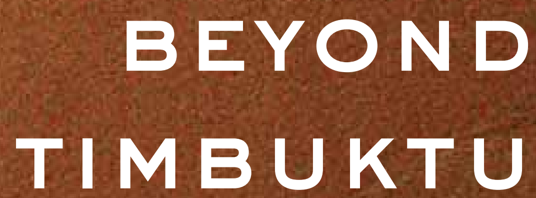
PART V



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CHAPTER 23

Arabic literature in the eastern half of Africa

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Undoubtedly the oldest Arabic documents concerning sub-Saharan Africa are those excavated at Qasr Ibrim on the Egypt–Sudan border. These go back to the tenth and eleventh centuries (with some items from the ninth century) and throw light on relations between Muslim Egypt and Christian Nubia in the Fatimid period (909–1171). Unfortunately, they have yet to be published.

The following gives a brief survey of what is known about the situation concerning Arabic literature in north-eastern and eastern Africa, beginning with the Sudan.

The modern Sudan republic has a very rich manuscript tradition, still largely unexplored. The various public, and some private, collections are described in the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*.[1] Here some 30 collections are listed. The oldest manuscript so far located is a commentary on the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq by al-Jundi, dated 963 *hijra* (*c.* AD 1555), and there are others from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The largest public collection is located in Khartoum's National Records Office (NRO)[2] which, in addition to pre-colonial and colonial administrative records (numbering over 20 million items), houses about 15 000 literary manuscripts. The NRO possesses one collection which is unique in an African Islamic context, namely the administrative and judicial records of the Mahdist state (1882–98), estimated to comprise some 250 000 items. Although much has been written on the Mahdist state, this mass of documentation, particularly relevant for social and economic history, has hardly been exploited. Additionally, the University of Khartoum houses several collections totalling some 3 000 manuscripts; these include an extremely valuable collection of medical manuscripts organised by the late Dr Tijani al-Mahi, as well as a small collection of manuscripts from Mauritania.

None of these collections is properly conserved or catalogued. However, *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 1)[3] provides a preliminary survey of the writings of the nineteenth century and before.

No attempt has ever been made to survey private manuscript holdings along the Nile or in western or eastern Sudan. Given the exceptionally dry climatic conditions and the existence of numerous Sufi centres, it is very probable that there are many more manuscripts to be found.

In striking contrast to the detailed archaeological surveys that have been made of the Nile Valley, where, for example, over 40 archaeological sites have been excavated in Lower Nubia alone, no attempt has ever been made to survey private manuscript holdings along the Nile or in the western or eastern Sudan. Given the exceptionally dry climatic conditions (in this respect, similar to the savannah and Sahelian regions of West Africa) and the existence of numerous Sufi centres, particularly in Omdurman, Shendi, al-Damir, Berber, Dongola and elsewhere, it is very probable that there are many more manuscripts to be found. I would guess that there are as many manuscripts in private ownership in Omdurman as there are in the public collections. To give only one example, one Sufi leader in Omdurman has produced privately a work of over 300 pages on his manuscript collection.[4] If the current negotiations to end the conflict in the Sudan are successful, it may prove possible to find funding to make a start on such a survey.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that there is a collection of about 5 000 or more xerographic and photographic copies of manuscripts and documents from the Sudan deposited at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Bergen, Norway. These include some thousand items from the various Sufi orders present in the Sudan, particularly the various branches of the Idrisiyya tradition, judicial documents and land charters from the Darfur sultanate, and the commercial records of a prominent nineteenth-century Sudanese family of traders. A catalogue of this collection is in progress.

Moving eastward to consider Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, our information is very patchy and uneven. However, one contrast with other areas of Muslim Africa is that north-eastern Africa has received the attention of a number of distinguished orientalists. Thus Enrico Cerulli has written with great authority on the Arabic writings of Somalia while Ewald Wagner has comprehensively catalogued, described and analysed the indigenous writings, in Arabic, Harari and Silte, of the city state of Harar.[5] More recently, researchers such as Hussein Ahmed (Addis Ababa), Scott Reese (Northern Arizona University), Alessandro Gori (Naples) and Jonathan Miran (Michigan State University) have been actively engaged in mapping and cataloguing in the region. What is known to date of the Islamic writings of north-eastern Africa is brought together in *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3A), entitled *The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa*.[6]

East Africa (here meaning Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania), particularly the coastal region, is home to a literary tradition that is unique in Islamic Africa, namely a highly developed literature in a living African language, Swahili, written for centuries in the Arabic script. Swahili is the most widely spoken African language in Africa with an estimated 100 million speakers. Swahili is also the Islamic African language with the most highly developed literary tradition, inviting comparison, particularly in regard to its poetry, with Farsi (Iran), Urdu (India) and Turkish. Presently, how old the Swahili poetic tradition is, is difficult to say. Here a distinction needs to be made between the physical survival of manuscripts and the longevity of the poetic tradition. The damp,

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humid conditions along the coast have meant that, in contrast to Sudanic Africa, both west and east, few old manuscripts have survived – the earliest we have are from the late seventeenth century. However, the poetic tradition, which may well incorporate pre-Islamic elements, must, on linguistic grounds, be much older. Such poetic cycles as Fumo Liongo (see later) – comparable to the Sunjata cycle[7] in West Africa – probably have their roots in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Characteristic of Swahili literature are the *tendi* – epics, often of 5 000 quatrains or more, on themes drawn from episodes in early Islamic history, themes common to several cultures around the Indian Ocean, reflecting Swahili's unique position as Africa's only urban maritime culture. The longest *tendi* is that on the last moments of the Prophet Muhammad, which comprises 45 000 quatrains. Some 300 *tendi* from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century are known, but of these only 6 have been properly edited and translated.

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Swahili is also exceptional in another sense: it is the one African Islamic literary tradition, apart from those in Ethiopia and Somalia, that has a history of over 100 years of study within an orientalist paradigm. German orientalists such as Van Velten and Ernst Dammann, the Dutch scholar Jan Knappert, French and British missionaries and scholars such as Edward Steere, Father Charles Sacleux and JWT Allen have contributed much to the study of Swahili both as a culture and literature. Dammann's catalogue of the Swahili manuscripts in Germany,[8] together with that of Wagner for Ethiopia,[9] have set a standard of scholarship that needs to be emulated in other parts of Islamic Africa. While much of this scholarship may be regarded as uneven, it has nevertheless laid the foundation for the further study of Swahili literature.

The study of Swahili in the immediate post-colonial period became subsumed under concerns of nation building and language planning, particularly in Tanzania, under the influence of President Julius Nyerere. In recent years the situation has changed with the enthusiastic adoption of Swahili, and Swahili poetic forms, by poets far from the coastal area. This has led to an efflorescence of interest in classical Swahili poetry and, with it, a concern with the preservation of existing manuscript collections. The largest of these is to be found at the University of Dar es Salaam, preserved in the Institute of Kiswahili Research. This collection of about 4 000 items was made by the late Dr JWT Allen in the late 1950s and early 1960s; there exists a preliminary checklist by Allen,[10] but the collection is badly in need of conservation and cataloguing to professional standards. It is hoped that a Norwegian aid agency will fund a programme to make a start in this area. In addition to the Dar es Salaam collection, there is a small but very rich collection of Arabic and Swahili manuscripts (the earliest from the late seventeenth century) held at the departments of Antiquities, Archives, and Museums in Zanzibar, comprising some 600–700 manuscripts. Outside Africa, there are major collections of Swahili manuscripts in Germany (see Dammann's catalogue) and at the School of Oriental and African Studies (Soas) in London. The Department of African Languages at Soas has recently received a very substantial grant to prepare a proper catalogue of the collection at the school.

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This has been something of a Cook's tour of the region and its Islamic intellectual heritage. The important point to emphasise is that this is very much a living tradition. The facility and rapidity with which poets coming out of a non-Swahili and, in many cases, a non-Muslim background, have adopted and adapted the classical Swahili poetic forms of *tendi*, *nyimbo* and *shairi* to local concerns emphasises that the literary tradition of Swahili is very far from being moribund. One recent survey reckons there are 2 000–3 000 'Swahili' poets active as far afield as Rwanda, the Congo and Zambia. This I hope will be apparent when *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B), entitled *The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Eastern Africa*, hopefully forthcoming soon, is published. But it cannot be emphasised enough how much more there is to do in terms of research. Islamic north-eastern and East Africa are still very much terra incognita in terms of their intellectual, literary and artistic traditions.

Overview of *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa*

The modern states and near-states that make up the region here defined as north-eastern Africa comprise Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia. Although in terms of population the area is predominantly Muslim, leaving aside numerous small sultanates, either tribal or urban in origin, the major state-forming tradition in the region is Christian. The size and strength of Ethiopia has waxed and waned over the centuries, but its existence has defined much of the experience of Muslims within its borders, or in countries neighbouring it. Likewise, real or putative conflict between Muslims and Christians tends to dominate (perhaps overly) surveys, for example by Trimingham,[11] of Islam and the Muslim presence in the region. This is not to say that war and polemic between Christian and Muslim have not happened, but the complexities of coexistence have been understudied (Ahmed[12] is a beginning).

Within the wider context of Muslim Africa, both north and south of the Sahara, the region has a unique position within Islamic history, featuring as it does in the *sira* of the Prophet. In about 615 the first *hijra* took place, when several small groups of Muslims took refuge in the court of the Negus, assumed to be the ruler of Axum, in what is now northern Ethiopia.[13] The details of this episode or its historicity do not concern us here, but its consequences, or rather the imagined recollection of its consequences, do. A *hadith* is reported thus, 'Leave the Abyssinians in peace so long as they do not take the offensive.'[14] From this tradition arose an ambiguity among the Muslim learned class about the status of Christian Ethiopians within the Islamic *Weltenschauung* (world view) that was embodied in a distinctive literary genre, the *fada'il al-habash* or *hubshan* (The virtues of the Ethiopians) which, in an indirect way, goes back to the 'Blameless Aethiops' of Herodotus. This is no antiquarian issue; in modern times, the status of Axum as a place sacred to both Christian and Muslim has been, and still is, a contentious issue between the two communities. Two political examples of overarching

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ambiguity in the region are the membership of Somalia in the Arab League and the 'Arabism' debate concerning Eritrea's identity in the 1960s and 1970s.[15] In this respect, both Eritrea and Somalia have affinities with the Republic of Sudan, which has its own ambiguous relationship to the Muslim Arab world.

In this respect, Ethiopia and its environs mark themselves off from much of the Muslim Africa recorded in the volumes of the *Arabic Literature of Africa* series in that they partake of some of the issues that mark the complex multi-confessionalism of the Middle East and, for example, Muslim Spain. *Jihad* and counter-*jihad* there certainly were, but there was also a scholarly polemic, exemplified in the writings of Enbaqom and Zakaryas. Little of this is found elsewhere in Muslim Africa, although there are some traces of it in the Christian–Muslim encounters of the late nineteenth century in East Africa (see, for example, 'Ali b. Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Mundhiri in *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Vol. 3B).

It is not possible here to give a detailed ethno-history of the Muslims of north-eastern Africa. Crudely, the Muslim communities of the region may be characterised as nomadic, for example the Somali and Beja; settled agriculturalists, as in Wallo in Ethiopia; or dwelling in small urban coastal settlements such as Masawwa', Zayla', Harar, Mogadishu or Brava, the latter two being extensions northwards of the Swahili urban environments that dominated the East African coast, and whose writings will form the bulk of *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B), while the former form part of a nexus of maritime city states that rim the Red Sea (including Jidda, al-Lith, al-Hudayda and al-Mukha on the northern coast, and Sawakin on the southern coast) and which have their roots in Graeco–Roman times.

It is from one of these cities, Zayla', that the first Islamic writings come, namely the scholarly production of a group of émigré Zayla' scholars, largely based in Cairo in the fourteenth century. Their surviving writings are recorded in Chapter 2 of *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B). This tradition continued with the presence in Cairo of Ethiopian Muslims, somewhat later designated as Jabart, and concretised by the establishment of a *riwaq al-jabartiyya* or hostel (literally 'corner') for the maintenance of Jabarti Muslim students at al-Azhar. The most famous Jabarti was undoubtedly the Egyptian chronicler 'Abd al-Rahman b. Hasan al-Jabarti, whose writings fall outside our purview, but whose family had a long connection with the *riwaq*. The longevity and complexity of Islamic connections in the region are well illustrated by the fact that the *riwaq al-jabartiyya* was to have an important role in the formal establishment in July 1960 of the Eritrean Liberation Front, which in turn led to an Eritrean state in 1991. The Islamic strand in the emergence of a distinctive Eritrean nationalism is a complex and ambiguous one.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the high point of the Muslim–Christian confrontation between the Christian highland empire of Ethiopia and the largely lowland Muslim cities. Here, for the first time – unless one includes the period of Abraha, the Sassanian Persian and Byzantine involvement in the region at the time of

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the birth of the Prophet – the region becomes the scene of a semi-global geopolitical involvement, pitching alliances between Ethiopia and the Portuguese against the city states of the Hawash Valley, and their largely Somali nomadic rescuers under Ahmad Gran, backed to a degree by the Ottomans. The *Futuh al-Habash* is the major record of this struggle. The geopolitical scene moved on; the Christians fell out among themselves as Portuguese Jesuits failed to win over orthodox Ethiopia, while the Ottomans consolidated their control of the coast.[16] It was only in the nineteenth century that confrontation resumed, with the wars between the Mahdist Sudan and a resurgent Ethiopia under Johannes and Minilik.[17]

It is very hard to generalise about the character of Islamic writings. In one sense, they differ little from what will be found elsewhere in Muslim Africa. At one end of the spectrum are the commentaries and super-commentaries on approved texts of *fiqh*, here largely from the Shafi'i school which dominates the region. But it is clear that both in Wallo and Somalia, from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries onwards, there were winds of change in the form of greater *tariqa* activity, an activity that may very loosely be described as 'neo-Sufi'. This activity was characterised by the establishment of communities[18] of adherents to specific Sufi traditions – in our region mainly Qadiriyya, Sammaniyya, Tijaniyya, Salihiyya, Dandarawiyya and Idrisiyya – and who were often recruited from hitherto marginalised groups. Other new trends appear to include the production of *manaqib* (virtues; praises) literature centred on both 'international' and local saints (Harari writings are rich in this category), and the production of popular poetry, either in Arabic or in various vernacular languages; these two categories obviously overlap. Here one can usefully compare the careers of Muhammad Shafi b. Muhammad with that of Uways b. Muhammad al-Barawi, the one from central Ethiopia, the other from southern Somalia. One research area that is still in its infancy is the study of the links in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries between the Muslim communities of north-eastern Africa and those of the Islamic heartlands, in particular the Hijaz and the Yemen.

Popular Islamic poetry, whether in Arabic or in vernacular languages, is to be found throughout the region. Research on the various traditions in the region is very uneven. The work of Cerulli and Wagner on Harari writings and, more recently, Samatar, building on Andrzejewski and Jammac 'Umar Ciise on the Somali male poetic tradition, and Kapteijns on Somali-sung women's poetry, only highlight how much more there is to be done. There are interesting comparisons to be made here in terms of themes and the influence of classical Arabic prosodic forms both with Sudanese popular poetry (see *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Vol. 1, Chapter 3) and the complex prosodic developments of Swahili poetry (which is documented in *Arabic Literature of Africa,* Vol. 3B).

Another area that deserves investigation is the creation of literacy in vernacular languages, whether through the adaptation of the Arabic script to the needs of local languages, whether Oromiñña, Harari or Somali, or through the creation of new scripts,

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for example Abu Bakr b. 'Uthman Oda's invention of a script for Oromiñña and the complex history of the Osmania script in Somalia. This is a complex theme in the region; one example is the contemporary debate among Ethiopian Muslims, not on whether to translate the Qur'an into Amharic, but whether to print it in *ajami*, that is, the Arabic script, or in the Ethiopic alphabet. These debates have their echoes both among the Hausa and others in West Africa, and among the Swahili of East Africa. But it is, I think, true to say that the orthographic debate is more complex in north-eastern Africa than anywhere else in Muslim Africa.

The Islamic literatures of north-eastern Africa thus represent and reflect a variety of different impulses. Proximity to the Middle East – but not simply proximity, since there is also the imperialist intervention of Ottoman Turkey and Khedivial Egypt to consider, plus the Islamic policies of Italy and later Britain in Eritrea – means that the nature of the relationship of north-eastern Africa with the Islamic heartlands was different in kind from, for example, West Africa. In intellectual terms there were, indeed, the traditional patterns of 'shaykh seeking', of the transmission of *isnad*s, both in *fiqh* and *tasawwuf*, both from within the region and from without, the writing of commentaries and the like, and the coming of new Sufi affiliations, especially in the nineteenth century. But, because of the involvement of the region in both local and regional conflicts that consciously or unconsciously cut across the religious divide, whether it be Turk versus Portuguese, British and Italian against the Mahdists of the Sudan with reverberations in Eritrea and western Ethiopia (see Talha b. Ja'far), or 'Abdille Muhammad Hasan versus the British, Italians and Ethiopians in Somalia, the nature of Muslim/non-Muslim interaction was qualitatively different in north-eastern Africa by comparison with most of the rest of Muslim Africa. North-eastern Africa is not quite Africa, nor is it quite the Middle East; it partakes of both, but is not quite either, and this is reflected in the complexities of its Islamic intellectual traditions.

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Overview of *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B)

The study of Swahili

No other living Islamic African language, including Arabic,[19] has had such a long and complex pedigree of scholarship brought to bear upon it as Swahili, both as a language and a culture.[20] In the western scholarly tradition, the first generation was represented by Ludwig Krapf, J Rebmann, WE Taylor, Edward Steere and Charles Sacleux – all Christian missionaries, as were several key figures of a later generation such as Ernst Dammann and Roland Allen.

But Krapf (d.1887) was not the first outsider to take an interest in Swahili. Rather, it was a Muslim scholar from Oman, Nasir b. Ja'id al-Kharusi (d.1847) who wrote at least two works comparing herbal medicine as practised in Oman and Arabia with that among the

Swahili. A tradition of interest in and, increasingly, the practice of Swahili, especially poetry, grew among the Omani and Hadrami *'ulama* of the coast and islands, as they interacted in various complicated ways with the local scholarly and literary elites. This tradition was to intersect in various ways with the Christian missionary tradition.

Christian missionary interest in Swahili was essentially utilitarian, a way into the community, and eventually a means of proselytisation. The Universities Mission to Central Africa, based in Zanzibar, was prohibited by the sultans from missionary activity directed towards Muslims, but they were allowed to proselytise among freed slaves. There was some tension between Muslim and missionary, which Bishop Edward Steere (d.1887) helped to provoke by holding public sermons in the slave market, by the side of which the Anglican Cathedral was built. The famous Zanzibari scholar 'Abd al-'Aziz b. 'Abd al-Ghani al-'Amawi wrote a response to Steere, which unfortunately appears not to be extant. However, one response has survived, namely a defence of Islam entitled *Jawab 'ala 'l-Risala al-mansuba ila al-Masih b. Ishaq al-Kindi al-Nasrani* by the Ibadi scholar 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Mundhiri. However, the exchanges between the missionaries and the *'ulama* seem to have been essentially gentlemanly; al-'Amawi helped Steere with the latter's work in translating the Bible into Swahili.

Relations between WE Taylor (d.1927) and many of the local scholars in Mombasa seem to have been especially cordial, even if Taylor seems to have harboured ambitions of converting Swahili Muslims to Christianity. This cordiality had important consequences for Swahili literature, in that the friendly collaboration between Taylor and Muhammad Sikujua led to the recording for posterity of much of the poetic production of Muyaka b. Haji al-Ghassaniy, an outstanding poet of *mashairi* of a generation before them. Without Sikujua and Taylor, Muyaka would be a lost voice. In Mombasa, and to a lesser extent in Zanzibar and Lamu, there appears to have been an interaction between two scholarly traditions that were able to respect each other.

In Lamu, the role of Muhammad Kijumwa – poet, calligrapher, wood-carver and dance master – as an interlocutor with several researchers, among them Alice Werner, W Hichens and Ernst Dammann, was of profound importance to Swahili studies.

In several respects the missionaries, and later colonial officials and nationalist language-planners, had a specific agenda. One aspect was the romanisation of Swahili. As Frankl has noted, there is no particular reason to romanise Swahili; the language is no easier or more difficult to read in either script.[21] The administration of German East Africa, throughout its duration, regarded Arabic script as normal (Swahili: *Kiarabu*), and made no effort to change it. Although nowhere explicitly stated, the 'decoupling' of Swahili from the Arabic script may be regarded as a way of 'de-Islamising' the language.

Decisive in this was the Interterritorial Language Committee's decision to adopt Kiunguja (the dialect of Zanzibar, which was never an acceptable form in classical Swahili literature) as 'standard' Swahili,[22] in preference to Kiamu (the dialect of Lamu) or Kimvita (the

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dialect of Mombasa), both of which are the preferred forms for classical Swahili writing.[23] Wilfred Whiteley, who was actively engaged in the enterprise, sums it up thus: 'In Swahili…the standardization [was] effected on a non-literary dialect during a period of Colonial administration. Inauspicious augury for a national language.'[24] Whiteley does not explain why Kiunguja was chosen. RA Snoxall, author of a Swahili/English dictionary and member of the Interterritorial Committee, offers an explanation:

> First of all [at a conference meeting], I was asked why had Kiunguja or Zanzibar dialect of Swahili been chosen for standardisation rather than the other forms, such as Kimvita, which I had mentioned. I replied that it was because it was more used in commerce than the other forms and its commercial value really dictated its being chosen as the standardised form of the language.[25]

If one is talking of the late 1920s, when Mombasa was becoming the major port for East Africa, this does not seem to be a very persuasive argument.

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Questions of definition

Swahili literature poses a major challenge in terms of defining boundaries. For example, much of the *tendi*, or epic poetry writing in Swahili, was, and is, produced within an Islamic milieu. However, a number of *tendi* are on modern secular themes. Many of these have been included, either for the sake of their form or because they were written by people from a Muslim background. Again, transitional writers – that is, writers emerging from a Swahili Muslim background, but who increasingly wrote on 'national' or secular themes (Shaaban b. Robert is an outstanding example) – are generally included.

The problem of boundaries is compounded by contradictory definitions of 'secular' and 'Islamic'. Ibrahim Noor Shariff argues that 'at every stage of history, the Swahili have produced a far greater volume of secular poetry than of homiletic verse', but continues that 'Swahili society has traditionally attached great importance to the *preservation* [Shariff's emphasis] of religious verse for posterity'.[26]

In other words, although at any given time more non-religious verse was being composed, much less of it has survived. This is probably true of any literate Islamic society. But here one must be careful to distinguish between 'secular' in the sense of not being about overtly religious topics, and 'western-influenced' or 'modern'. Indeed, Muyaka b. Haji al-Ghassaniy, for example, wrote verse on secular topics, but did so within the context of a Muslim community.

Shariff further argues that western scholars of Swahili have compounded the problem by overemphasising the Islamic nature of Swahili culture and literature. He quotes Knappert: 'Swahili literature is entirely Islamic from its inception in 1728 [the date of the *Hamziyya*] until the advent of German administration in 1884.'[27] If Knappert is defining 'Islamic', in a generalised cultural context, as the literary production of a Muslim society, then it seems to be an unexceptional generalisation. This alleged bias

is de facto, based on problems of source criticism. It is understandable that Knappert chose, as a scholar, to concentrate on Swahili Islamic poetry, in as much as there were available some general yardsticks by which to analyse it. Thus in researching *tendi*, recounting episodes in the life of the Prophet, or the early years of the Islamic era, Knappert was able to build upon the research of Rudi Paret[28] on the *maghazi* (genre of prophetic biography in Islamic literature) legendary found throughout the Muslim world.[29] Shariff argues that there is another reason for this overemphasis on the religiosity of Swahili literature, quoting Lyndon Harries: 'There are hundreds of short Swahili poems in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, which still defy interpretation, partly because no one is able to provide the context in which the poem was written.'[30] A look at Professor Abdulaziz's admirable study[31] of Muyaka's *shairi* will confirm Harries's point. The problem is a continuing one: there are many poems, particularly in the very rich and varied collections at the Soas (London) that are of such a specific and occasional nature that their interpretation has probably been lost forever. This is not a problem peculiar to African literatures.

Following this line of argument further, Shariff continues by contending that the sophistication of Muyaka's verse – and that of his contemporaries – is such 'that it could not have been invented by Muyaka or his contemporaries'.[32] The argument is analogous to that used in the study of classical Greek literature: that Homer is too sophisticated to have stood at the beginning of a literary tradition.

I argued above that the secular quota of literature (not necessarily in writing), in most Islamic societies, was probably greater than what has survived until today. Indeed, this is probably true of the pre-modern literatures of all the monotheistic religions. What was written down and has survived is what the people of the time thought important, and they tended to give priority to religious or homiletic literature. 'Secular' literature was transient, or survived for non-literary or marginal or ironically religious reasons; the Arabic poetry of the *jahiliyya* ('the ignorance') that is, the pre-Islamic period, survived in part for its importance to the canons of Arabic style, essential to an understanding of the sacred book.

Arabic Literature of Africa (Vol. 3B) is intended to be a record of what exists (or is reported to have once existed) in the way of writings of a primarily Islamic character in the region, although some discussion of oral forms will be included. Thus, no attempt is made to engage in the debate about the identity of the Swahili people, their origins, or the degree to which their literature is Islamic or secular – themes on which there is already a large and often polemical literature.[33]

Rollins notes:

> Between the years 1900–1950, there were approximately 359 works of prose published in Swahili; 346 of these were written by Europeans and published mainly in England and Germany.[34]

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He continues by noting that, overwhelmingly, this literature was Christian, and that it tended to impose a Euro–Christian norm on the language. Needless to say, this literature is not included here. To the present compilers, very striking is the degree to which European scholars of Swahili have indulged in aesthetic and other value judgements about the literature they are studying – to a far greater degree, for example, than western scholars of Arabic literature.

When the time comes to write a general history of Swahili literature, to which hopefully *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B) will be a useful contribution, the complex interaction between 'orientalist', colonial administrator, Christian missionary and indigenous (however defined) writers will present an analytical problem of the greatest complexity.

On the periodisation of Swahili poetry

Before the twentieth century, Swahili literature seems to be primarily poetry. There is little or no evidence that the language was used to write prose, except for the odd letter, some of which survive from the early eighteenth century. Arabic was used for prose; there are parallels here with Farsi and Urdu.

Swahili poetry is at once oral, sung and written; the complex interaction between the three is beyond the scope of this overview.

Despite the pioneering research of Taylor, Dammann, Harries, the Allens (father and son) and Knappert, our understanding of this tradition is still fragmentary. There is much basic philological, lexicographical and textual work to be done before any reliable overview can be given. No one has been more assiduous in warning against premature generalisations than Jan Knappert in his various surveys. The comments that follow must be seen in this context.

In presenting a very preliminary periodisation, one must begin with the poetic cycle by, or about, the northern Kenyan coastal 'culture hero', Fumo Liongo, a figure of anywhere between the seventh and seventeenth centuries, who may have existed or not, and who may have written some, but surely not all, of the poetry ascribed to him. What might be essayed at this stage is the assertion that it is within the Fumo Liongo cycle complex that the origins of *tendi* as a poetic tradition may be found.

This latter point raises again, for the moment, the unanswerable question as to the transmission of 'popular' Islamic themes that were later transmuted into Swahili in epic forms. Again, there is an ambiguity here, in that the earliest, physically surviving long poem, the translation dated by Knappert to 1652 of the *Hamziyya* by Bwana Mwengo, is a rendering into Swahili of a well-known Arabic literary text. What we know of the *Hamziyya* points to a Pate origin, and the scanty evidence we have of the origin of *al-Inkishafi* (The Soul's Awakening), possibly the greatest of Swahili *tendi*, suggests a very sophisticated poetic milieu in that city in the eighteenth century. The earliest manuscripts are epics, *chuo* or *tendi*, for example the *Chuo cha Herkal* (Epic of Herkal), one manuscript of which is dated 1141 *hijra* (AD 1728–29).

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At this stage in our knowledge, about the only safe generalisation one can make is that poems such as *al-Inkishafi* were not the products of a young untried tradition, but rather the productions of a very refined and sophisticated poetic tradition. How literary, or how oral, this tradition was in its inception is an open question.

A further question for consideration in exploring the history of Swahili poetry is the extent to which the forms and content of the poetry reflected the changing socio-political realities along the East African coast.

Again, generalisations are probably premature, but one might argue that the post-Portuguese period (effectively after about 1700) saw a certain political hegemony in Pate/Lamu, the area that, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, produced some of the classics of Swahili literature like *al-Inkishafi* and *Mwana Kupona*. This political hegemony may be related to patterns of trade on the Benadir coast in Somalia before the coming of the Omani hegemony, that is, in a northerly direction.

In mid-nineteenth century Mombasa, under an assertive Mazrui clan fighting against the inroads of Sa'id b. Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, there emerged new poetic forms, supremely espoused by Muyaka b. Haji, namely the *shairi*, intimate, dialogic and polemical. In terms of what has survived, it is the nineteenth-century dialogue/polemic poetry that is the most substantial, if one accepts that most of the epics we have today, outside the so-called 'classical' corpus of *tendi*, are de facto modern. The bulk of the Taylor (Soas) and Dammann (Berlin) collections comprise this genre. But this is essentially 'occasional' poetry where, as Harries reminds us, the occasion of its composition is often beyond recovery. However, its recovery and interpretation are a challenge to future historians of Swahili literature. This dialogic tradition, *kujibizana*, about which Ann Biersteker has written much, has reinvented itself in the twentieth century in the newspapers. It seems not unreasonable to see a continuity between Muyaka b. Haji and Moza binti Mi, writing on the topics of the day in the Zanzibari newspaper *Mwongozi*. While some poets will hail the coming of the East African shilling, or the birthday of King George V, others deal with much more enduring themes.

Once established, the writing of *tendi* became an integral part of Swahili literary culture. *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B) documents in detail the enormous range and variety of the Swahili poetic epic tradition. Less well known is the writing of poetry of a didactic character by, for example, the Brava poetess Dada Matisi, and Muhyi 'l-Din al-Qahtani. Here one is at a meeting point between the past and modernity; Matisi and al-Qahtani used Swahili (or in the former case, Cimini) to present Islamic teachings in the vernacular. Out of this was to grow indigenous (as opposed to missionary-inspired) Swahili prose literature.

Swahili prose writing

In the nineteenth century and before, Muslim scholars of the coast and islands wrote prose in Arabic and poetry in Swahili (although some, such as al-Qahtani, wrote poetry

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in both languages). Swahili prose writing emerged approximately in the 1920s.

The pioneers here were Muhammad al-Amin al-Mazrui and his brother-in-law, Muhammad Qassim. The Mazruis and their Zanzibari counterpart, ‘Abdallah Saleh Farsy, produced a very considerable body of Swahili Islamic prose literature, which is duly recorded in *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Vol. 3B). Most of this literature is didactic in nature, essentially pamphlets or booklets giving elementary information on a variety of Islamic topics. More ambitious are the various translations, beginning with the *Ahmadiyya* version, of the Qur'an.[35] The production of such literature has vastly increased in recent years and there are few mosques that do not have a bookseller outside their doors. There is some reason to believe that much of this literature is directed towards women, who are becoming an increasingly visible element in Muslim public life.

From the 1930s there has developed a tradition of writing fiction in Swahili. Many of the leading exponents of fiction writing write out of an Islamic milieu. The most influential figure was Shaaban b. Robert, whose father converted to Christianity, but who himself returned to Islam. Bin Robert is a transitional figure in the emergence of Swahili as a national language.

Arabic writings

The earliest Arabic writing, apart from the classical Arab geographers, that throws light on Islam on the East African coast is *al-Sira* or *al-Maqama al-Kilwiyya* (The Story of Kilwa) by Muhammad b. Sa‘id al-Qalhati. It is an Ibadi polemic written around 1116 (*hijri*) by two brothers living at Kilwa, ‘Ali b. ‘Ali and Hasan b. ‘Ali, who were actively propagating Ibadi Islam in the Kilwa region.

The earliest indigenous Arabic writing is the Kilwa chronicle entitled *al-Sulwa fi akhbar Kilwa* (The History Book Concerning the Pleasure of Kilwa). The original version was written by an unnamed author who was born on 2 Shawwal 904 (13 May 1499). The antiquity of this chronicle, the oldest in sub-Saharan Africa, is confirmed by the fact that Joao de Barros (1496–1570) quotes a partial translation in his *Da Asia* (Of Asia), first published in 1552.[36]

Little in Arabic has survived before the nineteenth century except for some Ibadi texts dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, brought to Zanzibar under the sultanate. In 1880 Sultan Barghash (r. 1870–88) established a printing press in Zanzibar and embarked on an ambitious programme of printing Ibadi works of theology and jurisprudence, involving a network of scholars from the Wadi Mzab (Algeria), Cairo, Oman and Zanzibar (see Chapter 2 of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Vol. 3B).

Since the dominant *madhhab* in East Africa is Shafi‘i, much of the Arabic writing concerns that school's jurisprudence.

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NOTES

1 Roper (1994: 129–154).
2 National Records Office, PO Box 1914, Khartoum.
3 O'Fahey & Hunwick (1994).
4 Hasan b. Muhammad al-Fatih b. Qarib Allah; see O'Fahey & Hunwick (1994: 113).
5 Wagner (1997).
6 O'Fahey & Hunwick (2003).
7 Sunjata Keita was the founder of the Mande Malian Empire and much poetry was written about him, referred to as the Sunjata cycle.
8 Dammann (1993).
9 Wagner (1997).
10 Allen (1963).
11 Trimingham (1952).
12 Ahmed (2001).
13 Trimingham (1952: 44–46).
14 Abu Da'ud, quoted in Trimingham (1952: 46).
15 See Erlich (1994: 151–164).
16 Orhonlu (1969).
17 Emperor Johannes IV (r. 1868–89) and Emperor Minilik II (r. 1889–1913).
18 *Jama'a* in Arabic, *camaa* in Somali.
19 Brockelmann has some eight pages devoted to Africa in his five volumes published between 1937 and 1949. By the 1940s the study of Swahili was nearly a century old.
20 See further Miehe and Mohlig (1995).
21 See Frankl (1998).
22 The Interterritorial Language Committee was established in 1930. See Whiteley (1969: 79–95) on the promotion of 'standard' Swahili.
23 This is not to overlook the body of poetry in Chimini or Chimbalazi, the Swahili dialect of Brava in southern Somalia.
24 Whiteley (1969: 94). What is striking is that Whiteley never really explains the rationale behind the decision. The whole episode invites further investigation.
25 Snoxall (1984).
26 Shariff (1991: 41).
27 Knappert (1971: 5).
28 See Paret (1927–28).
29 See Gibb et al. (1960–2004: 2, v, 1161–1164).
30 Harries (1962: 2).
31 Abdulaziz (1994).
32 Shariff (1991: 43).
33 See, for example, the polemic against the western 'orientalist' imposition of an Arab–Muslim identity upon the Swahili and their literature in Mazrui and Shariff (1994).
34 Rollins (1985: 51).
35 I exclude from consideration here the translation of the Qur'an by the missionary Godfrey Dale.
36 See Freeman-Grenville (1962: 34).

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6

بسمه تعالى

من سلطان زنجبار علي بن حمود   الى كافة من يراه   فليكن معلوما

اننا قد شرفنا محمود بن حميد قبطان أيلت بنيشاننا السامي
المسمى بالسعيدي الذي هو من الرتبة السادسة جزاء له
منا لاجل اجتهاده في خدمة دولتنا ليحظى بحمله فخر المتقلدين

ليعلم الواقف ١٣٢٣

زنجبار ٣ ربيع الثاني

[illegible] مملوكه عبد العزيز بن محمد