
Theoretically, by some form of osmosis, reviewing this book while in Africa should be an advantage. But being unfamiliar with Swahili studies and having literally nothing to refer to except this text, the review may prove unfair to Knappert's efforts. The back cover notes the author's impressive academic background in African and Oriental languages, and certainly he is well-known for his publications and work at the School for Oriental and African Studies in London. Unfortunately, little of this background is displayed in the present work.

I do not feel the many problems with this publication, which will be enumerated below, can be totally the fault of Knappert -- rather, they are the fault of the publisher. Heinemann was one of the first publishers to "discover" African writers and in their African Writers Series established an early and impressive list of publications (including Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi, Mongo Beti, Lenrie Peters, Ferdinand Oyono). But, possibly caught up in the general dilemma we face today: if it's done by an African, it will sell, Heinemann has recently come out with some absolute trash. This is hardly the place to list Heinemann's disasters, but it must be kept in mind that Knappert's collection is part of this series and seems to be yet another result of their poor editorial policies. Although I am suggesting that the limitations of Myths & Legends of the Swahili are mainly Heinemann's, the fact remains there are severe problems and Knappert cannot be excused for such detrimental control by publishers of either traditional or contemporary African literature can no longer be tolerated.

It would appear Knappert sensed Heinemann's heavy hand, but he only acknowledges it in one respect. Legends about the Prophet Mohammed, Knappert notes, are far more numerous than the collection indicates; but,

The publishers felt...that a volume containing too much religious material would be of less general interest than one in which the secular type of story balanced the Islamic myths (v).

This brilliant rationale recalls the story of the tourist in North Africa who was having difficulty late one afternoon getting a good photograph of a Moslem praying. But the lighting problem was easily solved by simply turning the Moslem around so that he was facing the sun. "We" (read: the publishers) are not Moslems; therefore, "we" do not need to hear "their" "religious myths." This blatant form of intellectual neo-colonialism should and will not be allowed to continue.

"Myths" and "Legends" are supposed to be cute, recognizable tales from exotic lands and times. And the titles of the chapters faithfully carry out this imposed concept. We are treated to "Mysterious Destinies," "Stories of Wit and Wisdom," "The Wiles of Women," "Social Satire," "Astute Animals" (with the "lead-off" tale of "Handy Hare and the Drought"), "Traveller's Tall Tales," "Spirits and Sorcerers," and (alliteration continues to run amuck) "Just Judgements."
Possibly I am being too lenient with Knappert, but it is hard to believe that someone with his background could produce a volume with so much wrong with it. His Preface and Introduction do contain the necessary (very necessary in retrospect) qualifications concerning the purpose of the collection:

The present collection of Swahili Myths and Legends in English translation is intended to make Swahili mythology and folklore better known to the English-reading public as well as to the student of folktales and legends (v).

This collection is not intended as a scientific work. Its purpose is simply to make available material which, it is hoped, will enable readers to gain familiarity with Swahili thought as expressed in folk literature (vi).

And later, after a discussion of Swahili men's attitudes towards women:

This is not the place for scientific argument. The intention of this collection of folktales is only to provide samples of moods and views as they seem to be present among the people (v).

Well, "student of folktales and legends," there is little doubt that this is not a "scientific work." It is unclear why Knappert has such a phobia about "scientific work" -- apparently one cannot be entertaining and "scientific" (scholarly?), let along informative, at the same time.

In the Preface we are told that most of the "religious legends" came from manuscripts -- "most of them in Arabic script, and other unpublished material written down by Swahili scholars since the early eighteenth century" (v). The "more worldly folk stories" were collected by the author in the field "mainly in the years 1961-4" (v). Then, in the Introduction, Knappert states that "there is no sharp distinction between the religious myths and legends and the secular" (v). Such comments present quite a few problems. We are first faced with the all too common lack of distinction (either "folk" or "academic") between myth and legend (if, indeed, there is one in this case). Also, in several different places, Knappert refers to "Swahili mythology," but whether or not this is analogous to, for example, "Greek mythology," is not made clear either in the Introduction or in the texts. Another problem, especially for a collection of material which spans nearly three centuries, is the lack of distinction between material translated from Arabic scripts and that recorded in the field. This situation is worsened by the absence of any references to exact sources for either the written or oral materials.

This slippiness continues:

Variants of these stories are to be found in the collections of Bueuttner, Lademann, Steere, and Velten. A 'variant' may be a story which shares one fragment or even only one motif with another or several others. Fragments may be inserted into a story without being an essential part of it. Conversely, an essential part of a story may be missing in one variant, so that it seems pointless until one discovers another variant which supplies the missing link (v-vi).
Where to begin? "The collections of Buettner, Lademann, Steere, and Velten" are never mentioned again (there are no bibliography or footnotes), so I sincerely hope everyone knows who they are and where to find their collections. For the rest of the quote, I am tempted to suggest a Folklore Forum contest for best interpretation in 25 words or less. But the final thought really bothers me. Apparently, the Swahili are among those unfortunate people (usually discovered by folklorists) who wander about telling hopelessly confusing and pointless stories to each other, and only the lucky few (including folklorists, of course) hear two "variants" (?) of one myth (?) (or is it a legend?) and are able to piece them together a la Leakey. Such comments not only insure that this is not a "scientific work," but also make it a bad work.

Elsewhere in the Preface, Knappert has ventured the usual comment when publishing translations that he has attempted to keep "the typical Swahili flavour of the narrative" (vi) and,

To this end, references that immediately mean something to a Swahili had to be made explicit in order to give an insight into the purposes of a story (vi).

Given the author's (he has certainly gone beyond the limits of a translator) method of presenting rewritten composite-variants, such clarifications are added directly into the narratives. There are also italicized, bracketed explanations inserted into the texts; but frequently these are the author's impressions, not objective clarifications. It is interesting to note that these explications grow less numerous through the collection -- thus suggesting the fatigue of the author or the increasing universality of Swahili narratives by the time we reach "Just Judgements."

The collection does have a brief introduction with a few paragraphs commenting generally on material in each of the chapters; but this falls into the "better than nothing" category. Knappert seems to know the more strictly Islamic narratives very well, but when he comes to the "secular" material, his observations are frequently simplistic. For example: "The cult of spirits is still very much alive in many parts of Africa..." (4); "Animal fables are probably the most typically African form of oral literature" (8); "The art of making arrowheads is an old tradition in Africa" (10). In fact, such statement are just plain stupid. In his last grouping, "Just Judgements," Knappert seems to equate these tales, in which the cadi or judge gives the answer (or, actually, Allah's judgement) to tales which he terms "You be the Judge" (here I believe he is referring to "dilemma tales"), where there is no "real" answer. In my mind, these are two very different types reflecting their very different cultures.

I suppose what bothers me most about this collection is the conflict of stated aims and final product. I could, of course, belabor the absence of: a bibliography, a glossary (although there is not enough Swahili used to merit one), any suggestion of motif or tale type correspondences, any reference to sources (written or oral), any background on narrators or performance context, any consistant use of genre terminology, etc. But, presumably, these would have made the collection a "scientific work" and this was to be avoided. OK. But how does one gain a "familiarity with Swahili thought" from such a collection? As Knappert himself states, many, if not all, of these "myths and legends" are composites of the translations of several variants, and his own clarifications. In his
introduction, Knappert comments on the role of double entendre in the narratives, especially in the Abu Nuwasi trickster tales -- but such language is not indicated in the texts! Surely this aspect of "Swahili thought" is affected by such translation methods.

As one who has published translations without original texts because of a publisher's request, believing this was better than nothing at all, I can no longer accept such an approach. If we cannot appreciate the scholarly value of original texts and intelligent ethnographic notes, at least we could occasionally consider the native speakers. Ironically, this series is supposed to be intended for an African audience (the price in Africa is less than in England). As we all well know, European languages do not survive translation; but luckily for us, third world languages apparently lose little in translation.

The aversion to "scientific work" (which I continue to hope is Heinemann's, not Knappert's) remains an all too real problem despite the number of publications (Herskovits, Finnegar, etc.) that prove one can publish translated material (even without complete original texts) without sacrificing knowledge. The scarcity of Swahili material is unaided by this publication. It remains an enjoyable, i.e., readable, collection of "myths & legends" from the Swahili coast, as told in English.

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