

Four Centuries of Swahili Verse

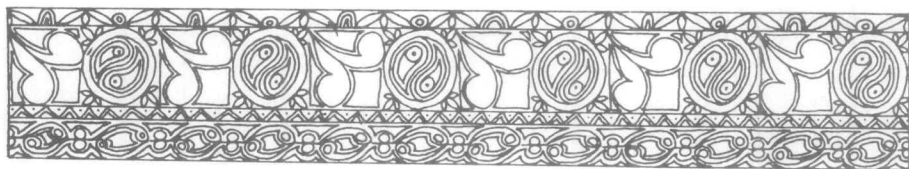
A literary history and anthology



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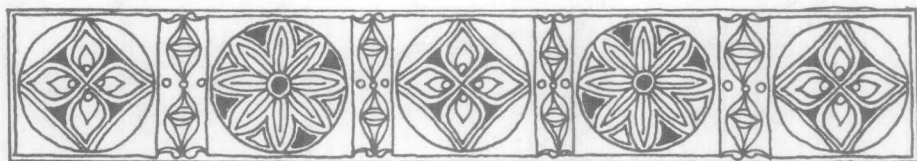
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FOUR CENTURIES OF SWAHILI VERSE

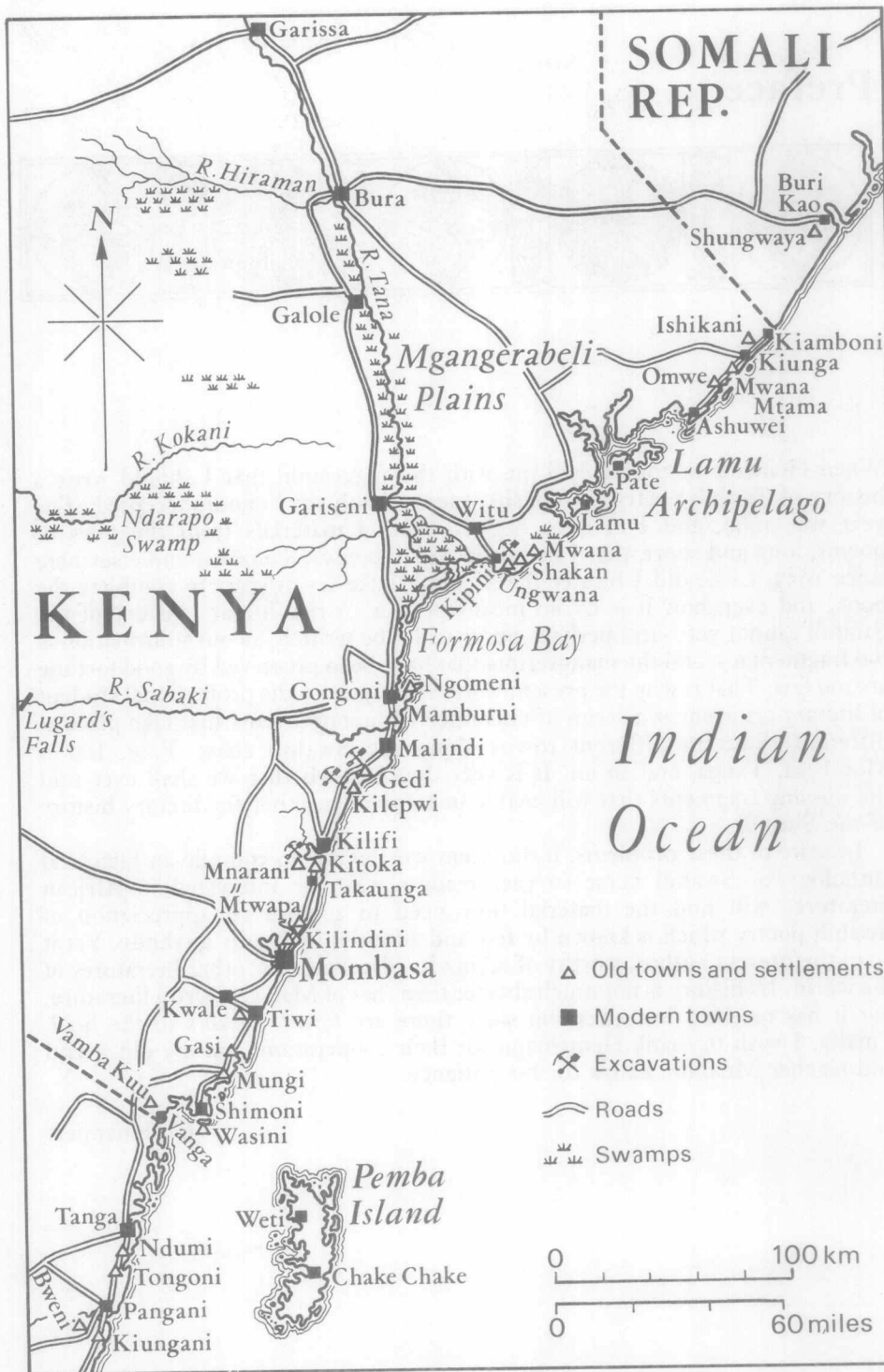
Preface



When Heinemann approached me with the suggestion that I should write a history of Swahili poetry, I, foolishly pleased with the honour, accepted. The year was 1969, and I at once began selecting materials from the piles of poems, long and short, that I had collected in Kenya, Tanzania and elsewhere since 1953. Little did I foresee that it would take seven years to complete the book, and even now it is by no means perfect. A real literary history of the Swahili cannot yet—and perhaps never will—be written, as our information is too fragmentary, and the manuscripts that have been preserved by good fortune are too few. That is why the present work will appear to the professional student of literary criticism as a series of unconnected literary events that take place at different times in different towns along the Swahili coast: Pate, Lamu, Mombasa, Tanga, and so on. It is very doubtful whether we shall ever find the missing fragments that will enable us to piece together the literary history of the Swahili.

In spite of these problems, it did seem worthwhile to compile an historical anthology of Swahili verse so that readers who are interested in African literatures will find the material they need to acquire an appreciation of Swahili poetry which is known by few and admired by hardly anybody. Yet it is, to the present author, worthy of taking its place with the other literatures of the world. Its history is not much shorter than that of Malay or Urdu literature, but it has received less attention since there are fewer workers in the field. Finally, I wish to thank Heinemann for their cooperation, and my old friend and teacher Muallim Yahya for his patience.

Jan Knappert

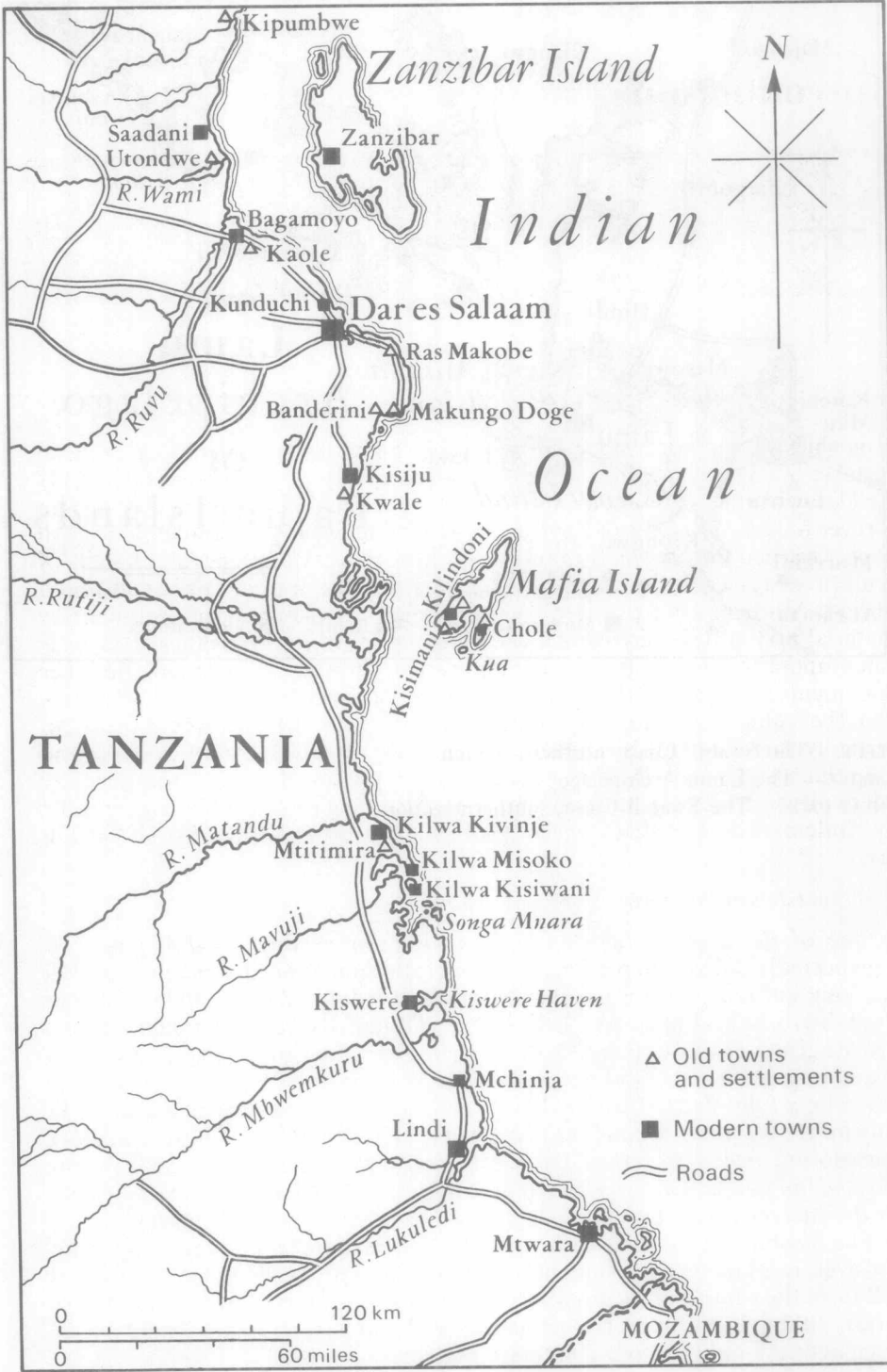




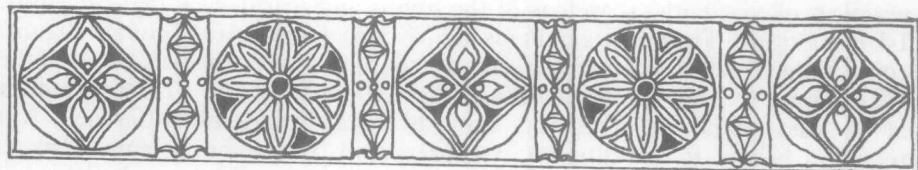
LEFT: The Swahili Coast, northern section

ABOVE: The Lamu Archipelago

NEXT PAGE: The Swahili Coast, southern section



Introduction



It is with the literary history of the Swahili people as it is with their political history: our knowledge of it is only fragmentary. Some periods are reasonably well known, others present us with questions for which the answers may remain forever hidden. Students of English or French literary history and criticism will expect learned treatises on Swahili society in successive centuries and a series of erudite essays critically assessing the works of the leading authors in each period. Neither is yet possible. We may hope that some more documentary material may still be discovered, shedding new light on the authors and their contemporaries, but the present author is not optimistic. A few letters and other documents belonging to the diplomatic correspondence between the Portuguese and the sultans of Pate may still be lingering in the archives at Lisbon; certainly there are still Swahili manuscripts in the possession of persons who are reluctant to show these to outsiders, even though the paper may literally fall to pieces. Many manuscripts remain in the strong rooms of libraries, unread by students who find that it is too hard to learn Arabic script. As the Swahili say:

Bei ni bidii ukitalii. Exertion is the price when you study.

One of the reasons for this lack of attention is that Swahili poetry is unexpectedly difficult to penetrate. Some explanation is needed here, as Swahili has long suffered from a peculiar misunderstanding. We are often told that Swahili is a hybrid language, half Arabic and half Bantu. One might observe that English is half Germanic, half French; is it wrong for a language to be of mixed origin? The implication is, of course, that Swahili, being a 'hybrid', can never be a fully fledged national language. It will always remain a jargon, fit only for the market place and the plantation, in short, a pidgin. Those who speak thus do not realize that they are familiar only with one type of Swahili, the *kisokoni* 'market language', which is current in much of East and Central Africa on the market places between people who have no common language.

The Swahili that is used by the genuine Swahili people in the coastal towns, however, is infinitely richer and more varied. It has produced the literature that will form the subject of the present work. It was traditionally written in Arabic script, although in this work that aspect of the literary expression will not be discussed; it would require a separate volume.

Another problem is that all the writers of Swahili verse and prose between 1650 and 1850 were Muslims, and did not hide the fact. They wrote consciously as believers in the doctrine of their Holy Prophet, and this fact has discouraged many western students of Swahili from making any inroads into this body of literature. It requires serious study and a deep understanding of the tenets and practices of that faith, as well as of the myths and world-view that prevail in Islamic culture. Those poets built (as did Milton) lengthy works out of religious convictions which are unacceptable or even despised in the modern world of the West. Without a fair understanding of these convictions and a certain amount of (at least temporary) sympathy towards them, ideological differences will remain a barrier to any attempt at appreciation. In Swahili Islamic culture, every poet's work is soaked in the implicit assumptions of Islamic belief; even the secular poetry has to be appreciated in terms of its Islamic imagery, among other things.

We cannot make a distinction between the doctrinal content and the literary art, nor concentrate on the purely aesthetic side of their poetry. They wrote and write about ideas which have little affinity with the mentality of the West in the twentieth century. Especially the great epic tradition is a series of long romances revolving around the revered personality of the Prophet Muhammad. It relates the work which God has undertaken through His Prophet, on behalf of the erring human race. The intense convictions of these devout poets that it was for the good of their fellow human beings that they were writing made them into modest craftsmen, wielders of the pen by His grace, who claimed no credit for themselves since all artistic merit belongs to the Creator, so they feel. This humility explains why so many poems are unsigned and undated, and why so little of the poetry reflects daily life in the Swahili world. All this should not prevent the devoted student of literature from an honest attempt to master Swahili poetry. It is worth it. The religious feelings expressed in it are genuine and often lead to wonderful flights of poetic ecstasy; the narrative passages often open up into true epic with a power that may stand on equal terms with other poetry anywhere in the world.

Amongst the peoples of tropical Africa, the Swahili are unique in having developed a written literature. Unfortunately, the Swahili coast belongs to one of the most humid and torrid zones on this planet. Apart from the sweltering climate, there are many other enemies of paper: white ants, cockroaches and torrential rains. The result of these destructive powers is that only half a dozen or so manuscripts written in Swahili survive from the period prior to 1800. Students of the literatures of drier or cooler lands are lucky: in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, northern India and North China, manuscripts have come down to us from antiquity, so that a continuous history of literary traditions can be written. Apart from the great works of the well-known authors, there are letters, diaries, notes and sketches, as well as bills and accounts of income and expenses, all of which help to give us a picture of the life and times of these great authors. In the case of Swahili literature up till the last hundred years, we possess no such sources. We should reckon ourselves lucky that we know at least the names of the few great poets of the earliest periods: Aidarusi, Bwana Mwengo and his son Abu Bakari, Muyaka Ghasani and a few others. We can just date them with approximation, and locate them in their customary domiciles along what is now the Kenya coast and its islands—but nothing more. We do not know when they were born or when they died;

even Muyaka's grave is unknown, although he probably died in 1837. Liongo's grave can be seen near the mouth of the Ozi River, but who will believe that a grave twelve feet long belongs to a human being? We know nothing about those early authors' background. Were their parents rich or poor? Muyaka is the first Swahili poet about whose life we can speculate, and that only on the basis of his own works. There are no letters or diaries by contemporaries, no account books of royal courts in which the names of the authors are entered for stipends or any other form of princely patronage. We know that Bwana Mwengo lived about 1720, and flourished in Pate, and that the sultan ordered him to write what was to become one of the masterpieces of Swahili literature. Alas, the archives of the sultans' court in Pate perished with the palace in the early years of the nineteenth century. A few manuscripts of that early period may have survived in the private collections of some families whose members have kept up an interest in their historical inheritance in spite of the hard times upon which all old-established Swahili families have fallen. These people are naturally reluctant to lend, or even show, their priceless treasures to foreign students, the more so since some Europeans, and some others too, have not been as scrupulously honest as they ought to have been.

But even with regard to the later period, to the poets born in the early 1900s, all of whom died in the 1960s, none of these has found a biographer yet. Consequently, although there are still people alive today who remember these writers from personal encounter, nothing has been published of their reminiscences.

Clearly it is not the task of the literary historian to interview all the authors' contemporaries. In the case of, say, English literature, such 'grass-roots' work has been done. The lives of all the great English poets who lived between 1600 and 1900 are well known and documented too. By comparison, the lives of the Swahili poets of the same period are almost totally *terra incognita*. That is why a true and proper complete history of Swahili literature is not, and will not be, possible.

There is an additional problem, equally incomprehensible to the student of English literature: that of the language. Shakespeare is perhaps the last English poet about whose language and linguistic usage not all scholars are confident. However, the literature about this one poet exceeds in bulk many times that which has been written about all Swahili poets put together. Detailed critical studies exist analysing every single one of his works, and glossaries are available to enable the uninitiated reader to acquaint himself with Shakespeare's use of the English language. There is nothing of this nature for Swahili literature. No critical studies have yet been written about any of the classical poets. Few glossaries exist; some which do the present author has compiled. And the language of the Swahili poets is easily twice as extensive as that which is contained in the so-called *Standard Swahili Dictionary* which the Oxford University Press still advertises as the best Swahili dictionary (because it is the only one available). The present author had to do almost all his own research in Islam, in Swahili culture and in Swahili lexicography, before much of the poetry in this book could even be translated.

In the case of contemporary poets, such as Mathias Mnyampala, Ahmad Nabahani, Ahmad Nassir and others, the present author has studied their works in full and asked them many hundreds of questions about the vocabulary in their poems.

In the case of poets of the early nineteenth century such as Muyaka and Bwana Mataka of Siu, the author had the invaluable assistance of Muallim Yahya Ali, who is widely recognized as the best living scholar of Swahili poetry.

For the poets of the Islamic tradition, whose vocabulary is profoundly influenced by Arabic literature, one has to make use of Arabic dictionaries, and study the Koran and the Muhammadan tradition, in order to clarify the obscure passages in their works. As for the eighteenth-century poets, the Swahili language of that period is already so distant from present-day usage that one has to draw heavily on comparative linguistic data such as are provided by the study of closely related Bantu languages of the area. In addition, all the epic poetry of the Islamic tradition describes the heroic deeds of the great warriors of Islamic history, whose exploits had to be found in the prose works of Arabic literature, so that the student of Swahili/Islamic epic now possesses at least an outline of the course of the narrative. In this manner, the meanings of many unknown words could be inferred from the context of the story, or from the parallel and contrastive stylistic devices of the poets.

Some early Swahili works are translations from known Arabic works. This is, fortunately, the case with the one great work we possess from the seventeenth century, the *Hamziya* (see p. 103).

The Purpose of Poetry

The chief, if not the only end of poetry, Dryden said, is to delight. The Swahili people certainly take a great delight in their poetry; they speak of good verse as *mashairi matamu*, 'sweet poems', and they say:

Maneno yapendezayo ❁ huleta mema matayo. Pleasing words bring a good reputation.

Yet neither fame nor the wish to please their fellow Swahili is the main inspiration for poets to write or recite their verses. Their chief aim is to teach. One poet, who admittedly belonged to the Islamic tradition, expressed it thus:

*Kwa nufai siandiki
mali ya dunya sitaki
Nandika kwa Mwenye haki
wana kuwapa wasia.*

I do not write to gain advantage,
the possessions of this world I do not crave;
I write for the sake of Him who owns the truth
and to admonish the young generation.

The expression of these wishes is found throughout popular poetry in the world of Islam. Even many of the secular poets in East Africa write in a didactic spirit, so that a large part of Swahili poetry, Islamic and non-Islamic, narrative as well as non-narrative, can be called sententious or gnomic. Even in amorous songs numerous lines are quotations from proverbs. It is not so much the poets' desire to play the father figure, nor is it just a fashion or a tradition among poets of the second magnitude; it is a genuine wish to acquire *hikima*, 'wisdom', and *elimu*, 'knowledge', that is, knowledge of the best way to live and to find one's way in the labyrinth of this world. This striving of Swahili poets is connected with their place in society which is fundamentally different from that of western poets in European and American societies. The latter have become individualists in a technocratic society, men and women whose strongly emotional attitudes towards life and their fellow men have placed them outside

the mainstream of life which runs in the direction of rationalism, of a business-like, composed behaviour. Consumption and politics, the desire for luxury and power, seem to be the main motivations of behaviour in western society. Not so amongst the Swahili. Sure enough, there are many who like power, and many who love luxury. At the same time, however, there is room for a strongly emotional outlook on life in Africa. Religion, man's relations with the spiritual world, seems to be the first recipient of these emotions. Secondly, the relations towards one's fellow men, parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, friends and brethren in the faith are frequent subjects for discussion, and find their place in poetry. The poet here has a function to fulfil in society: he is the one who gives a beautiful shape to these powerful emotions, the truth of which is in the life of his society itself; he voices the needs and wishes of his community with which he is one. He is not estranged from his world, he is in the midst of it, hence *we* would say that his verse is 'traditional' which is a misinterpretation of his work, and his place in his milieu. This is also why we call his verse 'gnomic', as if it were wrong to write down words of wisdom which, of course, is a matter of taste. The Swahili poet expresses what his community feels, the ideals to which it aspires, and for this he is regarded as a man of great knowledge and wisdom.

It is hoped that these few introductory words may have opened the English reader's eyes to the differences between our knowledge of English and Swahili literatures. Since this whole book is intended principally as an introduction to, and an anthology of, Swahili verse, the number of footnotes has been kept to a minimum. The author hopes later to put together a sourcebook of Swahili literature, with all the references to manuscripts in Arabic script as well as oral information collected in the field.

Very little of the poetry in this book has been published before. The material in the first five chapters is entirely the fruit of the author's personal research, and so is much of Chapter 6, except the last part which leans heavily on Sir Mbarak Ali Hinawy's *Al-Akida and Fort Jesus*. Those familiar with Swahili literature will observe that all the translations are the author's. Much more is known about the Swahili language today than in the days when Hichens and Hinawy wrote. The same applies to Chapter 7: many of the poems were already known, but the translations were totally unsatisfactory. Chapter 8 is based to a large extent on the work done by J. W. T. Allen to whom the author owes so much in this field. Without his work, Tanga would probably not be on the map of Swahili literary history. Chapter 9 is again mainly based on the author's own research, and grateful thanks are extended to the poet Ahmad Nassir Juma for his help with the work of his great-uncle, Ahmad Basheikh. As for Chapter 10, only Shaaban Robert's work was published before the author arrived in East Africa. The poems by Mnyampala and Amri Abedi were published by the author in the *Journal of the East African Swahili Committee*, or at his recommendation. The poems of Ahmad Nassir Juma at the end of the book are unpublished ones. He too, owes his fame to the author's recommendation. It was thus a great privilege to be so personally and so deeply involved in developing and making known a literature which deserves the attention of all students of literature in the developing nations. There was a time when Europeans and Americans said that Swahili did not have a literature, because who had heard of it? That time will never come back. Swahili literature will

take its place among the literatures of the world, as it will continue to flourish and become better known.

Swahili Language and Culture

The Swahili language belongs to the linguistic family of the Bantu languages, numbering well over a thousand languages and dialects which are spread over most of Africa south of the equator, reaching north of it in Cameroun, Zaïre, Uganda and, sporadically, in Kenya. Swahili was originally spoken as far north as Mogadishu where some place names (such as Shangani, on the sand) are reminders of the old population who were expelled by the Somalis in the sixteenth century and later. In Barawa and Kisima-iu (the latter place name means 'upper well' in Swahili) Swahili is still spoken, as also on the islands along the southern Somali coast, which are called in Swahili Magunyani. Barawa and Kisima-iu are still centres of Swahili literature and Islamic scholarship. The southern tip of the Swahili language area lies in northern Mozambique; the town of that name was once a Swahili town, and its original name, Msumbiji, is Swahili. In between these towns, Mogadishu and Mozambique, lies what has been known since the Middle Ages as the Swahili coast. Arab scholars of that period called it the *Bilādu's-Sawā'ilī*, the towns of the coastal people', hence the name Swahili. All the islands off the coast between these places are Swahili speaking, including the Comoro Islands. As a trade language, Swahili is known even in Aden and as far north as Suez, and as far south as Majunga in northern Madagascar.

As a trade language also, Swahili was carried inland by the caravans which bartered Indian cotton cloth for ivory and other wares. The southern caravan route ran from Kilwa south-west to the southern tip of Lake Malawi; the central route ran from Bagamoyo opposite Zanzibar, via Tabora (Swahili, camp) to Ujiji (Swahili, township) on Lake Tanganyika, and from there to Kasongo on the Lualaba River, then north to Kisangani (Swahili, on the sand). Another route led from Mombasa west to Mwanza on Lake Victoria, until it was made unsafe by the Masai in the nineteenth century. Minor routes led from Kilifi up along the Voi River, from Malindi along the Sabaki or Athi or Galana River, and from Kipini via Garsen (Swahili *gariseni*, garrison) up the Tana River to what was once the Kingdom of Kaffa, according to the Swahili traditions. In these same traditions, the Swahili call themselves Wapwani and Wamwambao, both words meaning 'people of the coast', or Walungwana (Waungwana) which means 'free men', as opposed to the slaves who had not accepted Islam. Under Islamic law, pagan peoples may be made into slaves if they refuse to convert to the faith of Muhammad.

When the learned Arab traveller Al-Mas'ūdī landed at Mombasa in the tenth century, he noted a few words in the local language which he called Zinji or Zanji; owing to the fact that Arabic script does not usually distinguish the vowels, we are not certain of the pronunciation. The words that Al-Mas'ūdī wrote down are the following, as quoted from one of the two surviving manuscripts. The word for God is spelled as *M-k-l y-j-l-w*, which can, without hesitation, be identified as *Mukulu Ijulu*, two Swahili words meaning 'the Great One Above'. In modern Swahili these words are *Mkuu Juu*. The third word in the Zanji language mentioned by Al-Mas'ūdī is spelled *k-l-r* or *k-l-l*. This can easily be identified as *kilali* or *kilari*, modern Swahili *kiazi*, 'sweet potato'.

We may conclude from this that Swahili was spoken along what is now the Kenya coast during the tenth century. Obviously, the language has evolved since that time, like every other language; nevertheless, the sound changes are regular, so that we can assume a straight descent, a continuous evolution for a thousand years.

During that millennium, a cultural movement spread peacefully along the coast that was to exercise a lasting influence on the Swahili people and their language. This was the religion of Islam. Islam is more than dogma and morality, more than ritual and ceremony: Islam is a way of life, a law for the individual as well as for the community, a cosmology that has made the Swahili language into a uniquely beautiful vehicle for the expression of its ideas in literary form. This offshoot of the Bantu stock was already the medium of an African culture, and the treasure trove of many songs, proverbs and stories. After the advent of Islam, Swahili was enriched with thousands of Arabic words, which were fitted into the Bantu system of noun classes and verb categories. The result was a totally new linguistic structure, that evolved along its own lines and blossomed forth into a wealth of forms, uniquely suitable to become the vehicle of a great epic tradition, something unknown in equatorial Africa; of a fine liturgical tradition within the framework of Islamic sung worship; and of a new tradition of scholarly works on history, theology, law and morality.

After the First World War Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar were united to form British East Africa. The new 'Inter-territorial Government' encouraged writers to compose stories and novels in Swahili which added a new dimension to Swahili literature which hitherto had not known fiction as a written form. A second new development of the same period was the appearance in the weekly press, of poems, mainly in the *shairi* metre, which had previously belonged chiefly to the oral tradition of secular verse.

Political Awareness

There is no Swahili tribe, nor did the Swahili ever form themselves into a nation with a comprehensive political structure. Their towns as political units were rather more comparable to those of ancient Greece, medieval Italy or the Malay Islands of South-East Asia before the colonial period. City states which dominated the surrounding countryside were formed into larger states by fragile and variable alliances, depending now on the commercial prevalence of one city, now on the military strength of the ruler of another, who might style himself 'king', 'sultan', 'governor', or more modestly 'captain', or, if his political power rested upon religious influences, *imamu*, leader of the *umma*.

Rulers of great states within the conscious world-view of the Swahili were all Islamic, including the King of the Galla, whose name is once cited as Ahmad, although the tradition is not clear on this point, and the King of Ethiopia (Mufalume Habashi), who is supposed to have been Muslim, ever since his ancestor was converted by ambassadors from the Prophet Muhammad himself. We are here in the realm of Islamic myth rather than of pure history. Strangely enough, the Swahili authors are much better informed about political units outside Africa. Even the Kabaka of Buganda is never mentioned. The Turkish Sultans of Constantinople (Kostanti or Sitambuli) occur in the literature as well as the presumably Abbasid Caliph of Misiri (Egypt), the Kisira,

that is the Shah of Persia, and the Padeshaha of India. In modern times, that is after about 1870, there appear the Malikia or Queen of England, and the Kaizari, the German Emperor. The Byzantine Emperor of medieval times is referred to as Kaisari. Otherwise, the Swahili are entirely oriented towards Arabia, Syria, Iraq and the islands in the Indian Ocean, mainly the Comoros, Ceylon (Sarandibu) and Madagascar (Buki or Tinku). Regular contact existed with the south coast of Arabia; Yamani, Hadharamauti, Omani, Masikati, Shihiri and Mkele are names with which the travelling Swahili are familiar, as well as Basora in Iraq and Hurumuzi in Persia.

Social Structure

Like the Arabs and most, but not all of the East African tribes, the basic micropolitical unit of the Swahili is the patrilineal clan.

Its head is referred to as *shehe*, from the Arabic *sheikh*. In the villages one might speak of a patocracy, as only the *wazee*, the fathers, married men with children, had any say in decision-taking. They in turn were ruled by the *wakuu*, the elders; *bwana* is the word for 'head of the family'. *Nyumba*, 'household', *yumba*, 'palace' and *mlango*, 'gate', all referred to the family unit which included the brothers of the same father and their offspring. Together the brothers would decide the fate of individual members of the family in matters of marriage, education, and so on. The eldest surviving brother would usually have the decisive vote.

Unmarried people would simply be referred to as *watoto*, 'children'; whereas women had no vote in the northern, more strongly Islamicized parts of the Swahili world, in the south, in what is now Tanzania, women were much freer to determine their own destiny. Women could live independently, earn money, sit on councils and move freely around. A typical difference between the two areas is that while in Kenya there were women poetesses known to have flourished in the nineteenth century, in Tanzania there were also women singers who could appear in public to perform their art, something which the northern Muslims did not allow. Female singers did perform in Kenya privately and indoors.

Islamic Culture

During the long process of Islamicization, the judiciary powers passed gradually from the village council into the hands of the *kadhi*, the professional judge, who administers the *sharia*, the law of Islam. Swahili literature, both prose and poetry, is full of references to Islamic law, and of admonitions to the faithful to observe it in every detail. A knowledge of Islamic law is essential for understanding Swahili literature, especially with regard to marriage and family law.

The many Islamic concepts that are found in Swahili literature, have been discussed by the present author in four separate volumes,¹ so that the subject need not be elaborated upon here. Special points that need explanation will be annotated as they arise in the texts in this volume. Islam is too encompassing an aspect of Swahili culture to be treated as an appendix to its literature. On

¹ *Traditional Swahili Poetry*, 1967, and *Swahili Islamic Poetry*, 3 vols., 1971.

the contrary, Swahili literature is profoundly immersed in its spirit. The Koran, the legends of the Prophet Muhammad and the other prophets and saints of Islam, points of doctrine and theology are referred to on every page of traditional Swahili literature.

One should not conclude from this, as some have done, that Swahili literature is unoriginal. On the contrary, Swahili literature is on the whole much livelier than Arabic literature. There is no slavish imitation except in a few translations of liturgical works. Islamicization is not the same as Arabization. Like the other Islamic nations, the Turks and Persians, the Indonesians and Pakistanis, the Swahili have created a new culture, Islamic to be sure, but by no means Arabic.

Some points which prove this case spring to mind: there is not a trace of Arabic prosody in the Swahili system of metre and verse-form; the most extensive branch of Swahili literature is the epic. This is an entirely original invention of the Swahili, since there is no epic in Arabic literature.

Other aspects of culture, too, are radically different, for instance the Swahili methods of house-building are local inventions; the style and shape of their houses, the device of laying mangrove poles as crossbeams for roofing are typical for the East African tropical areas.

The life of the family, too, is rather different from what it is in Arabia. Swahili women are much freer than their Arabic sisters; the role of the maternal uncle and aunt is more important in the family system. Female circumcision, obligatory among all the Arabian peoples (according to Richard Burton), is not practised by the Swahili. Swahili culture is usually dealt with as derivative from Arabic culture. In fact it is quite old and has developed independently.

One explanation for this independence is that the Swahili were not conquered by the Arabs before the nineteenth century. Islam spread peacefully amongst the Swahili, percolating their lives gradually.

After the first Arabic invasion of the eighth century, there may have been a period of calm, during which the Swahili developed their own individual Islamic culture. When Al-Mas'ūdī visited the Swahili coast, the city of Mombasa was not yet Islamicized, but the regions farther north were. In the eleventh century the prevailing Islamic culture seems to have been fed from Persia rather than from Arabia, and still later, during the fourteenth century, Indian influence can be detected in the architecture of mosques and palaces. The Portuguese occupation, which lasted two centuries, made a town like Mombasa practically Christian in its culture. A second Arabic invasion came a millennium after the first, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the last hundred years, European influence grew gradually stronger until it outshone all other influences.

Contrary to what is usually believed, the Swahili never lost their cultural identity, in spite of the diverse pressures that these foreign cultures brought to bear on it. Not only that, the Swahili acted also as intermediaries, as teachers of culture to the other peoples of East Africa. The Swahili were professional traders and travellers. They carried goods of oriental provenance to the fringes of the Congo forest. In all East African languages, the words for the tools of travelling (horse, donkey, litter, cart), firearms (gun, pistol, as well as gunpowder, guncap, etc.), commerce (money, silver, copper, debt, etc.) and for many commercial goods are Swahili in origin.

As they travelled, the Swahili traders wrote down their accounts, and