

A Grammar of Genre: Ethnic Identity and
the Boundaries of Swahili Literature

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Just as social scientists have been trying to explain who the Maswahili are for the past 150 years or so,¹ literary historians of Swahili have been trying to delimit the boundaries of this literature. Unarguably, ethnic identification is an abstraction that is difficult for anyone to get a practical purchase on and this is no less so for one trying to figure forth such a concept as Uswahili from a body of literature. Indeed the two, ethnic identity, or Uswahili, and Swahili literature, or fasihi,² seem to be referents for one another: for the latter is nothing short of a literary expression of the former. More specifically, Swahili literature may be seen as a particular set of literary constraints that taken together express a particular ethnic identification (Uswahili) of a group of people who acknowledge, support and defend this ethnicity. And thus I will argue in this paper that Swahili literature can be defined by the "Swahiliness," for whatever that is taken to mean at different historical points, of particular literary expressions. This in turn I intend to measure by an analysis of genre in Swahili prose.

In much the same way that Royce was able to apprehend the changes in dance performance as evolving expressions of ethnic identification of different cultural groups in her The Anthropology of Dance (1977),³ so too can the evolving sets of constituents that make up the regulative concept of any given genre in Swahili be seen as an indicator of aesthetic preference and hence ethnic choice. Therefore historical shifts in the apprehension of a genre actually may be seen as expressions of evolving ethnicity. Swahili literature, then, has variable boundaries that depend

on both time and context since the concept of Uswahili, and the acceptable means of its expression, are constantly in flux. To see this with more clarity one need only examine the diachronic development of one of the many Swahili prose genres: the hadithi.

To begin with, as has been discussed earlier,⁴ the Swahili hadithi is etymologically connected to the Arabic radicals h.j.D.Th which as a verb in form one means to "invent," while in form two it signifies "talk."⁵ However since the advent of Islām, al-ḥadīth (with the definite article), has come to signify a specific corpus of prose narratives that had a specific form made up of two parts: an isnād (Ar. إِسْنَاد) or chain of guarantors, and a matn (Ar. مَتْن) or text, both of which had a particular context: stories about Moḥammed and his Companions. These narratives were intended to be short, verifiable records of Mohammed's sayings as a second authority to the Qur'ān. In time this body of literature became attenuated and a false body of hadith arose as well and thus the semantic range of the hadith embraced both true and untrue accounts.

Its earliest documented use in Swahili seems to be in the Swahili town chronicles⁶ where it is used as "history" and in the well-known example of the history of Liongo, Hadithi ya Fumo Liongo, an account which impressed Bishop Steere enough that he was able to write in 1870 that the story was "The nearest approach to real history I was able to meet with."⁷ However one also finds it however less frequently used as "fiction." But this may also be explained by noting that the principles of Arabic historiography, which very much influenced the Swahili chronicles, traditionally made little distinction between accounts that were true and those that were not. It mattered more that an account be recorded accurately rather than it being corroborated by fact. Thus the ta'rikh,

khabar and ansāb all included fictive materials as did the great universal histories of al-Ya'qūbī and al-Mas'ūdī.⁸ And thus both Swahili uses of hadithi can be seen as a regulative concept expressed in this genre as an element of ethnic identification. A connection was clearly sought between Swahili culture and Arabic. Indeed the very concept of ustaraabu, the Swahili word for civilization which dates from this period, means literally "Arab-like,"⁹ yet with a critical East African application. Hadithi ya Fumo Liongo thus is Swahili and not an Arab story about a Swahili hero because: it is written in Swahili; and it is written in a genre, the hadithi, that is measurably different in both form and content from the Arabic hadīth having no recognizable isnād but a matn or text only which is a particular literary expression of Uswahili.

During the next period in the development of Swahili prose genres, the early part of the twentieth century, one may note that with the increasing influence of mission presses and the formation of the East African Swahili Committee and later of the East African Literature Bureau,¹⁰ the hadithi underwent further alterations. The mission schools that had firmly established themselves along the coast by this time had already had an inordinate effect upon the Swahili language and its traditional means of literary expression. The hadithi, for example, was considered by many mission houses to be too closely associated with Islam to be a proper means of expression (especially through translation) of the Christian word; yet early translations of the New Testament such as Krapf's and Steere's¹¹ relied heavily on Swahili aid in the form of local Sheikhs, such as 'Abd al-'Aziz,¹² who were proficient in Arabic and who naturally translated a story about Jesus (who was consistently referred to by the Arabic Isa Masia), as a hadithi it made perfect sense to

everyone except the missionaries and the Foreign Bible Society.

In time the German mission sought to put right what they considered to be this inappropriate influence of Arabic in Swahili writing although of course this was motivated from strictly personal concerns and Karl Roehl finally printed a version of the New Testament in Swahili in 1930 that had been virtually purged of all Arabic words and syntax. In their stead the reader found Bantu words not in general use--or even understandable by the Swahili.¹³ It was against this background that one finds the hadithi in this period most commonly applied to fables and brief narratives unassociated with anything historical or Christian; rather now the genre habari seems to have been the genre of choice as a medium of things historical. Collections such as Visa na Hadithi (1927) for the most part contain translations of Oriental stories such as "Kisa cha Buddha," "Rafiki," Sultani Hakkum, "Sultani Mahmoud" and other stories from Alf Layla Wa-layla, although there is one very brief story about "Kristofer" which begins "Hadithi ya Kristofa ndigo hii."¹⁴ (The story of Kristofer is true.), Or Frederick Johnson's translations of Kipling's Jungle Books (Hadithi za Mauqli) (1929) or his Hadithi za Mjomba Remus: Clearly now the perception of the genre as a printed means of Swahili ethnicity had undergone a significant change as a regulative concept.

But with some notable exceptions such as Muhamad bin Kidjumwa¹⁵ this phenomenon had occurred from without Swahili culture, not from within and the question may very well arise, Did the Swahili themselves accept this use of the hadithi that was instituted by the mission presses and then formulized by the manipulation of the East African Swahili Committee and the East African Literature Bureau? While this is indeed difficult to answer, not knowing what was written but not published during

this period by Swahili writers, one can point to published Swahili prose specimens such as Hadithi za Kale za Sungura na Hadithi Nyinginezo (1936) that bear out more than a passing acceptance of such changes. And indeed as Royce¹⁶ and others have pointed out, it is frequent changes outside of a culture that most often produce changes in aesthetic preference inside a specific culture. That is to say, a shift in aesthetic preference which may represent a choice in ethnic identification may very well be an internal response from some outside stimulus. At any rate, a Swahili seventy some years ago (1850) would have been much perplexed upon seeing the hadithi in the 1930's for clearly he would have witnessed represented in the performance of this genre, an evolving notion of ethnic identification that claimed less Arab and more Bantu heritage than he might have been able to accept.

Finally in the contemporary period, one finds, yet another shift in the performance and thus the subsequent perception of the hadithi as a regulative concept, for now it is seen once again as "history," something factual with an implied isnād. Undeniably there is here the manifestation of ethnic identification as one may note in Bethwell Ogot's explanation of the choice of hadīth, the Arabic not the Swahili word (hadithi), for the title of the Historical Society of Kenya's proceedings: "We wish to resurrect the more scholarly and respectable connotation of hadīth, meaning history."¹⁷ The very associations that the various mission presses and to some extent the EASC sought to disrupt twenty years earlier are now reconstituted. Titles such as Kingdon's Hadithi ya Bakuria wa Tanganyika (1966), or even Hadithi juu ya Lenin suggest as collection of ethnographic writing and expository prose this more "respectable" connotation are now more common.

But as well one finds just as commonly Kayumbo's Hadithi za Babu Zetu wa Tanganyika (1952) as a novel, fiction, or Moorjehan's Hadithi Kutoka Nchi Mbalimbali Zaidi (1970) as translations of Ali Baba, Hansel and Gretel and other stories, or the many prose specimens published by Longmans under the general title Hadithi Kuisimua (Thrillers) or even fables such as Hadithi za Mzee Kobe (1967). And one may also point to versions of the New Testament and histories of the Christian church that are described as hadithi too. Thus it seems that the perimeters of this genre by the 1970's have been widened significantly bearing out Ibrahim Noor Shariff's assertion that "Swahili literature is and has been the creation of all groups among the Waswahili."¹⁸

How then can this brief history of the hadithi as a regulative concept expressing Uswahili at different historical points demarcate discernable boundaries of Swahili literature? In the first instance, the Swahili hadithi in the middle of the 19th century, the genre formally expressed an ethnic statement like the story of Liongo, A Swahili hero, through a medium expressing truth or factual matters or occasionally as clearly untrue accounts, such as fables without any pretense given to veracity. Next, by the 1930's, it seems to have been a generally acceptable expression of Uswahili to see the hadithi as primarily a fictive account, narrowing the acceptable constraints considerably. Then after independence, as noted, one finds another deliberate attempt to refocus the hadithi as a particular expression of Uswahili by reconstituting Oriental associations such as the case with the journal Hadith. But by this time as well, one can find all the previous uses--history, fiction, fable--in currency as well.

Thus what can be concluded about the boundaries of Swahili literature

from studying a Swahili genre as a regulative concept expressing Uswahili is that an analysis of a genre at any particular historical point will reveal ethnic choice in the form of aesthetic preference. In short, a grammar of genre is nothing short of a testament of Uswahili, the ultimate boundary of Swahili literature.

NOTES

¹ For a recent treatment of Swahili ethnicity see Abdallah Khalid's The Liberation of Swahili (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1977) which is an attempt at a synthesis of previous definitions.

² Actually the word means "pure," or "correct" and is itself a perfect metaphor for the argument in this essay since it is from the Arabic fasuha (فصح) al-fusuh, being the signification for pure Arabic, i.e., literary Arabic, and ifsah as flawless literary Arabic. This is also found in other Bantu languages as well as Persian. The very concept of fasihi then may be seen as being conditioned by an Arabic/Islamic aesthetic standard. Significantly, an expression such as "Swahili literature" in Swahili is strained; there is no such common expression.

³ Anya P. Royce, The Anthropology of Dance (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1977).

⁴ See the writer's A History of Swahili Prose, Part One: From Earliest Times to the End of the Nineteenth Century (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), and "Literary Theory in Africa: A Rapprochement Between Linguistic and Literary Theory: The Case of the Swahili Hadithi," in Interdisciplinary Approaches to African Literature (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, in Press).

⁵ See Hans Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, N.Y.: Spoken Language Services, 1971), pp. 161-162.

⁶ For example, see the chronicles of Lamu, Mombasa, Vumba, and Kilwa.

⁷ Edward Steere Swahili Tales, rev. Alice Werner (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1922), p. vi.

⁸ See A History of Swahili Prose, Part One, Chapter Two for more about Arabic historiography and the Swahili chronicles.

⁹ From form ten of the Arabic verb 'arab (Ar. عرب): ista'araba (Ar. استعرب), meaning to adopt the customs of the Arabs. See Wehr, p. 601.

¹⁰ For a brief history of these two remarkable institutions, see A. F. Bull, "Looking Backward Thirty Years--and Forward: The Story of the East African Swahili Committee," Swahili, 1, No. 32 (1961), pp. 20-23 and W. Whiteley, Swahili: The Rise of a National Language (London: Methuen & Comp., 1969), pp. 79-96.

¹¹ See Rev. Matti Peltola "An Outline of the Translations of the New Testament into Swahili," Studia Missiologica Fennica, 1 (1957), pp. 19-38 for a discussion of these translations.

- ¹²See ibid., pp. 22-23 for more about Sheikh 'Abd al-'Aziz.
- ¹³Roehl's "Purified Bantu Swahili" was described by Canon Broomfield as a "no-language," claiming that the Swahili "always ask 'where is this Swahili spoken?'" See K. Roehl, "The Linguistic Situation in East Africa," Africa, 3 (1930), pp. 191-202 and G. W. Broomfield, "The Re-Bantuization of the Swahili Language," Africa, 4 (1931), pp. 77-85.
- ¹⁴Visa na Hadithi (London: Lund Humphries, 1927), p. 49.
- ¹⁵Muhamadi bin Abu Bakr bin Omar Kidjumwa Masihii, also known as "M. K.," was a Swahili poet who lived on Lamu, made al-Haj four times, and then converted to Christianity in 1932, asserting that it was possible to embrace both Islam and Christianity at the same time.
- ¹⁶See Anya P. Royce, Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 7-8. Nonetheless, she concludes that the "ability of an ethnic group to maintain boundaries, and hence survive as a distinct entity, may depend on its ability to marshal an impressive array of symbols." (p. 7)
- ¹⁷See Hadith, 1 (1968), p. v.
- ¹⁸Ibrahim Noor Shariff, "Waswahili and Their Language: Some Misconceptions," Swahili, 43, No. 2 (1973), p. 74.

Bibliography

Given in the notes.