

## SOME REMARKS ON ONE OLD SWAHILI MANUSCRIPT

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As is well-known, there are presently several archives of old Swahili manuscripts: in Dar es Salaam, Halle and Hamburg, London etc. These collections and separate manuscripts are being studied from various points of view by both European and African scholars.

Beside the vast collection of old Swahili manuscripts kept in SOAS, there is another collection of Swahili works at the British Library in London, which has been considerably expanded recently by acquisitions from Jan Knappert. There, one of the most interesting manuscripts which I have ever seen is kept. I am talking about the manuscripts (OR 4534) received in 1884 by a well-known expert of the Swahili language and literature: W.E. Taylor, who was a missionary in East Africa. In 1891 they have been acquired by the British Museum. It is a roll that is 200 cm long and 16-17 cm wide. Seven sheets, glued together, of a thick paper of special quality (2-3 sheets put together) which even resembles a kind of skin, it is skillfully written on in stable ink. The manuscript is put into a small old case made of wood; and on the inner side of its lid there is an inscription: "Bought Rev. W. E. Taylor Nov.20.1891". The manuscript has been well preserved. In several parts of the work, there is, however, some impairment to the readability: corrections of later date, ink spots, and even some insect damage.

In the "Oriental and Indian Office Collection" where the manuscript is kept today, I was given a photocopy, favorably made upon my request, about which I am going to present you some thoughts in the following.

The first two sheets glued together are written by the one author, while the rest of it is written by another. Both of them can be claimed to have belonged to a traditional school.

This old manuscript has not been subject to special paleographic research. Carl Meinhof worked with its photocopy only, while Alice Werner had it at her disposal. In transcribing and translating the text he was assisted by Hamshi bin Ferani and by his colleagues, Dr. M. von Tiling and Dr. A. Klingenheben, both of whom later became famous scientists in African linguistics. He also translated a similar text into English which was published by Edward Steere in Latin script. Concerning the manuscript itself Meinhof remarked: "Ich halte es für am besten bezeugt" (1925:243).

A prominent expert of Swahili literature, William Hichens, naturally showed interest in this manuscript. He wrote a letter (15.07.1930) to the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Mss, British Museum, where the manuscript was at that time, in which he applied for its photocopy, Or.4534, Poem of Liongo Fumo. The reply of the British Museum (17.07.1930) said: "With reference to your letter, I am desired to inform you that photostat copies of Or.4534

would require 8 sheets, each 7x11 and the cost for negative sheets would be 8/6 including postage". However, W. Hichens has never published the facsimile of the manuscript. In his papers at SOAS, I failed to find the photocopy which seems to have been produced for him.

The manuscript was also mentioned by Lyndon Harries (1962). Unfortunately, in his analysis of its content and in the English translation of approximately half the text he did not use the manuscript itself, but Meinhof's edition in Latin transcription, which he considers to be *quite faultless* (1925:188-192, 308-310).

The Latin transcription by Meinhof also served Jan Knappert as a basis to his publication of some excerpts of the text – the last two lines of each *block*, because he supposed that the first three lines had been omitted since they were written by a later poet (1979:92-92). The Latin transcription of the London manuscript, brought into scientific discourse by Meinhof, was later on used by Abdilatif Abdallah, Mohammed Abdulaziz, Kineene wa Mutiso, and others in their works. An essay on the history of the study on the different versions of the poetic text, called *Mashairi ya Liongo* by E. Steere, was done by Gudrun Mieke (1994).

This poetic work consists of 25 five lines *blocks* with caesura in the middle and rhyme on the –ma-syllable. The poet Sheikh Abdallah Muyuweni, is supposed to comment in the first three lines (*hashiya*) the last two lines, referring to Fumo Liongo. To these 25 *blocks* the author added 3 more in which he indicated his name and the significance of his family. According to Meinhof:

Die beiden letzten Kurzzeilen tragen in den ersten 25 Strophen durchweg einen ganz andern Charakter - sie sind ein wildes Hinrauschen - der Bergstrom, während die ersten drei Kurzzeilen der gelehrten Poesie entstammen, die sich bemüht, zur ritterlichen Kraft der Schlusszeilen sich aufzuschwingen, aber nicht immer erfolgreich. (1925:242)

A comment of such kind is called *takhmisa* (from the Arabic term *takhmis* making into five) in Swahili poetry. For the first time a sample of this genre appeared in Latin script, with a variant in modern Kiswahili and a translation into English, when it was published by Steere under the title *Mashairi ya Liongo*, in his *Swahili tales* (1870). - The text though not identical, is very much like the London one. In the Preface he wrote:

The translation of the *Poem of Liongo* into the current Swahili of Zanzibar was made by Hassan bin Yusuf, and revised by Sheikh Mohammed bin Ali, to whom I was indebted for a copy of the original with interlinear version in Arabic. (1870: XIII).

It is not clear what Steere meant by a "copy of the original"; probably the text in Latin script. This "copy of the original" has not been published by Steere. As for an *interlinear version in Arabic*, I suppose that in this case not the Arabic language was meant but the old Swahili writing in Arab letters (Kiarabu). However, Harries' statement, that the "examination of the Arabic interlinear version has shown that it does not vary much from the basis for the Swahili version" (1962:188), indicates, that he studied a copy of the original owned by Steere. Unfortunately, Harries does not give any hint concerning the location of this copy. Later, when re-publishing Steere's book, Werner disposed of a similar text, written down for her by Muham-

mad Kijumwa in 1914. This re-publication includes some corrections in the transliteration of the text of the *takhmisa*. (In fact, Meinhof did not agree with all corrections.)

All scholars and authors of the publications mentioned value *Mashairi ya Liongo* as an outstanding piece of Swahili literature. Their conclusion perfectly agrees with Knappert's words: "This song of Liongo's is one of the oldest specimens of Swahili literature, much older than the epic and probably eighteenth-century in the form in which we have it. Its language is archaic." 1979:92).

The synthesis to be drawn is, that only Meinhof (probably also Werner and Hichens) worked with the authentic manuscript (or rather its photocopy), which is to be found today in the British Library. He transcribed the text into Latin letters and carefully commented it, and thus formed the basis for the following research work. Still, two main problems with Swahili studies have remained acute: First, paleographic research of the original manuscript and its dating has been neglected. And secondly, it is necessary to publish this manuscript in facsimile, as it will allow us to correct and verify the Latin transcription of the text based on more recent standards.

As to my conclusion, I would like to express one simple idea once more: It is absolutely necessary, as to further any study concerning Swahili culture of the past and therefore also of today, to attain a serious paleographic study of all known Swahili manuscripts, including, first of all, their reproduction in facsimile.

#### References:

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