

## SWAHILI PALIMPSESTS: THE MUSLIM STORIES BENEATH SWAHILI COMPOSITIONS

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Although a textual relationship between Arabic Muslim texts and their rendition through Swahili epic poems (*tendi*) is acknowledged in Swahili poetry studies, “translation” is not a straightforward explanation of this relationship. Furthermore, Swahili narrative poems on the prophets (*manabii*), mostly created at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have seldom been considered in textual relation to the *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* literature or to the Qurʾān. Thus, important questions have not been asked: How did the Arabic stories of the prophets arrive on the Swahili coast? How did poets appropriate these stories and forge them into a new narrative discourse? In this paper, I focus on *tafsiri* as a form of appropriation and adaptation, applying Gérard Genette’s concept of “palimpsest” to analyse the textual relationship between Arabic Muslim and Swahili literary texts. This will allow me, through a close reading of these texts and consideration of both language and genre, to identify the palimpsestuous presence or rather copresence of Arabic source texts within Swahili works. Ultimately, this method offers a model for future philologies of world literature.<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The presence of a prior Arabic text which has inspired a Swahili poet to translate it into Swahili is a common narrative incipit of a Swahili classical *utendi* poem. In the *Utendi wa Ayubu* (‘The poem of Job’), for instance, the unknown poet officially announces the Arabic origin of the story he is about to tell the audience (“*hadithi ya kiarabu*”, “an Arabic story”, stz. 2). The poet depicts himself as the translator eager to translate the story from Arabic to Swahili in order to let everybody understand its meaning:

*2 Nandikie kikutubu*  
*Hadithi ya kiarabu*  
*Kwa habari za Ayubu*  
*Tumwa ya Mola Rasuwa.*

That I may write, inditing  
An Arabic story  
With the history of Job,  
The messenger sent by the Lord.

*3 Napenda kuwakhubiri*  
*Kiarabu kifasiri*  
*Kwa lugha yetu thahiri*  
*Pasiwe yasomwelea.*

I wish to narrate (it) to you,  
Explaining the Arabic  
In our language, clearly,  
So that there may not be (any words)  
which are not plain to him.

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4 *Kufasiri nimeweza*  
*Lugha yetu kiweleza*  
*Na nyinyi mkisikiza*  
*Yote wayafahamia.*

I am able to explain  
Making it clear (in) our language,  
And you, when you listen,  
You will understand it all.

5 [*Kinuthumu kikutubu*]  
*Yalo katika kitabu*  
*[Kabadili] kiarabu*  
*Kisawahili kawimbi*

Composing and writing  
Those (words) which are in the book,  
I translated (them from) Arabic  
And sang (them) to you in Swahili.  
(Transl. by Alice Werner 1921: 89, 101)

However, the term *tafsiri* should not be seen as referring to a straightforward process of translation from a source text to a target text. The *Utendi wa Ayubu* indeed does not house in its stanzas an interlinear translation from Arabic to Swahili, nor can it be considered a literal translation of an Arabic prose text, since in fact it is a Swahili *utendi* form. As suggested by Serena Talento, the verbs *kufasiri/kutafsiri* ('to translate') can refer to "a variegated series of re-writing processes" (Talento 2013: 86). The verb stems indeed from the Arabic root *fsr.* meaning 'to interpret', hence the Arabic *tafsīr* meaning 'interpretation, exegesis', mainly refers to the Qur'ān. Also in Swahili the idea of "to translate", often perceived simplistically, incorporates the actions of 'to explain, interpret, comment on'.

In the following, I shall examine a selection of three Swahili classical *tendi* on prophets (Ayubu/Job, Isa/Jesus and Yusuf/Joseph) which echo their prior Arabic prose texts, the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*. These texts, relating to stories about the prophets who lived prior to Muhammad, were classic literature in the lands of Islam long before they were adapted on the East African coast. As a comparative analysis of the texts in Swahili and Arabic shows in the following, the process of *tafsiri* involved for the *Utendi wa Ayubu*, *Kisa cha Sayyidna Isa* ('The story of our Lord Jesus') and the *Utendi wa Yusuf* ('The poem of Yusuf') in relation to the Qur'ān as well as to the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* shows a literary relationship which is created through appropriating the Arabic source text and reformulating it into a new Swahili poetic genre and register. In contrast to the term appropriation, which connotes "some form of taking" and "making one's own" (Klings 2015:17), the term adaptation as used here should not be conceived merely as a re-casting process involving two different media, such as novel into film. It should rather be seen as the imprinting from one text onto another one; in our case, as imprinting from a prose text genre (the Arabic *Qiṣaṣ*) onto a poetic one (the Swahili *utendi*).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As attested by Linda Hutcheon, "To interpret an adaptation as an adaptation is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a "work," but a "text," a plural "stereophony of echoes, citations, references" (1977: 160). Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double or multilaminated works that they can be theorized as adaptations" (Hutcheon 2006: 6, original emphasis).

This hermeneutic journey results in Swahili palimpsests: the palimpsestuous presence or co-presence – through quotations – of the Arabic text(s) within the Swahili compositions. The term palimpsest comes from the Greek verb *psan* ‘to scrape’ and the adjective *palim* ‘newly’, which originally referred to a scraping process and product. A text written on a papyrus or parchment was scraped to allow a new text to be written on the same papyrus. The newer text was thus grafted upon the earlier one, which was still legible. Furthermore, *Palimpsest* or *La littérature au second degré* is the pioneer work of Gérard Genette (1982), which has established the basis for talking about the textual transcendence of a text; that is, everything that sets a text in a secret or overt relationship with another text. I shall consider in the following that the new Swahili text was grafted *upon* the earlier Arabic one, this latter text being in turn still readable *within* the Swahili rendition. Borrowing the term “haunted” from the Scottish poet and scholar Michael Alexander, Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), talks about previous works haunting their adapted texts: “If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly” (Hutcheon 2006: 6). Indeed, the adapted texts might even highlight the existence of previous ones. How is this presence made tangible by the Swahili poets in their poetic renditions?

Before delving into a comparative reading of the texts, I will give a short overview of the literary history of the Arabic-Muslim text tradition on the Swahili coast. Then I will discuss how the literary relationships between Arabic and Swahili texts are defined and will make a first attempt to establish a new text cycle for the *Qışaş al-Anbiyā*’ and the *tendi* on *manabii*.

### **The Arabic-Muslim text tradition on the Swahili coast**

Considering the westward routes from Sudan to the Bilād al-Sūdān up to Senegal and the Swahili corridor, which extends from Barawa on the southern Somali coast up to Sofala in Mozambique and dots 3,000 kilometres of East African coastline (Horton 1987:89), the Arabian Peninsula and Africa are not so far from each other. Although the geographical proximity is more than evident, our research on African-language texts often does not go beyond the physical boundaries of the continent. From that point of view, Eastern Africa, as part of Africa and the coast, figures as a remote and marginal part of Kenya. It is rarely considered part of wider translocal textual networks, and texts distributed in other, non-Western networks are seldom taken into consideration. Only recently have scholars like Anne Bang (2014) and Ronit Ricci (2011) made a plea for considering the network of Arabic texts across the Indian Ocean. Paradoxically, these texts, which often provided the only reliable source texts, had been ignored as a topic of study within Indian Ocean studies, which have increasingly gained prominence over the last two decades. As Ricci puts it, “Texts of many kinds – the Qur’ān above all [...] were the bearers of new religions and ways of life, both in Arabic or in vernacular translation” (Ricci 2011: 1). How, then, did Arabic-Muslim texts reach the East African coast?

Thomas Geider’s attempt to trace copies of *One Thousand and One Nights* in early Swahili classical folktales led him to the conclusion that the *Nights* reached the East African coast not

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only orally but also by way of Arabic books, which were widely diffused at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this evinces a printing culture that did not depend on the West or the colonial powers as its centres (Geider 2004: 248). Both Carl Becker's register of books that were confiscated from Swahili scholars' private collections in German East Africa in 1905 and Bang's survey of Arabic book collections in Zanzibar and Lamu confirm that "East African scholars were aware of and in possession of the Islamic books that were being printed in Egypt" (Bang 2014: 131). As suggested by Clarissa Vierke, the composition of many Swahili *tendi* at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may have been inspired by pamphlets and books coming from the Near East or the Arabian Peninsula at that time (Vierke 2010: 457, 475). The circulation of books reflects a multilingual and cosmopolitan atmosphere in a wider sense. One can imagine the so-called "Babylonian mess" at the palace of Zanzibar, described in the autobiography of Princess Salme, the daughter of Sultan Sayyid Said: "[T]he Sultan insisted that everybody talk Arabic, while, as soon as he turned his back, a 'Babylonian mess' broke out with people speaking Persian, Turkish, Circassian, Swahili, Nubian and 'Abyssinian'" (Ruete 1989: 35 quoted in Geider 2004: 264). This colourful anecdote also confirms Geider's assumption that little is known so far about the transmission of stories across languages. Arabic texts were not necessarily read in the Arabic language, but adapted to local language and enjoyed only by a few Swahili literati, who, as attested by Ibrahim Noor Shariff, "extracted the parts which took their fancy and made modifications in their translations and renderings to suit local needs" (1991: 38). Competence in both Arabic and Swahili was the privilege of a few elite families, and writing in Arabic script, even after the introduction of Roman script, was a mark of patrician distinction (Vierke 2014: 322). The more rigid court system arrived with the Zanzibari Sultan Bargash b. Said (Pouwels 1992: 279), under whom literature, particularly the Ibadī literature of the Hejaz and Hadramawt regions, was especially promoted: Zanzibar, Mombasa and Lamu turned into cultural magnets for highly educated scholars with a strong background in Islamic sciences. The race to record knowledge was strongly encouraged by the thriving Sufi brotherhoods, for whom Arabic script became "the accepted means of recording information" (Pouwels 1992: 277). Arabic script, as well as the Arabic and Swahili languages, were not only promoted as tools for reading and commenting on the Qur'ān. In fact, as pointed out by Bang, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a text-based form of authority, or a "textualisation of charisma", was promoted by Sufi orders (Bang 2014: 109, 44).

### **The Arabic stories of the prophets**

The literature on "The Lives of the Prophets"<sup>3</sup> (*Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*) is an extant genre that came into vogue among several authors and in a *lingua franca* of the post-classical period, which was

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<sup>3</sup> The use of this title follows the English translation of the *Qiṣaṣ* by William M. Brinner (2002). In the introduction to his work, the author claims to choose the term "lives," rather than "stories" or "legends", "to indicate particularly that to manew yotk Muslims these are not mere tales or legends but actual historical accounts relating what is known about the stories of the prophets" (2002: xi). An explicit defense of the prophets' stories' being history and not legend was expressed by Ali Musa Raza: "Any historical fact related by Oriental people is a myth in the terminology of the 'broad-minded' Europeans" (1965: 227, quoted in Knappert 1975: 110).

the idiom of *maghāzī* and eschatological literature as well (Tottoli 1999: 165ff.; Brinner 2002: viii ff.; see also Nagel 1967 and Klar 2006).

Although the earliest attestations of the *Qiṣaṣ* have not been preserved, the first work devoted exclusively to the stories about prophets has been ascribed to Wahb ibn Munabbih, a Yemenite of Hebrew origin (Tottoli 1999: 165ff.). The *Qiṣaṣ* as a literary genre have played an important role in the commentarial literature and, as noted by Peter Awn, they have not been seen as an isolated genre of religious literature drawn wholly from Jewish and Christian sources (Awn 1983: 6-9). Some of their versions became widespread in many Islamic countries because Muslim itinerant preachers and storytellers, the *qussās* (sg. *qāṣṣ*, from the Arabic root *qaṣaṣa* ‘to tell, to narrate’), appropriated these stories for moralistic as well as entertainment purposes:

Who [the *qussās*] aroused the piety of the masses and taught morality to them, but who all too often fell in disrepute when unscrupulous *qussās* misused those tales, even creating vulgar or erotic tales which were condemned by the religious leader (Brinner 2002: xii ff.; see also Tottoli 1999: 100ff.).<sup>4</sup>

Hence, Awn states that “cross-fertilisation occurred, with nuances and embellishments traded back and forth among the various religious communities” (Awn 1983: 9; quoted in Klar 2006: 341). The different versions by various authors were the result of the diverse ways through which Islamic storytellers and historiographers tried to explore the stories they inherited, “attempting to present these stories to their readers in a convincing and communicative way” (Klar 2009: 344).<sup>5</sup> The *Qiṣaṣ* authors (Wahb ibn Munabbih, Ishaq ibn Bishr, ‘Umara ibn Wathima, al-Tha‘labī, al-Kisā’ī, al-Ṭarafī), generally speaking, fashioned their work as a chronological description of historical events from the time of creation (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel) to the year of Muhammad’s birth (known as the Year of the Elephant, approximately 570), providing accounts or detailed biographies of people commonly known as Islamic prophets, namely: Idrīs, Harut and Marut, Nūḥ, Hūd, Ṣālīḥ, ‘Ibrāhīm, Lūṭ, Yūsuf, Mūsā son of Manasseh, Ayub, People of al-Rass, Dhu l-Kifl, Shu‘ayb, Korah, al-Khiḍr, Musa, Balaam, Elijah, ‘Ilyās, Dhu l-Kifl, Eli and Samuel, the historical figures of Saul, Dāūd and Solomon, Issaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra, Luqmān, al-Bulqiyān, Dhu al-Qarnayn, Zacariah, Yaḥyā, Maryam, ‘Īsā and Yūnus.<sup>6</sup> The Qur’ān is the main reference for the tale of each figure, and cross-references to its verses pervade the narrative of the whole *Qiṣaṣ*, but long chains of authority (*isnads*) are repeatedly mentioned over the course of the tales.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Among the first converted Jewish storytellers, the figure of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār has played a prominent role. For a detailed criticism on the issue of the *isrā’īliyyāt*, see Tottoli 1999: 97–105, Brinner 2002: xxvi–xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> A common approach shared by most of the Muslim writers was the adaptation of material based on Judeo-Christian tradition, Midrashic literature, Arabic and non-Arabic sources (Brinner 2002: xx; Awn 1983: 6-9).

<sup>6</sup> The number of prophets and the material linked to them changes from one work to the next. The figures mentioned above are those listed and presented in Brinner (2002). I have adopted the Arabic versions of their names.

<sup>7</sup> Klar refers to the following major sources attested in the *Tales*: the Ibn ‘Abbās-based commentaries of Sa‘īd b. Jubāyr (d. 714), Mujāhid (d. 718/722), al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 723/724), ‘Ikrima (d. 723/724), al-Suddī (d. 745), al-Kalbī (d. 763) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767); Ibn ‘Abbās himself (d. ca. 687) and other companions of Muhammad, such as Abū Hurayra (d. 678), Ibn Masūdī (d. 652/653) and ‘Abd Allaāh b. ‘Umar (d. 693) (Klar 2006: 340).

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The longest and most imitated work of this genre (except for al-Ṭabarī's universal history in 40 volumes) was written by the Persian-speaking religious scholar Abū Ishḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī (d. 1035), a Shafiite born in Nishapur, Iran, and the most knowledgeable Qur'ān expert of his age. His *Qiṣaṣ* composition came after his commentary on the Qur'ān, which earned him fame and authority. He quotes it frequently in the book as a narrative tool for admonishing and instructing his readers (Klar 2006: 339). However, the abundant presence of reverential chains of authority makes al-Tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ* a narrative mosaic in which different viewpoints and facets coexist in prose form, rather than a "simple explanation of the Qur'ān in a narrative form", as Knappert (1975: 105) describes it. As Marianna Klar points out, the relation between al-Tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ* and other sources is less than simple: "These individual reports each present a facet of the topic under discussion, and it is through the accumulation of these various facets that al-Tha'labī constructs his narrative. The narrative therefore does not progress in a straightforward, linear fashion, but rather would appear to meander its way through its presentation of historical events" (Klar 2006: 343).<sup>8</sup>

Tha'labī's '*Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*' ('The brides of sessions about the tales of the Prophets') is the richest extant text of its genre and remarkably well-known and widespread (see Nagel 1967, Brinner 2002, Klar 2006). There exist at least 42 catalogued manuscript copies of the text, whose oldest copy is a late 11<sup>th</sup> century manuscript kept in Paris;<sup>9</sup> moreover, there are countless modern editions of the text, such as the 1869 Būlāq edition by al-Maṭba'a al-Miṣriyya, listed by Princeton (Klar 2009: 2), and the work has been translated into Persian, Turkish, Tatar, Italian, English and German.

### Arrival of 'The Tales of the Prophets' at the Swahili coast

As he was registering and confiscating texts on religion, law, grammar and astrology in 1905, Becker noticed that the stories of the prophets played a significant role as edification literature (Becker 1932: 51; see also Geider 2004: 248 and Pouwels 1992: 279-80). These stories included the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* by Tha'labī, *Muḥtaṣar raud' ar-Rājāhīn fī Manākib aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn* by Jāfī'ī and *Badā'i' aṣ-Zuhur* by Ibn Ijās (Becker 1968: 95). While Becker did not supply any origins for the *Arabian Nights*, he did verify that most of the books listed had been imported from Bombay or Cairo. The Arabic *Qiṣaṣ* he referred to come from the edition published in Cairo (1906), which could be the terminus post quem for dating the arrival of these Arabic *Qiṣaṣ* in East Africa.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ*, after having been published in Cairo for the first time

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth pointing out the exact meaning of the term '*isnād*' in this context; the term derives from the Arabic *sanad*, 'support', which refers to a system based on interdependent readings taking the form of a chain in which each witness depends to some degree on an earlier one. Edward Said, for instance, in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2006), argues that *ijtihad* as "an interpretative effort; individual thought" is precisely a commitment to the '*isnād*' or hermeneutical community (Said 2006: 68).

<sup>9</sup> Klar informs us that the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris and the British Library respectively store the incomplete but earliest manuscript (final pages missing, late 11<sup>th</sup> century) and the complete but slightly later (1119) manuscripts of the work.

<sup>10</sup> Geider rightly points out, however, that "while Becker's brief remark is representative for the two decades of German colonial rule in East Africa, it certainly cannot be excluded that such Arabic booklets had already

in 1865 and then again by the Būlāq Press in 1869, mushroomed to ten times its original size in subsequent republications in Cairo between 1292 and 1875-1926 (Klar 2006: 339). To give a final example, in 1937 Dammann found on Zanzibar an Arabic booklet, printed in Bombay (1920/1921), that included the Arabic version of the *Kisa cha Kadhi na Haramii* ('The Story of the Judge and the Thief') (Dammann 1957: 433). Thus, as this overview indicates, Arabic source books such as the *Qiṣaṣ* were in wide distribution even in printed form along the Swahili coast from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The poets-adaptor of *tendi* on prophets might have relied on a printed version of the *Qiṣaṣ* for their compositions in *utendi* form.

What enabled early scholars to identify a textual link between certain *tendi* and the *Qiṣaṣ* by Tha'labī? In his work on the poet, scribe and artist Muhamadi Kijuma from Lamu (1855-1945), Abou Egl makes reference to an Arabic *du'a* ('prayer, invocation') quoted in the *Utendi wa Yusufu* that stems from the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* by Tha'labī (Egl 1983: 193). According to Egl, the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* was the same source used by Kijuma for the composition of the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*. How did Kijuma obtain a version of Tha'labī's narrative? Egl's assumption is that "it is likely that Kijuma got a copy of this book in Lamu, or rather that he bought it from Zanzibar while he was at the Sultan's place" (Egl 1983: 185). However, although we do not know exactly whether Kijuma obtained or bought Tha'labī's Arabic narrative in Lamu or during his stay with Sayyid Hamoud, Sultan of Zanzibar, between 1901 and 1908, this shows without a doubt the role of Zanzibar and Lamu in the book's reception by the Near East and Arabian Peninsula.

Zanzibar had a particularly tight-knit network of *shāf'ī 'ulamā'*, and the arrival of 'alim like Ibn Sumayt from 1870 to 1925 made Zanzibar an important centre of education in East Africa, one that eventually became more prominent than the previously important centres of Lamu and Mombasa (Bang 2003: 93). One might thus assume that if Tha'labī's book came into the possession of the 'ulamā' and host at the palace of the sultan in Zanzibar, it was because of the author himself: Tha'labī was a Shafīte, and the *shāf'ī 'ulamā'* welcomed works impregnated with the notions of the Shafī school. That Kijuma might have referred to Arabic books in the composition of his *Utendi wa Yusufu* and *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* does not come as a surprise. For the composition of the *Utendi wa Barasisi* ('The Poem of Barasisi'), he himself named the two sources that he relied on for the Swahili adaptation: the *Al-Arbaini Hadithi* ('The Forty Ḥadīth') and *al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf* ('The Exquisite in Every Elegant Art'), written by Muhammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ibšīhī (Egl 1983: 178).<sup>11</sup>

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reached East Africa shortly after they were printed, i.e. before the era of European colonialism" (Geider 2004: 248).

<sup>11</sup> Kijuma composed this poem by combining two *tendi*, the *Utendi wa Mwana Hasina* and the *Utendi wa Barasisi* (Miehe & Vierke 2010: 49, 200-210; Egl 1983: 171), and it is also attested that Kijuma used to read this book, featuring stories of a different nature in Arabic verse, together with other scholars on Lamu (Egl 1983: 178).

### How to “translate” textual relations

As by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the concept of authority on the east African coast had become ever more text-based (Bang 2014: 141-144), what did it mean to render a text from Arabic into Swahili? And to what extent did Arabic textual presences resurface in or haunt the Swahili texts?

The subject of textual relations between *tendi* and Arabic Muslim texts is a well-established topic in research on Swahili poetry, which, however, still may need further in-depth investigations for “making sense of the text” in agreement with the so-called “future philology” fostered by Sheldon Pollock (2009: 937). In her survey “Moslem Literature in Swahili”, Alice Werner claimed that “without exception [...] the subject matter of the religious poems belongs to Moslem theology and tradition derived either directly from Arabia or by way of Persia” (Werner 1920: 25). The complexity of copies, sources and variants was already pointed out in 1927 by Werner, who considered these early Swahili works (like the stories of Ayubu, Yusuf, Isa, Hunain and Miqdad na Miyasa) as “free compositions” rather than slavish copies of foreign Arabic originals: “I do not think any of these are translations of any particular Arabic originals; they are more probably free compositions on subjects orally delivered – or perhaps derived from books, as the author of the *Kutawafukwe Muhamadi* expressly says that he derived the matter of his poem from a book written by Hasan of Basra” (Werner 1926-1927: 107–108). Yet, in considering the Swahili works “free” compositions, Werner emphasised the aspect of creativity that Vierke later investigated in her examination of appropriation practices: “In how far can *tendi* be considered translations from Arabic sources? How much creativity did the ‘African natives’ invest into the texts? Is the *utendi* better understood as an imitation or an ‘authentic’ creation?” (Vierke 2017: 329).

Over the centuries, the practice of translation has become invested with different hermeneutic practices: from versification into new rhyme schemes<sup>12</sup> and free compositions up to more in-depth textual approaches, which have looked at the practice as a “yielding into” activity (Taussig 1993:45).<sup>13</sup> With regard to the plethora of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century precolonial poetry from the northern Swahili coast, Vierke has analysed how travelling literary motifs,

<sup>12</sup> An example in this respect is the *Utenzi wa Hamziyya*, the oldest manuscript of Swahili literature, dated to 1652. The *Utenzi wa Hamziyya* was adapted from the Arabic poem ‘*Umma al-qurai*’, written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the famous Egyptian poet Sheikh Muhammad, known as al-Busiry (d. 1296). Whereas in Arabic prosody *Hamziyya* refers to a poem rhyming in the letter hamza (ء), translating it into Swahili, the poet-adaptor Sayyid ‘Idarusi bin Athman made the text fit into a new rhyme scheme based on the letter *mim* (م) which reads as the syllable *-ma* in the Swahili text. Nevertheless, the Swahili poet decided to keep two lines per verse and 15 syllables in a line, following the Arabic pattern in this respect. For a whole reading of the *Utenzi wa Hamziyya*, see Mutiso 2005: 109.

<sup>13</sup> According to Taussig, mimesis refers to a specifically sensuous encounter with the original: “[T]he sensuous moment of knowing includes a yielding and mirroring of the knower in the unknown, of thought in his object” (Taussig 1993: 45). For Giorgio Pasquali, mimesis is indeed an activity of one who wishes to closely associate a new work with a major classic, so that a comparison with its model might shed light on the merits of the new, “modern” work: “Come si chiama nelle lingue antiche l’attività di colui che vuole porre al fianco di un’opera classica un’opera nuova di bellezza pari, sì che la vicinanza del modello, eccitando al confronto, renda più evidenti i pregi di quella moderna? In Greco si chiama non μίμησις (*mimesis* – trad. imitazione) ma ζήλος (*zēlos* – trad. emulazione, gara), in latino non *imitatio* ma *aemulatio*” (Pasquali 1920: 119). For the Swahili context, see also Vierke’s article “Poetic ‘Translation’ as Mimetic Practice” (2017: 321-335).



particularly those from the “foreign” Arabic tradition – like the narrative patterns and imagery of the *maghāzī* literature (such as the ruined city depicted in the *Inkishafi*) – have been adapted in Swahili poetry. One of her main concerns is how to consider adaptation as a form of expansion, and thus make room for the coexistence of both continuity and creativity:

Adaptation does not consist in translating a concept by a single equivalent notion. The poet does not merely describe the same scene in Swahili but expands on the preexisting text, striving to render the idea even more palpable to the audience. [...] The poet essentially re-explores existing figurations, that is, ideas shaped in form, not by mechanically repeating them but by (re)considering them (Vierke 2015: 231).

Beyond that, little has been said so far with reference to the text as a palimpsest and its textual transcendence as analytical tools for reading Swahili textual relationships. In Genette’s terms, this is what is known as “*transtextualité*, ou transcendance textuelle du texte”, that is, “tout ce qui le met en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d’autres textes” (Genette 1982:7).<sup>14</sup> In the context of this paper, I would like to create a link to earlier research and concentrate on some “palimpsestuous presences” (Hutcheon 2006:6) or copresences in the Swahili *tendi* compositions that have been the object of my recent, broader studies. What I shall argue in the following is that ideas put into *utendi* metre are merely the departure point; creativity and mimetic elements are important components, but not sufficient without considering the “palimpsestuous presence” (*Ibid.*) of this Arabic genre in Swahili compositions.<sup>15</sup> I shall devote my attention to the hermeneutical approaches that the Swahili poets/adapters used to refer to the sacred texts as well as the *Qışaş* as a source material in their own compositions. It is striking how Swahili authors have been “translating” or rather verbalising these sources at liberty. The free use of sources also corresponds to the multifaceted role of the poet, who can simultaneously be a copyist, an adapter, a quoter, an editor and a commentator of the work. All of these factors tend to make the question of undisputed authorship a rather moot point: It is the ongoing transcendence and reformulation of a text that is revealed by its palimpsests. From the moment we call a work an adaptation, we inevitably set it in relation to previous texts: incommensurability, copresence and palimpsestuousness.

Is this textual relation always overt and visible to the reader? In *tendi* such as the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* and *Utendi wa Yusufu*, the poet did not make metatextual comments on the narrative parts and quotations taken from the Arabic *Qışaş* of Tha‘labī’, either because it was obvious and easily recognisable by the literati acquainted with Muslim traditions or because making references to specific texts and thus marking the *utendi* as authentic was not an important concern in these Swahili reformulations. Reinforcement can be found in Hutcheon’s

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<sup>14</sup> “All that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1992: 83-84).

<sup>15</sup> Ibrahim Noor Shariff has noted that the stories of the prophets of Islam (Isa/Christ, Musa/Moses, Suleiman/Solomon, Daud/David, Adam, Ibrahim/Abraham, Ismail/Ishmael, Is’haq/Isaac, Yusuf/Joseph and Nuh/Noah) have been used “in the course of educating children, constantly amplified in relation to everyday experiences” (1991: 39). The adapter’s imagination, narrative expansions and communicative ways of showing the facts are all elements of adaptation.

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definition of the “palimpsestuous intertextuality” of the audience: “For audiences, such adaptations are obviously ‘multilaminated’; they are directly and openly connected to recognisable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity” (Hutcheon 2006: 21).

As will be shown in the “Reading closely” section below, as opposed to the *Qışaş*, in which the Arabic author makes an enormous effort to indicate the different sources and mark perspectives as coming from different witnesses, within *tendi*, the poet is far less concerned with historical reliability. His major intention is to depict the story in vivid terms.

The Arabic source is thus silently but tightly woven and adapted into the narrative plot of the *tendi*. In contrast to Sayid Umar bin Amin bin Nasir al-Ahdal (1798-1870), the blind Sharif of Siu and alleged poet of *Ayubu*, Muhammad Kijuma, the presumed poet of the *Utendi wa Yusufu* and the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, never presents himself as the translator of an “original” Arabic text, nor does he refer in the poem to an Arabic source (*awali*), as it is in the *Utendi wa Qiyama* (‘The last judgement’);<sup>16</sup> to a sourcebook (*chuo*, pl. *zuo*), as in the *Utendi wa Ras al-Ghuli*,<sup>17</sup> nor to a chronicler (*mwenye hadithi*), as s/he does in the *Haudaji*.<sup>18</sup> It is rather the copresence of quoted fragments within the Swahili narrative that speaks of prior text(s) from which a new copy has been woven together.<sup>19</sup>

### Arabic-Swahili text cycles

The Arabic *maghāzi* literature and its relation with Swahili *tendi* were later taken up by Rudi Paret (1926-1927) and Martin Abel (1938). In collaboration with Alice Werner and Carl Meinhof, they undertook further research and highlighted how the Arabic corpus shared multiple stylistic and thematic features with a large number of *tendi*, such as the *Utendi wa Tambuka*, *Utendi wa Hunaini*, *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa*, *Utendi wa Abdirrahmani*, *Utendi wa Ras al-Ghuli*, *Utendi wa Vita vya Uhud*, *Utendi wa Katirifu* and *Utendi wa Badiri*. Later, other *tendi*, like the *Utendi wa Haudaji* (‘The poem of the palanquin’), were added to the list (Vierke 2011).<sup>20</sup> Besides their stylistic similarities, these *tendi* are thematically close to each other: they all deal with the battles of the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad against his opponents during the Prophet’s lifetime.

In addition to the *maghāzi tendi*, one could argue that there is another thematically well-defined corpus of *tendi*, which the *Utendi wa Yusufu* also belongs to: *tendi* about pre-

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<sup>16</sup> *Awaliye tawambiya/Alinena abdalla/Bin abbas fadhawila/Radhi yallahu Taala*, “I will tell you its source: it was told by Abdalla son of Abbas Fadhil; may he rest in peace” (stz. 14) (Allen 1971: 440–442).

<sup>17</sup> *Hadithi hii jueni/Naliona chuoni/a zita zali Yemeni/Zamani zake Bashairi*, “Know that this story – I saw it in a book; it’s about the Yemeni wars in the day of the Prophet” (stz. 26) (Harries 1962: 7).

<sup>18</sup> *Wambiye mwenye hadithi*, ‘the chronicler said’ (stz. 138) (Vierke 2011: 506).

<sup>19</sup> What in transtextual terms is called the hypotext or “text A,” from which the hypertext or “text B” draws (Genette 1982: 12-13), early Swahili classical poems refer to as *awali*, which comes from the Arabic ‘awal (“first”), in order to convey the creative genius of the “original” source text to the second, newer text.

<sup>20</sup> For a list of all the editions of classical Swahili poetry, see Mieke 2010.

Muhammad prophets like Ayubu (Job), Isa (Jesus), Musa (Moses), Burahimu (Abraham), Hud and Yunus (Eber and Jonah) and Yusuf (Joseph). Each of these *tendi* is likewise based on Arabic texts and borrows from the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiya* ('The stories of the prophets'). Unlike the *maghāzī tendi*, they have never been considered to form a text cycle.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, in contrast to the *maghāzī* and *tendi* narratives, the Arabic *Qiṣaṣ* about the prophets (Sw. *nabii*, pl. *manabii*), have rarely been considered in relation to Swahili narrative *tendi*, although, as Jan Knappert points out, in Swahili literature "the prophets are alluded to or even enumerated in almost every didactic work" (Knappert 1975: 106). He assumes that Swahili literature must contain not only the stories of Yusuf and Ayubu in verse form but also those of Adam and Hawa and Isa bin Mariamu, in addition to episodes from the life of Musa and the miracles of Yunus, Salehe, Sulemani, Burahimu and Zakariya (see Knappert's survey from 1999).

### ***Qiṣaṣ* and *tendi* on *manabii*: A new text cycle**

Not only in terms of content, but also with regard to the focus and techniques of amplification, the *Utendi wa Ayubu*, *Isa* and *Yusufu* are very similar. In fact, all the three *tendi* have so much in common, being derived from the prophet's stories, that one could group them together as a new cycle, an idea that has not been explored in the research so far. Their coherence, in terms of both content and style, is as strong as those of the other *tendi* cycle, the *maghāzī* narratives, analysed by Rudi Paret (1926-1927, 1930) and Abel (1938). In the following, I put forward some observations shedding light on shared motifs among the Ayubu, Isa and Yusuf *tendi*, before placing them in relation to the Arabic *Qiṣaṣ* literary tradition.

The trials and victories of the prophetic missions are a central motif in *tendi* depicting the prophets' lives, as, for instance, in the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, *Utendi wa Ayubu* and *Utendi wa Yusufu*. While in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, the prophetic mission is mainly based on dreams and trials, in the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* it focuses on the prophet's miracles, and in the *Ayubu*, on the torments that are meant to test him. In all three narratives of the prophets' lives, the harmony that characterises their early stories is always compromised by the absence of someone or something, which triggers the early difficulties. In the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, the prophet is the only one without a branch; this leads Yaqub to pray to God to grant him a branch from paradise, which is finally given to him by Jibril. Furthermore, Yusuf's dreams, sent by God, trigger his brothers' jealousy. In the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, the virgin Mariamu is not accompanied by her companion precisely on the day when the angel appears at the well to reveal God's decree to give to her a boy called Isa. Once she is back at her home, rumours about her pregnancy spread. In the *Utendi wa Ayubu*, on the other hand, it is the opposite of a lack, namely his wealth and affluence, that pushes Iblis to ask God to test Ayub's faith by depriving him of all his property and goods. Thus, at the beginning, all three narratives depict a situation that "has gone

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<sup>21</sup> Since no systematic comparison between the *Qiṣaṣ* and *tendi* has ever been carried out, my work is the first attempt in that direction. The topic needs, however, further research, which I intend to pursue in the near future.

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on for years”, but which starts being narrated at a moment of change and loss, when “the dispatcher or searcher realises what particular thing is lacking” (Propp, quoted in Vierke 2010: 256). Yusuf lived without a stick for years until the moment the poem begins, when he reaches boyhood and asks for his branch. Likewise, Mariamu had never gone alone to the cave until that day, the hottest one, when she is asked to fetch water and she sets off alone. In a similar way, Ayub lived a prosperous life until the moment he was deprived of everything.

The narratives of both Yusuf and Isa begin with their childhood and continue until their death. Before dying, both prophets leave messages which have to be read as instructions and admonitions to their people: the sons of Israel (*banu israilia*) in the *Utendi wa Yusufu* (stz. 719), the people standing before Isa in the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* (stz. 345). While in the former, the arrival of Moses is announced (stz. 723), in the latter it is the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad that is proclaimed (stz. 344). Facing death, Yusuf asks to be buried and recites the *shahada* before being put in a marble coffin by Juda (stz. 726–727), whereas Isa rises to heaven and his return to this world is announced by scholars (stz. 347). While Yusuf’s death takes place in a calm and peaceful scenario – not only does he wish to die, but his role as messenger of God has been widely acknowledged by all his people – the conclusion of Isa’s story is less idyllic. In the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, Isa’s resurrection is not recounted by the poet-narrator himself, who instead merely hints at what other scholars have said about his probable return (stz. 347). Since his return is not depicted, the conclusion seems incomplete and the circle of life is not properly concluded. In the *Utendi wa Ayubu* (Werner 1921-1923), which focuses on the tragic figure of the prophet Ayub (Job), the *utendi* narrative covers a briefer period of the character’s life. The *fabula*<sup>22</sup> starts when Ayub is already an adult (stz. 18–24) and ends not with the character’s death but with the restoration of his prosperity (stz. 358–365). Thus, in a certain way, Ayub is as successful a character as Yusuf – but while Ayub’s “happy ending” depicts him as still alive, in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, the story ends with the death of Yusuf. Thus, the chronological sequence of events is not the most important organising principle of the narrative in the *Utendi wa Ayubu* – at least not compared to the relevance it has in the Yusuf and Isa *tendi*. The narrative is rather bipolar in structure, as it traverses the dichotomy of good and evil, temptation and fall. An important presence is the character of Iblis, “somewhat comically commuting between God and Job” (Gérard 1977: 12-13), who tempts the latter in many ways (stz. 45–153) and tests Job’s wife Rehema several times (stz. 122–280) until Ayub’s prosperity is finally restored.

More generally, stories of the prophets, such as Ayub, Isa, Yunus and Yusuf, form a common subject depicted both in the *Qisasa* and in *tendi* narratives. As opposed to the Qur’ān, which talks about the prophets here and there in the passages of various *sura* (see Tottoli 1999 on the anecdotes and messages of the prophets occurring in the Qur’ān), the prophets’ lives represent a coherent text in the case of both the *tendi* and *Qisasa* traditions. The life of each prophet is not confined to a brief snapshot form, but is turned into a long and detailed story, adapted to prose

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<sup>22</sup> I will refer to the main part of *tendi* narratives with the term *fabula*, conceived of as “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 2009: 5).

(the *Qışaş*) or poetic (*tendi*) form. This common subject, which creates an affinity between the two oeuvres, accounts for a further parallel with another cycle of *tendi* and the *maghāzī* traditions: as *tendi* and the *Qışaş* depict the lives of prophets who lived before Muhammad, other *tendi* and *maghāzī* narratives share the common subject of battles and struggles (Paret quoted in Vierke 2011: 421). Furthermore, just as *tendi* and *maghāzī* share a set of *topoi* and motifs, like those surrounding the figure of Ali (Vierke 2011: 421), shared *topoi* and motifs also bring together *tendi* and *Qışaş* narratives. The role of Yaqub as a sensible man with forethought towards his beloved son in Yusuf's story, for instance, as well as the roles of Iblis and Jibril in Ayub's, Isa's and Yusuf's stories (see Werner 1921-1923, Dammann 1980), who are meant to make the prophets stray or awaken, are common shared motifs.

In addition to this, as I will show in the next section, some motifs are repeated both in the Arabic texts and the *tendi* narratives, like Yaqub's blindness, who was healed by the scent of his beloved son's gown in Yusuf's story; the cities of Kan'an and the doors to enter to Egypt (Raia 2017:305-306; *Qışaş*, Brinner 2002: 196); the palm tree in Bethlehem under which Mary took shelter (*Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, stz. 72, Dammann 1980: 22-23; *Qışaş*, Brinner 2002: 642); Iblis's whirlwind fire in Ayub's story (*Utenzi wa Ayubu*, stz. 82, Werner 1921: 108); and Gabriel's blowing into a hole in Mary's garment (*Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*, stz. 24, Dammann 1980: 17; *Qışaş*, Brinner 2002: 639).

### Reading closely

In the following, I present extracts from stories of the prophets stemming from the Arabic *Qışaş* (along with English translation) and their Swahili *tendi* counterparts. The excerpts selected will show different layers of appropriation. They range from the freest and most elusive rendition, such as in the Swahili *Utendi wa Ayubu* vis-à-vis its parallel *qışat* in Arabic, to the most astonishing form of appropriation in which the Swahili-uttered words or speeches are haunted by, hint at or conjure up already spoken Arabic utterances, as the passages from the *Utendi wa Yusuf* and *Kisa cha Sayyidna Isa* will show.

### Ayub

The first excerpt discussed here is from the *Utendi wa Ayubu*, and focuses on Iblis visiting Ayub's sons in the shape of their teacher, destroying the childrens' lives and then giving the bad news to Job. In both the Swahili and Arabic narratives, this scene give way to mimetic and melodramatic scenes.<sup>23</sup>

He [Iblīs] shook the palace until it cracked to its foundations, and rammed the walls against each other. Then, he hurled logs and stones against the sons of Job, making

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<sup>23</sup> The *Qışat Ayūb* passage presented here is offered only in translation, whereas in the examples about Isa and Yusuf, the quotations will be presented in their original form as well. While in the Yusuf example, the quotation is included in the original Arabic (in Arabic script), the quotations from the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* will be reproduced as in Dammann's edition, that is, with the Arabic script transliterated and in translation, as the manuscript of the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* is not at my disposal.

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a dreadful example to them; then lifted up the palace into the air and turned it over with them inside, so they were upside down. Then Iblīs went off to Job, disguised as his sons’ teacher who taught them wisdom. He came to him injured, with a bruised head and face, blood streaming from his skull, and told him what happened. He said to him, “Ah Job, to see your sons in their agony, your heart would have been torn to pieces, as they were falling down on their heads in the upturned castle, their blood and brains spilled from their nostrils and lips, their bellies split open and their entrails scattered about.” As he repeated this again and again, Job’s heart filled with compassion. He wept and grabbed a handful of dust and put it on his head. Iblīs seized the moment and flew up, rejoicing in Job’s anguish. (Trans. Brinner 2002: 257-58.)

The same scene in the *Utendi wa Ayubu*<sup>24</sup> is realised as follows:

<p>79 <i>Kutoka kwake, yuani, Akafuza Shaitani, Hatta akenda chuoni Zijana huisomea.</i></p>	<p>(In) his going forth, know (that) Satan went on without stopping, Till he went to the school (Where) the boys were wont to learn.</p>
<p>80 <i>Waana washishie mbao Kama ada wasomao, Papo mu'allimu wao Akosao huwambia.</i></p>	<p>The children were holding their boards, As is the custom (of) those who read, When their teacher Speaks to those who make mistakes.</p>
<p>81 <i>Kijana kitia kosa Mu'allimu humuwasa. Hatta wote wamekwisa Jami'i kuwaridhia.</i></p>	<p>If a boy makes a mistake The teacher is wont to correct him, Till all have finished And he is satisfied with them all.</p>
<p>82 <i>Kangia kiwambawamba Ibilisi kama mwamba Akaitekua nyumba Nyumba ikawangukia.</i></p>	<p>He entered (in) a whirlwind— Iblis, like a storm, And he broke down the house, And the house fell.</p>
<p>83 <i>Nyumba ikawawekeza, Majiwe yote nakaza. Pasiwe aloyokoza Kwa kupata kukimbua.</i></p>	<p>The house covered them And all the stones pressed on them. There was not one who escaped, (So as) to be able to run away.</p>
<p>84 <i>Asizepo mwenye dhambi Kuweka wana majumbe, Kaipakapaka vumbi Sura akaizungua.</i></p>	<p>When the (arch-)sinner finished Putting away the sons of the chiefs, He smeared himself with dust And changed his appearance.</p>

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<sup>24</sup> Werner 1921-1923: 94, 107.

<p>85 <i>Akavaa na mavao</i>  <i>Kama mu'allimu wao</i>  <i>Ule awasomeshao</i>  <i>Akenda akiomboaa.</i></p>	<p>And he dressed himself in clothes          Like (those of) their teacher –          That (one) who had been hearing them read –          And he went (along) lamenting.</p>
<p>[...] 90 <i>Akenda hatta kikoma</i>  <i>Kwa Ayubu, chegema</i>  <i>Akazidi kunguruma</i>  <i>Kwa matozi namamia.</i></p>	<p>He went on until he stopped          At Job's house and came near          And groaned still more (than before)          With tears, bending down.</p>
<p>91 <i>Akalia kwa siaha,</i>  <i>Achamba, sina furaha,</i>  <i>Wala sitoona raha</i>  <i>Illa nami kuifia.</i></p>	<p>He wept noisily,          Saying, "I have no joy,          Nor shall I see any rest          Except by dying myself.</p>
<p>92 <i>Hawa zijana zititi</i>  <i>Yamewakuta mauti.</i>  <i>Laiti mimi, laiti</i>  <i>Akhera katangulia.</i></p>	<p>These little children –          Death has come upon them.          Oh! would – oh! would that I          Had gone before them into the          world to come!"</p>
<p>[..] 98 <i>Ayubu kashawishika,</i>  <i>Ini likamzunguka,</i>  <i>Matozi yakamtoka;</i>  <i>Yakamuoza kifua.</i></p>	<p>Job was (almost) persuaded (to give away);          His liver turned round in him,          His tears started flowing.          They rotted his chest.</p>

As the lines of the *Utendi wa Ayubu* show, the Swahili poet does not provide a literal translation in verse of the *qiṣat* prose passage. The same setting is also described in further detail. The references to the Swahili board (*mbao*) held by the pupils in stanza 80; the metatextual comment on the role of the teacher (*mwalimu*), who commits himself to his students in stanza 81; the figure of Iblis, impetuous like a storm (*mwamba*), in stanza 82; the stones (*majiwe yote*) that crush all of Ayub's children, for whom there is no chance to escape: these all convey and demonstrate that the Swahili poet has taken a stance towards the Arabic opus and has through appropriation in a sense turned the story into the intellectual possession of the Swahili. The moment Iblis falsely tells Ayub of his children's death is depicted in a more emotional way in the *utendi*: both the tears (*matozi*) and the act of crying loudly (*akalia kwa siaha*) are images meant to amplify the *qiṣat* in the *utendi*. The death (*mauti*) is explicitly announced in the *utendi*, and exclamations such as "*laiti mimi, laiti mimi*" ('Oh! would – oh! would that I') stress the gravity of the event, adding to the atmosphere of desperation. In a similar line in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, when Yusuf's brothers falsely reveal to Yaqub that his beloved son Yusuf got lost (a deception not unlike that of Iblis in the *Utendi wa Ayubu*), their bad news is prefaced by exclamations such as "*la illaha illa huwa*" ('There is no God except him') and gestures of

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desperation, such as tearing their clothes: “*Nguo wakiziraruwa/Wachendra wakiumbuwa/La Ilaha illa huwa/Yusufu amepoteya*”: ‘They were tearing the clothes apart, when they went depreciating themselves: ‘There is no God except him: Yusuf got lost!’ (stz. 147).<sup>25</sup>

The detailed description that the *qiṣat* devotes to the agony of Ayub’s children as the castle is being crushed (“their blood and brains spilled from their nostrils and lips, their bellies split open and their entrails scattered about”) is instead replaced in the *utendi* with a greater focus on Ayub’s own corporeal agony, which is rendered palpable in stanza 98 with the metaphorical image of the liver (*ini*) – considered the seat of emotions – turning around inside him (*likamzunguka*), and the vivid description of tears (*matozi*) – true ones, in contrast to those of Iblis – flowing down and falling on his chest (*kifua*).

### Yusuf

As mentioned above, Egl already pointed out that the quoter-narrator also used the *qiṣat* narrative as further source material to cite in his poem. Specifically, there are two quotations from the *qiṣat* embedded in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, which occur in two different episodes.<sup>26</sup> While the first quotation is an invocation uttered by the angel Gabriel in the third person, the second is an admonishment voiced by the herald in the third person.

Quoting from the *qiṣat* narrative, however, entails an aspect that makes this practice different to the often-quoted Qur’ānic *āyāt* (‘verses’; sg. *āya*) embedded in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*: how did the Swahili poet reconcile the plurality of views and sources that substantially shape the *qiṣat* narrative? In fact, as I will show with the following excerpt from the *Utendi wa Yusufu*,<sup>27</sup> it is highly improbable that the Swahili poet, when quoting or rephrasing the *qiṣat*, is truly citing Tha‘labī’s own words, since Tha‘labī’s *Qiṣaṣ* owe their contents to a compilation of *ḥadīthi* and accounts transmitted by various Muslim authorities (*‘isnād*). The following passage recounts the admonishment not to surrender, delivered to Yusuf by a herald when he was dropped in the pit.

Then suddenly, as Ka‘b al-Ahbār tells it, Joseph heard a herald behind him, saying, “Be firm. But your firmness is from God alone.” (Transl. by Brinner 2002: 196)

207 *Sauṭi akasikiya*  
*Mnaḍi kimnaḍiya*  
*Subiri Mola Jaliya*  
*Ewe Mthumi Nabiya*

He heard a voice,  
A herald calling him loudly:  
“Be patient for your God,  
You, the Prophet.”

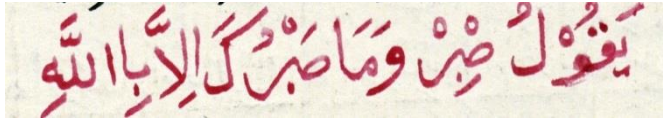
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<sup>25</sup> Raia 2017: 290.

<sup>26</sup> As recounted in my PhD thesis (2017) on the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, the second episode is “On Yusuf’s fall” (stz. 107-142) and the third, longer one is “On how the brothers deceived Yaqub and how he exposed their lies” (stz. 143-175). For a general overview of the *Utendi wa Yusufu*’s episodes, scenes and plot turns, see Raia 2017: 65-87.

<sup>27</sup> Raia 2017: 305-306.





<sup>28</sup> *yaqūlu ṣbir wa mā ṣbruka illā bi-Allāhi*

And he [the herald] said: “Be firm. But your firmness is from God alone.”

As the comparison above shows, both narratives depict the magical arrival of a herald (Swahili *mnadi*, Arabic *munād*), whose voice reassures the tearful Yusuf. In the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, however, the voice of the herald (*sauti, mnadi*) is quoted twice: in the second hemistich of the *utendi* stanza (vv. 207.3-4), though embedded in a third-person character’s speech (“*subiri Mola Jaliya*”), and via quotation in the “original” Arabic language, which directly follows the stanza.

The exact wording of the Arabic quotation has a bearing on the *utendi* text. For example, the Swahili noun *mnadi* echoes the Arabic equivalent *munad*, which is not quoted but is beneath the *qiṣat* excerpt; moreover, the verb *subiri* (207.3) echoes the same verb quoted soon after in the Arabic: “*ṣbir wa mā ṣbruka*.”

A close reading also allows us to see how – despite the common basic motifs shaping both narratives – this anecdote is reported in the *qiṣat* to have been transmitted by Ka’b al-Aḥbār, while reference to its source is omitted in the *Utendi wa Yusufu*’s appropriation.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the *Utendi wa Yusufu* quoter-narrator quotes the herald’s reported speech without ascribing the anecdote to any source. The Swahili poet takes notable freedom in selecting and quoting fragments of Qur’ānic *āyāt*. This might be attributed to the genre of the *utendi*, which targets a larger audience not particularly interested in textual accuracy and historical transmission but in the story as such. While both narratives share a meandering style, in the *qiṣat* the presence of authoritative voices from Muhammad, his nephew and the second caliph “remind the reader of where this apparently meandering narrative is leading” (Klar 2006: 344). In the *Utendi wa Yusufu*, on the other hand, it is the poet-narrator’s voice that directs, collects and summarises the *utendi* threads in the various narrative episodes. The *Utendi wa Yusufu* poet, in selecting this particular passage from the *qiṣat* and omitting reference to Ka’b al-Aḥbār, has appropriated the *qiṣat* to his own story, turning it into the intellectual property of Swahili culture. Therefore, while the *qiṣat* quotes not only the Qur’ān but also the opinions of other authorities, such as Ka’b al-Aḥbār, the Swahili poet rephrases some of those views, adapting them to the prosodic stanza pattern through diegetic and mimetic constructions and turning the story into a popular narrative account.

<sup>28</sup> Expert from the Swahili manuscript DA1, *Qissati Yusuf*, p. 22, showing a quotation of the Arabic *Qiṣat*.

<sup>29</sup> Among the first converted Jewish storytellers, the figure of Ka’b al-Aḥbār has played a prominent role. For a profound criticism on the issue of the *isrā’īliyyāt*, see Tottoli 1999: 97-105.

## SWAHILI PALIMPSESTS

### Isa

Contrary to Werner's early suppositions, which ascribe Kijuma's *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* to apocryphal Gospels and the Old Testament (Egl 1983: 185), the palimpsestuous presence of the *Qiṣaṣ* of Tha'labī also haunts the Swahili *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa*. The following excerpts depict the episode in which the angel Gabriel (*Jiburili*) appears to Mary, revealing to her that she will give birth to a boy, Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

A comparison of the Swahili and the Arabic version of Isa shows that both stories contain quotations from the Qur'ān. The co-presence of Qur'anic quotations in Arabic within the Swahili *utendi* text gives rise to further considerations in relation to textual relationships and appropriation, which will be commented upon in the analysis following the experts below.

14 *Mariamumu papo hini*  
*Akenenda kisimani*  
*Akipata ukingoni*  
*Jiburili katokea*

Precisely at that time, Mary  
went to the pit.  
Once she reached its border,  
Gabriel appeared.

15 *Jiburili wafahamu*  
*Akaya kwa Mariamumu*  
*Sura za binadamu*  
*Ndizo alomtokea*

Gabriel, you know,  
he came to Mary  
in the guise of a human being;  
that is how he appeared to her.

17 *Jiburili mwenye ina*  
*Akaya kana kiyana*  
*Kidevuni ndevu hana*  
*Mzuri mezotimia*

Gabriel, the bearer of a name  
He arrived like a youngling:  
without a beard on his chin,  
beautifully wrought.

18 *Na nyee zake nyeusi*  
*Mzuri mwema jalisi*  
*Alimweta Mkwasi*  
*Ma'anaye thakwambia*

And his hair was black;  
a handsome and good companion.  
The Wealthy had brought him;  
for which purpose, I will tell you.

19 *Alimweta Latifu*  
*Jiburili ma'arufu*  
*Zisimwingie yofu*  
*Mariamumu kakimbia*

The God of gentleness brought  
Jibril, the well-known,  
so that no fear would befall  
Mary and make her run away from him.

20 *Kwamba yeye alishuka*  
*Kwa sura za malaika*  
*Mariamumu bila ya shaka*  
*Yofu ingalimwingia*

If he had appeared  
with his angel traits,  
Mary certainly  
would have been seized with fear.

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<sup>30</sup> Dammann 1980: 16-18.

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22 *Mariamamu akanena*  
*Thapatiye kiyana*  
*Nami mume kamwe sina*  
*Hakunidaraa mmoya*

Mary said:  
“How could I have a boy  
if there is no man at all  
who has ever touched me?”

Qur. 19:20: *Qālat 'amāyakūnu lī gūmun walam yamsasnī bašarun walam 'aku baḡiyyan*  
She said: “How can I have a son when no man has touched me, and I am not sinful?”

23 *Jiburili kamjibu*  
*Mariamamu sijawabu*  
*Moliwa hana ajabu*  
*Ayaweza yothe piya*

Gabriel answered her:  
“Mary, I do not answer:  
My Almighty God has no wonder,  
He is capable of everything.”

Qur. 19:21: *Qāla: kadhaliki (qāla rabbuka ) huwa 'allaya hayyinun*  
He said, “Thus will it be. Your Lord said, ‘It is easy for Me.’”

24 *Jiburili aushike*  
*Mkono wa khandu yakwe*  
*Kapuzia mbee zakwe*  
*Mariamamu kaingia*

Gabriel took  
the sleeve of her garment.  
He blew [into it] before her,  
and he [Jesus] entered Mary.

Qur. 66:12: *Fanfahna fīhi*  
So We breathed into her.<sup>31</sup>

25 *Mariamamu wa sitawa*  
*Khandu yakwe msafiwa*  
*Alikuwa meivuwa*  
*Kisa akaivalia*

Mary, the Harmonius<sup>32</sup>  
with her purified garment  
[which] she took off,  
then she clad herself again.

26 *Jiburili kwenda zakwe*  
*Kaivaa khandu yakwe*  
*Katukuwa mimaba yakwe*  
*Isa papo akangia*

Gabriel went;  
she wore her garment;  
she conceived the pregnancy:  
at that moment, Jesus arrived.

In the *qiṣat*, the episode of Gabriel’s visit to Mary and his blowing into her gown reads as follows. As in the Swahili *Kisa cha Sayyidna Isa* above, the Arabic text also embellishes this episode with quotations (printed in italics) stemming from the Qur’ān:

<sup>31</sup> The integral verse from Sura 66, 12 recites it as follows: “And Mary, Imran’s daughter, who guarded her virginity, so We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Books, and became one of the obedient” (Arberry 1986: 595).

<sup>32</sup> In Dammann’s translation: “die Ebenmäßige” (Dammann 1980: 18).

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So she took up her jar and went alone. She entered the cave, and there she found Gabriel, whom God made appear to her as a shapely human. He said to her, “O Mary, God has sent me to you to give you a pure and righteous boy.” She said, “I seek refuge in the Merciful from you, if you fear Him” (19:18)—that is to say, are faithful, obedient.

According to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, she knew that a God-fearing man was one of mercy and fear, and she thought that Gabriel was a human being. ‘Ikrimah said that Gabriel appeared to her in the form of a beardless young man, with a bright face, curly hair and regular features. The learned men say that God sent him in human form only so that Mary might stay and listen to him. If he had descended in his own angelic form, she would have been frightened, scared away, and would not have listened. When Mary had besought God to protect her from him, he said, “I am only a messenger from your Lord [sent] to bestow a good son on you.” “How can I have a son,” she said, “when no man has touched me, and I am not sinful?” He said, “Thus will it be. Your Lord said, ‘It is easy for Me,’ [and that ‘We shall make him a sign for men and a blessing from Us.’]” (19:19-21). When he had said that, she submitted to the decree of God. Then he blew into the pocket of her loose outer garment that she had removed, and when he had left her, she put on this garment and conceived Jesus. She then filled her water-jar and went back to the house of prayer. (Trans. Brinner 2002: 638-639)

What is striking from this comparative reading is above all the close similarity of the plots and the way they unfold: the lack of something that forced Mary to go fetch the water alone, the appearance of the angel Jibril in the form of a human being, the description of his beauty with particular focus on his youth (marked by the lack of beard and his dark hair), the eventual stupor of Mary, Jibril’s blowing into the gown that Mary took off, and the conception of Jesus exactly at the moment she put it on again.

The palimpsestuous presence definitely also haunts Swahili stanzas 19 and 20 in particular, in which the poet, through metatextual comments, explains why God made the noble Jibril look like a human being: if he had appeared to Mary as an angel (“*kwa sura za malaika*”), this would have scared her away in fear (19.2, “*Zisimwingie hofu/Mariamum kakimbia*”; 20.2, “*Mariamum bila shaka/hofu ingalimwingia*”). The reason is the same in the Arabic *qiṣat*; however, in the Arabic passage it is overtly ascribed to Ali b. Abi Talib, Ikrimah and “the learned man”. In contrast, these sources are not mentioned in the Swahili narrative: it is only the poet-narrator who hermeneutically absorbs, reformulates and strings them together into a unique and new creation, presented by himself to his own audience.

Thirdly, the presence of quotations between the stanzas reveals the multilayered nature of the Swahili narrative. It is indeed in the act of quoting and embedding passages from the holy

Qur'ān<sup>33</sup> that the poet puts his composition into textual relation with another text. Quotation is the most explicit way to put one text in relation to another.<sup>34</sup> The quotations in this narrative passage are Qur'ānic *āyāt* from suras 19:20, 19:21 and 66:12 (see Dammann's notes 1980: 57). Two of these quotations are the same as those also embedded in the *qiṣat*'s Arabic passage, whereas the one from sura 66:12, which occurs in the Swahili version, is missing in the *qiṣat*. Whether the poet had at his disposal a copy of the *qiṣas* from which he drew all the quotations, we cannot know. However, it might be possible that, even without a copy at his disposal, he thought of this practice as he was writing the poem down and applied it to his own text, inevitably with some changes, omissions or additions. How else do we interpret, for instance, the presence of just the initial fragment of the verse 66:12 that is quoted? The poet might have quoted it from memory, but did not know the whole verse and thus might have cited just a fragment of it. Though just a small portion, this partial quotation nevertheless would have allowed the reader to connect the Swahili narrative scene to an event already expressed, or better, revealed in the holy verses of centuries ago.

### The Qur'ān and the *Qiṣaṣ* in Swahili *tendi*: entangled relations

As this last excerpt from the *Kisa cha Sayyidina Isa* has shown, Arabic narratives, such as fragments of *sura* from the Qur'ān and the *Qiṣaṣ*, haunt and/or coexist within the *tendi*'s poetic re-writing. What makes the *tendi* and the *Qiṣaṣ* even more entangled is that both quote and refer to the *sura* in their own stories. Thus, the thrilling question arises as to the kind of relationship the *tendi* have with the Qur'ān: do *tendi* have a direct relationship with it or only via the *Qiṣaṣ*'s mediation? Does the Swahili poet refer directly to the Qur'ān or copy the *Qiṣaṣ*'s style of quoting Qur'ānic verses and reappropriating them in *tendi*? In the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, for instance, the presence of Qur'ānic verses – exclusively from sura 12 – that are quoted and embroidered with the narrative is of immense significance. Almost all the *āyāt* embedded in the *utendi* are also present in this *Qiṣat*, which indeed contains in its prose an abundant number of Qur'ānic quotations, likewise drawing exclusively from sura 12.<sup>35</sup> This detail confirms that the *āyāt* quoted in the *utendi* seem to have been taken from the *Qiṣat* text (rather than from the Qur'ān). Thus, the very style of integrating quotations can also be considered to have been borrowed from the Arabic narrative.

<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, what makes the *Kisa cha Sayyidna Isa* a very interesting, entangled and palimpsestuous work is that the *Utendi* contains quotations which stem from both the Qur'an and the Bible. As also suggested by other scholars, this would be an interesting point to develop further in the future.

<sup>34</sup> As I explain at length in my thesis, “Conceived as the easiest and most intuitive mode of linking one text to another, every quotation is stirred by the instinct of repetition (Compagnon 1979: 50). Repetition in turn implies that ‘the formulations being uttered have been uttered before’; what ‘pre-exists the immediate context’ is thus subsumed into a new one and recontextualised (Barber 2007: 77-78). The moment a formulation or verse is incorporated into a new context, it is then that it becomes a quotation and, in doing so, the quoter reveals it as belonging to or being appropriated into his/her new discourse” (Raia 2017: 119-22).

<sup>35</sup> Sura 12, which tells all of Yusuf's story at once in a unified fashion, is indeed the only *sura* whose verses are quoted in both texts. The *āyāt*'s presence in the two plots is remarkably abundant and consists of 58 embedded quotations in the *utendi* and 95 in the *Qiṣat*. 42 *āyāt* are shared by both narratives.

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To sum it up, the Qur'ān is without a doubt the co-present pillar around which both the *Qīṣaṣ* and *tendi* knit their own stories; the *tendi* have taken a considerable amount of narrative material from the *Qīṣaṣ* and adapted it to a new mimetic tone and prosodic pattern. While the *Qīṣaṣ* supply what the Qur'ān only hints at by constantly referring to and accumulating accounts and viewpoints ascribed to long chains of witnesses (the chain of authority called *isnād*) and prominent figures like Muhammad, his nephew and many others, *tendi* about the prophets appropriate the *Qīṣaṣ*' narratives without reference to the sources, putting them into a new creative discourse and bringing the characters themselves, rather than the authorities' names, to the forefront of the work. The *utendi* poet has assigned to the Qur'anic verses a new sequence and different functions.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

It seems that, despite the great temporal and spatial distances between the *Qīṣaṣ* and the *utendi*, the Swahili poets-adaptor have committed themselves to interpreting, absorbing and relating stories about the prophets from the Arabian peninsula and beyond.<sup>37</sup> These are, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “small worlds which connect laterally through bonds of Aporetic community” (quoted in Apter 2006: 245).

Prophets, such as those analysed in this paper, (Ayubu/Job, Isa/Jesus, Yusuf/Joseph) lend themselves well to a moral agenda since, after all, “prophets are the people who are most afflicted because of all the torments they have had to undergo living ‘among the unbelievers’” (Schimmel quoted after Renard 1994: x). At the same time, their life stories are either not mentioned in the Qur'ān at all or appear only in rather condensed form. It is this “gap”, on the one hand, and the appeal of the figures of the prophets and the depth of tragedy in their lives, on the other hand, that invite *tafsiri* through appropriation and reformulation.<sup>38</sup>

The new translated original works in Swahili speak of fragments or “haunted” translations of previous Muslim narratives that also contain a reformulation. While Tha‘labī for the *Qīṣaṣ* is a reliable commentator and reporter of sources, the alleged poet of *Kisa cha Sayyidna Isa* and *Yusuf*, Muhamadi Kijuma, instead shows in his compositions an extreme freedom in playing with his sources, variously hiding them, overtly declaring them or letting his first-person voice as an observer emerge. The *Qīṣaṣ* of Tha‘labī are built on a different style of attestation, and the author hardly appears at all in the narration, which abounds in third-person accounts. Muhamadi Kijuma truly edited his work, while Tha‘labī commented.

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<sup>36</sup> On the presence and functions of Qur'anic quotations in *tendi* compositions see: Raia, forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> This was shown by Ahmad b. Hanbal, according to whom the Prophet of Islam said: “Transmit on my authority, be it even one verse (from the Qur'ān), narrate (traditions) concerning the Children of Israel and there is nothing objectionable” (Brinner 2002: xiii).

<sup>38</sup> In the *Inkishafi*, – written after 1749, when the sultanate of Pate had fallen – the noble sharifu of Pate and poet Ahmed Nassir (1720/1820) rouses his people through images of their ruined city compared to its previous glory. In contrast, Kijuma explores the widely known figure of Yusuf and, so that his audience can taste Yusuf's final glory, slowly delves into various episodes that let the audience experience his tribulations and inner conflicts.

Through *tafsiri* the links that the Swahili poet of *tendi* on *manabii* establishes with the Arabic originals of the Qur’ān and the *Qīṣaṣ*, whether or not they are overtly mentioned in the opening stanzas, forge a connection, or in Krings’s words a “relational thing” (2015: 15), between the well-known Arabic “original” and the new Swahili “original copy”. At the beginning of this article I used the term poet-adapter. It has become clear that working with the palimpsest expands the role of the poet. For instance, through quotations from, for instance, the *Qīṣaṣ* or Qur’ān, the poet-adapter has embedded segments of discourse belonging to a previous text into a new one. In so doing, the poet-quoter not only evokes the existence of the two texts but also reveals that utterance as belonging to or being appropriated into the new discourse. Additionally, the amplification of motifs such as tears (*matozi*) and loud crying (*akalia kwa siaha*) that describe Ayubu when Iblis falsely told him of his children’s death (stz. 91-92, 98) shows the poet-narrator’s commitment to go beyond a literal translation and to make that story more palpable to his East African audience. Lastly and to conclude, the adherence to words like the noun *mnadi* in the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, which echoes the Arabic *munād* in the parallel excerpt from the *Qīṣaṣ*, and the free rearrangement of the sources through which the Swahili poet-editor omits parts of the Arabic discourse while newly embroidering other narrative scenes, all speak of a co-presence of Muslim stories beneath Swahili *tendi* compositions.

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