

## HEAVENLY DROPS

### THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

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#### Introduction

Iba Ndiaye Diadji, a Senegalese professor of aesthetics, sees water as intrinsic to African ontology. He also argues that water is the most important substance to inspire African artists. (Diadji 2003: 273–275.) Water certainly has a significant role in Swahili poetry, written traditionally by people living on the coast of the Indian Ocean. Swahili poems have used aquatic imagery in expressing different ideas and sensations, in different contexts and times. Water imagery can be found in hundreds of years old Islamic hymns as well as in political poetry written during the colonial German East Africa. This article discusses water imagery in traditional Islamic Swahili poetry.

With ‘traditional poetry’ I mean the poetry written in Swahili before the middle of the twentieth century, which can be seen as the beginning of modern Swahili poetry. As e.g. Barry Hallen (2006: 275–276) notes, the term ‘traditional’ is problematic. It is often seen to imply a static nature of culture, whereas ‘modern’ is seen as connected to change and openness; in this article the use of the words ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ intends not to include such implications. Another problem is the implication of two completely different things: as Hallen puts it, “[t]radition and modernity are not ‘opposed’ (except semiotically), nor are they in ‘conflict’. All this is (bad) metaphorical talk.” (ibid. 302). A division that opposes traditional and modern is certainly not possible in Swahili poetry, because some of the old poetry is written in free verse, and some of the recent poetry follows the traditional Swahili prosody; some of the old poetry deals with very ‘modern’ topics and some of the new poetry with ‘traditional’ ones. However, due to the huge amount of material, some division is needed. Shaaban Robert, a famous Tanzanian poet who lived 1909–1962, is often considered to be the first modern poet, and in this article, too, traditional Swahili poetry means pre-Shaaban Robert poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Swahili people have traditionally been Muslims, the old religious Swahili poetry is Islamic. Consequently, the basis of the water imagery of the poems has much in common

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of the difficulty of separating traditional and modern Swahili poetry, it can be noted that, instead of Shaaban Robert, M.M. Mulokozi (1975: 49) considers Muyaka bin Haji the “Father of Modern Swahili poetry”; Muyaka lived approximately 1776–1840. Mulokozi’s outlook is probably influenced by the conception of Muyaka being the first secular Swahili poet; Lyndon Harries (1962: 2) famously states that Muyaka “brought Swahili poetry out of the mosque and into the marketplace”.

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

with the Koran.<sup>2</sup> Many of the old written poems, for example *Kitabu Mauludi*, ‘The Maulid in Nun’, are either translations or adaptations from Arabic poems; even the arguably oldest known Swahili poem *Hamziya* is a translation.<sup>3</sup> Ergo, the relationship between Arabic poetry / Muslim tradition and Swahili poetry has been a subject of a lot of discussion. J.W.T. Allen (1971: 434) notes that we should not understand wrongly the fact that a lot is drawn from the Muslim tradition:

That is inevitable; but what is important is the selection and use of the traditions and the introduction of words and phrases which give the selection made a peculiar feeling.

It can be argued that the translators/adapting poets brought into the Swahili versions their way of narrating, and with it, their own imagery, including water imagery. The nature images are often drawn from the poet’s immediate surroundings, and since the Swahili people lived next to the ocean, water imagery constitutes a much-used tool for description and symbolism. As the natural environment of the Swahili coast of the Indian Ocean is quite unique, some of the nature images can be seen as explicitly Swahili. Knappert (1979: 117) argues:

The images referring to wind and rain, storm, thunder and monsoons, are purely Swahili. They belong to the Indian Ocean coast, and are not Arabic.

However, many of the water images are also clearly drawn from or influenced by the Koranic water images; my analysis quite often notes a similar use of water imagery in the Koran. Moreover, the water images in traditional Swahili poetry share aspects with the wide collection of Islamic legends and Arabic poetry, and consequently, probably with all the other Islamic poetries of different cultures and languages that have been influenced by the Koran and Arabic poetry. Nevertheless, this article does not seek to compare water imagery in different Islamic poetries of the world; even seeing what is specifically Swahili and not directly from the Koran, is not the main aim. In this article the poems discussed are regarded as texts that are important and interesting as such: no matter what the influence, these water images are the water images that can be found in traditional Swahili poetry and that have had impact on Swahili culture and Swahili people.

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<sup>2</sup> As Mulokozi (1975: 47) rightly points out, poetry existed before the advent of Arabs and Islam, too, and it was naturally not Islamic; this article deals merely with Islamic poetry.

<sup>3</sup> *Hamziya* is generally cited to be the oldest survived (Islamic) Swahili poem (e.g. Knappert 1979: 103; Bertoncini 1987: 15), but as Zhukov (1992: 61) notes, this assumption is “bare of any paleographic support”, which would be needed to be able to really date the old Swahili poems. However, Zhukov (ibid.) exaggerates the absoluteness of Knappert’s statement: he cites Knappert claiming that *Hamziya* is “the earliest survived Swahili poem ... and the first ever recorded”, omitting the crucially extenuating middle part of the sentence (and altering the rest). The whole sentence of Knappert (1979: 103) actually is: “The *Hamziya* is the oldest surviving Swahili poem of the Islamic tradition, and it may well have been the very first ever written” (My emphasis). Similarly, Bertoncini also seems to misread Knappert, or at least does not give other sources that she might have had; she refers to Knappert 1979: 106 and apparently means 1979: 103, but that source does not offer ground for her statement: “*Hamziya* is not only the first dated text in Swahili, but also the oldest written document in a language south of the equator (except Indonesian languages) that was written by a native scholar” (Bertoncini 1987: 15).

## KATRIINA RANNE

The poems whose water imagery I discuss in this article are (in order of first appearance): *Wimbo Wa Kuzingatia* ‘A Philosophical Song’, *Kitabu Mauludi* ‘The Maulid in Nun’, *Dua ya Kuombea Mvua* ‘Prayer for Rain’, *Utenzi wa Qiyama* ‘The Last Judgement’, *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Buruda of Al-Busiri’, *Maulidi ya Dali* ‘The Maulid Rhyming in Da’, *Maulidi ya Jambeni* ‘The Nativity of Mohammed According to Moh. Jambeni’, *Utendi wa Miiraji* ‘The Ladder’, *Ukawafi wa Miiraji* ‘The Poem of the Ladder’, *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* ‘Miqdad and Mayasa’, *Utendi wa Ayubu* ‘Job’, *Utenzi wa Nuhu* ‘The Poem of Noah’, *Utenzi wa Yusufu* ‘The Poem of Joseph’, *Utenzi wa Yanuzi* ‘The Poem of Jonah’, *Chuo cha Herekali* ‘The Epic of Heraklios’, *Al-Inkishafi* ‘The Soul’s Awakening’, and some unnamed poems from Knappert. If the information of the writer and/or the date of composition is known, it is given in the footnotes, along with the information about other editions. Similarly, the verse numbers are mentioned if they were stated in the edition I have used.

I will first discuss the ‘good water’ connected to God, Mohammed and Paradise, and after that the other side of the coin: water and the lack of it as punishment, and the suffering caused by the interchanges in the order of water and other elements.

### Pouring with blessing

*It is He who sends down water from the sky.*

(The Koran 6:99.)<sup>4</sup>

Similarly to the Koran, in traditional Islamic Swahili poetry God is seen as both the creator and the controller of the waters. This can be seen in the anonymous and undated poem *Wimbo Wa Kuzingatia* ‘A Philosophical Song’ (Knappert 2004: 228):

<i>Nguvu zake kwa dhakiri</i> <sup>5</sup>	His powers are in evidence
<i>Swifa yake ni kadiri</i>	His quality is of omnipotence
<i>Ya kufanya mambo pia.</i>	The power to make all things.
[...]	
<i>Na bahari yote yake</i>	And all his oceans
<i>Hujaa na kurejea.</i>	[Tide] rising and lowering. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The references to the Koran in this article use mostly the English translation of M.A.S. Abdel Halaam (2005), and occasionally M.H. Shakir’s (1983) translation. A Swahili version of Koran is not referred to because the first translation into Swahili was published as late as 1923 (tr. by Godfrey Dale); hence the composers of the Swahili poems discussed cannot have read the Swahili Koran but most probably the original Arabic Koran. Even though before the first Swahili translation many people were able to memorise Koranic verses but did not understand their meaning (Lacunza-Balda 1997: 97), the poets who were either translating from Arabic or influenced by Arabic poetry/legends naturally were able to read the Koran in Arabic.

<sup>5</sup> This might be a problem of transcription: *dhakiri* should be *dhahiri* ‘clear’, ‘evident’, ‘well-known’. Knappert’s translation of *dhakiri* as ‘in evidence’ would suit *dhahiri* perfectly.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to high and low tide, this could also refer to waves, and could be translated as ‘Coming and returning’. Knappert’s translation of this line (*Hujaa na kurejea*) is ‘Filling, (emptying) and coming back’. On the other hand, Knappert (1967: 165) translates *maji ya kujaa* (lit. ‘water of coming’) as ‘high tide’. Chacha Nyaigotti Chacha (1988: 109–117) also reads *maji kujaa* as ‘high tide’.

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

<i>Ufikiri tiyatini</i>	Think about the earth
<i>Na kwa maji visimani</i>	And about the water in the wells
<i>Na kwa jua la mbinguni</i>	And about the sun in the sky
<i>Hutowasha sote pia.</i>	It does not burn us all.

The suggestion to *-fikiri* ‘think’, ‘consider’, ‘ponder’ on the source of water occurs frequently in the Koran, e.g.: “Consider the water you drink – was it you who brought it down from the rain-cloud or We?” (56:68–69).<sup>7</sup> Allah has created all the water and Allah is the one who can give water to the ones who need it. At the end of *Kitabu Mauludi* ‘The Maulid in Nun’<sup>8</sup> the poem turns into a prayer for Allah, and the poet prays: *nyingi mivua itujie nyakati zetu* ‘may many rains come [down] on us during our times’ (Knappert 1971: 306, verse 118:c).

Water is fundamental for life and therefore highly valued; Knappert states that “[i]n Africa, water is more precious than any other element” (Knappert 1990: 255). Consequently, very commonly water is seen as blessing or mercy of Allah, or as containing his mercy. The composer of *Dua ya Kuombea Mvua* ‘Prayer for Rain’<sup>9</sup> pleads: *Utunyeshenze vuwa nyingi yenye rehema* ‘Let a lot of rain with mercy rain on us’ (Knappert 1979: 199). In *Utendi wa Qiyama* ‘The Last Judgement’<sup>10</sup> the tortured, those who had sinned but repent, beg God: *Turahamu Mola wetu / Kwa mayi haba na kitu* ‘Bless us, our God / With a little bit of water’ (Allen 1971: 476, verse 288). As Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2001: 30) notes, in the Koran it is never said that rain “falls” (by itself); it is said that God “brings” or “sends” it down. The same attitude towards rain can be seen in the traditional religious Swahili poems.

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<sup>7</sup> Besides thinking, there is advice to see/hear; often the choice of the verb depends on the version of Koran. E.g. in the translation by M.H. Shakir (1983) the verse 22.63 is “Do you not see that Allah sends down water from the cloud [...]”, whereas in the translation of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2005) it is “Have you not considered how God sends water down from the sky [...]”. Haleem (2001: 37) notes that in the Koran, “in discussing water, man’s senses, emotions and reason are constantly brought into play”. Ingrid Mattson (2008: 43) notes that the recurrence of the advice to think/perceive carries the message that “God is to be approached by a multifaceted perceptive engagement with His creation”.

<sup>8</sup> *Kitabu Mauludi* ‘The Maulid in Nun’ is one of the many Maulid poems written about the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. Knappert’s edition has used three manuscripts, oldest one of which was first published by Dr. Gustav Neuhaus in 1935. The poem is a translation of Barzanji’s poem (in Arabic) (Knappert 1971: 276–277). Knappert states that it is “one of the oldest and still one of the best of all the Swahili Maulid texts” (ibid. 277).

<sup>9</sup> In the last stanza of *Dua ya Kuombea Mvua* ‘Prayer for Rain’ the composer names himself as Muhiuddini bunu (son of) Shehe, son of Waili, of the Kahtani family (Knappert 1979: 201). He lived in Lamu, Kenya (and also Zanzibar, Tanzania), from 1798 to 1869 (ibid. 196).

<sup>10</sup> *Utendi wa Qiyama* ‘The Last Judgement’ is a description of the Last Day on Earth, of the day when the unbelievers go to Hell and the believers to Paradise. The version used is edited by J.W.T. Allen and published in 1971. The other editions are Sacleux 1939, Allen, R. 1945, and Knappert 1964 (in addition to them, Noor 1972 which is same as Allen 1971).

KATRIINA RANNE

In *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Buruda of Al-Busiri’<sup>11</sup> God answers Mohammed’s prayer with rain, *wat’u wakangia katika nema* ‘and the people entered blessing/goodness’ (Knappert 1971: 196). The poem’s image of the rain is a strong and interesting one (ibid. 198):

<i>Kwa wingu la mvua lenye baraka</i>	By a rain cloud with blessing
<i>ukadhanni nt’i yaliposhuka</i>	you would think when it (the rain) descended
<i>ni mayi ya pwani hutawanyika</i>	(that it) is water of the coast that gets mixed
<i>au seli kubwa ilo ‘adhima.</i>	or a big river with greatness.

Knappert notes that this image is an original Swahili image introduced by the poet who translates from Arabic into Swahili, using the image “of the shores of the Indian Ocean, where, in a torrential rain, the distinction between land and water is lost” (Ibid. 198).

In addition to water as such being regarded as a blessing, verbs related to water are used with words such as *baraka* ‘blessing, fortune, prosperity’, using concrete predicates with abstract agents or objects. For example in *Kitabu Mauludi* ‘The Maulid in Nun’ when the poet says that the recited verses *ghaita baraka yetu sote kama mvua* ‘pour down an abundant blessing for all of us like rain’ (ibid. 308, verse 126:c). The predicate *ghaita*, from the Arabic *ghātha* (or root *gh-y-th*) ‘pour (down) abundant rain’ (ibid<sup>12</sup>), is very strongly connected to water because it does not need a word for rain or water with it, whereas the verb *-nya* (and *-nyesha*) ‘rain’ is used with the noun *mvua* ‘rain’, ie. *-nyesha mvua* ‘rain’.<sup>13</sup> By applying a concrete verb to an abstract object, the image both holds the idea of (literal) water as a blessing and conveys the intensity of the (abstract) blessing. As Reuven Tsur notes, through this kind of verb–object combination a “high metaphoric tension” can be created (Tsur 2003: 248). The choice of verb links the act with the nature of rain in many ways: the direction of the blessing, the invisibility of the sender, the unbrokenness and strength of the act, the lack of boundaries of the material, as well as the ability of the material to descend and enter virtually any object; the thoroughness.

The connection of blessing and water can be found at the linguistic level, too: in Swahili *vua* ‘a rain’ is homonymous with the verb *-vua* ‘fish’ which can also mean ‘save’ (Knappert 1971: 220) and which, according to the *Dictionnaire Swahili–Français* by Sacleux (1939: 1000), is in the figurative sense often used about God. An interesting image of rain can be found in *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Burda of Al-Busiri’, in a verse in which the direction of a

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<sup>11</sup> *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Buruda of Al-Busiri’ is a translation of the Arabic poem written by Sharafu ‘d-Dini Muhammad bin Sa’idi bin Hammadi bin Muhsini bin Sanhaji bin Hilali as-Sanhaji Al-Busiri (from Egypt) who lived 1212–1296. The poem is a praise of Mohammed. Knappert’s edition is based on two manuscripts, one of which had the name of the translating poet: Sheikh Muhammad ‘Uthman Haji Alekuwako, from Shela, Kenya. It was probably written at some point during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Knappert 1971: 165–167.)

<sup>12</sup> Instead of English, Knappert offers the French translation ‘verser une pluie abondante’. Knappert’s transcription of the Arabic word is *ghayyatha*, so he seems to refer either to *ghatha* or the root *gh-y-th*.

<sup>13</sup> The line can be understood as referring to rain in two ways: either it sees that the process of pouring of blessing is similar to the process of pouring of rain, or, the blessing itself is compared to water, which is seen as a typical blessing; since the water-related predicative, the first interpretation is more likely.

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

rain cloud is reversed. Instead of God sending us blessing, rain represents the prayers of people on the Earth (Knappert 1971: 220, verse 159):

<i>Idhinisha wingu la swalawati</i>	Allow that a cloud of prayers
<i>lende kwa Mtumi kwa daimati</i>	goes to the Prophet eternally
<i>linye kama vua kila wakati</i> <sup>14</sup>	may it pour like rain all the time
<i>na wingu lingine la tasilima.</i>	and another cloud of peace-wishes.

It is noteworthy that the word used for prayer, *swalawati*, sounds similar to the word *sama-wati* ‘sky’ and rhymes with it. The play of resemblance enhances the connection of the prayer with the image of the cloud.<sup>15</sup>

In the same poem a person not wanting water even if (s)he has fever represents a person who does not believe in God (Ibid. 202, verse 104, my alteration):

<i>Yito hutukia nuru ya yuwa</i>	The eye hates the light of sun
<i>lipatapo ndweye kutotambuwa</i> <sup>16</sup>	when it gets it, it does not perceive it
<i>kanwa halipendi mayo kupowa</i>	the mouth does not like water (that would) cure/heal
<i>aliye muweye hata wa homa.</i>	even the one who is feverish.

As Knappert notes, a feverish person hating water means that

the organs do not fulfil their normal duty, symbolizing how their owner deviates from his duty of believing in Koran (ibid.: 203).

However, the imagery can be seen at the same time to refer to God more directly. Since light is a very common spiritual image (e.g. Tsur 2003), both water and light can be interpreted as the blessing or word of God; the unbeliever does not let God or God’s words enter him/her, though that is what his/her thirsty soul would really need. The interpretation of a physical illness and the interpretation of a spiritual illness are not incompatible; poetic images are not like reversible figures of which only one interpretation can be seen at a time. When both readings are activated simultaneously, the image of water both has a strong concrete

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<sup>14</sup> In Knappert’s edition the line is *lenye kama vua kila wakati*, which can be translated as ‘with/having [something] like water all the time’. As Alena Rettová (personal communication, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2008) clarified me, the word *lenye* ‘with, having’ should probably be *linye* ‘may it rain’; the *-enye* structure is (usually) not used without a noun. The poem was written in Arabic script that has no distinction between *i* and *e*, so there is no certainty which word was intended; but since *linye* is the more likely option, I have changed the transcription in the quotation from Knappert’s.

<sup>15</sup> My reading of hidden references to other words has been influenced by John Shoptaw’s idea of “lyric cryptography”, but it does not agree to the theory in whole. “Lyric cryptography” means that poems have “crypt words” that can be read as ordinary words. Shoptaw suggests that by decoding these crypt words the “superficial complexity” of a poem can be turned into “an underlying simplicity” (Shoptaw 2000: 239). I agree with Shoptaw in his claim that words in poetry can refer to other words and bring in mind more common phrases with similar sounds, and that their entering into the reader’s mind can participate in the interpretation of the poem, but I argue that primarily the words should be read as they are. As Hugh Kenner puts it: “It is unwise, whenever you encounter an unusual expression, to suppose that it is merely a colourful way of saying something commonplace, and then translate it into a commonplace near equivalent. The poet writes down what he means” (Kenner 1975: 31).

<sup>16</sup> In Knappert’s edition: *kutota mbuwa*.

meaning and expresses God's "water" (blessing, mercy, words), establishing a powerful impression.

In Knappert's edition the second line of the stanza is transcribed as *lipatapo ndweye kutota mbuwa*, and Knappert reads *mbuwa* as *pua* 'nose', translating the line '(as) when it becomes bleared (near) the nose' (*-tota* can mean 'become wet'). As Alena Rettová clarified to me, the line should probably read *lipatapo ndweye kutotambuwa* (personal communication 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008). *Kutotambuwa* is the negative infinitive of *-tambua* 'perceive, realise, understand'; consequently, the translation of the line is now 'when it gets it, it does not perceive'.<sup>17</sup> Without the image of a wet nose and with the idea of not understanding/perceiving (God), the identification of water and light with God is stronger.

The image of thirst recurs throughout religious traditional Swahili poetry. In *Dua ya Kuo-mbea Mvua* 'Prayer for Rain' (Knappert 1979: 199–201) the images of thirst (and water) seem to be predominantly concrete, creating a prayer imploring God to give water on account of drought and heat: *juwa la mtana kula siku lisilo koma* 'fierce sun every day without ceasing'. On the other hand, with no mixing of abstract subjects and water-related predicates (or vice versa), the whole poem can be read as a metaphor. Rather than excluding each other, here again the concurrent activation of the readings opens up an image of both a concrete and spiritual drought: *Tuletee vuwa twondolee nyota na juwa* 'Send us rain (so that you) take away thirst and sun'.

### The purified Prophet

Very often the one who is prayed to to quench people's thirst is the Prophet, Mohammed. A hymn in praise of Mohammed reminisces how *Ulitoa maji Musutafa mkono wake / Yakiwo-sha kiu kya jamii sahaba zake* 'The hand of the Chosen one brought forth water / Quenching the thirst of all his companions' (Knappert 2004: 306, the composer not mentioned; Knappert's translation), referring to a legend according to which Mohammed once quenched the thirst of a whole army in a desert: he prayed and after that all the men sucked his fingers (*ibid*). Occasionally water is identified with blessing so thoroughly that the word 'blessing' is omitted: Mohammed *hutumiminia kama seli* 'pours in us like a stream' (Knappert 1971: 292, *Kitabu Mauludi* 'The Maulid in Nun'). The context (of praising Mohammed's abstract qualities) and the adverb *kama* 'like' confirms that the omitted object of the predicate is not water but either *baraka* 'blessing' or some other positive term; Knappert's translation adds the word 'favours' (*ibid*). The verb *-mimina* can mean both 'pour out', 'pour into', and 'fill'; the last two meanings make the image illustrate the comprehensiveness of the spiritual experience. Moreover, since the object of pouring is omitted, the 'pouring' could be read to refer directly to God or Mohammed himself: the divine is poured into us.

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<sup>17</sup> The word is usually written *kutotambua*, but in old Swahili poetry the letter *w* is often added in verbs, without reference to passive form. *Kutotambuwa* is the (negative) infinitive form, but the infinitive form is generally used as a predicate (after once using the ordinary predicate form).

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

Water imagery is already connected to the birth of Mohammed. According to *Maulidi ya Dali* ‘The Maulid Rhyming in Da’<sup>18</sup>, when Mohammed was born it rained (ibid. 118, verse 73). Another Maulid poem, *Maulidi ya Jambeni* ‘The Nativity of Mohammed According to Moh. Jambeni’<sup>19</sup> connects the strong rain with the quenching of thirst, which can be seen both as a metaphor and a purely concrete image (ibid. 348):

<i>Mengi yalikuwa</i>	<i>mayi chini yaliyongiya,</i>
<i>ziwa la samawa</i>	<i>na habari ikaeneya</i>
<i>ya kunywa na kuwa</i>	<i>mwenyi nyota hana udhiya,</i>
<i>kwa wetu Nabiya</i>	<i>barakaze akaterema.</i>

Abundant was	the water that came down
a sky-blue lake	and the news spread
that one could drink	so that the thirsty one does not have trouble,
for our Prophet	sent down his blessing.

The simultaneous activation of the interpretations – water as both spiritual and concrete blessing – emphasises the significance of the birth. As Reuven Tsur notes, this kind of ambiguity in a poem can generate “an impetuous forward-driving ‘perceptual force’” (Tsur 2003: 109). The compound adjective *-a samawati* (here shortened to *-a samawa*) generally means ‘azure, sky-blue’, but since it is formed from the word *samawati* ‘sky’, *ziwa la samawa* could be read as ‘a lake of sky’, too. Thus *ziwa la samawa* can be seen referring at the same time both to the great amount of water in the sky and the great amount of water (forming a lake) on the ground, making the image even fuller of water.

Mohammed is thought to have been special since his birth, but before he receives his prophethood, Mohammed’s breast is opened and his sinful human nature is washed away. It is done with the water from the Zamzam well, a holy well located in Mecca. *Utendi wa Miiraji* ‘The Ladder’<sup>20</sup> describes how the archangel Gabriel asks for Zamzam water and then performs the washing (Knappert 1967: 203):

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<sup>18</sup> *Maulidi ya Dali* ‘The Maulid Rhyming in Da’, another poem about the birth of Muhammed, is a translation of an Arabic poem written by Muhammad al-‘Azabi, which again is a versification of Barzanji’s prose version of the Maulid. The Swahili composer/translator of *Maulidi ya Dali* is Muhammad bin ‘Uthman, from Shela, Kenya.

<sup>19</sup> *Maulidi ya Jambeni* ‘The Nativity of Mohammed according to Moh. Jambeni’ is again a poem about Muhammed’s birth, written by Mohammed Jambeni.

<sup>20</sup> *Utendi wa Miiraji* ‘The Ladder’ is one of the many *Miiraji* poems dealing with Mohammed’s journey to Heaven. The legend of *Miiraji* is considered very important, which can be seen in the many versions of the tale; among the Islamic Swahili poems, only *Maulidi* is more popular than *Miiraji*. In the manuscript Knappert used there was the name Ali wa Salimu, but as well as to the poet, it might refer to the copyist. (Knappert 1967: 201–202.) Other versions of *Utendi wa Miiraji* ‘The Ladder’ are Dammann 1940, Farsi 1965, and Knappert 1964; however, these are different poems, not just other editions of the same poem (more about these versions in Rettová 2007: 289–291).

KATRIINA RANNE

<i>Mara t'atu kauosha</i>	Three times he washed it
<i>wasiwasi kaondosha</i>	removed all anxiety/worries/troubles <sup>21</sup>
<i>baadaye kusafisha</i>	after that he purified/cleaned
<i>moyo wa T'umwa Nabiya.</i>	the heart of the Prophet.

The Swahili verb *-safisha* can be used both for actual cleaning and abstract purifying. Due to the symbolism commonly attached to the heart, the act of 'washing someone's heart' immediately seems to refer to abstract 'washing'. In another *Miiraji* poem, *Ukawafi wa Miiraji* 'The Poem of the Ladder'<sup>22</sup> the narrator does not even mention washing: *wakapasua kifua / nyongo zote ghashi wakazitoa* 'they cut the breast open and / all the bitterness, deceit they took out' (Knappert 1971: 242, verse 5).<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, equally to the symbolic reading, in *Utendi wa Miiraji* 'The Ladder' the setting with real water (from Zamzam well) supports the palpable, literal interpretation of the washing. In the Koran water and purification are closely connected: it is reminded that God "sent down water from the sky to cleanse you, to remove Satan's pollution from you, to make your hearts strong and your feet firm" (8:11).

Mohammed becomes the most important prophet. In *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* 'The Burda of Al-Busiri' his significance is illustrated by the images of ocean and rain (Knappert 1971: 184):

<i>Wote kwa Mtumi wana kiyasi</i>	Next to the Prophet all the other prophets have a measure,
<i>katika bahari mayi ukusi</i>	a handful of the water in the sea,
<i>au sondo moya ni hilo basi</i>	or one sip, that is all
<i>penye vua k'uu iliyo njema.</i>	where there is the great rain with goodness.

According to Knappert, the last line of the stanza means that "Mohammed's prophetic power and his capacity for giving fertility is compared to a tropical rain on dry land. At the same

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<sup>21</sup> The *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français* (Sacleux 1939: 1018) translates *wasiwasi, waswas* as 'Trouble de l'esprit, perplexité, hésitation, irrésolution, scrupule' (=Disorder/trouble of the spirit, perplexity, hesitation, irresolution, scruple) but notes that it comes from Arabic *waswas* 'inspirer à qqn une chose futile', 'suggestion du démon' (= 'to inspire someone to do something futile', 'suggestion of the demon'). Knappert also notes that in the Koran (114.5) the word *wasiwasi* is used in the meaning of "the temptations of Satan", from the verb *-waswas* 'to whisper' (Knappert 1967: 203). This reading supports the idea of moral purifying.

<sup>22</sup> *Ukawafi wa Miiraji* 'The Poem of the Ladder' is the only known *Miiraji* in *ukawafi* metre, and also one of the first Swahili poems ever printed (Knappert 1967: 201). It was first published 1894 by Büttner; the other edition in addition to the one referred to (Knappert 1971) is Knappert 1966.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in a recent version of *Miiraji* named *Kisa cha Miraji* ('The Narrative of Miiraji'), which is an *utendi* by Kadhi Sheikh Abdulla Saleh Farsi written in 1963 (published in 1965), the description does not mention water: *Alipoamka Jibirilu alipasua / Kifua cha Tumwa taka zote akaondoa* 'When he woke up, Gabriel cut open / The breast of the Prophet and took away all the filth' (Farsi 1965, stanza 5). Mohammed's ascension is described in the Koran, as well (53:1-18; also 17:1 and 81:19-24). Fazlur Rahman comments on the concreteness of these descriptions (in the preceding sentence he refers to the image of mosque, but can be regarded to concern the general question of the concreteness of the images, too): "Since the experiences are spiritual in nature, the entities mentioned in these passages obviously cannot be physical, although it must be remembered that when a spiritual experience is of great intensity, where the distance between subject and object is almost completely removed, 'voices' are 'heard' and 'figures' 'seen' by the subject and the inner experience takes on a quasi-concrete form" (Rahman 1989: 93).

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

time his wisdom is compared to beneficial rain.” (ibid.). The image of rain can be seen to comprise these qualities, but it can also be read to include many other virtues. The image of sea or ocean, which Knappert does not mention, seems to be above all a symbol of the immensity of Mohammed’s greatness. However, as parallel images, ‘ocean’ and ‘rain’ reinforce in each other their literal meaning, activating the many connotations that are attached to them. As Tsur points out, this is the strength of concrete images, such as the image of water:

The word ‘concrete’ is derived from a Latin word meaning ‘grown together’. In a concrete noun a large number of features are ‘grown together’. Every such feature is a ‘meaning potential’ of the spatial image. It also holds the potential to combine with other meaning potentials in the context. [...] This efficient coding enables one to manipulate a large amount of information, without overburdening the system, and to move from one potential of the image to another, granting one great flexibility. (Tsur 2003: 319.)

With the help of water imagery, the stanza efficiently conveys different ideas or meanings; it can be read as a multidimensional, dense description – or meditation – of Mohammed’s exquisiteness.

Similarly, the image of water is used of the Koran. In an unnamed song the act of well digging illustrates studying the Koran; and it is promised that *mchimba kisima hakatazwi maji* ‘the well digger is not refused water’ (Knappert 1979: 48). In *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Burda of Al-Busiri’ waves express the greatness and enormity of the Koran; the image of the (presumably ocean) waves is followed by the image of *jauhari* ‘precious stone’ (Knappert 1971: 200):<sup>24</sup>

<i>Ni kama mawimbi kwa kwandamana</i>	It is like the waves in constant succession
<i>ndiyo Kuru’ani yake ma’ana</i>	this exactly is the meaning of the Koran
<i>Jauhari zake hushinda tena</i>	its precious stones surpass repeatedly (everything)
<i>tangu kwa uzuri hata kwa kima.</i>	with their beauty/goodness as well as their value/extent.

The image of the stones can be seen to extend the image of the ocean: the stones could be part of the ocean, lying on the bottom and being constantly swept by the waves; the stones of an ocean are beautifully polished precisely by the waves. In addition to that, the word *kima* can refer not only to the value but also to the size or extent of the Koran, connecting the image of the stones to the idea of vastness which the image of ocean instinctively has launched.

### Rivers that wash sins out

In addition to giving water to the other prophets, Mohammed is the one who usually gives water to the people entering Paradise on the day of Resurrection. In the preface of the Swahili version of *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Burda of Al-Busiri’, the poet wishes that on that day

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<sup>24</sup> The word *jauhari*, or *johari*, can also mean ‘a valuable thing’ and is often used figuratively, like in *johari ya maisha* ‘the jewel of life’.

KATRIINA RANNE

Mohammed [*a*] *ninweshe nami mayi mazuri / ya kunwasha nyota zote dahari* ‘may quench my thirst with good water / that quenches the thirst of all the centuries’ (Knappert 1971: 170, verse 5). The next line reveals that the ‘good water’ he is referring to is from *Haudhi yake li Kauthari* ‘Mohammed’s pond of the river Abundance’. This is one of the four rivers in Paradise, the one in which the repentant sinners are washed before entering the Paradise. Since even Mohammed had to be washed, ordinary human beings are certainly in need of the wash (Ibid. 202, verse 101):

<i>ma’aswi wakenda kwa taghayuri</i>	the disobedient go there eagerly
<i>hwosha nyuso zao zikanawiri</i>	it washes their faces which start to shine
<i>dhambi zikondoka wakawa wema.</i>	their sins disappear and so they become good.

*Utendi wa Miiraji* ‘The Ladder’, on the other hand, tells that the sinners bathe in the other three rivers in the seventh heaven, and as the result, they *wakang’ara wote* ‘they all shine’ (Knappert 1967: 224). Each river makes them a bit cleaner so that after the third one they are paper-white (Knappert 1971: 258–260). Thus the people are washed three times, reflecting the three washes of Mohammed’s breast. The bathing on the day of Resurrection can be seen significant in many ways. The water makes the bathers clean and pure, but it is also closely connected to the resurrection itself. As Anthony H. Johns (2006: 463) notes, in the Koran “[t]he wonderful effect water has on drought-stricken earth is proof of God’s power to resurrect the dead”, for example in the line:

Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send water down on to it, it stirs and grows. He who gives it life will certainly give life to the dead. (41:39)

Besides water, these paradisiacal rivers carry other liquids, too: milk, honey, and wine. The other liquids, which are not found in nature on Earth in such abundance, are mentioned in a very positive tone – and no wonder since they are something that is attached to the best imaginable place. In an unnamed poem about Adam and Eve, Eve describes the wonders of Paradise with admiration: *Muna na miti ya tembo / na maziwa yaso chombo* ‘There are trees of palm-wine / and milk that is not in a jug’ (Knappert 1967: 97). The milk does even have powerful qualities: *anwaye kijaza tumbo / kiu hataizidia* ‘he who drinks it fills his stomach / the thirst will not increase’ (ibid.).

Nonetheless, it is water that has the most precious status among the liquids of Paradise. The descriptions of the sublime perfection and pleasantness of Adam’s and Eve’s life in Paradise include water imagery: *wakendea mito / kuzama kuogelea* ‘they go to the rivers / to dive (and) to swim’ (ibid. 96). This image of water is connected to the idea of being free of all responsibilities: going to the rivers, Adam and Eve [*m*] *ithili yao watoto* ‘are similar to children’ (ibid.), another quality expressing the felicity of their setting. In the Koran Paradise is con-

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

stantly referred to as “Gardens graced with flowing streams”<sup>25</sup> (e.g. 2:25, 3:15, 3:136, 3:195, 3:198, 4:13, 4:57, 4:122, 5:12, 5:85, 5:119.)<sup>26</sup>

On Earth the water of Zamzam, the holy well whose water was used for the breast washing of Mohammed, represents the water of Paradise and the connection to Mohammed. In *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* ‘Miqdad and Mayasa’<sup>27</sup> one of the characters tells Miqdad not to treat a company of Muslim soldiers lightly, because they *ndio wenye Zamzamu* ‘are the ones who have the water of Zamzam’ (Allen 1971: 302). The purity of water seems to be connected to the religious purity also in the way that it can be altered by the quality of the religious practice of the one who holds the water. It is thought that if a person has neglected the prayers (s)he can contaminate water, too, and should be avoided (Knappert 1967: 41; an unnamed poem):

*Musinwe mayi pamoya*  
*yapo kakupa hidaya*  
*na ukinwa ni hizaya*  
*umekhalifu shariya.*

Do not drink water with him/her  
even if (s)he gives it as a present  
and if you drink it is a disgrace  
you have transgressed the law.

The water of Paradise is connected to completeness: it carries the ability to make human beings *kamili* ‘complete, whole’ or *timamu* ‘complete, perfect’. In *Utendi wa Qiyama* ‘The Last Judgement’ the repentant sinners bathe in the river *Kauthari* ‘Abundance’ and come out not only cleaner, but integrated (Allen 1971: 480):

*Ngozi zao na lahamu*  
*Mifupa yao na damu*  
*Ikarejea timamu*  
*Na sura ngema ajaa*

Their skin and the flesh  
their bones and the blood  
returned all complete  
and their face became beautiful

The word *timamu* ‘complete, perfect’ is placed at the end of the line making it part of the rhyme, and in addition to the last syllable, the penultimate syllable also participates in the rhyme: *ha-mu / da-mu / ma-mu*. This enhances the impression of completeness.

Similarly in *Utendi wa Ayubu* ‘Job’<sup>28</sup> the main character, Job, defines himself as being

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<sup>25</sup> In the translation of M.H. Shakir (1983): “gardens beneath which rivers flow” or “gardens in which rivers flow”.

<sup>26</sup> The image of abundance of milk and water, and interestingly, also blood, is used to illustrate the power of rulers in Arabic poetry (Sperl 1989: 35).

<sup>27</sup> *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* ‘Miqdad and Mayasa’ was composed by Saidi Abdallah Masudi el Buhry (or: Said Abdalla Masud el Buhry, or: Saidi wa Abdalla Masudi) from Pemba, Tanzania. It tells a heroic story of the time when Mohammed lived, drawing freely from history (Allen 1971: 269–270; 368). Other editions of the poem are *Hadithi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* ‘The Story of Miqdad and Mayasa’ by Werner 1930/31 & 1932, and *Utenzi wa Mikidadi bin Alasuadi na Mayasa Mkewe* (Mombasa version) by Knappert 1964 (Bashir 1972, which is same as Allen 1971). The tale is quite similar to a short poem titled *Qisa cha Miqidadi* (published by Werner in 1934), and both seem to have a common source as a base (Allen 1971: 270).

<sup>28</sup> Another edition of *Utendi wa Ayubu* ‘Job’ is Werner 1921–23. The author and the date of composition are unknown; Werner (1921–23) originally ascribed it to Umar bin Amini 1835 but was later informed that he was just a copyist, and that the poem “must be at least two hundred years old” (she added this information in a note after her translation went to press; quoted in Parker 1979: 380). If it was at least two hundred years old in 1923,

KATRIINA RANNE

*khalili* ‘whole’ after being washed. For Job water has the central role in the blessing and healing he receives after his sufferings are over. God talks to him (Ibid. 412):

<i>Haya ekue mateso</i>	Now, leave (lit. ‘destroy’) the suffering
<i>Ayubu hunu ni mwiso</i>	Job, this is the end.
<i>taka mai oshe uso</i>	Ask for water, wash your face
<i>pamwe na muili pia</i>	and your body.
<i>Na mai nikwambiao</i>	And the water of which I speak to you
<i>ya papo tini mwa nyao</i>	is down here by you
<i>hayo ndiyo yatakao</i>	it is this that will cure you
<i>kukupozza ukapoa</i>	heal you and you will be well
<i>Hiyo ndiyo dawa ako</i>	It is this that is your remedy
<i>rukudhu maguu yako</i>	stretch out your legs
<i>wala pasina sumbuko</i>	and there is no trouble
<i>mai hapo yatakuya</i>	water will come here
[...]	
<i>Guu ukilisukuma</i>	When you push your leg
<i>yatatoka mai mema</i>	there will appear good water
<i>yasokuwa ya zisima</i>	not of wells
<i>ya bahari na maziwa</i>	nor of sea nor of lakes

The same miraculous water episode is referred to in the Koran, too, but in just one line; it is reminded that God said to Job who had suffered: “Stamp your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash in and drink” (38:42). In *Utendi wa Ayubu* ‘Job’, Job’s recovery with the help of water is described in as many as 12 stanzas (4 of which are quoted above). Both the origin of the water (God, and secondarily, Job’s near surroundings with no previous source of water) and its healing abilities are beyond ordinary; hence it might be connected to the water of Paradise, too. Each attribute attached to that water amplifies the intensity of the image: the water is cure, remedy; the water is good.<sup>29</sup>

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it was written 1723 or before, making it even older than *Chuo cha Herekali* (oldest ms of which is 1728). — The poem tells the tale of the battle between Job and Satan.

<sup>29</sup> The belief in the healing power of water is common even among modern-day Muslims. The water from Zamzam well is used for healing the physically ill, as is ordinary water over which verses from Koran are recited. Some healing practises involve either writing the verses inside the bowl (before adding water into it) or dissolving verses written with an edible ink into water, and then drinking the water (Mattson 2008: 159–160). Zamzam water is believed to be able to cure even cancer (Ahmad & Ibrahim 1996: 40–45).

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

### The world will dry up

Given all the positive connotations of the image of water in religious traditional Swahili poetry, it seems natural that the lack of water illustrates something very negative. The image of drought is principally connected to the Last Judgement, the day on which everything we have done is revealed, everyone is resurrected, and the pious Muslims will enter Paradise (as will the sinning but remorseful Muslims after being washed, as noted earlier), and the non-believers will enter Hell. Belief in the Last Judgement is a cornerstone of Islam. (Knappert 1967: 243–264.) Drought is the very first sign of the approaching Last Day (Knappert 1967: 245; Knappert's translation.)<sup>30</sup>:

<i>kwa myaka arubaini</i>	for forty years
<i>pasi mai visimani</i>	without water in the wells:
<i>inti itakaukia.</i>	the earth will dry up.

*Utendi wa Qiyama* 'The Last Judgement' emphasizes the reach of the drought on the actual day (Allen 1971: 442.):

<i>Itakuwa duniani</i>	All over the world
<i>Pasi mayi zisimani</i>	Without water in the wells
<i>Yote yamekamukiya</i>	All will dry up

Nevertheless, sometimes the water itself is harmful. *Wimbo Wa Kuzingatia* 'A Philosophical Song' draws attention to the fact that God has also created *mivua mivulizi* 'the fierce rain', and that [*a*]metupa na maisha / Yamwelea kutufisha '[h]e has given us life / he can kill us too' (Knappert 2004: 228–229). The image of the fierce rain is part of the imagery that illustrates the powerlessness of human beings, the idea of us being at the mercy of God.

Often the harmful water is an intended punishment from God. In *Utenzi wa Nuhu* 'The Poem of Noah'<sup>31</sup>, of which only fragments have survived, God sends flood to destroy the unbelievers. He drowns all the people except the ones Noah took into his Ark. Later God takes the water away by his word (Knappert 1999: 138–139). References to the story of Noah (Nūḥ in the Arabic form) can be found in the Koran in several places; the story is not told in a single narrative as in the Bible, but is generally the same.

In the *Utenzi wa Yusufu* 'The Poem of Joseph'<sup>32</sup> Joseph is thrown into deep well, and its water presents a danger, but God quickly creates a rock in the middle of the water to save Jo-

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<sup>30</sup> Knappert's edition is based on the Paris manuscripts of Sacleux in the Collection of the Maison Mère des Pères du Saint Esprit, Rue Lhomond. Knappert does not name the poem but says that Sacleux's version is quite similar to the other version, *Utenzi wa Kiyama* by Hemed bin Abdallah bin Saidy el-Buhry (no date). (Ibid. 243.) Hence Knappert's version can be seen as parts of his edition of *Utendi wa Qiyama* 'The Last Judgement'.

<sup>31</sup> *Utenzi wa Nuhu* 'The Poem of Noah' has no date. It is based on chapter 11 in the Koran, and tells the story of Noah that is in most parts similar to that in the Bible.

<sup>32</sup> *Utenzi wa Yusufu* 'The Poem of Joseph' was written by Muhammad Kijuma some time before 1918. It has influences from the Arabic *Kisusu 'l-Anbiya'* by at-Tha'labi and Persian poetry (Knappert: 1999: 159–160.)

seph (ibid. 159–160). *Utenzi wa Yanusi* (or: *Yunusi*) ‘The Poem of Jonah’<sup>33</sup>, which is also known only fragmentarily, contains a corresponding image: water presents a potential danger, but God miraculously saves the character from the danger, while still keeping him in the water (but out of the direct touch with water, as was the case with Joseph, too). Jonah is thrown overboard and a fish swallows him, but God tells the fish not to eat him but just to keep him in its stomach. The image of water is a combination of danger and rescue, for Jonah has been afraid of getting killed, and while in the water inside the fish, he is safe. (Ibid. 158–159.) Both the story of Joseph (Yusuf) and the story of Jonah (Yunus) can be found in the Koran.

In *Chuo cha Herekali* ‘The Epic of Heraklios’<sup>34</sup> the image of ocean is used to describe this world and the ones who are attached to it, the unbelievers (Knappert 1967: 174; Knappert’s translation.):

<i>Kwa kuwa nyingi jifiri</i>	So numerous were the hordes
<i>wakinga kama bahari</i>	that they resembled an ocean,
<i>kutua mwana tuyuri</i>	on which a small bird alights
<i>uziwani ukyoea.</i>	swimming on a surface.

As Knappert notes, the image of a small bird is clearly the image of Muslims (ibid.). In addition to the juxtaposition of the numerous unbelievers and a small (and thus brave) group of the followers of Islam, the image of the bird includes the idea of Muslims as above the earthly life, the secular world, only alighting it to fight for Islam. The image of world as ocean can be found also elsewhere in *Chuo cha Herekali* ‘The Epic of Heraklios’: a spy that has found faith thanks to meeting Mohammed, declares: *Wokoziye hiyatiya kwa mawimbi na miuya* ‘He saved my life from the waves’ (Knappert 1967: 180).

Similarly, in *Al-Inkishafi* ‘The Soul’s Awakening’<sup>35</sup> water represents this world, something that has its dangers and hardships, and in which it is even not good to concentrate (too much) on doing well with earthly issues which lead away from God (Mulokozi 1999: 84, verse 13):

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<sup>33</sup> *Utenzi wa Yanusi* (or: *Yunusi* – Knappert uses both spellings) ‘The Poem of Jonah’ is based on chapter 10 in Koran. The date is not known, the composer is probably from Mombasa. Jonah is one of the prophets of Islam (Knappert 1999: 158–159).

<sup>34</sup> *Chuo cha Herekali* (or: *Utendi wa Herekali*, or: *Utenzi wa Tambuka*) ‘The Epic of Heraklios’ was composed by Mwendu bin Athumani, from Pate, Kenya. It describes the war of Muslims (led by Mohammed) against the companions of Heraklios, who was a pious Christian emperor. Other editions (than Knappert 1967) are Büttner/Meinhof 1911/12 and Knappert 1958, 1979, 1983. The oldest manuscript of the poem is dated 1728, which according to Knappert makes it the oldest Swahili manuscript and also the oldest known literary manuscript in a Bantu language (Knappert 1967: 143); however, that does not mean that it would be the oldest poem. – *Chuo cha Herekali* is loosely based on Arabian legends (Knappert 1967: 143); the Arabic descriptions of the battle are in prose form, except for one poem (ibid. 144). – Zhukov (1992: 60) notes that in the manuscript which Krapft sent to Europe in 1854 the title was *Dshuo dsha Herkal*, of which Zhukov uses the literal English translation ‘A Book about Heraklios’.

<sup>35</sup> *Al-Inkishafi* ‘The Soul’s Awakening’ was written by Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir (or: Sayidi Abudallah) from Pate, Kenya, who lived “during the century c. A.D. 1720–1820” (Hichens 1939: 9). It is a lament on the decline of Pate. Other editions (than the ones used, Mulokozi 1999, Knappert 1979 and Hichens 1939) are Taylor 1915, Werner 1927, Allen, R. 1946, Harries 1962, Jahadhmy 1975, Allen, J. de V. 1977, Mlamali 1980, and Dittmer 2006.

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

<i>Suu ulimwengu bahari tesi,</i>	This world is a stormy sea
<i>una matumbawe na mangi masi,</i>	it has hidden reefs and many submerged rocks
<i>Aurakibuo juwa ni mwasi</i>	he who rides it, know (that he) is a rebel
<i>kwa kula khasara ukhasiriye.</i>	with every harm he harms (himself). <sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the dangerous, wild sea, in the next stanza of the poem the world is compared to *kisima kisicho ombe* ‘a shallow pool/water hole, water pit’. It does not have numerous hidden dangers in the water like the ocean, but it is dangerous to approach because of a bull that attacks people who come near (Hichens 1939: 56–57). The shallowness reinforces the idea of the vanity of approaching this little amount of water eagerly; to get attacked by a fierce bull just because of wanting to have a little bit of (earthly) water, is certainly foolish.

Life in this world is not everlasting, and human beings should not be misguided by its illusory beauty; in the same poem (*Al-Inkishafi* ‘The Soul’s Awakening’) a man in a desert realises that the water he thought he saw was only a mirage created by the shining sun (Mulokozi 1999: 85, verse 17):

<i>Chenda akaona mwako wa yuwa,</i>	He goes and sees the sunshine
<i>mai alotaka akayatuwa;</i>	the water he wants to take out
<i>Asifidi yambo ila shakawa,</i>	he does not get anything but troubles
<i>ikawa mayuto yasimsiye.</i>	his regrets will not cease.

The idea of this world being just a delusion can be found in the Koran:

And (as for) those who disbelieve, their deeds are like the mirage in a desert, which the thirsty man deems to be water; until when he comes to it he finds it to be naught [...]. (24:39; Shakir’s tr. 1983).

### Streams of fire and blood

Though drought is one of the punishments on the day of Last Judgement, water, but boiling water, is another. The thirsty sinners who beg for water are given a boiling drink (Allen 1971: 476, *Utendi wa Qiyama* ‘The Last Judgement’, verse 290.):

<i>Mayi ya moto makavu</i>	Parching hot water
<i>Wakapekewa kwa nguvu</i>	They were given by force
<i>Yakianguka matavu</i>	It was scalding their cheeks
<i>Maini kuteketeya</i>	Consuming their bowels

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<sup>36</sup> In Hichens’s edition the third line is identical (*Aurakibuo juwa ni mwasi*), but in Knappert’s edition it does not have the word *juwa* ‘know’ but the demonstrative *huyo* ‘that’: *aurakibuo huyo muasi* (Knappert 1979: 130), i.e. ‘he who rides it, that (is a) rebel’. Hichens’s translation of the stanza is poetic rather than literal: ‘‘Tis as a surging sea, this mortal vale, / of found’ring reef and shoal of ragged shell. / Who rides it, as a tyrant knows it well, / that loseth all to loss man’s hoped-for gain’ (Hichens 1939: 56–57, verse 13) – Hichens notes that the verse uses a common simile of jagged coral reefs that damage the boats.

KATRIINA RANNE

This punishment is frequently mentioned or described in a very similar way in the Koran (6:70, 10:4, 18:29, 22:19, 40:72, 44:46–48, 47:15, 55:44, 78:24–25), sometimes near descriptions of refreshing rain given to the believers. It is interesting that the first line of the stanza uses the adjective *-kavu* about water, for *-kavu* means both ‘parched’ and ‘dry’;<sup>37</sup> even though ‘parched’ is obviously more relevant in this context, the undertone of ‘dry’ can be argued to be present. Thus the hot water can, paradoxically, be seen as dry, connecting the punishment to the punishment of drought.

Even before making the sinners drink the boiling water, they are given a rain of fire. The tortured men are suffering because of heat, and when they see a cloud in the sky, they think they are saved. But (Allen 1971: 468, verses 223–224):

<i>Likaya likawapita</i>	It [the cloud] comes to them
<i>Matete yakawapata</i>	The reeds reach them
<i>Na kula walompata</i>	And consume them
<i>Wakazidi kuumiya</i>	And increase the pain
<i>Matete hayo ndamoto</i>	These reeds of fire
<i>Wakazidi mivukuto</i>	Increase the bellows
<i>Na matoneye mazito</i>	And the heavy drops
<i>Wakazidi kuumiya</i>	Increase the pain

This rain is concrete fire, but since the Swahili word *moto* means both ‘fire’ and ‘burning’,<sup>38</sup> and *-a moto* means ‘hot’, the image of the boiling water is connected to the idea of fire. It is noteworthy that the water given to drink was not just hot but extremely hot, boiling; but the poem does not use the unambiguous way of saying ‘boiling water’, *maji yachemkayo*, thus holding the connotation of fire.<sup>39</sup>

In *Burada ya Al-Busiri* ‘The Burda of Al-Busiri’ water and fire are completely intermingled on the day of Mohammed’s birth, as the punishment for Persians who were worshippers of fire. First both elements are diminished by making the fire mix with the water (Knappert 1971: 190, verse 62):

<i>Moto ukazima kwa sikitiko</i>	The fire went out with sorrow/regrets
<i>ukadarra mayi mayi yaliko</i>	and went in abundance wherever there was water
<i>ikawa kishindo na papatiko</i>	there was noise and fluttering/spasms/convulsion
<i>mayi kukauka moto kuzima.</i>	the water dried and fire went out.

<sup>37</sup> *Kavu* can also mean ‘barren’, according to the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili–Kiingereza* (TUKI 2001). *Dictionnaire Swahili–Français* (Sacleux 1939: 336) offers similar options: ‘desséché; aride (au pr. et au fig.); rouverin (fer)’ (= ‘sear’; ‘arid’ [lit. or fig.]; ‘burnt [iron]’).

<sup>38</sup> *Moto* has also several other meanings, of which in this context ‘heat’, ‘zeal’, ‘welt’, and ‘flame’ are most relevant.

<sup>39</sup> The Koran uses both “scalding water”, “seething water” and “boiling water” in this context (and in addition to that, “water like molten metal”, in 18:29).

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

The image of the lake water extinguishing the fire resembles the image of Mohammed as water extinguishing fire in *Chuo cha Herekali* 'The Epic of Heraklios' (Knappert 1967: 190; Knappert's translation):

<i>u mahalipi Bashiri</i>	where is he, Bringer of good tidings?
<i>mayi mazimisha hari</i>	the water that extinguishes the heat,
<i>moto ukawa makaa.</i>	so that the fire becomes charcoal.

As the result of the mixing of fire and water in *Buruda ya Al-Busiri* 'The Burda of Al-Busiri', the lake dries and the Persians cannot get drinking water anymore. What makes the image extraordinary is the following stanza in which the elements get the characteristics of each other (Knappert 1971: 190, verse 64):

<i>Pale penye moto rutuba yake</i>	Where there was fire it had moist- ness/humidity/wetness
<i>ndipo penye mayi namuna zake</i>	just when it had the properties of water
<i>pale penye mayi harara yake</i>	where there was water it had heat/zeal
<i>hutoa mvuke na kuvuvuma.</i>	it emitted heat/steam and roared.

Knappert notes that the aim of swapping the characteristics of the elements is to confuse the Persians and to dissuade them from worshipping material elements, by showing them that the material things are never permanent (ibid). In addition to the connection to the worshipping of the Persians, by making both elements unusable and dangerous, the punishment is also physically fierce.

In *Utendi wa Miiraji* 'The Ladder' the elements that are intermingled as a punishment, are water and blood. When Mohammed is passing through Hell he sees a man swimming in a river of blood. This man is not allowed to come out of the river; heavy stones are put into his throat to keep him there. The punishment is specifically for the greediness with which the man had practised usury; as Knappert notes, the heavy stones symbolise his greed. (Knappert 1967: 211–212.) The setting of the river of blood, a liquid that is not only dark but also charged with cultural beliefs and regulations, reinforces the impression of suffering and the danger of sinking down. In addition to that, the image of blood may also refer to the greediness, "squeezing the blood" of other people. It is noteworthy that in Islam eating animal blood is prohibited, making the image of being forced to swim in blood extremely powerful.

In *Ukawafi wa Miiraji* 'The Poem of the Ladder' it is described that Mohammed sees a river of blood with many people (Knappert 1971: 248, verse 22):

*Kisha wakenda wakaona mto wa damu*  
*Muna watu ndani wangilia wakila sumu.*  
*Jiburilu kamba: wato sao wala haramu;*  
*Ndio jaza yao wajaziwa kesho Kiyama.*

KATRIINA RANNE

Then they went and saw a river of blood  
There were people in it, they went in eating poison  
Gabriel said: They are those who eat the forbidden;  
This is the reward they will be rewarded with tomorrow on the Resurrection.

The connection of the prohibition of eating blood (in meat), and the punishment of being forced to eat poison in the river, is even stronger here; Knappert regards this as the “most probable interpretation” (ibid. 248). This interpretation can be seen in his translation, since he translates *haramu* as ‘forbidden food’, though the literal translation is just ‘forbidden, prohibited, illegitimate’. Nevertheless, even with the predicate *-la* ‘eat’, the object (*haramu*) can still have a wider meaning than just food. *Haramu* is used of everything unlawful, and the verb *-la* ‘eat, consume, destroy’ can also be used figuratively. On the other hand, the rhyming of the words *damu*, *sumu* and *haramu* at the end of the lines strengthens the connection of ‘blood’, ‘poison’ and ‘forbidden’.<sup>40</sup> Since the people are in the river of blood when they are described eating poison, the venom might refer to the blood or to some toxin in the blood.

Similarly to the other poems in which blood replaces water, in *Chuo cha Herekali* ‘The Epic of Heraklios’ that presents an extreme danger. Blood is the image of implementing judgement, the image of the destruction of the unbelievers. The battlefield turns into a red sea (Knappert 1967: 165–166):

<i>mawimbi yakishishiza</i>	Waves were foaming
<i>kana maji ya kujaa.</i>	like the coming water [waves].
<i>Yali mawimbi ya damu</i>	These were waves of blood
[...]	
<i>palio sili hukumu</i>	there was Judgement
<i>ya kavu na zilizaa.</i>	dry and trembling. <sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> These words are all loan words from Arabic, but such a great amount of Swahili words come from Arabic that the choice of these words does not necessarily mean e.g. that *Ukawafi wa Miiraji* ‘The Poem of the Ladder’ was a translation from Arabic, or that there is some specific meaning in the usage of words taken from Arabic. According to Krumm (1940: 2), in old Swahili poetry half of the words are of foreign (mostly Arabic) origin. The word for water (*maji*), too, is from Arabic *mā*.

<sup>41</sup> This stanza is very different in different editions (and even within an edition), as are the translations. In Knappert’s 1958 edition the stanza appears twice, as 475 (p. 147) and 871 (p. 169), similarly to Knappert (1967: 166 and 188); however, they use different transcription, and are preceded and followed by different stanzas. In Knappert (1967: 166) the last line is *ya kavu na zilizaa*, translated by Knappert as ‘and the dry earth trembled’, but on page 188 *na kaifu zilizaa* is translated by him as ‘it was like an earthquake’. In Büttner & Meinhof’s 1911/1912 edition (stanza 769) the line is *kaavu zilizaa*, and it is translated as ‘das dürre Land wurde fruchtbar’ (= ‘dry land became fruitful’); *kavu zilizaa* literally means ‘dry gave birth’ (the second a in *kaavu* is probably a mistake in transcription; it does not fit the metre). Then again, Knappert (1958: 282) cites another manuscript in which the line is *na ukalifu wa zilzaa*, translated as ‘über die Schwere der Not’ (=on/over the difficulty of lack). – Similarly, in Knappert (1967) the line *palio sili hukumu* on page 166, tr. ‘there where Judgement flowed’ by Knappert, is *patooshile hukumu* on page 188, tr. ‘the judgement arose’ by him; whereas in Büttner/Meinhof’s edition the line is *patoshile hukumu*, and their translation ‘es überstieg den Verstand’ (= ‘it was beyond comprehension’). – In Knappert’s edition both of the stanzas that I quote (i.e. also the previous

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

The streams of blood are linked to the lack of water, drying of the earth. Drying and dying take place at the same time. It is repeated several times that the blood is acting exactly like water: *Iti iyee wavui / na damu ikinga mai* 'The earth is filled with bodies [of men], / and blood like water' (ibid. 191), *damu ikita mawimbi* 'the blood streamed in waves' (ibid. 196), *mauti yakinyunya / kama matone ya mvua* 'death drizzled / like drops of rain' (ibid. 191). It is noteworthy that, as discussed before, in the previous stanzas of *Chuo cha Herekali* 'The Epic of Heraklios' water represented the unbelievers, the world. That water seemed to be never-ending; but now all the water has disappeared and the unbelievers are being destroyed by the waves of blood.

The waves are extremely powerful: *kama kufa li bahari / mausha myamba na kaa* 'like death was the ocean / washing over rocks and reefs' (Knappert 1967: 189).<sup>42</sup> The image appeals to the sense of hearing and the sense of movement: in addition to the already-mentioned trembling of the earth, it is told that *mawimbi yakishishiza / kama mayi ya kuyaa* 'waves hissed / like the coming water [of high tide]' (ibid. 188).<sup>43</sup> In contrast to that, the sight is dimmed: *Yali kiza na ghubari / pasi weu kudhihiri* 'There was darkness and dust, / no apparent/clear space' (ibid. 189). The effect of both reducing or destroying the visibility and making the chaotic voices and movements loud and strong, enhances the powerful image of the deadly waves of blood.<sup>44</sup>

In *Utenzi wa Abdirrahmani na Sufiyani* 'The History of Abdurrahman and Sufian'<sup>45</sup> the description of war similarly contains several images of waves of blood: *damu ikenda mawimbi* 'blood flowed in waves' (Buhriy 1961: 106, verse 887). Furthermore, as in *Chuo cha Herekali* 'The Epic of Heraklios', the description appeals to aural sense (Ibid., verse 895):

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stanza of which the last two lines are quoted) appear twice in the poem, in the same order, suggesting that the poem might have been altered by the reciter. Overall, Büttner/Meinhof's edition is much shorter.

<sup>42</sup> Knappert's translation of the line *Kama kufa li bahari* is 'It was like the shore of the ocean', which misses out the powerful reference to death.

<sup>43</sup> In Knappert (1967: 165) the line is transcribed as *kana maji ya kujaa*.

<sup>44</sup> In addition, the dust in the air can be seen as connected to the idea of suffocating; either by drowning in blood or breathing the air thick of dust. — As late as 12 years after the decolonization of Tanzania, Albert S. Gérard (1976: 9) presents *Chuo cha Herekali* 'The Epic of Heraklios' with a very narrow view: "The narrative structure of the African poem exhibits no attempt at esthetic organization of the material. The telling is rambling and repetitive, and strictly paratactic. Although Bwana Mongo's humble assertion at the end that he is no poet and is not instructed in the art of poetry (v. 1124) is just a commonplace of Swahili, as it is of Arabic, literary etiquette, its truth in this case is all too glaringly obvious." As I have presented in this section through the analysis of numerous different water images in *Chuo cha Herekali* 'The Epic of Heraklios', the imagery and narration of the poem are versatile and creative.

<sup>45</sup> *Utenzi wa Abdirrahmani na Sufiyani* 'The History of Abdurrahman and Sufian' was written by Hemed Abdallah Saidi Abdallah Masudi el Buhry el Hinawy, though he has "presumably incorporated in it some reminiscences of his grandfather's version and perhaps of the earlier version"; there is another poem with the same name published by Dammann in 1940 but they seem to have no common origin (Allen 1961: 3.) It deals with the story of a dangerous man called Abdirrahmani and a war of Muslims against infidels who at the end either convert to Islam or die.

## KATRIINA RANNE

<i>Damu ikenda mikondo</i>	Blood flowed in streams
<i>farasi hawana mwendo</i>	the horses could not move
<i>kwa siaha na kishindo</i>	for the loud cry and noise
<i>na damu kutapakaa</i>	and the blood spread

In addition to several nouns expressing noise in the poem, the narrator addresses the audience of the poem with the imperative *sikia* ‘listen, hear’. Even though in Swahili poetry it is often used in the meaning ‘Listen to me’, as a way to emphasise parts of narration, in the context of many sound descriptions, it can also be seen to refer to the soundscape of the poem (Ibid. 100, verses 834–835):

<i>damu mikondo yenenda</i>	blood flowed in streams
<i>kula upande sikia</i>	on every side, listen

<i>Harubu<sup>46</sup> ikakawia</i>	Destruction lingered
<i>tangu mchana sikia</i>	from day, listen
<i>hata kiza kikangia</i>	till the darkness set in

In addition to ‘listen, hear’, *-sikia* can also mean ‘feel, sense, detect, perceive’; ‘understand’; ‘pay attention, notice, heed’ (and ‘obey’, which does not fit this context). However, on account of the frequent sound descriptions, it can be read to include the idea of trying to make the audience of the poem to hear the battle, to directly sense the noise of destructive waves of blood.

## Conclusions

I have shown how religious (Islamic) images of water in the traditional Swahili poetry illustrate blessing, spiritual thirst, purifying, greatness, becoming complete, dangers, and illusions. I have also demonstrated how the replacement of water with other elements, such as fire or blood, acts as an extreme religious punishment in the poems. The analysis of the imagery shows that even though God gives water on Earth, in the strict sense real water can only be found in Paradise; the water on Earth is just an illusion, a poor imitation or a faint shadow of the real water of God. Within these poems, that real, pure water of God has the power to make human beings whole. Water imagery seems to be something that is able to illustrate this holistic experience and other ideas and spiritual sensations that escape conceptual language, which makes water imagery very useful for poetry dealing with religion.

The Islamic water images seem to be strictly divided into good and dangerous water. Water as blessing is generally clean freshwater (including rain), and water as danger is the salt

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<sup>46</sup> *Harubu* probably means same as *uharabu*: ‘Dévastation, vandalisme, brigandage; dommage, tort, mal causé surtout par méchanceté; [...] depravation’ (= ‘Devastation, vandalism, armed robbery; damage, wrong, evilly caused, especially by spite; [...] depravity’) (Sacleux 1939: 939).

## THE IMAGE OF WATER IN TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SWAHILI POETRY

water of deep, unknown ocean; even if the ocean is also created by God, it is considered as something to be very careful about, something very worldly and potentially calamitous – freshwater seems to have or at least to be able to have a heavenly aspect. The good water is connected to God, Mohammed and Paradise, whereas the bad water is just water on Earth. This dichotomy can be found in the Koran, too: it is told that God

released the two bodies of flowing water, one sweet and fresh and the other salty and bitter, and put an insurmountable barrier between them (25:53).

Overall, the religious water imagery in traditional Swahili poetry has much in common with the Koran, though it at the same time is based on the surroundings of the composers, too. For example the image of river, which occurs in the Koran over fifty times, is rarely found in Swahili poetry except for the descriptions of Paradise.

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