

A HISTORY OF SWAHILI PROSE

BY

JACK D. ROLLINS

PART ONE

FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO THE END OF
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



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To Linda, Derek and my father

Wa-li-kulli qawmin sunnatun wa-ʿimāmuḥā

And, of course, each people has its own way and its own leaders.

from “The Golden Ode” of Labīd ibn Rabiʿa

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi.

There is always something new from Africa.

Pliny, the Elder, *Natural History*, VII

It is the stars,

The stars above us, govern our conditions;

Else one self mate and mate could not beget

Such different issues.

King Lear, Act IV, Scene iii, 34

Muungu amekuleta juu ya ulimwengu, shindia moyo wako ...
Umekuja juu ya ulimwengu, ukapewa kitu chema—kitae tumboni,
kibaya—kitoke. Umekuja juu ya ulimwengu, usiwe mgomvi,
ukagombanisha watu, sababu wahenga wamesema:

“Lifaʿalo kueleza lieleze

lisilofaʿa limeze.”

God has brought you into the world; look to your conscience ... You
have come into the world; if you are given a good thing, hoard it; if
it is bad, throw it away. You have come into the world; do not be
quarrelsome and annoy people because the old men have said:

“Speak that which is proper

Swallow that which is not.”

Mtoro bin Mwenye Bakari, “Kuzaliwa
kwake Mtoto na Desturi baʿada ya
Kuzaliwa kwake,” from *Destruri za
Waswahili*.

PREFACE

This first small volume of *A History of Swahili Prose* is intended to set out in a systematic and comparative framework the backgrounds and earliest development of Swahili prose types. As such, a reader will find no newly discovered hitherto unpublished prose manuscripts here; indeed the emphasis has been placed on well-known published works. Thus it is hoped that any modest value that may be found in this book may be seen in the arrangement of the materials rather than in the elucidation of any new prose specimens.

To any reader who is at all familiar with the work of older Oriental and Swahili scholars, it is no doubt inutile to point out my indebtedness to the work of Goldziher, Brockelmann, Lane, Dozy, Nicholson, Rosenthal, Werner, Whiteley, Harries, Allen, Knappert, and many others too numerous to mention, it being easily recognizable that I have drawn freely from their scholarship.

Of the many others who might not be as easily recognized, but who have proffered as much help, I should especially like to thank Professor Emile Snyder who originally and then later steadfastly supported this book, Professors Charles Bird and Mary Gaither for their helpful criticism, and Professor Salih Altoma for his many patient hours helping me set my Arabic right. Also in this regard, I am grateful to A. P. Nawfal and Zaynab Istrabadi for their particular help with some orthographic matters. Doubtless, I think it will also be acknowledged that I owe a debt to Dr. Khalil Rizk of the University of Bahrain for his many suggestions and unfaltering encouragement. My thanks are also due to the African Studies Program and Professor Patrick O'Meara, and to Professor Breon Mitchell of the Comparative Literature Department, both of Indiana University for their financial and academic support. I am also very much obliged to Indiana State University and to the Department of English for having generously granted the leaves during which most of this book was written. Too, my gratitude is due to Professor Richard Frushell who read and corrected a draft of the Introduction; to Mr. Norman Coopridier, the University cartographer, I should like to acknowledge my appreciation for his expert map; and to Mrs. Mary A. Wallace, who typed this manuscript in its entirety more than once, I should also like to express my thanks. For permission to reproduce parts of the section on the *nenola hekima* which first appeared in *Research in African Literatures*, 10, No. 1 (1979), I should like to thank the editor, Professor Bernth Lindfors. Finally, I now feel as the late E. G. Browne must have when he wrote in

his Preface to the 1928 edition of his *A Literary History of Persia*, that “of the defects of this book, now that it is all in type, I am fully sensible.” And thus the responsibility of any errors declaring themselves on the ensuing pages is solely mine.

Terre Haute, Indiana
June, 1982

Jack D. Rollins

A NOTE ON THE transliteration OF THE ARABIC AND THE SWAHILI-ARABIC SCRIPT

In transliterating both the Arabic and the Swahili-Arabic script, I have tried to follow a consistent orthographic system observing solar letters where applicable in definite articles and rendering Arabic characters in Roman as follows:

ʾalif		Ghayn	gh	Diphthongs	
Bāʾ	b	Fāʾ	f	Wāw	aw
Tāʾ	t	Qāf	q	Yāʾ	ay
Thāʾ	th	Kāf	k		
Jīm	j	Lām	l		
Hāʾ	h	Mīm	m		
Khāʾ	kh	Nūn	n		
Dāl	d	Hāʾ	h		
Dhāl	dh	Wāw	w		
Rāʾ	r	Yāʾ	y		
Zāy	z	Hamza	ʾ		
Sīn	s				
Shīn	sh	Long Vowels			
Ṣād	ṣ	ʾalif	ā		
Ḍād	ḍ	Wāw	ū		
Ṭāʾ	ṭ	Yāʾ	ī		
Zāʾ	ẓ				
ʿayn	ʿ	Short Vowels			
		Fatḥa	a		
		Ḍamma	u		
		Kasra	i		

In transliterating the Swahili-Arabic script, I have tried to follow this same system as much as it was possible so as not to confuse the reader with many of the idiosyncratic orthographic practices followed by the Swahili during this early period. And thus it was hoped the characteristic features of this script as used by the Swahili might appear more obvious to the reader. Nonetheless, in order to transliterate some Swahili words written in the Swahili-Arabic script into Roman Swahili, it was necessary to observe, for example, a reversed *ḍamma* as a Roman letter o, and upon occasion, an orthodox *ḍamma* as a Roman o as well. But these specimens are few in number and the reader will find all of these matters explained in more detail in Chapter 1.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

EI ¹	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i>
EI ²	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of African History</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
SD	<i>East African Coast: Select Documents</i> , G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville
TNR	<i>Tanganyika Notes and Records</i> (Now <i>Tanzania Notes and Records</i>)



The Indian Ocean at the End of the Nineteenth Century Including the Traditional Dialects of Swahili.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a literary history of the varieties of Swahili prose from earliest times to the end of the 19th century; indeed, to affix more precise dates to this period would suggest limits that are not possible to claim. This work is thus not arranged by dynasties, rulers, movements or periods; in fact, strictly speaking, it does not proceed chronologically at all. Rather it is an attempt to illuminate a certain nexus existing between the deep recesses of the Swahili imagination and the forms of its prose: prose as metaphors. It is a history of sorts of the Swahili people as figured forth in its literature.

Acknowledging the importance of the political history of East Africa during the second half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century,¹ it is a curious fact that no general literary histories of Swahili

¹ It will be remembered that it was in the 19th century that the West renewed its acquaintance with Africa. The immense importance of the period from the middle of the 19th century to the early 20th century cannot be disputed whether in relation to modern Africa or to Europe and the United States. During this period a significant portion of the East African littoral bore witness to the rule of the Abulsaid dynasty of Oman in the singular personage of the Imam Seyyid Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi, a man of some perception about whom Atkins Hamerton, the British consul at Zanzibar, in his report of 1844 declared "Never will His Highness' dominions be under the rule of so benevolent and considerate a prince or one who has so much endeavoured to fulfill the engagements he has entered into with European nations." (R. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders*, New York: Russell and Russell, 1965, pp. 547-548). It was no doubt in part due to Said's commercial acumen that the ancient civilizations of Kilwa and Zanzibar had become cosmopolitan with French as widely heard as Swahili or Arabic in some quarters of the islands. As a rendezvous for foreign shipping, Zanzibar became the *entrepôt* for East Africa, exporting ivory, slaves, cloth, beads, weapons and cloves. In 1822, several years before Hamerton's report, a new trade agreement between France and Zanzibar had already been signed. This was followed by an agreement between the United States and Zanzibar in 1833. By 1840 Said had made Zanzibar his permanent residence and thus Zanzibar had become the virtual center of the Omani realm.

The European attention which focused on East Africa was, in large, begun by missionaries and European adventurers during this period. Yet while partition was only a few years away, it could hardly be claimed that they themselves had any colonial designs, commercial or political, on any part of East Africa. It was rather King Leopold II of Belgium who, because of his rather pretentious ambition to create an overseas empire for himself, declared his rule over the whole of the Congo basin that started the intense European interest and the subsequent partition of East Africa. Between 1883-1885 Germany had annexed portions of South-West and East Africa, seeking to legitimize their actions at the Berlin conference of 1884 by citing the so-called treaties obtained by Karl Peters. The British, chiefly to protect Egypt, turned to East Africa themselves, and by 1886 Salisbury had been able to demarcate both Kenya and Zanzibar for the British. Remarkably, nearly all of these boundaries, which were to form the outlines of many modern states, were sketched out in Europe and had little relationship to the actual ethnicity of the area. Thus one would not be in error in seeing a map of East Africa during this period as a projection of European political interests.

prose have been produced. While surely it is a commonplace to see a literature as a reflection of a culture's *Zeitgeist*,² the 20th century has paid precious little attention to this notion in regard to the Swahili. Doubtless this corpus of early Swahili prose, as primary material for any number of multi-disciplinary studies of the Swahili, seems invaluable and is further justification for a literary history of the prose of this early period. But there is an added and even more obvious one as well: for it was during this span of history that Swahili prose first made a sustained appearance.

The twenty-five year period before the advent of the British protectorate, especially after the 1861 partition of Zanzibar from Oman, and the sultanate of Sayyid Barghash, certainly constituted one of the most crucial periods of Swahili-Arab history. It was during this period that the coastal Swahili reached their summit of influence, an influence that extended to parts of Uganda, Nyasaland and the Congo, and an influence that would over the next twenty years also witness a precipitous decline. It was too a period that saw the infamous disputes between the last independent Mazrui, Mbaruk bin Rashid and Sultan Barghash and the abortive invasion of the East African littoral by the Khedive Ismail and the Egyptians. The famous slave treaties of 1873 and 1876 between Barghash and the British were also made during this period. On the coast, Frere Town was established near Mombasa to rehabilitate slaves. In 1884 a sweeping famine ravished the coast from Kilwa to Lamu and as a consequence, the slave trade was revived. The sultanate of Witu fell under German influence, an event that precipitated the Anglo-German treaty of 1890 that established a British Protectorate over Zanzibar and the withdrawal of the Germans from Witu. By 1900 the East African railway had approached Lake Victoria; and by 1924 Ormsby-Gore in his report on East Africa had reached the astonishing conclusion that economic development in East Africa had to be directed to the benefit of Africans. On the Swahili coast, Sir Arthur Hardinge, perhaps due to his sympathies toward Muslims, perhaps due to his lack of staff, began putting Arabs and Swahili in all fields of government. At the demand of the German government, he restored the Witu sultanate. By 1912 Arab schools had been established, and by the 1920's the Arab/Swahili influence was in rapid decline as interest shifted to the interior. For a fuller discussion, see *History of East Africa*, Vol. 1, ed. Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 212-454 and Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 171-206.

² That a literary history is a record of a culture, civilization is an argument that has appeared in many forms in many different periods; certainly to rehearse the entire history of this idea would be tedious here. In the 19th century, the period this history ends with, Hippolyte Taine, among others, defined the novel as a portable mirror that a writer held up everywhere he went. In the 20th century it has become popular to see literature as Harry Levin suggested, that is, as an illumination of Professor Stoll's concept of literature as a refraction of life rather than a reflection of life. This idea supposes that literary history should deal with both the milieu in which the literature was produced and the forms that it took, these two in the end being, in Levin's lexicon, "complementary frames of reference." See Taine's *History of English Literature*, trans. Henry van Laun (New York: F. Ungar, 1965), Edwin Greenlaw, *The Province of Literary History* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1931), pp. 36-86, Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 3-53, Morton Bloomfield, *In Search of Literary Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 193-233, Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn History* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), pp. 1-39, George Watson, "The Literary Past," *On Literary Intention*, ed. David Newton-DeMolina (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp. 158-173, Leo Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957), pp. ix-xvi, René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harvest Books, 1956), pp. 20-29, 252-273.

Hence, especially from a literary perspective, such a literary history is all the more exigent.

Previous historical studies of Swahili literature, different as they were in intent and execution, of course exist; but chiefly they have been focused on the older, intricate poetic genres. And however valuable in themselves, these works all seemed to share a common shortcoming: their perspective was too limited. Content to describe only selected features of form upon which their conclusions were based, these histories never seemed to combine linguistic phenomena with the more obvious socio-linguistic aspects of the development of literary types in Swahili. In varying degrees Allen, Knappert and Harries,³ for example, all chose to see particular elements of form characteristic of Swahili poetry in Oriental traditions. From this comparison of features, they were assured of an Oriental heritage of Swahili poetry. And indeed this may very well be a justifiable observation. However, as should be apparent to any comparatist, this position is weakened considerably if it is based on comparisons of literary form that are not integrated sufficiently with other linguistic and socio-linguistic phenomena, used ultimately to suggest more profound explanations for this convergence of literary forms. To see similar constituents of a particular genre in a literary type of another language is a literary perception of a low level. If one were to compare the prose genre of the *hadithi* in Swahili to the Arabic prose genre termed *ḥadīth*, he would admittedly find undeniable affinities.



Yet surely these affinities must be seen as symptomatic of other influences. For example, how does one explain this convergence of form on a linguistic level? Can it be attributed to imitation alone? While any attempt to offer an explanation for this convergence of form must be seen as a more comprehensive approach than those which focused exclusively

³ See J. W. T. Allen, *Tendi* (New York: Africana Publishing House, 1971), Jan Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) and Lyndon Harries, *Swahili Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

on the description of the constituents of a genre, it too dissolves into superficiality. Even if one were to compare similarly affected African cultures in terms of common Arabic/Islamic prose types, what could be concluded about the supposed convergence of form? Consider the Islamic cultures of the Nupe, Wolof and Hausa:

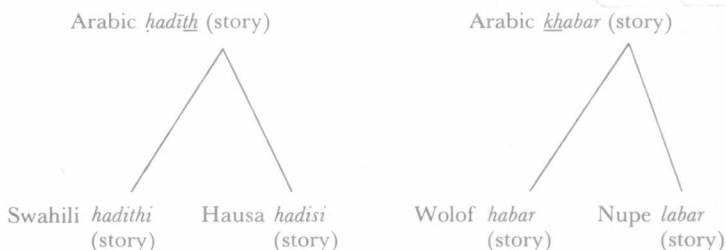


Figure B

All of these African languages appear to have words which are etymologically related to the Arabic words whose semantic range includes the sense of story. But again one is operating at a low level of description since all these affinities really demonstrate is that each language had some contact with Arabic. In fact all of these words in their African languages signified many things in addition to story.

These are obvious and undeniable shortcomings of previous approaches that need to be addressed in any diachronic study of Swahili literature. A literary history of the varieties of Swahili prose must attempt, on a more profound level and in a more systematic way, to explain the reasons, both linguistic and socio-linguistic, for the development of Swahili prose types and their complex relationships with Oriental cultures. To describe similar constituents in Arabic and Swahili genres should be but the very beginning of the inquiry. Each Swahili prose type should be traced historically to its first appearance in Swahili and then, through etymological study, to its etymon perhaps in a source language. If the etymon is found in a source language, say Arabic, then the process should continue from this level through the etymon's development in Arabic. Then it should be traced to its appearance as a prose type and its subsequent literary development to the corresponding period in which the Swahili prose type was described.

Represented graphically, the process would be:

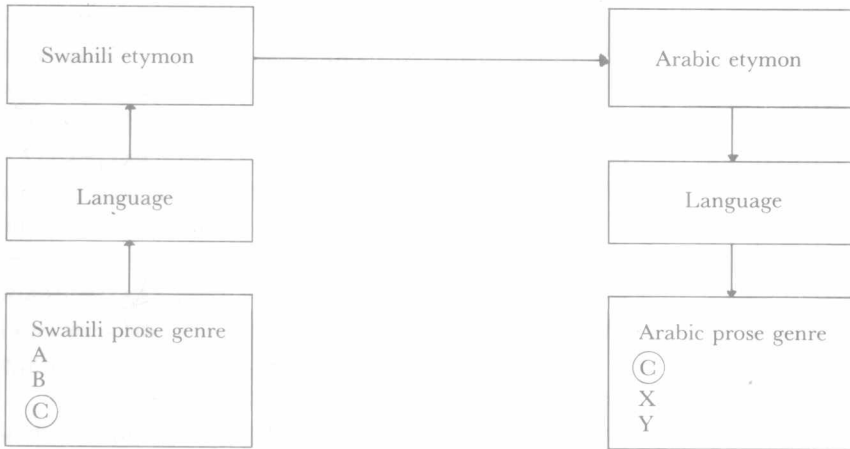


Figure C

Thus to see a convergence of the constituent C in both the Swahili and Arabic prose genres may be explained by noting a transfer of an etymon from Arabic to Swahili. This is a relatively common phenomenon between contact languages as Weinreich and others⁴ have pointed out. Linguistically, these etymons can be seen as free standing morphemes being transferred from a source language (Arabic) to a recipient language (Swahili). That the slot these morphemes filled in Swahili seemed to have similar semantic features while still proffering a different variety of alter-

⁴ Of the traditional partitions of subject matter of language acquisition and use—morphophonemics, syntax and semantics—the etymon should be seen in terms of its lexical properties. That is, to use Lyons' lexicon (*New Horizons in Linguistics*, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), it is really a lexeme, something akin to what Leo Spitzer in his *Linguistics and Literary History* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962) describes as a "spiritual etymon," a psychological root, a common denominator," (p. 11), or an aspect of a word that stands for a concept. See also Janice Mouton and George Robinson, *The Organization of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-36. For a fuller discussion of the transfer of morphemes from one language to another see Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 29-47, 63-71, and his *On Semantics* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), pp. 3-37, 267-317. The transfer of morphemes from Arabic to Swahili has been discussed by Edgar Polome, *Swahili Language Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1967), pp. 59-76, Bernard Krumm, *Words of Oriental Origin in Swahili* (London: Sheldon Press, 1940), pp. 75-84 and Sharifa Zawawi, *Loan Words and Their Effect on the Classification of Swahili Nominals* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), pp. 37-59. Usually the recipient language, Swahili, accepts the "loans" in the slot that best fits their semantic content. Also see Dorothea Driever, *Aspects of a Case Grammar of Mombasa Swahili* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske, 1975), pp. 151-65, and Gudrun Miehe, *Die Sprache der älteren Swahili-Dichtung (Phonologie und Morphologie)* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1979), pp. 170-205. For a discussion of the role of etymons, see Yakov Malkiel, *Etymological Dictionaries: A Tentative Typology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 1-28.

nates in this the recipient language, would suggest an explanation for the perhaps wider semantic range of the word in Swahili, and by extension, in Nupe, Hausa and Wolof if the slots filled in those languages also served a differing range of function than in the source language, Arabic.

This transfer of etymons might also suggest, at a very deep level of language, an explanation for convergence of form that is seen to exist between certain Swahili and Arabic literary types. Thus these Swahili prose genres can be seen as metaphors for this confluence. To see the constituent C in a Swahili prose genre and constituent C in an Arabic prose genre (See figure C) might very well be, in part, the result of a transfer of etymons as unbound morphemes between these two languages at a deep level of structure.

But that too, while certainly attempting a deeper more comprehensive level of analysis, is ultimately only a partial explanation. Tempered by the dialectic between itself and its milieu, language is always in flux: the etymons that might condition the generation of language in a particular Swahili prose genre are certainly as protean as the Arabic etymon is in its own environment. These cannot be seen as constants, or worse, *in vacuo*. In short the socio-linguistic environment plays as important a role as the purely linguistic milieu. Consequently any literary history that traces the development of Swahili prose types must look for explanations of form in the *rapprochement* between both aspects of linguistic and socio-linguistic phenomena. The complex relationship between these two constitutes the realm in which the contemplation of literary form occurs: it is the very domain of the praxis of a literature.

During the early history and to the end of the 19th century, Swahili shows two major socio-linguistic influences both of which lead one to Oriental cultures: language domain and linguistic allegiance. Both of these were very much conditioned by the contact between Arabic and Swahili through the medium of Islam, a medium that was hardly unique in Africa. Indeed Arabic, through the medium of Islam, had a significant influence on many African cultures and languages like the Swahili which did not so much as even present congruent grammars or *apriori* similar vocabularies. Yet this congress, as evidenced in the case of the Swahili, very often resulted in linguistic borrowing. But very often this was due to individual psychological and socio-cultural reasons rather than purely linguistic ones. For example, in many cases where Islam was assimilated with African traditions through the medium of the Arabic language,⁵

⁵ See J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), and *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) in which he argues that Islam was accepted in common stages by African converts. The last stage is of most interest for this discussion since it was here that he claimed the most profound