometimes be highly elaborate. In verse 16.8, for example, all the rhythmic cores fall upon terms related to parenthood and the giving of birth:

16.8	*Uta ni **ba**ba ndiyo ni **ma**ma azazi**ye**o*
	‘The bow is the *father*, yes it is the *mother*, who *parented* [me]’[7]

In the translation, the terms corresponding to the words which bear a rhythmic core in the origi-

[6] The word *nd̲ooni* is contracted as *nd̲oni* for synaeresis: the employment of this figure of speech in archaic verses will be discussed later in this paper.

[7] The translation is mine, but for the reading of *azaziyeo* as *aliyenizaa* (‘who parented me’) see Miehe et al. 2005, 72. It is possible that *azaziyeo*, rather than a relative verb, is an archaic form of the perfect (‘she has given birth [to me]’).

nal are marked in italics.

A strict connection between prosody and syntax characterizes even the metre of *utenzi*: Vierke (2011, 68–69) shows, for example, that there are some syntactic patterns that tend to group themselves into one foot of the *utenzi*, rather than being separated into more feet. Vierke's (2011, 69) conclusion is that "what belongs together semantically and grammatically also tends to be grouped together prosodically".

This statement is valid even for *tumbuizo* and could therefore constitute a further principle in the scansion of feet; nevertheless, it is important to notice that a strong correlation between the syntactic and the metrical gaits of the verse seems to be a widely spread stylistic element in *tumbuizo*, rather than a structural metrical constraint. In some verses the syntax is not reflected by the metrical structure of the poem as theorized here. A good example is verse 2.4:

2.4	*Yu wapi **sim**ba ezi li **k**ana mt̲e**mbe**zi*
	'Where is the mighty lion? He is like an inveterate wanderer!'

Syntactically speaking, the verse could be divided into two parts: one interrogative word phrase ("*yu wapi simba ezi*") and one affirmative ("*li kana mt̲embezi*"). This syntactic division is stressed even by the disposition of consonances: the consonants *mb* (pre-nasalized *b*) and *z* in the expression "*simba ezi*", the last ones in the first part of the verse, are in fact also the last ones in the second part, in the same order ("*mt̲embezi*"). On the other hand, the verse must be scanned into three feet as has been done here. Thus, the rhythmic cores cannot coincide fully with the syntactic emphasis. The exactness of such scansion is also proven from graphic evidence: in the manuscript ms. 47754 (Taylor Collection, conserved at SOAS University of London), an image of which is presented in Miehe et al. (2005, 93), the verse is divided into three parts that correspond to the feet individuated by it.[8] The statement that a *tumbuizo* verse can be structured in feet is confirmed by comparison, both with external metrical traditions and diachronically with the canon of Swahili classical poetry. On the diachronic side, the disyllabic structure on which such feet are based corresponds to what Vierke (2011, 28–34) has defined as the *rhythmic core* of the verses of *utend̲i*. She states, in fact, that every *utend̲i* line can be divided in two parts corresponding to two different rhythmic units, composed of a stressed syllable and the unstressed one that follows. It is of great importance that, despite the fact that the total length of the verse must be constantly of eight syllables, there is no other restriction in the number of additional syllables that a rhythmic core may contain (that is, the unstressed syllables that may precede it): one could find, therefore, verses of 2+6 syllables (indicating in this way how many syllables each of the two parts of the verse contains), 3+5, 4+4, 5+3, or 6+2.

Clearly, an *utend̲i* line could contain more than two – phonetically – stressed words, and consequently it is not always true that every stressed syllable corresponds to a rhythmic core; but the reverse conclusion, that every rhythmic core corresponds to a stressed syllable, is always valid, as shown in the last line of the example above. The division into feet proposed here corresponds to a generalization of this system to metres other than *utend̲i*: it is not impossible for the pair of rhythmic cores in *utend̲i* verse, which have no equivalent in Arabic metrics, to derive historically from this system.

In terms of external comparison, a metrical system in many aspects analogous to the one theorized here is the old Germanic one, as well as all the metres derived from it that were the

[8] The symbol used for dividing the verse is the same as that used for indicating caesurae and ends of verses. The employment of this character for individuating feet is discussed later in this paper.

basis of poetry in the Germanic languages until the Middle Ages (see Mittner 2002, 123 and, for the case of *dróttkvætt*, the principal old Norse rhymed metre, Pálsson 2001). Both Swahili and Germanic languages are characterized by the fixed position of stress in words: this corresponds to the penultimate syllable in Swahili and to the stem-initial syllable in the Germanic family (Frog 2019, 39). Such a feature has created the grounds for the development of a metre based on the structuring of the verse into different feet, each one based on the emphasis put on a stressed syllable. Several scholars, in fact, claim that the development of such a system is due to the particular nature of the Germanic stress accent, which makes stem-initial syllables much more emphasized than the unstressed ones (Mastrelli 1951, xlvi; Mittner 2002, 12–13). One example of the old Germanic verse was the so-called *Kurzvers*, which is a succession of two feet, each of them composed of a stressed syllable and an undefined number of unstressed ones that follow. Two *Kurzvers* tied together by the insertion of a caesura form a *Langvers*, that is thus composed of four feet and four corresponding stressed syllables. An example of *Langvers* composition is the *Hildebrandslied*, which we know from a unique manuscript dating from 820, which was probably composed in a Gothic-Longobard context (Mittner 2002, 114). The third verse of the poem (cited in Onesti 2015, 143–144) is *Hiltibrant enti Hadubrant | untar heriun tuem*; it contains four metrical stresses, two for each colon:

> ***Hi**ltibrant enti **Ha**dubrant | untar **he**riun **tu**em*
> *Hildebrand and Hadubrand | between the two troops"*[9]

It is worth noting that the two words that do not present a metrical stress do not bear a particular lexical value: they are *enti* ('and') and *untar* ('under'). The two hemistichs are tied together by the alliteration of the sound *h*, involving the first foot of the second hemistich (as compulsory in the structure of this metre) and both feet of the first hemistich (generally only one foot of the first hemistich is required to alliterate in order to form a correct *Langvers*). Alliteration is a fundamental element of old Germanic prosody. The *tumbuizo* metre uses similar patterns as structural elements.

It is evident that in these verses a constant number of syllables is not required: the fundamental requirement is, in fact, the constancy of the number of feet, in a very similar manner to what has been exposed so far about *tumbuizo*. The differences between Germanic and *tumbuizo* verses can be related to their prosodic structure: the Germanic feet were based on one stressed syllable, the first one of the foot itself, because of the position of Germanic stress; similarly, the fixed position of Swahili stress on the penultimate syllable has led to the development of metric feet based not on one syllable, but on two – that is, on the disyllabic rhythmic core found at the end of the foot itself.

As a concluding remark to this exposition, it can be affirmed that the manuscripts reporting the *tumbuizo* texts provide indirect evidence, in some cases, that these poems were consciously composed on the principle of a foot-based pattern, corresponding to that exposed here. In some manuscripts, in fact, signs such as the symbols for caesurae, that in Miehe et al.'s (2005, 12) opinion seem to be put "haphazardly, probably following aesthetic and not metric reasons", are placed exactly in correspondence with the boundaries between feet. Such topic deserves a more detailed analysis than can be treated in one paragraph; I hope to deal with it in future in a separate paper.

[9] Here I have rendered in English Onesti's (2015, 144) Italian translation of the line: *Ildebrando e Adubrando | fra le due schiere*.

Exceptions and irregularities in feet

As mentioned above, some verses of the compositions analysed seem, however, to be exceptions to these rules. A first kind of exception is a rhythmic core preceded by more than three unstressed syllables. Such a case is interesting because it suggests that in *tumbuizo* verses synaeresis was probably employed. Synaeresis is a phonological process that consists of the contraction of two or more adjacent vowels belonging to different syllables in one syllabic unit. Such a process is also permitted in classical Swahili literature in some cases, for instance with the reduction of syllabic *u* and *i* to the semi-vowels *w* and *y* (Allen 1971, 25).

The irregular character of feet with more than three auxiliary syllables is suggested mainly by statistical considerations: among all the poems analysed, there are only nine examples of such feet. All of these present four auxiliary syllables: no example of a foot with five or more auxiliary syllables can be found. Moreover, in all these feet synaeresis can be applied to reduce the number of auxiliary syllables to three. All these factors suggest that a foot with four auxiliary syllables is to be considered an exception rather than the rule. An example is 2.1:

2.1	*Pijiyani **p'e**mbe, vigoma**m**le na t'o**wa**zi*
	'Strike for me the horns, the long drums and the cymbals'

Here, the foot *pijiyani p'embe* has four auxiliary syllables (*pi-ji-ya-ni*), but they can be reduced to three by the employment of synaeresis (**pi-jya-ni*).

Another kind of exception occurs in a small amount of verses that, because they contain an insufficient number of stressed syllables, present fewer feet than others of the same composition. In particular, there are some verses which lack one foot with respect to the required number. Some examples can be found in the first four verses of poem 9:

9.2	*Nite**keya** wa kikasi**kini** · teshe**weo** ni m**gema** wangu*
	'serve me the one from the jar, tapped by my own tapster,'
9.3	*Nite**keya** na wa kitu**pani** · uy**ayongao** kwa zungu*
	'and that intoxicating wine, bring it in a little flask.'
9.4	*Nite**keya** u**lio** nyu**nguni** · ulo**pikwa kwa k'uni** na nyungu*
	'Pour for me also the one from the earthen pot, brewed and without its lees,'

The verses 9.2 and 9.3 are defective: colon 9.2.1 has only two feet, as also holds for 9.3.2. It is worth noting, nevertheless, that wherever a foot is missing there is a compensatory group of three or more auxiliary syllables: *wa kikasi* between ***-keya*** and ***-kini*** in 9.2; *na wa kitu* between ***-keya*** and ***-pani***; *uyayo* before ***-ngao*** in 9.3. If it is assumed that the constancy of the number of feet is the base element of *tumbuizo* verses, it is reasonable to think that in the few cases of exceptions such as these some device was used to bring the verse into a regular pattern. This hypothesis assumes that the defective feet are not actually missing, but that their rhythmic core falls on syllables that are phonologically unstressed. In this manner the right number of feet is reached, and the mistake of building feet with more than three auxiliary syllables is avoided. Therefore, the feet in 9.2 and 9.3 are to be scanned in this manner:

9.2	*Nite**keya** wa **kika**si**kini** · teshe**weo** ni m**gema** wangu*
	‘serve me the one from the jar, tapped by my own tapster,’
9.3	*Nite**keya** na **wa ki**t**upani** · **uyayongao** kwa zungu*
	‘and that intoxicating wine, bring it in a little flask.’

Feet falling on a phonologically unstressed syllable are not regular cases. The exceptional character of this situation is demonstrated by statistics: the 254 verses of the poems can be scanned in a total of 1504 feet. Among these, just 47 (approx. 3.1%) fall on unstressed rhythmic cores. It is thus reasonable to think that such artistic licence was permitted but was not an appreciated or popular device to be employed in verse building.

This kind of exception involves a small number of verses (seven in total) which contain the right number of phonological stresses, but which cannot use all of them as metrical stresses without avoiding the building of feet with too many auxiliary syllables. An example is verse 3.26:

3.26	*Kwa ku**pa**ta **pa**to la t**i**j**a**ra · liso **shi**d**a** na m**t**ango**ta**ngo*
	‘obtaining the most befitting rewards without overstraining or tiring oneself.’

If the second colon were scanned considering each phonological stress as metrical stress, the result would be ***li**so **shi**da na mtango**ta**ngo*: the last foot would then present four auxiliary syllables. Furthermore, the first foot would fall upon a word which does not have a semantic value; a scansion which considers a non-phonologically stressed foot thus seems to be more reasonable.

A last category of exceptions is that of verses containing one foot more than the required number. The number of such verses is miniscule, to the extent that they can be considered exceptions to the rule, or mere mistakes occurring in composition or transmission. Verse 2.20 falls into this category: it is the concluding verse of the poem, hence its irregularity is perhaps due to its particular position, which probably corresponded with the closure of the chanting melody. Besides this, only two other verses are of this type: 2.14 and 16.11. They both present four feet instead of the three found in the other verses of these compositions:

Verse	
2.14	*K’ila **t’apo** ni**kila** t**ambuu** na zi**popoo** za mwituni*
	‘[Liyongo says] ‘[Since] I (only) eat t’apo nuts, chew betel leaves and wild areca nuts,’
16.11	*Vuwani **ma**t**o** muti**zame** wa**mbuji** u**mbuji** yeo*
	‘Raise your eyes and look at the elegant singers and (appreciate) their charming ways today.’

For both of these verses there are variants that satisfy the criteria here exposed. The version of 2.14 reported in Harries (1962; cited in Miehe et al. 2005, 90) is *nikila **tapo** na zi**popo** za mwi**tuni***. Similarly, the version of poem 16, reported in ms. 3552 H 117, conserved at the Institute of Asian and African Studies of Hamburg, reports *Vuwani **mato** muti**zame** wambuji **yeo*** (Miehe et al. 2005, 155–156). Both of these alternative versions regularly present three feet.

Syllable counting: *mizani* in the *tumbuizo*

As previously mentioned, the main difference between the *tumbuizo* and the poems in classical metres is the absence of constraint in the syllable count (*mizani*) of the verse: in the compositions here examined, in fact, the *mizani* can vary throughout the text without a precise rule. Nevertheless, in most cases, the verses of each poem present similar, or equal, syllabic lengths. This is clearly shown by statistical evidence:

Poem ID	Minimum value	Maximum value	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
1	14	16	15.00	0.49
2	9	19	14.25	2.30
3	18	27	20.11	1.49
4	19	20	19.83	0.37
5	9	16	13.67	3.30
6	14	15	14.83	0.37
7	24	24	24.00	0.00
8	28	29	28.50	0.50
9	18	20	19.50	0.87
10	24	25	24.14	0.35
11	20	22	21.00	0.47
12	24	24	24.00	0.00
13	19	21	20.03	0.30
14	20	20	20.00	0.00
15	20	20	20.00	0.00
16	14	17	14.33	0.85
17	20	20	20.00	0.00
18	16	20	18.00	1.63

One may observe that, with the exceptions of poems 2, 3, and 5 (this one in particular seems to be fragmentary (Miehe et al. 2005, 46)), the standard deviation calculated for the lengths of each verse is very small, less than 1. The small amount of the standard deviation is statistically relevant: it shows that in each poem the majority of the verses have similar or equal lengths, despite the absence of a formal rule of constancy in *mizani*, as found in classical metres. There is therefore statistical evidence that verse length in archaic metrics was not totally arbitrary, and that some limitations to the syllable count were adopted in addition to those deriving from the constraints in the building of the feet. If the possibility of synaeresis is taken into consideration, the variations in syllabic length throughout the poems tend to decrease even more. The employment of synaeresis in syllable counting is evident in those poems in which isosyllabism is more strictly respected. In the three *tenzi* aforementioned (poems 7, 10, and 12) all the cola are of six syllables, with the only exception being 10.5.4, *kuuwawa na ngwa*, composed of seven syllables: *ku*|*u*|*wa*|*wa na n*|*gwa*. It is possible to obtain the regular number of six syllables by applying synaeresis and thus considering the two *u* of *kuuwawa* as one.

In the aforementioned poem 8, the constancy of syllable counting is valid even for feet:

the first feet of each colon are five syllables long, the second ones four syllables, and the third ones – if synaeresis in the second verse is considered – five syllables again. The *utumbuizo* thus shows a tendency towards isosyllabism: it is likely that the completion of this process has led to the birth of the isosyllabic classical metres.

Conclusion

The several hypotheses exposed in this paper constitute a first attempt to reconstruct the metrical system of the *tumbuizo*. In spite of the complications related to this goal, the written evidence at our disposal is sufficient to make and justify several observations, with the help of statistical analysis and the instruments of comparative metrics presented in the first section of this paper.

The analysis of the texts carried out in the second section, in turn, has identified the main elements of *tumbuizo* metres from their particular verse structures. There are two elements outlined: the organization of the verse (and each colon) into stress-based feet and the tendency of the verses to achieve a constancy in syllable counting (*mizani*), though this does not seem to have constituted a mandatory rule. These assumptions have been confirmed by statistical considerations and by comparison with other metrical systems based on prosodies and phonologies in many ways analogous to those found in Swahili: in particular, the old Germanic metres have been employed for this task.

These findings are far from constituting a complete theory, and further investigations should be made regarding, for example, the behaviour of vowel-initial syllables in the Swahili language in the formation of consonances and the effective role of the colon in *tumbuizo* metres. Moreover, the analysis carried out in this work is not based on the listening to oral performances, which could provide additional information to confirm or refute the findings. Nevertheless, the observations presented in this paper are to a large extent confirmed by comparison and statistical analysis, and could therefore serve as a solid basis for further research.

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Appendix 1

Names of the poems

ID	Title
1	Utumbuizo wa Dhiki
2	Utumbuizo wa Kikowa
3	Utumbuizo wa Liyongo Harusini
4	Utumbuizo wa Kumwongoa Mtoto
5	Utumbuizo wa Kumwawia Liyongo
6	Utumbuizo wa Uta
7	Utungo wa Ndoto
8	Utumbuizo wa Mayi
9	Utumbuizo wa Uchi na Embekungu
10	Natani niliye
11	Gungu la Mnara Mpambe
12	Utendi wa Mwana Manga
13	Utumbuizo wa Mwana Mnazi
14	Utumbuizo wa Mnazi
15	Utumbuizo wa Mkoma
16	Utumbuizo wa Ukumbusho
17	Utumbuizo wa Wasiya wa Kuolewa
18	Utumbuizo wa Kujisifu