

## MOSLEM LITERATURE IN SWAHILI

It does not appear to be certainly known when the Swahili language was first written. The earliest Arab settlement on the East Coast of Africa to which a definite date is assigned is that of the Batawiyyûna in Pate, A. H. 69 (A. D. 689). If the poems attributed to Liongo Fumo are authentic, and if his date is correctly placed by some native authorities as prior to 1300 A. D. it is evident that the language now known as Swahili was already sufficiently developed to be used for literary purposes. No mss. of any great antiquity are known to be in existence, and the only one<sup>1</sup> mentioned (so far as I am aware) by the Portuguese historians of the 15th and 16th centuries, was written in Arabic. We know, from a casual reference by Sir William Jones (*Asiatic Researches*, Vol. 11) that at least one religious poem in Swahili was extant before 1783; but this has not hitherto been traced.

A large number of poems on religious subjects exist in mss. of which some five or six have been published, and it is probable that many more are yet undiscovered. They are called *tenzi* (pl. of *utenzi*), a word which, if derived (as I assume it is) from the verb *tenda* "do" is as nearly as possible equivalent to *chanons de gestes*. They are not confined to religious subjects, some of them dealing, as a native authority informed me, with "matters of war" so that the designation is not inappropriate.

The subject matter of the religious poems belongs without exception to Moslem theology and tradition. derived either direct from Arabia or by way of Persia. The question of Persian influence on the Swahili coast is not yet fully elucidated; confining ourselves to the linguistic and literary side of that influence, we may remark that the language contains a few Persian words (some of which may possibly have been introduced at a later date by Indian Moslems) and some of the stories

<sup>1</sup> The *Chronicles of Kilwa*—published (from a copy made at Zanzibar in the 19th century) in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1895.

orally current among the peoples come unmistakably from Persia. Thus the collection printed at Zanzibar in 1894 by the Universities' Mission (*Kibaraka*) contains a version of the "Pardoner's Tale" which differs considerably from the Vedabbha Yâtaka (usually accepted as the original) and agrees very closely with a Persian legend quoted by Dr. Clonstin, in which Christ, at the request of an unnamed follower, changes some heaps of sand into gold, warning him at the same time that the gold will bring about the destruction of any one who meddles with it. The disciple, remaining behind with the gold, unwilling to leave it and unable to carry it away, is surprised and killed by robbers who, afterwards (as in Chaucer) kill each other. To the same category belongs a variant of "The Proud King" (printed in Büttner's *Swahili Schriftstücke*<sup>2</sup> 1892) and at least two of Steere's *Swahili Tales*.

But these prose stories, *in their Swahili form*, were only orally current till written down by, or at the instance of, Europeans within the last 80 years. It is otherwise with the poems, which to judge by their literary form (complying, so far as the character of the language permits, with the canons of Arabic versification and even observing the "eye-rhyme" at the end of the stanza) seem to have been written down to begin with, though perhaps handed on over long periods from one reciter to another. One often comes across people who know much, if not the whole, of them by heart; though I believe all the copies in my possession were made from mss. some of which had been in their owner's families for generations.

Whether any of these poems are direct translations from Arabic originals remains to be decided. Some appear to be taken from the prose romances, of which a great many have been catalogued and summarised by AHLWARDT.<sup>3</sup> Of these there are several dealing with the history of Job which may have been utilized in the *Utenzi wa Agubu*.<sup>4</sup> This introduces the incidents men-

<sup>2</sup> Vol. X of *Lehrbücher des Seminars für orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin*.

<sup>3</sup> Handschriftenverzeichnis der Kgl. Bibliothek zu Berlin Bd. 20; Verzeichnis der arabischen Handschriften von W. Ahlwardt bd. 8. No. 8968.

<sup>4</sup> The open stanzas are printed in Steere's *Swahili Tales* p. 482.

tioned by the Koranic commentators; of Satan tempting Job's wife Rehema, of her selling her hair to provide food for Job, of his vow to give her a hundred blows and Gabriel's suggestion that it can be fulfilled by striking her once with a palm branch having a hundred leaflets. The realistic details of Job's illness apparently came from the same source. Job's sons are represented in the Swahili poem as children at school and when Satan has destroyed them by overthrowing the building, he assumes the form of the schoolmaster in order to announce the disaster to Job. I have not, so far, discovered the origin of this incident.

The history of Joseph is the subject of another very popular poem of which at least two versions appear to be in circulation. This may be adopted from an Arabic prose work, or—which is quite as likely—an independent writing up of matter contained in the Koran and the commentaries on it. The episode of Zuleika is handled at great length, though without offence, and at the end of the poem, when Joseph is at the height of his prosperity, he finds her reduced to the extreme of destitution, begging her bread on the highway. At his request she is restored to youth and beauty and he marries her. This poem has not yet been printed.

A poem whose subject matter is derived (indirectly, no doubt) from the New Testament and the Apocryhal Gospels is the curious *Qissat Sayyidnā Isa*. The only information furnished by the Swahili who transcribed it is, that it is "old"—which may mean anything from sixty years to six centuries ago. I see no reason to doubt his good faith, and he is certainly not backward in acknowledging the compositions which can partly or wholly be attributed to his authorship. But this poem seems to me to show a closer acquaintance with the Gospels than is usually possessed by Moslem writers. Possibly the copyist has to some extent modified or added to his text. But without careful editing and alteration with other mss. not obtainable at present and with the Arabic material from which it is presumably derived, no opinion on the subject can be offered. Ahlwardt's catalogue mentions four prose

romances on the life of Mary (Nos. 8974-8977) on any or all of which our Swahili poem may be founded. It is much more detailed than anything to be found in the Koran but follows that account pretty closely, quoting XIX, 19, 20 part of XXI, 91 and several other verses. As in the Koran, Elizabeth (not mentioned by name, but as *Mamake Yahya* "the mother of John") is called Mary's sister and Joseph (who does not appear in the Koran) is also described as a relative. There is a certain pleasing simplicity in the account of the two sharing their daily tasks—drawing water from the well and sweeping at the Temple. Mary happens to go to the well alone on the day of the Annunciation—Joseph having represented that he is tired and has plenty of water in the house already. It may be worth while, at a later date, to transcribe and translate the whole poem, in order to determine, if possible whether any new elements have been added in its passage into Swahili.

I have still to notice three *tenzi* based on purely Moslem traditions, which have not, so far as I am aware, been traced to any actual originals. They were all published by the late Dr. Büttner, in his *Anthologie aus der Swahili Litteratür*. To these we may add the *Chuo cha Herkal* published by Professor Meinof in the *Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen*, 1912, and narrating the war of the Arabs with the Emperor Heraclius.

The *Utenzi wa Shufaka* describes a dispute between the angels Gabriel and Michael, the former of whom complained that there was no compassion or kindness left on earth. Michael refused to believe this, and they finally agreed to settle the question by experiment and descended to Mecca in human form—Gabriel as a sick pilgrim and Michael as a physician. Michael, being called in by the kind hearted townsfolk, declared that there was but one cure—the sacrifice of an only son. A rich citizen came forward and offered his son for the purpose—his wife when appealed to was equally willing, and the destined victim himself, not to be outdone in devotion, professed his eagerness to suffer through several stanzas. He was then slaughtered but miraculously

restored to life. It is difficult to relate this seriously in English but strange as it may seem it has a certain pathos in the original. The emotions of the parents are dwelt on at great length, and the poem is enormously popular especially among the Swahili women.

Another popular favorite—I found that the women knew many stanzas by heart—is the *Kutawafukwe Muhamadi*, which describes the last hours and death of the Prophet. The writer of this poem says that he found its subject in a book by Hasan of Basra (d. 728) but it is probably a paraphrase rather than translation.

Lastly, the *Utenzi wa Mi'ragi* describes the Prophet's journey through the seven heavens, as elaborated by tradition from the mere limit of a dream or vision given in Koran XVII. I. It has not so far been determined which, if any, of the numerous Arabic and Persian poems on the subject is the original of this, which consists of 133 quatrains. Space does not allow for detailed discussion but we may conclude by quoting the 52nd stanza, as a specimen of stype and metre. The latter, is, of course, borrowed from the Arabic, but profoundly modified by the difference in the system of accentuation, and the disregard of quantity. The metric stress, which occurs four times in each line, is marked by an accent. Apart from this, each word is accented on the penultimate.<sup>5</sup>

Kiisha wakangi mwombezi na Jibreli,  
Wasita uwingu wakafika wote wawili.  
Wakabisha lángo kwa héshima no tabujili  
Wakafunguliwa wakóana Músa Kalima.

Then they entered, the Intercessor and Gabriel  
The seventh heaven they entered, both of them,  
They knocked at the gate with respect and reverence  
And it was opened to them and they saw Moses the orator.

A. WERNER.

<sup>5</sup> This does not apply to *heshima*. Arabic loan-words are accented Swahili-wise or not, according to convenience and the degree to which they have been naturalised.