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SWAHILI ORAL TRADITIONS

1. THE TALE (*NGANO*)*

Prose tales in Swahili are in plentiful supply in the sense that almost everyone in East Africa can tell a story on request. Most East Africans are not native speakers of Swahili and so their stories may not be of purely Swahili origin, but then, all the 'pure' Swahili tales themselves are of varying provenance: Arabian, Persian and Indian as well as African, as I have pointed out in the Introduction to my *Myths and Legends of the Swahili*, London 1970. In addition, a large number of the tales of the other East African peoples have been influenced by the motifs which the Swahili travellers brought from the East African coast where they may have heard oriental tales told by the sailors and traders from overseas. In this way many themes that are familiar to us from the Arabian Nights and the Indian Fables [1] penetrated into the interior of Africa, a process that has been going on for centuries. Probably as a result of this Swahili influence, vestiges of Indian fables and judgment tales can be found in tales of the Mongo-Nkundo of Zaire,[2] and even in Southern Africa.[3] The Swahili are very fond of travellers' tales and some of these have been written down and published by the German scholars Büttner and Velten in c.1900.[4] Both also published other Swahili narratives, in verse and prose. The best-known early collection was published in 1869 by Bishop Steere.[5]

The oriental strain in Swahili tales sets them apart from those in most other sub-equatorial languages.[6] Whereas in Zaire there are more animals and spirits figuring in the folklore, in

Swahili we find the (to non-Africans) more familiar characters of princes and princesses, sultans and jinns.

2. THE SONG (*WIMBO*)*

In Swahili literature, oral and written, songs are divisible into five categories, depending on the metre in which it is composed; the metre also determines the social function or the 'standing' of the poetry. These categories are, sliding down the scale from 'classy-classical' to popular-ephemeral: *shairi, tarabu, gungu, wimbo* and the impromptu songs of love which show no discernible metrical form and are sung in a free plainsong-type manner. All the existing metrical forms can be sung to traditionally available tunes and frequently new melodies are launched at special occasions. In Kenya and Tanzania, love songs, especially the *tarabu* type, enjoy a tremendous popularity which helped them survive the onslaught of the electronic guitar and the jazzification of the original refined Swahili music. The secularisation of Swahili society in the colonial and post-colonial period has gradually worn away the taboo against love songs in traditional Islamic society. See Ralph Russell, 'In pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal', *Journal of Asian Studies*, November 1969, p.113, whose description is almost completely applicable to Swahili society as it was; see also Knappert, 'A Gungu Song in the Gunya Dialect', *Afrika und Ubersee*, LVI, 3, 187-199.

The *gungu* is the oldest type of Swahili songs about love; we have specimens of it which date reputedly from the early seventeenth century; it is traditionally sung at weddings, often by the women for the bride. It contains reflections on marital love with covert allusions to lovemaking, but also with more philosophical feelings like the following lines sung by the bride:

> I thought I was born for misfortune
> but now God has made me a bride...

Songs of this type have been collected in Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, London: Heinemann 1979, pp.76-99; for other types, see Knappert, 'Wedding Songs from Mombasa', *Africana Marburgensia*, VII, 2, 1974, pp.11-31.

The *tarabu* is by far the most prominent of the 'classy' type of love poetry in Swahili. These songs still clearly display the characteristics of their original Islamic culture, so admirably summed up by Ralph Russell for the Urdu Ghazal *(loc.cit.)*. Frequently the poet accuses the beloved, or is accused by her, of unfaithfulness, of double-crossing him so that it becomes clear that in the former instance the poet had an illicit affair with a lady of fragile virtue who deserted him for another, but in the latter case, the poet had in some

secret way communicated his feelings to his beloved, who returned his love but then heard no more from him. The poet subsequently protests his undiminished love for the lady who is apparently in purdah, and explains why he he has been unable to re-establish contact with her: her father had doubled the guards at the door, or the poet did not want to endanger her still unblemished reputation. Often the poet has apparently married his beloved (or, in the traditionally cryptic language of this poetry, 'I put my song-bird in a cage'), who subsequently escaped; presumably she ran away with The Bad Man. Learning of this sad event, the poet invariably digresses into philosophical reflections on the unsteady hearts of women, and on the painful illness that is called Love. The only medicine for this disease is the beloved herself, another frequent theme in these songs. If she does not come soon, the poet will surely die; she may be compared to one of the chapters of the Koran which Swahili doctors prescribe as a cure for sickness, fever, insomnia, restlessness, listlessness, etc. An analysis of the themes in love poetry can be found in Knappert, 'Swahili *Tarabu* Songs', *Afrika und Ubersee,* LX, 1/2, pp.116-155 (Hamburg 1977).

Much shorter are the *nyimbo* (plural of *wimbo*), made up of stanzas of 36 (6 x 6) syllables, many consisting of only one such stanza, in which the poets compress their thoughts on love, philosophy, politics and many other aspects of life, real gems comparable to the Spanish *coplas*. See Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, London 1979, p.55; 'Swahili Proverb Songs', *Afrika und Ubersee,* LIX, 1976, pp.105-112. Even in these short songs one may unexpectedly find stray influences from other Islamic literatures, like the following, inspired by an unknown Persian song:

*Uwe Shiri * mimi niwe Farahadi*	You be Shirin, and let me be Farhad.
*Ukaapo, * niwe ndani ya fuadi*	Wherever you live, let me be in your heart.
*Tuwe hai * tutimilize miadi*	Let us be alive, let us fulfil our vows.

The metre is 3 x (4 + 8) syllables, one of the variants of the *wimbo*. See E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, Cambridge 1964, p.405, for Shirin and Fahad.

The singers are, with one or two exceptions, distinct from the poets, the latter being usually scholars writing poetry in their spare time. See Knappert, *A Choice of Flowers, an Anthology of Swahili Love Poetry*, London: Heinemann 1972, Introduction. Some of them write (or rather, recite in the tradition of Islamic scholars) anonymously when composing amorous poetry, such as the physical descriptions of the female body, of which there are some splendid examples in Swahili love poetry. For a specimen, see Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse,* 1979, pp.84-91.

Some songs are called *ghazali* by the Swahili poets. They are all in the *shairi* metre of 16 syllables in the line (for the metre, see Knappert, 'Swahili Metre', *African Language Studies* XII, SOAS, London 1971, 108-129). Its four-line stanzas are linked together by an elaborate rhyme scheme; amorous and philosophical themes alternate freely, showing remarkable similarity to the Urdu ghazal as described by Ralph Russell and Khurshid ul Islam in *Three Mughal Poets*, London 1968, pp.8-9. One *ghazali* of the mid-nineteenth century opens with the theme of ingratitude:

> Those on whom good things are showered
> many are they in this world...

Its refrain is: 'How could eye and eyelid quarrel?', i.e., a man should be grateful and obedient to his mother. See Carl Gotthilf Büttner , *Suaheli Schriftstücke in Arabischer Schrift*, Berlin.

Muyaka is the best-known poet of ghazals in Swahili, see Muyaka Bin Hajji al-Ghassaniy, *Diwani*, Johannesburg 1940. Muyaka was also the inventor of the political song in Swahili. He composed the oldest known epigrams in the language of his native Mombasa, witty little quatrains which could be interpreted in three ways, one philosophical, one amorous and one political. These verses could be sung as they were composed in a traditional metre (*shairi*: 16 syllables in the line) and became a success since everyone could read his own meaning into them. Here is an example:

> Two companions must not quarrel while they travel in the jungle.
> Ever watchful, the hyena may attack one after t'other.

That is true enough as an advice for travellers in the African bush. The reader should know, however, that in Swahili poetry the hyena is the image of the man who takes what does not belong to him, especially other people's wives. Consequently, the second meaning of the song may be an advice to a man not to quarrel with his wife lest she go off with another man. The third meaning of the song was very topical in Muyaka's days when Sayid Said, Imam of Oman, was busy conquering the Swahili towns by playing one off against another. In other words, Muyaka is counselling the leaders of the Swahili towns to unite against Oman before it is too late. Again, this third interpretation hinges on the image of the hyena in Islamic thinking, as the eater of carrion, forbidden food for a Muslim. This old Swahili tradition of composing political songs with hidden allusions in cryptic language which only the initiated understand, is very much alive today, while the same metrical forms are used as in Muyaka's days.

The non-metrical songs in Swahili are of a more ephemeral

nature, by which is meant that they are harder to get hold of, not that they are less interesting. A person who feels moved by the spirit, may compose a little song, often only one line, 'off the cuff', and sing it for his companions, who will repeat the last word or phrase, while travelling, cultivating or just sitting together. This impromptu singing is universally heard in Africa and needs no further comment, except that we still know very little about the technique of singing, the composition of the tune and the form of the refrain. The problem is that as these songs arise spontaneously and evaporate with time, the research worker seldom has his recording equipment ready to fix the song before it is forgotten.

3. THE PROVERB (*MATHALI*)*

Swahili proverbs are composed in either poetic or prose form, they may rhyme or scan or both. Many proverbs that do not strike the unsuspecting reader of Taylor's priceless collection[7] as poetic, do in fact have the 'right' number of syllables to form lines of verse, and scan when recited. Many poems and songs[8] in Swahili are composed entirely of proverbs (not only epigrams but love songs too) so that one may go as far as saying that proverbs form the major bricks of Swahili non-narrative and non-lyrical poetry. Even the lyrical poetry, yes, even the amorous songs are often built up of strings of rhyming proverbs[9] to form proverb songs[10] in which lyrical emotions are expressed allusively, so that the poet shows wisdom, resignation and self-restraint as well as love in his song:

> Unguarded birds cannot be kept in cages.
> Who can prevent the kites from seizing chickens?
> A cat will slip through narrow lanes and alleys.

These three proverbs are truisms to the unsuspecting listener who might be forgiven for thinking that the Swahili poets enjoy composing jingles for the sake of perfect rhyme and metre. The initiated listener, however, will perceive that this is a song of a resigned, deserted husband whose young wife has 'escaped' the marital home and has run away with another man. A kite is a common image for a man who takes what does not belong to him, a chicken for a good wife, a cage for marriage, and a cat for an adventurous woman.[11] This flowery symbolic language is used for both poetry and proverbs.

In Swahili tales, as in very many Bantu tales, the proverbs play a vital part, as does the song, and often the proverb is hidden in the song and is the clue to the tale. I call the tale to which the proverb refers the referential meaning of the proverb.[12] Many common expressions refer to tales, e.g., 'Do not expect me to be like the washerman's donkey', refers to the story of the monkey and the shark.[13]

4. THE EPIC (*UTENZI*)*

Epic poetry forms the largest single corpus of Swahili literature. The titles of some 70 epic poems have become known in the course of research by John Allen,[14] Alice Werner[15] and myself.[16] Not all the epic texts have come to light, so that of a few we know only the title. There are others of which the existence was not even suspected, that have been discovered by Mr. and Mrs. Allen.[17] In Swahili literature, epic can easily be defined as a narrative poem of 150 stanzas or more in the *utenzi* metre .[18] The longest known poem in Swahili, the life of Muhammed (unpublished) has 6,384 stanzas (an *utenzi* stanza has four lines), the longest ever written in an African language - to my knowledge. Modern poets write poetry, including epic, to be read, but the tradition of recitation is still alive, as long as sponsors can be found to pay the reciters for an evening, or a whole night. The reciter is called *mwimbaji* 'singer' in Swahili because he sings the stanzas to a melody that is part of his repertoire. The tune usually comprises two stanzas, then starts again at its beginning, with variations. There is no attempt at representation of characters or the expression of emotions. Singing epic is not accompanied by musical instruments as is the *tarabu*.[19] The contents of the majority of epic poems belong to the Islamic tradition; of the 70 epics, 43 are in the Islamic tradition, 36 of which deal with supposedly historical events, i.e., there is an historical nucleus wrapped up in much legendary material. For instance, two epic poems deal with the creation of Earth, followed by the lives of Adam and Eve and their children. Twenty-three of these 36 narratives, including all the long ones, are set during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. The great battle epics, which form the nucleus of the true chivalresque romances of Swahili literature are all part of this cycle with only one exception: the two epics that have come to light which immortalise the death of Husayn Bin Ali are set, of course, in a time when the Holy Prophet has already died, in 680 AD.

Of even greater interest to the Africanist are the two epic narratives on the heroic struggles of the Tanganyikans against the German conquest and oppression, known as the *Wajerumani Kutamalaki Mrima* (The Germans taking possession of the northern Tanganyika coast) and the *Majimaji*. In the former there is still a very strong Islamic element in the tradition and motivation, but the latter is entirely African in its setting. Unfortunately, I do not know of any recitations of epic poems other than those of the Islamic tradition. The reciters possess a repertoire of long poems which enables them to sing in their monotonous manner for a whole night. They have a prodigious memory, and can memorise a poem of a thousand stanzas in a week. This they do from the following source material:
(1) By listening to the performance of other reciters. The 'plagiarist' may write down the poem after he has heard it, from memory, for his own use, but some reciters never work with manuscripts, and we possess some epics on tape of which no manu-

scripts are known to exist so that in those cases the tradition is exclusively oral. (2) The reciter may copy a manuscript or have it copied for him by a scribe, usually a student. Or he may borrow a manuscript and memorise it. The singer, especially if he is not a professional, may also use his manuscript notes as an *aide-memoire* during his recitation, but this is the exception. Normally the reciters have no difficulty remembering hundreds of stanzas, although, of course, they do make mistakes. They may make a line longer or shorter than the rigidly prescribed eight syllables, so that it limps where they have forgotten a line, or they may repeat a previous line, but they will not normally improvise a line. The reciter will adapt the performance to the available time, so that if he is paid for an hour (c.£10), he will abridge the poem to half or a third of its length by omitting individual stanzas where they are repetitive, and often entire scenes from the epic. (Swahili epics are not divided into *cantos* but into scenes of differing length, marked by the words 'Now we will tell you of...' 'Now we must see what happened to...' or similar phrases.) Many scenes in the epic are descriptions of dress, jewelry, weaponry, horses and camels, flags and armour, battles and battlefields, scenes which can be omitted without disrupting the course of the narrative. Sometimes the reciter restores a line where he had forgotten a word by inserting another word which 'sticks out' because it has the wrong number of syllables or because it does not rhyme. Sometimes a proverb or other saying is misquoted so that the line limps. But in my experience there is never any real improvisation in Swahili epic recitations. The performer does not compose, he recites as faithfully as he can the lines as the poet has written them, with all the proverbs and other allusions to erudite works in them, which the reciter does not always appear to understand.

The definition of epic in Swahili has been given above. In Swahili, poetry is clearly distinguished from prose by its conspicuous rhythmic arrangement. The question may be posed: why is the term *epic* chosen as a label for these long poems, not the more descriptive one of rhymed narrative? The answer lies in the very nature of the subject. In literature there are no precise categories as there are in the sciences. Content must be the dominant criterion for the distinction of universal categories. For instance, if we decided to classify songs, proverbs or other literary categories by their functions in the society that uses them, these functions would be so different that we could never compare songs in one society to songs in another. The same applies to proverbs, riddles and other international categories. Epic is, more than any other literary form, a reality that one must have experienced in order to recognise it. Swahili epic poetry displays a grandeur of diction, a richness of style, a stately rhythm, a splendour of imagery, a sweep of vision that make it quite evident one has come face to face with the real epic poetry. This is, of

course, a personal statement, but that is inevitable in literature.

For other categories of oral literature the reader will have to be referred to the literature. Praise songs in honour of great personages have been discussed in a short article in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under *madīh*. Swahili elegies, i.e., songs in honour of the dead, will appear *ibidem* under Marthiya.

Liturgical literature is extensive in Swahili. There are a few good Christian hymns, but the vast majority of liturgical works serves the Islamic community. Hymns, sung prayers, songs in praise of saints and to accompany pilgrims on the road to Mecca, songs to celebrate weddings and homilies in verse. The most important single religious celebration is the Maulidi, when the Holy Prophet's birthday is commemorated. Numerous hymns in his honour are sung, six of which were published by this author in Volumes I and III of *Swahili Islamic Poetry*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1971.

NOTES

1. See Knappert, *Malay Myths and Legends*, Singapore: Heinemann 1980, pp.171-92.
2. E.P. Hulstaert, *Fables Mongo*, Tervuren: Musée de l'Afrique Centrale; Knappert, 'Judgment Tales of the Nkundo', paper SOAS.
3. See Knappert, *Namibia, Land and Peoples, Myths and Fables*, Leiden: Brill 1981, pp.99-112.
4. Dr. C.G. Büttner , *Anthologie der Suaheli Literatur*, Berlin 1894; Dr. Carl Velten, *Prosa und Poesie der Suaheli*, Berlin 1907.
5. Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales*, London 1869. For a modern collection, see *See That We May See* by Peter Seitel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1981.
6. See Knappert, *Myths and Legends of the Congo*, London: Heinemann 1971.
7. W.E. Taylor, *African Aphorisms, Saws from Swahililand*, London: SPCK 1894.
8. See p. 25 above.
9. See Knappert, 'Rhyming Swahili Proverbs', *Afrika und Ubersee*, 49, 1965, 59-68.
10. See Knappert, 'Swahili Proverb Songs', *Afrika und Ubersee*, 59, 1976, 105-112.
11. See Knappert, 'A Gungu Song in the Gunya Dialect', *Afrika und Ubersee*, 56, 185-200.
12. See Knappert, 'On Swahili Proverbs', *African Language Studies*, 16, 1975, 117-146.
13. E. Steere, *Swahili Tales*, London 1869, p.3.

14. J.W.T. Allen, 'Tendi', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, January 1950, 81-83.
15. Alice Werner, 'Swahili Poetry', *BSOS*, I, 2, 1918, 113-127.
16. J. Knappert, 'The Canon of Swahili Literature', in B.C. Bloomfield (ed.), *Middle East Studies and Libraries*, London: Mansell 1980, pp.85-102.
17. J.W.T. Allen, *Tendi*, London: Heinemann's Educational Books, 1971, p.77.
18. See Knappert, 'Swahili Metre', *African Language Studies*, XII, 1971; SOAS London, p.112.
19. See Knappert, *A Choice of Flowers*, London 1972: Heinemann, p.7; Knappert, 'Swahili Tarabu Songs', *Africa und Ubersee*, 60, 1977, 119-155.

* GLOSSARY

MATHALI, pl. *mithali* (or *methali* without distinction of pl.), 'a proverb', (lit.: a parable); the word *fumbo* is also used for 'a gnomic line of verse with a hidden meaning', or, 'an image, a comparison'.

NGANO, a tale, a fairy tale; *hadithi* a more serious narrative, a tradition, usually from Islamic history (but which non-Muslims call legend).

UTENZI, pl. *tenzi*, in Kenya Coast Swahili, *utendi*, pl. *tendi*, 'a poem in the metre of 32 syllables in the stanza'. This metre being almost exclusively used for epic poetry, *utenzi* has come to mean 'epic'.

WIMBO, pl. *nyimbo*, a song in general, and more specifically, a song of 12 syllables in the line.