

OLD SWAHILI-ARABIC SCRIPT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SWAHILI LITERARY LANGUAGE

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Swahili culture and language occupies a specific place in the literary culture of African peoples. Besides the rich oral tradition and folklore, the old Swahili script in literature and the old literary language were an integral part and parcel of Swahili culture. At present there is modern multi-genre fiction in Kiswahili. Swahili literature, thus, has served for understanding the cultural wealth of Waswahili through its centuries-old history.

Swahili folklore is widely known, starting with E. Steere's collection of Swahili tales, published in 1870. The written heritage has been less studied, although there are vast funds of old manuscripts in the library of Dar es Salaam University and in the most prominent centres of African studies in Europe.

Side by side with Islam, the characters of the language of the Holy Qur^ʿān came to the East African coast (from the eighth century). The Waswahili adapted them for their language. Thus the Swahili written language and written tradition were brought into being.

The old Swahili script, or Swahili-Arabic alphabet (Kiarabu) based on the Arabic letters, seems to have been used as far as back as the eleventh century. The earliest specimens of the old Swahili script were found on coins and tombstones (*makaburi*). According to the W. Hichens, in early times writing was done on papyrus, made of the split leaves of palms. Later Syrian, Indian and European paper

came into use.

The old Swahili script served the needs of the Swahili society until the beginning of the twentieth century. It was used for drawing up trade documents, correspondence, writing down the genealogy of the ruling families, for chronicles of towns, literary works, and so on. Unfortunately the Swahili manuscripts dating back to the Middle Ages or earlier have been lost: almost all of them were destroyed during the Portuguese invasion in the sixteenth century. But many samples of the written heritage survived in oral form and in course of time they were put down on paper again. Many noble Swahili families had their own libraries. At the beginning of the nineteenth century first European seamen came across some copies of the old Swahili manuscripts. Those were 'chronicles' of Kilwa, Pate, Mombasa and other Swahili city-states. The 'chronicles'—social-legal documents to be precise—were shown to European captains or shipowners as official documents, where genealogy and social rights of the upper strata of a certain Swahili town were fixed.

L. Krapf, the first Christian missionary who began his activity not far from Mombasa in 1845, had a far better possibility to get acquainted with the Swahili written language heritage of the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1854 he sent two old Swahili manuscripts of long poems in Kiswahili to the Library of Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in Halle in Germany. At present there are, besides these manuscripts, very good collections in the libraries of Dar es Salaam University, the School of Oriental and African Studies and the British Library in London, the Institute of Africanistics and Ethiopistics in Hamburg, and elsewhere.

Unfortunately no serious attempts have been made to date old manuscripts. The problem of dating known monuments, though of great historical and cultural importance, has not yet been discussed in detail, although there are

hypotheses concerning the time of creation of certain texts, based mainly on the linguistic data.¹

Fourteen letters from Goa are considered to be the oldest Swahili manuscripts in existence, presumably dating from 1711–28. Without sufficient grounds Jan Knappert dates the manuscript of the poem ‘Chuo cha Tambuka’ from the Hamburg collection back to 1728. In any case, proceeding from the accumulated material and our current level of knowledge the earliest known Swahili manuscripts (*zuo*, or *vyuo*) can be dated from the eighteenth century. These are the long poems—*tendi*.

In the process of expansion of the written language functions in the Swahili society literacy was spreading among representatives of its upper strata. After Islam had

1 See for example well-known publication by I.L. Krapf, C.G. Buttner, W. Taylor, C. Meinhof, W. Hichens, A. Werner, E. Dammann (various classical works), Shaaban Robert, J.W.T. Allen, H. Lambert, L. Harries, W. Whiteley, J. Knappert (various works), R. Ohley and G. Mieke. In the last 30 years many important works on the history of Swahili poetry—papers and monographs—were published by Chiraghdin Shihabuddin, Mathias E. Mnyampala, E. Kezilahapi, S.D. Kiango, S.Y. Tengo, M.H. Abdulaziz, M.M. Mulokozi, Yahya Ali Omar, P.J.L. Frankl and others. For general surveys of the study of Swahili-Arabic script and the dating of old Swahili manuscripts see for instance the following by A. Zhukov: ‘Swahili: Literatur und Gesellschaft’ in *Sozialer Wandel in Afrika und die Entwicklung von Formen und Funktionen afrikanischer Sprachen*, 1980; ‘The dating of literary monuments of the old Swahili literature’, in *Africa in Soviet Studies: Annual 1987*, Moscow 1988; ‘The dating of old Swahili manuscripts: Towards Swahili palaeography’, in *Swahili Language and Society: Notes and News*, Vienna 1992; *The role of translation in Swahili literature. Defining new idioms and alternative forms of expression*, Amsterdam 1996; ‘The literary monuments as a source for the historical study of literary Swahili’, in *Second World Congress of African Linguistics. Abstracts*, Leipzig 1997; ‘The study of old Swahili scripts’, *Vostokovedeniye-5*, Leningrad 1977 (in Russian); *Swahili: culture, language and literature*, Leningrad 1983 (in Russian), and *The history of Swahili literature and literary language*, St. Petersburg 1997 (in Russian). Both monographs have vast bibliographies.

been adopted, the traditional forms of transmission of social experience and education, that is, oral tradition, ceased to satisfy the spiritual needs of the ruling elite. Written traditions took the place of the oral ones and became the main instruments of cultural and ideological influence on the literate part of the society, in the first place on its upper social strata, including representatives of a new layer of Muslim teachers (*shehe, walimu*), that is, intellectuals of that time. Although medicine men (*waganga*), poets, and singers (*malenga*) continued to play important social roles, predetermined for them by centuries-long tradition, ‘bookish men’ (*wanachuoni*), professional copyists, and court poets became the keepers of cultural information among literate part of the society. A manuscript book (*yuo, or chuo*) became an integral part of the culture, a means of recording and fixation of the monuments of the Swahili literature.

For the education of the young generation it was necessary to have literature, which would contain appropriate rules of the social conduct, a sum of certain knowledge. There was a need for works which would specify the new ideology, explain the dogmas and practice of Islam, describe its history, and the Prophet’s life and deeds. A written literature appeared. Illiterate people, both freeborn (*waungwana*) and dependants (*watumwa*), used the same literature, but in its oral form. In its oral paraphrase the religions and didactic literature was under the influence of the oral tradition and in its turn may have been written down in these variants, more comprehensible for the ordinary people. Under these circumstances it is difficult (or even impossible) to differentiate (or separate) the oral tradition from the written one.

It became necessary to render, interpret and translate the well-known and wide-spread stories of Muslim history and literature. While the upper strata of the educated Waswahili got the possibility to use the religions books in Arabic, the overwhelming majority of *walimu* and other literate people

had the religions and didactic literature in Kiswahili, in its traditional poetic form, *tendi* (or *tenzi*). *Utendi* (or *utenzi*, sing.) can be translated as ‘the poem’, and from the standpoint of both form and content the Swahili *tendi* must be typologically scrutinized in the same category as the epics of other peoples of the world; heroic songs, sagas, bylines, and so on.

The old Swahili *tendi* are specimens of written literature based on the plots of the Qurʾān, legends about Prophet Muḥammad, or stories from the medieval Arabic *maghāzī* literature, telling us of the Prophet’s deeds and campaigns. It is quite probable that the appearance of the plots, connected with the idea of ‘war for Faith’, intolerance to the ‘unfaithful’ was caused by resistance of the Swahili towns to the Portuguese, that is, Christians.

Close survey and analysis of the most famous and well-studied monuments of the old poetic art of the Waswahili makes it possible to make some general conclusions.

First of all there are monuments which can be dated (although not yet with sufficient reliability) to the eighteenth century: ‘Chuo cha Herkal’ (1728), ‘Hamziya’ (1749), ‘Inkishafi’ (1749), ‘Wangi Wangi’ (not later than 1750), ‘Utenzi wa Katirifu’ (the third quarter of the eighteenth century). All dates, apart from that of the ‘Hamziya’ were established by Jan Knappert. In one paper he dated the ‘Hamziya’ to 1652. Moreover, as publishers and investigators of the actual monuments point out, the texts known at present are based on earlier Swahili variants going back to the sixteenth century. It is also necessary to take into consideration that because of the complicated interaction of the oral and the written traditions, the time span between the date of the text in its more or less completed form and that of the manuscript is not known. The verbal prehistories of the written texts are also unclear. On the one hand, the characteristic feature of these works is the beginning, when the author asks to bring him articles for writing: ‘a pen made

of reed, some ink and Syrian paper, a lining board'. That is, we have the result of a personal creative act. On the other hand, some parts of *tendi* are introduced by appealing direct to the listeners: '*sikia*' (you hear), '*nambia*' (I say) and so on. These traditional formulas are certain to have come to the written literature from singers and story-tellers (*malenga*).

The link of the Swahili poetical works to the Arab sources does not mean direct translations of them, though at the very beginning of some stories their authors say that their labour is only a weak attempt to interpretate or reproduce (*tafsiri*) 'this Arab story' (*hadithi ya kiarabu*), which once had been told. This verb stem (*tafsiri*) rather refers to an author's rearrangement of the plot of some work of the Muslim literature. Having borrowed the general contents, a Swahili author-copyist freely improvised on this base. So it was not a direct translation of the Arab sources (some of them not existing in their full form, as in case of 'Herekali'), it was a creative rearrangement. This gave a new strong impulse to the process of borrowing Arabic words, which served for explaining new categories and concepts, enriching the Swahili vocabulary and strongly influencing the formation of the written literary language.

By the eighteenth century 'the common *tendi* language' had developed. Several centuries and generations of singers and story-tellers (*malenga*) had passed away before this became possible and the literary works acquired a clear style and shape. These *tendi* were connected to oral tradition, to the art of song, within the limits of which this song-poetic *genre* had developed long before any samples of it were put down in writing. A high degree of generalization of the oral element and a high level of song-poetic culture was displayed in the eighteenth-century *tendi*. The enrichment of the poetic vocabulary with Arabic words affected the phonological structure of the language and contributed to the appearance of new rhythms and consonances. The poetic

tradition with the song in its core did not disappear, but continued its organic development.

Old Swahili *tendi* are didactic-explanatory poems, substantiating and establishing Islam, Muslim values and its way of life. Their purpose was not only 'to tell about', but first of all 'to teach'. Philosophic, religious, ethnic and didactic literature was born in the silence of mosques; the educated Waswahili (*shehe, walimu*) created it. New social experiences were concentrated in it, appropriate rules of conduct, elements of social relations were reflected there. The written literature, as the oral tradition in the past, had a social function of education. From this point of view *tendi* gave rich material for studying the ideological, moral and ethical values of the Waswahili.

New ideas and conceptions connected with the Muslim themes appeared in the written literature, but these battle-epics, ethic-didactic works, and religious treatises were as before created in the poetical form that was typical and traditional for the cultural-ideological influence on social life in the pre-Islamic period. A kind of apotheosis of interpenetration and mutual influence of the typical African element (initiation-songs) on the one hand and of the Islamic doctrines and values on the other was reached in the poem injunction 'Untenzi wa Mwana Kupona'. One of its manuscripts dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. The contents of the poem, its structure and its language indicate that the creation of this kind of poem-injunctions can be related to an earlier period. The tradition could ascribe to a certain person (Mwana Kupona in this case) what had been created much earlier by several generations of story-tellers and had existed for a long time in oral form. Poem-injunctions of this kind continued to be created later and found their place in the modern literature as well.

Alongside the formation and development of the new, that is, written, literature with a religious and moral bias, the oral poetic-song tradition continued to develop under the

influence of the written literature, being affected by the latter in its turn. It would be a mistake to reduce the process of development of the literature only to the existence of ‘the Swahili Islamic poetry’.

In the eighteenth century individual creators of poetic texts began to emerge from the generalized concept of ‘the author’. The only Swahili poet of that time whose life and creative work are known to a certain extent, is Muyaka from Mombasa (1776–1837 or 1840). He left samples of another traditional genre of the Swahili poetry—*mashairi*. Two tendencies which had developed in the early stages of Swahili literature were reflected in his creative works, interweaving intricately and influencing each other. First of all it is the tradition of travelling singers and musicians, which existed in oral form, accessible to wide strata of the population; and secondly the tradition of court poets, later of learned people and authors of the written literature, those who meditated on the sense and values of life. Muyaka, a rich merchant, was at the same time a poet at the Mombasa rulers’ court. And again the folk memory ascribes to Muyaka much of the *mashairi*, created by not one generation of *malenga*.

Muyaka’s *mashairi* existed in oral form, their first records in the old Swahili script date from the end of the nineteenth century. Muyaka, like Fumo Liongo, Mwana Kupona, represents a symbol, a personification of the whole poetic epoch, in which oral creations of many singers, storytellers, their best specimens were crystallized.

Co-existence of two traditions—the oral and the written—is characteristic for the Swahili literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The development of the written tradition, caused by expanding functions of the old Swahili writing, resulted in the rise of an ‘author’s literature’ proper, in the form of individual ‘authors’ of literary works, or persons to whom the creation of these works were ascribed. On the one hand such an ‘author’

could accurately copy the text of some work from earlier manuscripts or put down the text, known up to that day only in the oral form. The professional copyist copied a great number of various literary texts (often the most popular of that time). On the other hand, in the course of this process those keen on language developed their own literary talent. They worked as interpreters of a popular story or text (oral or written), improvising and thus creating an original work, that is, they not only *copied*, but *created* as well. However, in both cases ‘the author-copyist’ and ‘the author-improviser’ spoke of their work as of something ‘composed by such-and-such person’ (*tungwa na*). In the nineteenth century in some Swahili towns literary centres were formed around noble and educated families, prominent poets and literary authorities. It was from them the Europeans got their first information of the Swahili literary art. One such ‘author’ of written literary texts at the end of the nineteenth century (in old Swahili script and probably in Roman as well), was Mohammed Kijumwa from Lamu, who became known first to missionaries then to specialists. He was a connoisseur of the old oral and written traditions, of the art of rhetoric, a professional copyist, an interpreter of the old themes, stories and personages, and a creator of new verse and poems.

The island and coastal trade-towns—centres of economic and cultural life—also became centres of ethnic and language consolidation. The interaction of the closely related sub-dialects resulted in the formation of several dialectal groups in those towns, which in certain periods found themselves in more favourable conditions, playing a leading role in the trade of the coast. At first (eighth–ninth centuries) large linguistic units were formed in the region where the northern towns were situated, first of all Lamu, under the influence of which the Kiamu dialect was formed. Later, when the economic centre moved to Mombasa (probably in the ninth century) a dialect community arose around this

town's dialect, the Kimvita. With the rise of Kilwa in the thirteenth century Kingao eventually came to play the role of centre in the dialect consolidation in the southern parts of the coast. But it did not acquire the same significance as Kiamu and Kimvita, because soon Mombasa's role grew again, and later it was the turn of Pate, whose dialect Kipate hardly differed from Kiamu. At the time the Zanzibar sultanate became the centre of economic and social life of Eastern Africa (from the 1830s), its town dialect Kiunguja acquired great significance. Thus, Kiswahili developed on its own dialect base which included three groups of dialects: the northern (the nucleus of which was Kiamu), the central (with the Kimvita as the nucleus), and the southern (with Kiunguja as the nucleus). The idea of the northern dialect base of Kiswahili was first put forward by L. Krapf.

The Swahili dialects and sub-dialects are so close to one another that we are most likely dealing with a linguistic *continuum*, a transition from one dialect (or sub-dialect) to another; each group of dialects is determined rather by its relations to another group than to some 'source-dialect', so to say, 'para-Swahili' or 'proto-Swahili'. Attempts to reveal such 'para-form' have not met with success. 'Regional forms' of Kiswahili (Kibenadiri and Sidi, Kingwana) that have developed independently, and the language of Comoro Islands need special studies.

Among the territorial and other varieties of the Kiswahili, Kingovi (or Kingozi) is of the utmost interest. There are different views on its nature, history and functions. 'Kingozi words—according to the Waswahili themselves—are secret, allegorical words'. Allegories, songs with the secret meaning were the indispensable element of the rituals-initiations. Alongside with other things boys in the *kumbi*-hut were taught different songs, *mafumbo*-songs, that is, song-allegories among them. Girls sang song-injunctions with a secret sense at the holy tree *muyombo*. In *ngoma* rituals songs are sung in a language understandable only to

the initiated, and are full of allegories. The medicine man, *mganga*, talk with spirits, *pepo*, in a special language. Singers and storytellers hold poetic tournaments, singing song-allegories to each other. The Fumo Liongo composes songs in a special language. It may be assumed that the above had something to do with Kingovi, which was most likely the language of ministers of a cult of the pre-Islamic period; *waganga*, *manju*, or *wangoi*. It is worth mentioning that the last word has the same stem as Kingovi. In the process of Islamization Kingovi, preserving its old vocabulary and grammatical peculiarities, continued to play a role in rituals, carrying on functions of the general poetic (that is, literary) language until it gave way to the more understandable and (at that time) widespread Kiamu. The Waswahili themselves appreciate Kingovi as an inalienable, integral element of their cultural heritage.

However, strictly speaking, we do not as yet have any complete texts which we can say are written in Kingovi. In the course of time the Waswahili themselves, and later linguists, began to indicate some rarely used words, phonetic peculiarities and grammatical forms (which have many common features with the language named Kinika by L. Krapf) as belonging to Kingovi. As a result it is now understood as a conglomerate of archaic features, preserved in the old poetry.

The northern Kiamu dialect constituted the base of the literary language of the next period. It is quite probable that in the fifteenth century it was already a written language, a language of books. Having an alphabet and a stable written form became the main prerequisite and the determining feature of the literary Swahili language.

Borrowings from Oriental languages gave a strong stimulus of its development in conditions of intensive trade exchanges. Replenishing the vocabulary with new words served to accelerate the smoothing out of the dialect distinctions, creating alongside the shared Bantu lexical fund a

common vocabulary from Oriental languages. It was adopted into the language fabric of all the dialects in accordance with the Bantu grammatical and phonetical norms. The common Bantu base and the lexicon from Oriental languages, which was the same for all dialects, served as a unifying force, a prerequisite for language unity.

This lexicon was composed of words related to commercial and maritime economic activities and town life. Islam brought appropriate philosophic and religious terminology. The new vocabulary first penetrated into the language of the traders, seamen and dockers, that is, into oral speech, then it was stabilized in the written language. The greater part of the Kiswahili vocabulary was composed of Arabic words (Omani dialect), words from the Persian, or from Indian languages. With a quite large number of loanwords, Kiswahili has nevertheless, at the same time, preserved words of Common Bantu to a greater extent than most other Bantu languages (according to M. Guthrie, 44 per cent, third after Bemba and Luba).

In the eighteenth century the old Swahili literary language achieved a high level of development and was a complex phenomenon, including few Kingovi elements, the colloquial base—Kiamu (and a bit later Kimvita as well), the lexical elements from Oriental languages, and characteristic features of local dialects, that is, of the place where the literary work was put down or copied. Although the dialectal features, reflected in the written language, make it possible to attribute some manuscripts closer to Kiamu or Kimvita, the old Swahili written language of the eighteenth century as a whole must be considered as a unity of the components mentioned above. Despite the fact that some monuments of the old Swahili written literature can be attributed to earlier periods, the manuscripts of the works known today are dated (conventionally) to the first half of the eighteenth century. Their language demonstrates a fairly definite unity. This is precisely the literary language of that time fixed in writing,

while the monuments are those of the old written literary Swahili language. The existence of old Swahili writing used for recording including literary works, demonstrates the formation of such an ethnic community that could already realize itself as a distinct ethnos. The written literature was the literature of the Swahili people (Waswahili).

Popular at their time, *tendi* poems were repeatedly copied and became known outside the place of their creation (copying). The language of the written literature united forms which were not used together in oral speech and served as a supradialectal phenomenon (Kingovi, in its own time, also had general character to some extent). On the other hand, being sufficiently balanced, it was enriched by borrowing from the dialectal forms. Existing dialectal distinctions submitted to the tendency of creating a common language of the written literature. The latter was understandable for the speakers of different dialects. The authors of new works (or new versions, variants and rearrangements of the old ones) had this written norm as their aim. Based on Kiamu, it acquired a supradialectal character and the authority of writing guaranteed this unity. Old written Kiswahili showed itself as the common language of religion and education, of common literature, specifically philosophic and religious works, ethical and didactic poetry. The written language, represented by the literary monuments of the eighteenth century, became 'classical' for the next periods of the developing Swahili literature. Later this old written language lost some archaic features and by the nineteenth century was under strong influence (at least in Mombasa and surrounding regions) of Kimvita—the folk-colloquial language.

In the middle of the nineteenth century it was Kiunguja, the dialect of Zanzibar town, which obtained some of the prerequisites to become a basis for the written form of the literary language based on the old Swahili script, extending the functions of the latter. A unification of linguistic forms

took place on the basis of southern dialects. Some Swahili intellectuals suggested that the old Swahili writing should be reformed to correspond better to the grammatical and phonetic structures of the language.

Thus whatever the geographic position of the Swahili town where literary works were created (in the South, in Lindi, in the North, in Tanga, or in Zanzibar), their linguistic features already corresponded to the southern dialects and were oriented at the common norm, mentioned above as Kiunguja.

The first texts in Kiswahili using Latin letters appeared due to the activities of missionaries. From the 1840s a great volume of works of Christian literature was accumulated. Later a Kiswahili press appeared as well. For some time two types of writing had coexisted in the Swahili literature: the old Swahili-Arabic writing and a new one in Latin characters that had not yet been unified. At the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s missionaries and officials of British colonial administration tried to unify this Latin script and adopted it officially for Swahili. The Kiunguja dialect was taken as a basis for 'Standard Swahili'.

It was this 'Standard Swahili' that became the official language for all East-African territories, and which answered the requirements and needs of colonial authorities and 'the colonial society' in general. If the change of dialectal basis of the written literary language earlier took place *spontaneously*, as a process of selection from colloquial and written forms, 'Standard Swahili' was made all at once on norms *consciously* selected for the standard language, although prepared objectively by the whole historical development of Kiswahili.

In 1930s and 1940s 'Standard Swahili' became a reality. It was used for all sorts of publishing, the greater part of which was literature translated from European languages for missionary and primary schools. These translations were made by Europeans. Only in releasing a series of 'Customs

and Traditions in Eastern Africa' were local people engaged, representatives of a new generation of intellectuals: petty clerks in the colonial administration, teachers, persons close to missionary circles. Their first literary works about the life and customs of different ethnic groups were actually written in the old Swahili genre, *desturi*. Africans also took part in different literary competitions, and cooperated with the popular magazine *Mambo Leo*, an official organ of the colonial authorities, which had been issued in Kiswahili since the middle of the 1920s.

The older generation of Swahili intellectuals tried to preserve the old Swahili script and the literary language, while the younger one adopted the new, participating in colonial periodicals as authors of poems and prose works in 'Standard Swahili'. One of the first among them was Shaaban Robert (1909–62), who became very popular in the 1930s and 1940s. In the new historical conditions, that is, in the conditions of 'colonial society', he continued the poetic tradition of Swahili folklore and literature. On the other hand Shaaban Robert is a creator of the Swahili fiction prose.

The literary activity by Shaaban Robert began when 'Standard Swahili' was under formation and acquiring its fixed form in literary works created by the Europeans and published under their control. Shaaban Robert, on one hand, had to accept these norms of 'Standard Swahili', but on the other, being an excellent connoisseur and an expert in Kiswahili, he introduced the best features and richness of the folk language and the written literature into 'Standard Swahili'. In fact he laid down the foundation for the norm on the language of modern literature and contributed to its adoption into modern literature. He is really a founder of the modern literary language.

The analysis of the written monuments makes it possible to trace the main trends and development of the dialect basis of the Swahili literary language and its history.