

IN MEMORIAM

MU'ALLIM YAHYA ALI OMAR, SWAHILI SCHOLAR

Mu'allim ("Teacher") Yahya Ali Omar died on 11th of October 2008, aged 84 at his London home near Russell Square, and was buried on the 14th of October at the Garden of Peace cemetery in East London. Yahya was a familiar figure at SOAS, where since the 1970s he taught Swahili language as a lecturer and helped the Swahili scholars with information about Swahili language, history and religion. In his latest years he kept coming to SOAS to read, talk with colleagues and students or have lunch at the student cafeteria until his very last days. He will be missed by many at SOAS, by the Swahili community in London, his friends around the world, and above all his family in Kenya, UK, USA and elsewhere.

Mu'allim Yahya was indeed a teacher of the Swahili Islamic tradition, but also in a western, academic sense. He taught generations of students from Kenya, Britain and USA, and also worked with prominent linguists while at SOAS. He attended Koranic schools in Mombasa at the Anisa mosque and later attended *Madrassa Ghazali Muslim School* in the same town where he learned from famous religious scholars such as Sheikh al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui – the well known scholar of Islamic Religious Science, and former Chief Kadhi (Muslim judge) of Kenya. After completing his religious education in Mombasa, Yahya started teaching Arabic and the Qur'an at the Arab Boys Primary School in Mombasa. He then worked for the Islamic Foundation in Nairobi where he translated a book by Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi titled in Swahili – '*Mpango wa Maisha katika Uislamu*' (1076) – or 'The Islamic Way of Life', and edited the Swahili translation of the holy Qur'an done by Sheikh Abdalla Saleh Farsy before coming to work at SOAS in 1969 as a Swahili Assistant to Professor Wilfred Whiteley. In the same period, he also worked for the Arab League branch in Nairobi as translator.

Yahya's work was concerned with preserving Swahili language and literature with emphasis on the Islamic character of its people and culture. He contributed much to Swahili scholarship, and to defending the contested issue of Swahili identity. According to Bwantomu Swaleh, chair of the London based Waswahili Trust, Mu'allim Yahya, signed and presented a petition to the Robertson Commission appointed by the British Government in 1961 before Kenya's independence. In his petition he demanded respect for Muslim minority rights, including the continuation of the Kadhi (Islamic) Courts, the preservation of Muslim educational institutions, and protecting Swahili land rights and their cultural heritage after independence. Effectively, a guarantee was given in 1961 at the Lancaster House Agreement by the incoming Kenya Government to respect Muslim minority rights, but alas, according to Yahya, this was never fully implemented.

Many publications came out of his collaborations with Swahili scholars such as Jan Knappert, Joan Maw, Torben Anderson, PJJ Frankl, and others from the USA, including Carol

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Eastman, Carol Scotton and Professor Swartz M.J. They and the entire Swahili academic community are indebted to Yahya's insights, deep and wide ranging knowledge of his native Swahili language and culture; without him many books would not have been written. In his twilight years, Yahya's played an indispensable role as lead Researcher in transcribing the Swahili Manuscripts, a project based at SOAS (<http://swahilimanuscripts.soas.ac.uk/>), because he was one of the few people literate in the Arabic based Swahili script who was able to decipher and interpret the old language of most of the manuscripts. Yahya published a heavily annotated book, *Three Prose texts in the Swahili of Mombasa* (Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1998), written in Kimvita, the Swahili dialect of his native Mombasa. These were written and broadcast earlier in the 1950s by the popular radio service in Mombasa at the time – *Sauti ya Mvita* ('Voice of Mvita'), and to which Mu'allim Yahya was also a regular contributor.

Mu'allim Yahya was humble, kind, friendly and hospitable to all those who sought to drink from his fountain of wisdom at his London flat, on the corridors and offices of SOAS or during Swahili cultural events. He lived a simple life, always caring for and supporting his extended family in Kenya. He often made use of many SOAS academics office hours during which he discussed issues of Swahili culture, history and folklore thanks to his vast knowledge. He also showed great interest in learning about other languages and cultures, in particular Swahili's Bantu cousins and he never failed to make comparisons, for instance with the Gikuyu language and its relation to Swahili structures or cultural lexicon.

Mua'llim Yahya will be greatly missed. He was the epitome of a good Swahili man: humble, gentle, kind, spiritual, and with a sharp sense of humour. *Mungu amlaze pema peponi*. May he rest in peace.

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