

HUMORISM AND SENSE: A PIRANDELLIAN READING OF TOPAN'S *MFALME JUHA*

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This paper discusses King Juha, the protagonist of the comedy *Mfalme Juha* by Farouk Topan, using an approach that considers the humoristic dimension of this character. The definition of humorism employed here is that given by Pirandello: the result of an aesthetic process in which the comic effect deriving from an object of laughter is tempered and contrasted by a “sentiment of the contrary” that observes and builds empathy with the inner contradictions of the object itself. After a short outline of *Mfalme Juha*'s critical history, which shows that the humoristic dimension of King Juha has never been considered in critiques, this paper focuses on an analysis of this character, in which the core feature of egocentricity is identified. Juha's egocentricity and its humoristic nature are analysed in the character's relationship with his subjects and in his idea of art and culture; in both cases it is shown that what is important is not the wickedness or egoism of Juha, but his lack of comprehension of the world. Juha is incapable of understanding his environment and other people, since he cannot doubt his own superiority: this puts him in several comic situations but also makes him a victim of his smarter subjects. Thus, he arouses a feeling of sympathy in which Pirandello's sentiment of the contrary can be traced.

INTRODUCTION

Farouk Topan's famous comedy *Mfalme Juha* 'King Juha' (1971) is nowadays considered as a fundamental landmark in the development of Swahili theatre. This play, in which the reign and the death of an “idiot” king is narrated ('idiot' being the literal meaning of the name Juha), is a fine example of a humoristic literary work in the sense that the Italian dramatist Pirandello (1867–1936) used the term. *Mfalme Juha* will be analysed in this article by looking at its humoristic features, which are centred in the character of the protagonist, in order to develop an interpretation that considers the value of this rare and special aesthetic mechanism. As will be shown, other critiques of *Mfalme Juha*, while recognizing the presence of a comic element, assume that its function is limited to the entertainment of the audience and put it aside in their interpretations of the play. Thus, despite its importance and widespread occurrence in the play, this element has not yet been studied.

In the first section of this paper, Pirandello's formulation of the concept of *humorism* will be discussed, in order to distinguish it from other related dimensions, like comic sense and irony,

and in order to explain how this Pirandellian formulation can be used as a tool to analyse the mechanism of humorism. After this, the second section examines the play itself and critiques of it. There are very few studies devoted to *Mfalme Juha*: it is mentioned in general overviews like *Outline of Swahili Literature* (Bertoncini-Zúbková et al. 2009: 223), but the only article specifically dedicated to it is perhaps Sengo's *Mfalme Juha* (1973), which proposes an allegorical and politically oriented interpretation. Finally, in the third and fourth sections, an analysis will be made of Juha as a humoristic character, and the differences between this and other readings (such as Sengo's) will be discussed in order to identify the points of originality in this paper. The third section will focus on Juha's humoristic dimension in his behaviour toward the other characters in the play, while the fourth section will be centred on his relation with the intellectual and artistic world. Both of these aspects will be shown to be fundamental to the plot.

PIRANDELLO'S *UMORISMO*

In his essay *L'Umorismo* 'Humorism' (1908),¹ Pirandello outlines the features of a genre whose definition, as he himself notes, is confusing and difficult to elaborate, because of its affinity to many other aesthetic genres, like the comic, ironic, satirical, et cetera (Pirandello 1908: 13). From the beginning, he specifies that the term "humorism" can be used in two senses: a broader sense that corresponds to the general ability of a text to cause laughter in the reader, and a stricter sense that he proceeds to define. It is the latter kind of humorism that is distinguishable from other forms of comic writing, like irony and satire.

In the first part of his essay, Pirandello (1908: 122) demonstrates that, contrary to the widespread opinion of his time, humorism (in both the broader and the stricter sense) is not a special feature of a certain nation, culture or period of time, but a universal, even if rare, form of art. In order to demonstrate this, the author cites examples of humorism from ancient and modern literature, and from the Latin as well as the Anglo-Germanic world; these are accompanied by some theoretical reflections. Pirandello (1908: 15–17) discusses the meaning of irony, stating that art knows two kinds of irony: *rhetorical* irony, which is just a figure of speech definable as alluding to a fact by stating its opposite; and *philosophical* irony, a concept developed within the tradition of German Idealism, and specifically by Schlegel. Following Fichte's subjective idealism, Schlegel defines irony as the consciousness of the artist that the matter represented by him, even his creation of art itself, is just as unreal and vain as the whole universe is, since the "I" (*das Ich*) is the only true reality. Pirandello (1908: 16) compares this to his concept of humorism (in the stricter sense that he gives to the term):²

Here, in rhetorical irony, we cannot take seriously what is said; there, in Romantic irony, we cannot take seriously what is done. Rhetorical irony, compared to Romantic irony, would be like the famous frog in the fable,³ which, once hauled into the intricate world of metaphysical German Idealism and filling itself up with wind rather than water, could have reached the envied dimensions of the ox. Pretence, the artificial contradiction which rhetorical irony talks about, has become here, by blowing itself up so much, the vain appearance of the universe. Now, if humorism

1 The term *umorismo* has been translated here by the English term 'humorism' instead of 'humour', since Pirandello (1908: 42) himself outlined some differences between this concept and the traditional *sense of humour* of English literature.

2 Here and in the other quotations, unless otherwise indicated, the translation is mine.

3 He refers to the fable by Phaedrus "The frog and the ox". In this fable, an envious frog tries to equal an ox in size by puffing itself up and inflating its skin, until its body explodes and it dies.

consisted wholly in the pin that pricks and deflates the bloated frog, then irony and humorism would be nearly the same thing. But humorism, as we are going to see, does not consist wholly in this pricking pin.

Humorism differs from irony since it involves a second step after discovering and showing the vain unreality of the universe. Pirandello focuses on this fundamental feature in the second part of his essay. He starts from the assumption that, in the creation of a work of art, the artist's faculty of *fantasy*, the creative force of *poiesis*, usually works in harmony with the faculty of reflection, the artist's consciousness, but this harmony is absent in humoristic art. In other words, Pirandello (1908: 148–149) notes:

Consciousness [...] is not a creative power, but the inner mirror in which thought watches itself; one could even say that it is thought that looks at itself, witnessing what it is doing spontaneously. And usually, in the artist, at the moment of conception, reflection hides itself; it remains, so to speak, invisible: it is almost, for the artist, a form of sentiment. As the work is being made, reflection criticizes it, not coolly, as an impassionate judge would do, analysing it, but immediately, following the impression that it receives.

Well, in the conception of every humoristic work, reflection is not hiding, does not remain invisible; it is not like a form of sentiment, like a mirror in which sentiment watches itself, but it stays in front of it, as a judge; it analyses it, impassionately; it decomposes its image; but from this analysis another sentiment rises or wafts: this could be called, and in fact I call it, the *sentiment of the contrary*.

Here is exposed the fundamental difference between humorism and any other proximal genre: if irony aims at revealing a contradiction, like that between the apparent necessity and the actual vanity of the universe, humorism develops when the contradiction itself becomes a matter of artistic creation, based on the sentiment of the contrary. Similarly, satire, which interprets contradictions as matters of indignation, and the comic sense, which makes fun of their absurdity, are different from humorism (Pirandello 1908: 170). A good example of a humoristic character, provided by Pirandello himself, is Cervantes' famous Don Quixote. The reader discovers that he does not laugh as he might have expected, because the comic consequences of Don Quixote's crazy and absurd actions, the *hidalgo's* ridiculous but absolutely heroic failures, create in him a feeling of compassion or pity. This sympathy is the sentiment of the contrary, the necessary counterpart of Don Quixote's funniness, which prevents us from abandoning ourselves to pure laughter and instead makes what would ordinarily be amusing bitter and sad (Pirandello 1908: 151).

Pirandello ends his essay by discussing the reasons for the existence of humorism. He claims that this particular kind of art derives from a natural, though rare, disposition. In his opinion, humorists are those who recognize that people are inclined to read and know the world through illusory schemata which are thought to be objective but in fact are not. This illusory vision of the world includes the opinion that every person has of himself, since people are led to restrict their reality, which is continually changing, to a number of fixed values which they attribute to themselves (Pirandello 1908: 168–170). The humorist sees clearly the real nature of these illusions in himself, as well as in others, but is not astonished or scandalized by them, since for him they are a normal and necessary law of nature. This vision of the world and of life was at the core of Pirandello's art, as he himself wrote in 1912–1913 in an autobiographical letter to the poet Filippo Surico (Pupino 2008: 21):

I think that life is a really sad buffoonery, since we have in ourselves [...] the need to deceive ourselves over and over again by the spontaneous creation of one reality (one for each one of us and never the same for all of us) which from time to time is discovered to be vain and illusory.

Anyone who has understood the play will not manage to deceive himself anymore, but someone who does not manage to deceive himself anymore will take no more pleasure or delight in life. [...] My art is full of sour compassion for all those who deceive themselves, but this compassion cannot be followed by a ferocious derision of destiny that condemns man to deceit.

The basis of humoristic art and a humoristic approach to life is familiarity with the sentiment of the contrary. Analysis of this feeling and its aesthetic expression in *Mfalme Juha* constitutes the basis of my critique of Topan's comedy as a humoristic work of art.

MFALME JUHA: ITS PLOT AND ITS READINGS

Based on a popular Swahili tale, the story takes place in the kingdom of Kichaa 'Craziness', ruled by the stupid *Mfalme Juha* (literally 'King Idiot'). A Wali (an Islamic religious guide) and his disciple Bakari arrive in this country while the king's crier is announcing a new law (written in the form of a poem) to put an end to the continuous lawsuits relating to the economy and commerce: from that day onwards, a *ratali* of anything will cost one *pesa*.⁴ After listening to the crier, Bakari decides to settle in Kichaa and enrich himself by taking advantage of this senseless law. The Wali tries to convince his disciple that "it is not safe to be a passenger on a ship where an idiot is the helmsman" (Topan 1971: 4), but failing to dissuade Bakari from settling there, he himself leaves the country. In the second act, King Juha appears. He is presented as desperate and stressed, facing a high number of lawsuits, which have only increased since he issued the new law. One of these cases in particular attracts his attention: an old lady, Bibi Kizee, has accused the rich jeweller Burahimu of murdering her three sons. She says they were trying to steal Burahimu's goods by making a hole in the wall of his house and entering through it, but while they were working to do this the entire wall fell down, killing them. Since the house belongs to Burahimu, he must be charged with murder. Juha, who is interested in this case because of Burahimu's wealth, takes the side of Bibi Kizee and calls Burahimu to his palace to condemn him to death. When he arrives in the king's presence, Burahimu manages to save himself by putting the blame on the builder of his house, Hasani, for his bad work. Summoned to the palace, Hasani in turn attributes the responsibility to Yohana, the clay-kneader, for having produced poor bricks. Yohana blames his assistant, Musa, the water-pourer, who must have diluted the clay too much. Musa argues that he had added too much water because he had been distracted by the sight of an unbelievably obese man who was passing by. This man is Bakari, who, by exploiting Kichaa's chaotic economy, had gained such great wealth that he became extremely fat due to the amount of food he ate. Bakari is called to the palace and condemned to death for murdering Bibi Kizee's sons. On the day of his execution, after King Juha has read a long poem written by himself about Bakari's trial, a person suddenly appears in the palace: the Wali, Bakari's old guardian, who has come to save his disciple. Presenting himself as a wise and pious man, the Wali begs Juha to hang him in Bakari's place, because he knows from religious books that whoever is hanged on that particular day of the Islamic year will be welcomed automatically in Paradise. Juha, believing the Wali's words, refuses his request and decides to be hanged himself, claiming that he is the only one who deserves to enter Heaven. As the curtain closes, Juha heads toward the gallows, followed by his entourage.

4 A *ratali* (*ratl*) is a unit of weight in the Arabic world, corresponding to about 4.5 kilograms. *Pesa* here is not a general term for "money", as is normally the case, but, as Topan (1971: 34) himself explains, a currency of Indian origin (*paisa*) used in Zanzibar until 1936. One *pesa* was equivalent to forty of the shillings used after 1936.

MFALME JUHA AND ITS CRITICAL HISTORY

Despite the general plaudits that critics have given to Topan's comedy, none have subjected it to a long and in-depth analysis. Several reasons may be advanced to explain this. One is perhaps the fact that comedy as a genre is thought to have no deep symbolism or meaning. Indeed, Topan (1971: v) himself wrote in the introduction to *Mfalme Juha*:

Msingi wake ni hadithi tuliyosimuliwa tulipokuwa shuleni, iliyokuwa na madhumuni ya kutufanya sisi, tulipokuwa tungali watoto, tusiwe na tamaa ya jambo kupindukia; 'tamaa nyingi mbele giza'. [...] Lakini hapa madhumuni yangu si kutoa funzo hilo, ingawa mtu huenda kweli akajifunza hayo. Madhumuni yangu ni kuchangamsha nyoyo tu [...].

It [the comedy] is based on a tale that we were told when we were of school age, the aim of which was to teach us, as we were still children, not to have extreme greed; "many hopes, but darkness before us". [...] But here my task is not to teach that precept, although one might actually learn from it. My task is just to amuse people.

It is therefore not surprising that *Mfalme Juha* has generally been considered merely as an amusing and entertaining play. This is, for example, the opinion of Bertoncini-Zúbková (2009: 223).

The article *Mfalme Juha* by Sengo, mentioned above as being perhaps the only article devoted to this play, approaches from a different angle, aiming to analyse the deep meaning of the comedy, which is "hidden" by the comic situations. Sengo (1973: 86) assumes that the comedy has two functions, entertainment and education, which are parallel and independent of each other: "There is nothing important that can be done by entertainment. Attracting people for amusing them is not a task of drama. This is just a means used to achieve the main aim of educating them."

More specifically, once the veil of funniness has been removed, Sengo (1973: 87–88) sees in the character of Juha a representation of the many sovereigns in the world who rule their countries in total disrespect of their citizens' rights and needs. Therefore, his can be considered the most politically oriented reading of the play. King Juha's death at the end of the play thus seems like a warning to such rulers: if they rule as crazily as Juha does, overthrow will be their destiny. The protagonist's idiocy is read univocally as an expression of his evil nature.

However, Sengo's allegorical reading of *Mfalme Juha* does not prevent him from falling into contradictions. Portrayed in this analysis as a symbol of social and political evil, Juha suddenly becomes a vehicle of good values and reflections on society in his dialogue with Bibi Kizee. King Juha convicts the rich jeweller Burahimu for a murder that has not actually happened. Sengo (1973: 89) explains this senseless act not as proof of the king's avidity, but as a way used by Topan to state that, since Burahimu is a rich oppressor, it is fair to steal from him. On the other hand, acknowledging that theft is in every instance a crime, Sengo (1973: 89) explains Juha's action as a condemnation of colonialism and its theft of African wealth. Both of these interpretations are in contradiction: in the first case, Juha's evil character is inverted and regarded as good, while in the second it is not considered at all.

Finally, the fact that Juha believes the Wali's words that will lead to his death is seen by Sengo (1973: 90–91) as a punishment for the king's ignorance of religion (represented by the Wali); the Wali's falsehood is religiously justified by the necessity of putting the crazy King Juha to death.

The incongruities in Sengo's analysis of Juha's character result from his separation of funniness and content in this comedy. Sengo's reconstruction of Juha's character is contradictory because it fails to take into account its humoristic aspect. This side of the king's character will be analysed in

the next section by considering his basic feature – stupidity – not as a moral judgement of his evil nature, but as the frame in which the humoristic process develops and works out.

POWER AND STUPIDITY: THE SENTIMENT OF THE CONTRARY

King Juha's stupidity is too complex to be reduced to wickedness and tyranny *stricto sensu*. Indeed, the king is not interested in his subjects and their oppression, but in himself. Pride and haughtiness are the main features of the protagonist's particular kind of idiocy. This emerges clearly from his very first line (Topan 1971: 7–8). He is attended in his court by a large number of people of Kichaa who have come to bring their complaints:

Watu wanasimama. Mfalme Juha, akiwa amevaa nguo zenye rangirangi, anakaa juu ya kiti cha ufalme. Watu wanakaa; wote kimya.

JUHA Waziri wangu! Ee waziri wangu! Wapo watu wengi leo barazani. Je, wamekuja kuniamkia, hawa raia zangu wazuri?

WAZIRI La, bwana. Wamekuja kuleta f.

JUHA Ah! Ah! Mashtaka! Nini haya mashtaka? Juzi yalikuwa sita, jana saba, leo mangapi? Sasa ni mwezi mzima tokea nilipotoa amri yangu ya pesa moja kwa ratili moja, na bado yapo mashtaka? Hayeshi? Leo yapo mangapi?

The people stand up. King Juha, wearing a many-coloured robe, sits on the throne. The people sit down; everyone stays silent.

JUHA My Minister! Oh, my Minister! Many people are here at court today. So, have they come to greet me, these my good subjects?

MINISTER No, sir. They have come to present their complaints.

JUHA Ah! Ah! Complaints! For what, these complaints? Two days ago they were six, yesterday seven, today how many? By now it is an entire month since I issued my order of one *pesa* for every *ratili*, and there are still complaints? Don't they end? How many are there today?

The dialogue continues, revealing Juha's genuine astonishment over the ineffectiveness of his law. Even in these initial lines, some fundamental features of the character are presented. The first is his naive haughtiness. This results from Juha's image of himself as the sovereign; he is a king and his subjects' respect, as well as his own paternalistic love for them, are natural consequences of his role. In general, as the reader will discover later in the play, Juha's vision of the world is totally concentrated on himself, and he expects the others' worldview to agree with his. This feature of spontaneous and ingenuous egocentricity, which is very far from Sengo's reading of Juha's nature as absolutely evil, is the basis of his stupidity and his funniness.

Juha's limited understanding of the world, his complete reduction of social reality to his authority and rule as intrinsically right, is contrasted with the conception of the subjects of Kichaa. Bibi Kizee, the jeweller Burahimu, and the workers Hasani, Yohana and Musa, as well as the other people present at Juha's court, are, on the one hand, as egocentric as Juha in reducing the concept of justice to a satisfaction of their needs (Bibi Kizee, for example, sees the death of her sons as an injustice done to her by Burahimu); on the other hand, they are clever and well aware of their sovereign's stupidity, and so they try to manipulate him. In this relationship between the sovereign and his people, the Pirandellian sentiment of the contrary can arise. The feeling of pure funniness caused by Juha's idiotic behaviour is tempered and contrasted by his awareness that the masses – specifically, his subjects – have power over him.

This character, whose ingenuousness will make him order his own death, becomes an object of pity and sympathy: the merely comic is transformed into humorism.

A look at the other characters in *Kichaa* excludes a third reading, that of *Mfalme Juha* as a satirical comedy. If we consider Pirandello's (1908: 170) concept of satire as a comic expression of scorn of reality and then propose an interpretation of this comedy as a derision of Juha's power as vain and destined to collapse, we would expect to find situations of comic mockery only in marginal aspects of the king's character. But this is not the case in Topan's comedy. As we have noted, the people of *Kichaa*, despite being smarter than Juha, are no less egocentric. In the play, they do not try to change the political situation of their country; they are keen to exploit it for their own personal advantage, and this, together with the total absence of a voice of moral judgement in the play,⁵ should be sufficient to exclude any interpretation of it as a satire of political power – power which, as the sentiment of the contrary suggests, does not belong to the sovereign, and so is not political.

An analysis of *Mfalme Juha*, then, cannot neglect the humoristic (or even generally comic) dimension of the play and try to formulate a supposed political message, as Sengo tries to do, without entering into contradiction with the text itself. The meaning of the play is not reducible to political and social issues; rather, it is a study of a very human feature, egocentricity, and the limits that this poses to forming a correct and objective vision of the world. Despite the fact that egocentricity affects all the people of *Kichaa* in the play, the character in whom this feature is most evident is that of Juha.

UPSIDE-DOWN VISIONS: KICHAA'S EGOCENTRICITIES

Juha's egocentricity is more evident than that of the others because of his different relationship with power. Power is officially attributed to him, so he does not have to resort to tricks and deceit to manipulate it for his own advantage. This, however, causes his egocentric vision to be even more limited. Juha identifies himself totally with his role of king. He is convinced that he is a great politician and ruler, a sincerely amorous and wise father for his people, and even a refined poet. Above all, he is sure that his subjects respect him and his authority. His is a completely upside-down conception of society: his ideas of authority, sovereignty and being a good ruler are not based on his behaviour and that of his people; the opposite is true. Juha is limited by a completely idealistic and anti-realistic vision, to the point that any fact or event that contradicts his conception is unexplainable for him or simply due to the fault of his subjects. This is shown clearly in the second act of the play, when Juha hears lawsuits in his palace.

The first case is that brought by Bibi Kizee against Burahimu. The old woman easily manages to get the king on her side. She just needs to suggest that the jeweller is smarter than him (Topan 1971: 8–9):

BI. KIZEE	Bwana, watoto wangu wameuliwa.
JUHA	(<i>ameshtuka</i>) Watoto wako wameuliwa? Na nani? Vipi? Wangapi?
BI. KIZEE	Watatu, bwana. Walikufa jana usiku.
JUHA	Vipi?

⁵ Even Bakari and his Wali do not show any trace of moral judgement while considering the possibility of living in *Kichaa* (see Topan 1971: 4–6).

- BI. KIZEE Bwana, jana usiku watoto wangu walikusudia kwenda kuiba. Walikwenda kwenye nyumba la tajiri mmoja mwenye mali mengi. Yeye ni sonara na jina lake Burahimu.
- JUHA Burahimu! Sonara Burahimu! Namjua. Ala, kwani yeye ana mali mengi? Mimi nilikuwa sijui hivyo. Waziri, wewe ulikuwa unamjua Burahimu ni tajiri mkubwa mwenye mali pomoni?
- WAZIRI La, bwana. Nilikuwa sijui.
- JUHA Ha! Kumbe Burahimu ana mali mengi? Mimi nilidhani yeye sonara mdogo tu. Je, waliweza kuyapata mali yake?
- BI. KIZEE Sir, my sons have been killed.
- JUHA (*astounded*) Your sons have been killed? By whom? How? How many?
- BI. KIZEE Three, sir. They died yesterday night.
- JUHA How?
- BI. KIZEE Sir, yesterday night my sons intended to go robbing. They went to the house of a rich, wealthy man. He is a jeweller and his name is Burahimu.
- JUHA Burahimu! Burahimu the jeweller! I know him. So, is he really that wealthy? I didn't know that. Minister, did you know that Burahimu is wealthy, excessively rich?
- MINISTER No, sir. I didn't know that.
- JUHA Well, well! Who would have thought Burahimu was such a wealthy man? I thought he was just a little jeweller. So, did they manage to steal his goods?

Juha's surprise does not hide his avid interest in Burahimu's wealth, and he shows irritation at not having been aware of it. This emerges more clearly a few lines later, after Bibi Kizee has told Juha how her sons died (Topan 1971: 10):

- JUHA Tutamtia adabu huyu Burahimu. Mwongo mkubwa! Anajidai maskini, kumbe tajiri! Waziri, sijakwambia kama huyu Burahimu mtu mbaya? Unakumbuka alivyoipinga amri yangu nilipotaka shauri lake? Akajidai kwamba akiuza ratili ya dhahabu kwa pesa moja atafilisika. Mwongo mkubwa! Ngoja aje!
- JUHA We will punish that Burahimu. What a great liar! He pretends to be poor, and he is rich! Minister, did I not tell you that Burahimu is a bad man? Do you remember how he opposed my law when I asked his advice? He claimed that if he sells a *ratl* of gold for one *pesa* he will be ruined. The great liar! Just wait till he gets here!

Any further doubts about Juha's intentions are dispelled once the jeweller enters the court and claims he is innocent, blaming the builder of his house for his bad work. The "rightness" of his defence is immediately accepted by Juha, who does not want to lose his reputation of being a good and fair judge. Furthermore, it is clear that Juha's resentment toward Burahimu is not the only reason for the efforts he will put into determining this case; he is sincerely moved by Bibi Kizee's tale, to the point that he even composes a poem about her sons' death (see below). Here we see that Juha's stupidity has nothing to do with wickedness and avidity, as in Sengo's view. Burahimu is not a victim of power, but just one more person who manages to manipulate the king. The other people involved in the trial treat Juha in the same way. The king, convinced that he is the representative of wisdom and justice in his kingdom, is running in a crazy race toward his ideal of justice, totally indifferent to his more realistic and pragmatic subjects, who are only concerned with directing his decisions so that they will not be hurt by them. This double figure

of Juha as the crazy owner and the victim of his power arouses the sentiment of the contrary and makes him a humoristic figure.

Another trial, inserted as a story within the story in the second act (Topan 1971: 15–19), makes this mechanism of manipulation even more evident. The three people involved in this case are Rajabu, his father-in-law Shaabani, and his brother-in-law Ramadhani. Rajabu starts by telling the king that he has married Mariamu, Shaabani's daughter, agreeing to pay his father-in-law a dowry of one hundred shillings, of which he has already paid one half. However, he is in dire economic straits and unable to settle his debt. This part of the story is told emotionally by Rajabu so as to move Juha (Topan 1971: 17):

RAJABU Ndio, bwana, zikabakia shilingi hamsini. Bwana Shaabani asichoke kunikera. Akaanza tena kama zamani. Nyumba yetu akaifanya nyumba yake. Akeshatoka msikitini tu huja kwetu akakaa na mjomba wangu. Hapo tena wazee hao wawili hupiga domo na mimi huwapa chakula na wao hula mpaka wakashiba. Mariamu masikini hutumika kama mtumwa. Vijizee viwili hivi hukaa tokea asubuhi mpaka jioni, na hawana maneno yoyote ila mahari yangu.

SHAABANI Si kweli! Maneno yake huyu, uwongo!

(Juha anaonyesha kama ameghasika na makelele ya mzee Shaabani. Lakini hamwambii kitu; anamtazama kwa ukali tu.)

RAJABU Yes, sir, I still owe fifty shillings. Mr. Shaabani never tires of pestering me. He is starting again, just as before. He takes our house and makes it his own. When he leaves the mosque he comes to our place and sits with my uncle. Then, while those two old men have their chat, I give them food and they eat it until they are satisfied. My poor Mariamu is used as a slave. These two little old men sit from morning to night and they have nothing to talk about but my dowry.

SHAABANI That's not true! His words are lies!

(Juha shows he is bothered by Shaabani's shouts. But he doesn't say anything; he just looks severely at him.)

Juha's reaction described in the stage direction shows that he is beginning to take Rajabu's side in this trial. But he definitely supports the young husband's position when Rajabu tells him that, after the law of one *pesa* for one *rafi* had been issued, he decided to weigh his wife and calculated a dowry of one hundred and twenty *pesa*, equivalent to three shillings, instead of the originally established value of one hundred shillings. Juha is pleased by Rajabu's behaviour, seeing in it a proof of the validity of his law. His vision of himself as a good sovereign is confirmed, and Shaabani and Ramadhani's protests cannot make him see the reality of the situation (Topan 1971: 19):

RAMADHANI Lakini, bwana, dada yangu si gunia la mchele. Yeye binadamu. Amri yako haiwahusu wanaadamu. Dadaangu si mtumwa. Mahari si ujira wala si bei. Mimi bwana, sikubali Rajabu amchukue...

JUHA *(kwa ukali)* Nyamaza, wewe mtoto usiokuwa na adabu na akili! Mimi nilitoa amri kwa sababu sitaki mashtaka kila mara. Vile vile nataka raia zangu waishi kwa raha. Sasa wataishi vipi kwa raha kama hawawezi kuoa? Yakiwa mahari ya wanawali makubwa kama haya ya dada yako wataoa vipi? Basi amri yangu inawahusu wasichana vile vile.

RAMADHANI But sir, my sister is not a sack of rice. She is a person. Your law does not apply to people. My sister is not a slave. Dowries are neither compensations nor prices. I, sir, don't agree that Rajabu should take her...

JUHA (severely) Shut up, you are a child without education or intelligence! I made that law because I don't want to have to deal with so many complaints. At the same time, I want my people to be happy. Now, how can they be happy if they can't get married? If all girls' dowries were as high as your sister's, how would they find wives? Believe me, my law applies to girls, too.

This last speech by Juha reveals many of his features: his idea of his own moral and intellectual superiority over his subjects, which leads him to adopt a paternalistic attitude to them and makes him impatient with having to settle their disputes; his gullibility in taking Rajabu's side because of his acceptance of the new law, which Juha does not see as exploitation; and his unrealistic assessment of his people's needs, which causes him to embrace populist solutions cleverly suggested by his subjects.

In the second part of the play, Juha's stupidity emerges as humoristic when he is used and manipulated by his subjects' sly ploys. It is evident that the basic conception the king has of himself is that of a good and generous sovereign whose duty is to ensure justice, a value that he considers innate in himself and in his kingdom. This abstract and idealistic vision prevents him from understanding the real intentions and purposes of his people. One could ask if Juha's vision of himself concerns his political responsibility as king or if it is a feature that involves his own conception of his being; in other words, it is not fully clear whether Juha's egocentric limits, and his humoristic characterization, involve only his public role or his whole identity. An answer to this question, which is a crucial point for the development of the plot, is to be found in Juha's relationship with art and culture.

EGOCENTRICITY IN JUHA'S LITERARY CULTURE

King Juha considers culture as a necessary complement of his personality, but this recognition of the value of knowledge, once constrained within the limits of his egocentricity, becomes an *a priori* certainty of his high cultural education. Once again, Juha makes an aspect of his personality derive from his idea of sovereignty, and by doing so he loses contact with reality. The relationship of the king with culture is fundamental to the Wali's strategy of deceit. At the beginning of the third act, before carrying out Bakari's execution, Juha reads a poem composed by himself about Bibi Kizee's case. The people are clearly irritated by having to listen to Juha's poem, but the king does not notice their lack of interest: even when the Minister is discovered falling asleep, he easily manages to convince the king that he had only closed his eyes to better appreciate the poem (Topan 1971: 29). After the end of the reading, the Wali comes into play. He presents himself as one of the king's servants, who had come from afar to listen to Juha's composition. This praise of the poem is sufficient for Juha to classify the Wali as "mtu wa heshima na murua. Mcha Mungu kamili" ('a respectable and noble man. A flawless God-fearing man'; Topan 1971: 30). Juha is totally sincere in expressing his consideration of the pious man; his self-identification with the qualities of culture and wisdom is so strong that the Wali's appreciation suffices for him to elevate him to the same level. Once accepted by the king as his equal, it is sufficient for the pious man to refer once again to his cultural education to make Juha fall into his trap: he tells him that anyone who is hanged on that very day of the year will go directly and without doubt to Heaven, referring to an unspecified "Book of Religion" (Topan 1971: 30). Sengo's argument (1973: 90–91) that in this scene Topan is mocking Juha's ignorance and neglectfulness of religion is inadequate. Of course the king is ignorant of religion, because of his stupidity, but he is not neglectful of it. He respects religion and culture as important values, and this is the reason of his great respect for the Wali. His weakness

is that he regards these values as features of his own being and that he confuses the real world and his idea of it. This is evident in Juha's reaction to the Wali's request to be hanged instead of Bakari. Fascinated by the description of Paradise, Juha decides to let himself be hanged instead of giving this opportunity to anyone else. However, he does not make this decision out of avidity or fear of going to Hell; he just thinks that going to Heaven is a prize that he deserves (Topan 1971: 32):

- WALI Basi, bwana, niachilie ninyongwe mimi.
- JUHA La, sikubali. Wewe vile vile mchoyo. Nyote wawili nyinyi mnataka kwenda peponi bure bila ya kufanya mambo mengi ya wema hapa duniani. Mimi nimefanya kila jema liwezekanalo. Nimetawala vema raia zangu, nimewapa kila wanachotaka na nimetoa hukumu za halali. Mimi ndiye ninayestahiki kwenda peponi. Basi mimi ndiye nitakayenyongwa badala ya kijana huyu.
- WALI So, sir, please let me be hanged.
- JUHA No, I won't agree to that. So, you are eager, too. Both of you⁶ want to go to Heaven without having done many good deeds on Earth. I have done every possible good deed. I have ruled my people well, I have given them whatever they want and I have pronounced right and fair sentences. It is I who deserves to go to Heaven. So, I will be hanged instead of that boy.

Thus, the Wali's trick transforms all Juha's egocentric limits into a trap into which he must necessarily fall: first, he gains his trust by appealing to the common values of culture, pretending to acknowledge the intellectual status which Juha is convinced he possesses; then, he fascinates him with the prospect of entering Paradise, referring to an invented written source in which the king must believe, as required by his idea of a refined and educated man; finally, the Wali lets Juha's egocentricity persuade him that he is the only one who deserves the prize of Paradise. Here, Juha's limits in understanding the world reach their peak, since he sees in the Wali's acceptance that he will not be hanged a sign of his superior qualities (after having rejected his request, Juha asks him to walk at his side toward the gallows; Topan 1971: 33). In Juha's comic and senseless decision to let himself be hanged, the sentiment of the contrary is fully expressed and objectified, since his glorious path to Heaven is aided by a group of people whom he considers to be his friends and allies, but who in reality are exploiting his childish trust in order to save themselves.

JUHA'S CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH HIS POEMS

Despite the fact that Juha appears on stage only in the second act, he and his egocentricity are indirectly introduced in the first act. After arriving in Kichaa, Bakari and the Wali hear the town crier, who is mustering the citizens in order to read them an order from the king (the new law, which fixes the price of a *ratl* of anything at one *pesa*). The particularity of this scene is the poetic form of the order as written by Juha (Topan 1971: 2–3):

- MPIGA UPATU (*kwa wimbo*)
 Njoooni, njoooni, mabibi na mabwana
 Watoto na watu wazima
 Njoooni, njoooni, wadogo kwa wakubwa
 Wake kwa waume

⁶ He refers to the Wali and to his doorman, who is secretly allied with him to save Bakari, and who pretends in turn to beg the king to choose him to be hanged and go to Heaven.

(*anasema*) Leo ninayo maneno muhimu. Songeni karibu myasikie. Ninayo amri ya Mfalme wetu. Nataka kukusomeeni. Amri yenyewe imeandikwa kwa shairi. Mnajua mfalme wetu anavyopenda mashairi. (*Baadhi ya watu wanacheka. Anafungua karatasi, anasoma.*)

Nimechoka mashtaka, kila kitu kuwa ghali
 basi natoa amri kwa, hao wote wenye mali
 Kutoka siku ya leo, hata kesho ya Ukweli
 Kila kitu pesa moja, kwa kila ratili moja
 Wauzaji wa Kichaa, na wote wangu raia
 Wanawake kwa waume, wakubwa wadogo pia
 Ifuateni amri, asofata atalia
 Kila ratili moja, iuzwe kwa pesa moja
 Nitasoma tena amri hii:
 Kila ratili moja, iuzwe kwa pesa moja.
 Hii ndio amri ya mfalme wetu, Mfalme Juha.

WALII (*polepole*) Shairi gani na amri gani! Yote hayana maana. La kwanza baya zaidi kuliko la pili.

TOWN CRIER (*singing*)
 Come here, come here, ladies and gentlemen
 Children and adults
 Come here, come here, little and big ones
 Wives and husbands
 (*speaking*) Today I have here important words. Step closer and listen to them. I have an order from our king. I want to read it to you. The order itself is written as a poem. You know how much our king loves poems. (*Some people laugh. He opens the paper, and reads.*)

I am tired of your lawsuits, that everything is costly
 so an order I emit, to those who live wealthily
 Starting from today until the day of Truth will go by lastly
 Everything's one *pesa* in price, for each *raṭl* of it one buys
 Oh, sellers of Kichaa, and my people, all of you
 Women as well as men, big and small ones, too
 Obey this law; if anyone breaks it I will pursue
 Each *raṭl* that one buys, be sold for one *pesa* price⁷
 I will read this order again:
 Each *raṭl* that you buy, be sold for one *pesa* price
 This is the order of our king, King Juha.

WALI (*speaking low*) What a poem and what an order! None of it makes sense. The first is worse than the second.

Juha's egocentricity thus appears first in his relationship with literature. Persuaded of his high moral and intellectual stature, he wants to be known to his subjects in this image, and to do this he chooses the device of poetry. His conception of poetry, however, reveals itself not as a product of aesthetic, fantastic *poiesis*, but as a simple stylistic exercise. Even on the stylistic side, Juha's poem contains many careless mistakes, as Topan (1971: 38) himself points out in his commentaries. In this composition, the Swahili metric structure of the *shairi* can be

7 In translating this poem and the following ones I have tried to imitate the stylistic features – and failures – typical of the Swahili poetic tradition present in the text, like metres and rhymes, rather than providing a literal translation of it. Even the choice of confused and bombastic language reflects the original poem.

recognized: it consists of quatrains composed of verses of sixteen syllables, with a caesura at mid-verse (between the eighth and the ninth syllables; see Abedi 1954: 1–4). In this verse structure, even rhyme (defined in the Swahili tradition as identity of the last syllables of the verse) is employed: the first hemistichs of the first three verses of every stanza, as well as the second ones, should rhyme, while the fourth and last verse have a freer choice of rhyme structure (in this case, both hemistichs rhyme with each other). In this poem, Juha seems to have failed in reproducing the *shairi* structure: in the first three verses of each stanza just the final hemistichs rhyme, while the first ones do not. In the first quatrain, a sort of rhyme is attempted between the first hemistichs of the first and the second verses, by putting the caesura after *kwa* in the last one (“Nimechoka mashtaka [...]/Basi natoa amri kwa”). By doing this, however, Juha does not match a perfect rhyme and even builds a hemistich of nine syllables instead of eight (in “basi natoa amri kwa”, as following the rules of Swahili prosody, each vowel and even the vocalized *m* of *amri* should be counted as a separate syllable). Furthermore, the rhyme of the third verse, in which “a day after Truth” (literal translation) is cited, seems to be completely out of context, though it rhymes perfectly with the other verses and is inserted in a hemistich correctly built of eight syllables. Finally, the rhyme in the last verses of the two quatrains are obtained by repetition of the same term (*moja*, ‘one’), a choice that is considered stylistically poor (Vierke 2011: 28).

Juha’s egocentricity prevents him from writing an aesthetically valid composition and restricts him to a rhetorically and stylistically limited vision of poetry, which he considers as an intellectual exercise appropriate to his stature. His purpose as a composer is not the creation of a “phantasm” (intended as a product of Fantasy in the Pirandellian way; see Pirandello 1908: 57–58) external to him and with its subjectivity and beauty; he is continuously concerned with his own subjectivity and beauty, so that his art, ingested in this devouring egocentricity, is a mere show of rhetoric, in which Juha himself and his supposed poetic mastery are the protagonists. This is evident in the second act of the comedy, when, after the end of the trials, Juha tells his minister that he wants to write a poem about Bibi Kizee’s case (Topan 1971: 23–24):

- JUHA Leo yalikuwa mashtaka mengi mno. Unajua, Waziri, unaweza kutunga shairi la mashtaka ya leo. Hasa ya hawa watoto watatu waliokufa.
(*Anachukua jiwe la bamba na kalamu. Anaandika na huku anasema.*)
 Watoto watatu wezi walikwenda ghalani
 Walitaka kuiba...
 Walitaka kuiba nini?
- WAZIRI Mali ya Burahimu.
- JUHA ‘Mali’ hailingani na ‘wezi’. Neno gani linalingana na ‘wezi’?
- WAZIRI ‘Mwezi’, bwana.
- JUHA Waziri, watoto hawa wangeweza vipi kuuiba mwezi? Lakini wangeweza kuiba ndizi, au sivyoy?
- WAZIRI Ndivyo, bwana.
- JUHA Basi shairi langu litaanza hivi:
 Watoto watatu wezi walikwenda ghalani
 Wakataka kuiba ndizi juu ya cherehani...
 Je, vipi? Walionaje?

JUHA Today there were too many complaints. You know what, Minister? You can compose a poem about the cases of today. Especially about those three sons who died.

(*He takes a stone slab and a pen. He writes while speaking.*)

Three sons, to be thieves very soon, went into the storehouse.
They wanted to steal...
What did they want to steal?

MINISTER Burahimu's goods.

JUHA 'Goods' does not rhyme with 'soon'. Which word rhymes with 'soon'?

MINISTER 'Moon', sir.

JUHA Minister, how could these sons have stolen the moon? But they could have stolen a balloon, couldn't they?

MINISTER Yes, sir.

JUHA So, my poem will start this way:
Three sons, to be thieves very soon, went into the storehouse.
They wanted to steal the balloon on the sewing-machine, and a mouse...⁸
So, how is it? What do you think?

A consideration of the content of Juha's first poem shows his limits in understanding the world. Juha is so sure of his abilities as a sovereign that he attributes the responsibilities of the problems in his kingdom to his subjects. This is evident in the first verse, "I am tired of your lawsuits, that everything is costly", which shows clearly how Juha is not able to solve the citizens' problems by seeking the reasons for their continuous disputes over prices; instead, he feels tired in the face of a situation that he cannot understand. This inability to comprehend, resulting from his egocentric limits in viewing the world, leads to a unilateral attribution of responsibility to his subjects. For Juha, it is impossible to acknowledge his own responsibility for the chaotic economic situation in Kichaa or to see any error in his own conduct. This inability will be instrumental in bringing him to his death.

The last poem by Juha is read by himself at the beginning of the third act, on the day of Bakari's planned execution. After a short paternalistic speech in which Juha justifies his decision to put Bakari to death as a way of preventing the diffusion of perversion in his country (Topan 1971: 27), the king reads the poem about Bibi Kizee's case, which he had started composing while in the company of the minister. In this text, too, Juha's egocentricity appears in the limits of his aesthetic sense (Topan 1971: 28–29):

⁸ In the original composition, the rhyme built by Juha is between *wezi* 'thieves' and *ndizi* 'banana', despite the fact that the banana is an element completely absent in Bibi Kizee's story; in fact, it is introduced only for the sake of getting the rhyme. As I will explain later, this process is very important in analysing Juha's characterization. I have tried to reproduce it in my translation by building a rhyme between 'soon' and 'balloon', an element which totally incongruous with the rest of the narration.

	Watoto watatu wezi Walienda ghalani Wakataka kuiba ndizi Juu ya cherehani	Three sons, to be thieves very soon, Went into the storehouse They wanted to steal the balloon On the sewing-machine, and a mouse
5	Walipoanza kuchimba Ukuta ukaporomoka Juu ya watatu simba Hawakuweza kuokoka	As they started to dig The wall fell down as alive On them a lion too big For them to survive
10	Mama yao aliposikia Akaenda mpaka kwa Juha Na baada ya kumwamkia Akamweleza yote hekaya	When the mother heard that She went to Juha, sitting in glory Whom she greeted and looked at Then told him all the story
15	Nyumba hiyo ni ya nani Akauliza Mfalme shani Ghalani mlikuwa nini Akataka Juha kujua	Who owns this real estate The king asked her, light of the State What was there to appropriate Juha wanted to know
20	Nyumba hiyo ya sonara Jina lake ni Bura Ghala yake inang'ara Dhahabu ni mali yake	This house is of a jeweller His name is Burahimmer of a big storehouse he's owner Gold is his richness
	Burahimu akaitwa Bawabu akamfuata Shauri akaikata Makosa haya si yangu	Burahimu was called to come The doorman searched for him at home Wholly certain he had become This fault is not mine
25	Mjenga nyumba akaja Mnyenyekevu mja Yeye akatoa hoja Lawama ni ya mpondaji	The house-builder arrived Into humility he dived then he made a claim thrive The blame is on the clay-kneader
30	Mpondaji akaletwa Sasa we umepatwa Akakataa katwa Makosa ya mtia maji	The clay-kneader was brought Now you have been caught He refused this thought The fault is with the water-pourer
35	Mtia maji akaja Bwana nina jambo moja Maji nilipoyamwaga Alipita mnene mtu	The water-pourer came Sir, I've someone to blame While I was pouring I lost my aim Because a fat man passed by

As Juha himself explains (Topan 1971: 27), he had started composing this poem in the *shairi* metre, but from the fourth stanza he decided to use another metre, the *utenzi*, which consists of quatrains of octosyllables with the rhyme scheme *aaax*, *bbbx*, *cccx*... in which *x* is unchanged all through the poem (Abedi 1954: 15–19). However, Juha is not able to respect even this structure fully, inasmuch as the final verses of each stanza have different rhymes. There are also many verses in which the syllable count does not respect the measure of the verse (for example, verses 6 and 8 consist of nine syllables and the third stanza is composed of decasyllables, while other verses, such as 18, are shorter than necessary, having seven syllables). Other elements showing the poet's inexperience are the cutting off of the second half of Burahimu's name (verse 18) in order to get the rhyme of the quatrain, and, in the last verse, the inversion of the normal word order *mtu mnene* 'a fat man' for *mnene mtu*, which can be regarded as poetic

licence but does not make much sense in this case, because no final rhyme between quatrains is conserved, and it seems to be just an exhibition of style.

The poem is more interesting in its content, because of its relationship with Juha's character. In the second quatrain we find the only metaphor in Juha's poetic production in the play: the collapsed wall of Burahimu's house is compared to a lion which assaults the lives of Bibi Kizee's sons. This is the only quatrain in which Juha's inspiration cannot be reduced to a mere exercise of style, nor is the content focused on himself. This can be considered as further evidence that Juha has been manipulated by Bibi Kizee to the point that he sincerely considers her sons as victims of a dramatic destiny. Thus, Juha's fundamental kindness and sense of responsibility emerge again, while in the following stanzas his egocentric limits reappear: in the third quatrain, he refers to himself in the third person (neglecting the rhyme) and focuses on Bibi Kizee's greeting of himself rather than on her emotional state; in the fourth quatrain, he gives himself the epithet of *shani* 'the glorious Sovereign'; in the seventh stanza, he notes the *mnyenyekvu* 'humble' attitude of Hasani, the house-builder, seeing the man's attempt to get himself out of trouble as a proof of his loyalty. Juha thus once again shows his inability to understand the world outside the idea of his own greatness.

The element of poetry in the comedy is not just an expedient to better illustrate Juha's character; it is a natural outcome of his character and an expression of the humoristic dimension of the king. Juha's incompetence in composing poems produces a comic effect, as do other features of his behaviour, but my analysis of the content of his compositions, particularly the last one, indicates the difficulty he has, despite all his efforts, in creating a work of true force and aesthetic impact. Thus, it arouses the sentiment of the contrary. His artistic weakness is a direct consequence of his stupidity; in the last poem, he is not able to give a voice to the characters in his narration because of the excessive focus on himself, and by this he shows that he has misunderstood their intentions in real life. The only moment of genuine artistic creation, as we have seen, is perhaps the metaphor in the second quatrain, comparing the falling wall to a lion. However, the very uniqueness of this example shows how Juha's natural kindness is not able to transcend the grip of his egocentricity.

CONCLUSION

This paper advances an analysis of Topan's comedy *Mfalme Juha* and, in particular, the character of its protagonist, the "idiot" King Juha, starting from the concept of humorism introduced by Pirandello in his essay *L'Umorismo* (1908). In this essay, Pirandello defines humorism as a particular kind of comic sense in which the fun caused by the object of laughter is accompanied by a *sentiment of the contrary*, a complementary feeling that derives from acknowledgement of the intrinsic contradictions of the object itself. Pure fun thus becomes a sort of sympathy for the object, in which its absurdity and vanity are recognized.

Pirandello's definition of humorism has been employed in this critique of *Mfalme Juha* to develop a characterization of the foolish king that does not read his stupidity as a symbol of wickedness, as Sengo does in his interpretation, but as the core of the humoristic nature of the character. Juha shows that he respects all the most important values that a good sovereign should honour, like culture, justice and wisdom, but he is limited in his vision of these values and, in general, his understanding of the world, by what has been defined here as ingenuous egocentricity. That is to say, Juha is not able to escape from his idealistic vision of the world in which he is a perfect and flawless sovereign who deserves the complete loyalty of his people.

If these limits put Juha in comic situations, their gravity and the way the people of Kichaa can easily use them to manipulate their king give rise to the sentiment of the contrary: Juha is thus seen not as the owner but as the victim of power, the power of his subjects being smarter than him. Examples of this power are found throughout the play; for example, the ways in which Bibi Kizee and Rajabu, a minor character, manipulate the king in his function of judge have been examined. Finally, the paper studies a particular aspect of the king, namely, his relationship with culture and the arts. Juha's poetic production, in particular, is revealed as a powerful way of expressing all the features of the character and, above all, his egocentricity. This particular feature can be considered as the cause of Juha's lack of aesthetic sense: in his works he is not able to evade the egocentric idea of his own superiority, and so even poetry becomes an empty exercise in stylistics, an intellectual expedient to express his moral and intellectual status. Juha's poetry is not only a means of demonstrating some features of his character, but it is also a natural outcome of it, and thereby one can trace the elements of his humoristic dimension and the contradictions at the root of the sentiment of the contrary.

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