

**BERND HEINE, KARSTEN LEGÈRE. *SWAHILI PLANTS*. KÖLN:  
RÜDIGER KÖPPE VERLAG. 1994. 376 pp. ISBN 3-927620-89-0.**

This book records the knowledge and experience Swahili-speaking people have acquired in dealing with their plant world (p. 12). With its folk botanic approach it aims at discovering the principles of taxonomy they apply in classifying and labelling their plants as well as the different kinds of uses they make of them. This is what distinguishes the book from other dictionaries of Swahili plant names, e.g. P. J. Greenway (*A Swahili-Botanical-English Dictionary of Plant Names*. Second edition. Dar es Salaam 1940) where short descriptions of morphological plant characteristics are given. Greenway only makes some remarks about the use of important plants. The dictionary of J. Schröbler and J. Berchem (*Mimea ya Afrika Mashariki. Sehemu ya pili. Kamusi ya majina ya mimea*. Cologne: Omimee Publishers 1992) consists of a list of Swahili plant names with their botanical equivalents and some additional remarks on plant ecology.

*Swahili Plants* is divided in two major parts, a theoretical section about folk taxonomy (44 pages) and a lexicon (315 pages). It is based on field research conducted from 1991 to 1993 in a limited area of some 13 villages at Pemba, Zanzibar and the mainland coast near Tanga, where Swahili is the mothertongue and the variety of Swahili spoken comes near to what is considered to be "Standard Swahili" (p. 11). The people interviewed were rural coastal inhabitants who live of farming and fishing.

The authors make clear that there are relatively few plant names which are used throughout the whole Swahili-speaking area. The ones which are in broad use refer to culturally or economically important plants like "mnazi" (*Cocos nucifera*) and "muhogo" (*Manihot esculenta*) as well as to perceptually salient plants like "mbuyu" (*Adansonia digitata*) (p. 38). As a whole, "[p]lant terminology differs from one village to another and from one region to another" (p. 11). Therefore the title of the book *Swahili Plants* should not be taken in the sense of "plants of the whole Swahili-speaking area" as the use of many plant names is restricted to the locations where the field work was carried out. Apart from this limitation, which in fact cannot be avoided for practical reasons, it must be considered as one of the merits of the book, that it marks the plant names which occur only at one place.

One would have wished that the authors had elaborated more on the methodology applied in the field research. However, there appear to exist some weaknesses in the design of the study. The first one concerns the sample of informants comprising of fishermen and farmers. It is most likely that fishermen have a different perception of their surrounding plant world than farmers. In the course of the study, however, the two groups are not distinguished from one another. In this respect it would have also been interesting to get some information about the knowledge of fishermen concerning sea-weeds. The entry "mwani" (sea-weed) in the lexicon informs the reader that "the uses of the weed, which is said to be exported [...] are unknown" (p. 262). This may be true for the informants, but for the reader it is nevertheless of interest that the sea-weed concerned is *Eucheuma* (*Rhodophyceae*) (P. Kyauka *Misingi ya sayansi*

Dar es Salaam 1980: 19) from which the colloid carrageen is extracted (W. Franke. *Nutzpflanzenkunde* Stuttgart 1976: 113). Another sea plant "mwelekea" is mentioned in the theoretical section (p. 43) but not in the lexicon (and it is not *Mimosa pudica*, which is the botanical name for "kifauongo"). Secondly, from the list of the main informants (p. 13-14) it becomes quite clear that most of them, if not all, are men (for three out of fifteen informants, their sex is not clearly indicated by their name) However, as one of the authors stated in the context of another folk botanic study among the Samburu in Kenya, "there exists a remarkable divergence in taxonomic behaviour between the female and the male population" (B. Heine and König, Chr. 'On the taxonomic status of folk botanic categories among the Samburu', *AAP* 10, 1987: 39) The authors should at least have discussed this issue in the section about folk taxonomy. Maybe the underrepresentation of women accounts also for the absence of the taxonomic category "magugu" (weeds) in the book, since this term applies to plants which are unwanted at the farm and therefore are weeded (Sw. -palia, -palilia). The weeding is mostly done by women.

The theoretical part of the book starts with an introduction, where the authors describe their approach and their field research. It is followed by a chapter about folk taxonomy. In it the studies are summarized, which up to now have been done in East Africa about the ways in which plants are conceptualized and classified. In this context a tree-diagram of Swahili ethno-zoological taxonomy is presented, which the authors derived from the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili sanifu* (= A Standard Swahili-Swahili Dictionary. Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press 1981). I think the *Kamusi* is not an appropriate source for folk taxonomy. It should be noticed that it applies western zoological as well as folk-zoological taxonomic categories. This can be clearly shown by looking at the entry "mdudu", which is described as "kiumbe kidogo, agh. chenye mbawa mne, miguu sita na bila uti wa mgongo" (a small being, usually with four wings, six legs and without spine). This description corresponds to that of insects according to zoological taxonomy (more precisely to the subclass *Pterygota* of the class *Hexapoda*). The *Kamusi*, however, labels as "mdudu" also some *Arachnida* like spiders ("buibui"), scorpions ("nge") and ticks ("kupe"), which have eight legs and no wings, as well as *Myriapoda* like millipedes ("jongoo") and centipedes ("tandu"), which have very many legs and also no wings. This makes clear that the characteristics of the real folk taxonomic category "mdudu" must be different from those which are used to describe the category "mdudu" in the *Kamusi*. In general, the *Kamusi* seems to classify taxa on the generic level according to folk taxonomy whereas biological categories are applied more on ranks above generic taxa. In a study like the present one, this fact should have been taken into account.

The chapters on "taxonomic ranks", "nomenclature", "plants and the noun-class-system" and "plant use" are directly based on field research and facilitate many insights into the taxonomic behaviour of the Swahili-speaking people under study. The chapter about plant use explains the kinds of uses the people make of their plants or parts of their plants and categorizes them in "use areas". These are "Food", "Forage", "Construction", "Material", "Fuel", "Medicine". All applications of plants, which do not fit into any of these areas are put in the category "Other use" (= 4.9%). The list should have been completed by the category

“Symbolic use” In this sense plants are used in proverbs and tales as well as for names of locations (for example, the name “Ndagoni”, a village where field research was done, means “at the nut-grass”).

The lexical part of the book resembles the dictionary of Greenway in the presentation of the plant names. There is a listing of the Swahili plant names and in addition a botanical-Swahili list. But the perspective adopted is different. While Greenway as a botanist describes the botanical characteristics of the plants, the present lexicon concentrates on the uses of plants. Furthermore, it mentions additional names of one plant as well as other botanical species which are labelled by the same name. Most of the data presented are based on the author's field research. These are supplemented by other material especially from Greenway (first edition 1937), R. O. Williams (*The useful and ornamental plants in Zanzibar and Pemba*. Zanzibar 1949). Therefore the lexicon provides a rich source of really detailed information.

Uta Reuster-Jahn

**MARIA VALTORTA: *INJILI KAMA NILIVYOFUNULIWA*. (TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN BY GIANLUIGI MARTINI). 1996. ISOLA DEL LIRI (FR), CENTRO EDITORIALE VALTORTIANO.**

An important editorial achievement has been the recent translation into Swahili of the first volume of the monumental work on the life of Jesus Christ in ten volumes, *L'Evangelo come mi Š stato rivelato* (the title of the English version is *The Poem of the Man-God*) by the Italian mystic Maria Valtorta (1897-1961)

The only daughter of a hard-hearted mother and a good but too submissive father, Maria revealed soon her profound spirituality. She had a difficult life, suffering many vexations from her mother who destroyed twice her love bonds with young men. In 1920, while she was walking on a street, Maria's spine was struck with a blow that later was to be the cause of her lifelong infirmity. In fact, from 1934 she was no longer able to get out of her bed. She had twenty-eight years of illness, bedridden for the rest of her life.

Maria Valtorta was introduced to her extraordinary mission of writer by her spiritual director. For him she wrote her autobiography in 1943 and to him she handed over about fifteen thousand copy-book pages, written amid sufferings and discomfort, while she was sitting in her bed. These writings include her masterpiece on the life of Jesus Christ and other minor works, comprising doctrinal lessons, biblical commentaries, narratives on early Christians and martyrs, and devotional compositions, all written, according to the author, by a divine revelation.