

2nd draft

THE NATIONS OF SWAHILI IN KENYA

By

Jack D. Rollins

African Literature Association Annual Meeting
Cornell University

11 April 1987

It is somewhat of a curiosity that, looking back over the past 80 odd years of Kenyan literary history, what has emerged as the most popular literary traditions in Swahili have been those almost totally devoid of Swahili cultural attachment. Rather, what has obviously been preferred to the articulation of the coastal, urban, Islamic culture of the so-called traditional Swahili, has been an expression of a culture that demonstrates little connection whatsoever with any of the traditional referents in the language. While the full history of these developments is a complex one, an outline of some signal features of this so-called " de-ethnicized " tradition may be touched upon in this brief essay.

The first 50 years of the 20th century in Swahili literary history in Kenya, 1900-1950, was witness to many intense cultural pressures upon speakers of Swahili, not the least of which was the continued assault of a form of linguistic imperialism that attempted to dominate the whole of Swahili culture through the manipulation of language, literary form and hence a system of thought and belief. And while the seeds of this process had been sown in the previous century, it was the early part of the twentieth century in which one begins to see the tremendous influence such institutionalized colonization of a culture had upon the linguistic and literary expression of Uswahili.

In a word, what one finds at the beginning of the 20th century is first the expected publication of traditional Swahili prose

narratives like those found in the 19th century such as the **Desturi za Wasuaheli, Safari za Wasuaheli, Prosa und Poesie**, all from the Oriental Seminar at Berlin, and the Town Chronicles, but then, after a short span of a few years, in addition to the European authored Swahili translations of religious writing, such as the **Biblia, Katekismu, Hadisi ya Dini**, of various Christian mission presses, and **Maisha ya Muhammad** and **Kurani Tafsiri**, also of Christian Mission Presses, one begins to find a growing number of secular texts both translated and written by Europeans, such as **Hadithi za Mjomba Remus, Hadithi ya Robinson Kruso, Hadithi ya Allan Quartermain** and so on. Indeed, from the years 1925-1950 Europeans wrote or translated well over 90% of the prose works published in Swahili. This, coupled with the political decisions to use Swahili as a national language (at different times in both Kenya and Tanzania), and the formation of the Interterritorial Language Committee to oversee the standardization of Swahili and its literatures through the East African Literature Bureau, resulted in a markedly different kind of Swahili language and prose tradition than was previously known. And, notably, it was this latter genre, European written, largely ~~West~~ern referenced prose literature, that achieved the widest currency in East Africa during this period. As an emerging tradition it determinedly moved farther and farther away from the more traditional ethnic expressions of Uswahili. Its texts illustrate a use of language and literary conventions increasingly bereft of cultural referents particularized to any specific cultural group within the broader Swahili community. At the outset, then, it may be seen as a purposely de-ethnicized

Swahili language and prose tradition and one, that for both political and economic reasons, received increasing attention in this [fifty year] period in Kenya. ✓

Along side of this, but much less obvious, was the continued performance of traditional Swahili prose narratives. Fewer in number, with limited publishing facilities and distribution, these Swahili prose texts--mainly Islamic in character--remained a popular and vibrant genre deep within Swahili communities and were--it certainly may be argued now--virtually unknown to most outside of these communities. Of these several should be noted as they are important examples of this tradition which existed via the small, often obscure Arab/Indian/Swahili publishing concerns like Haji Mohammed and Sons in Old Town, Mombasa: **Qurani Takatifu, Hadithi Zilizochaguliwa, Maisha ya Nabii Muhammad, Tarehe ya Imam Shafi, Seyyid Said bin Sultan.**

Consequently, the uniqueness of this period may be seen in the divergence of two increasingly distinct bodies of Swahili prose: the traditional ethnic Swahili prose tradition in line with those done in the previous century, and the new, de-ethnicized Swahili prose tradition begun, and in large measure developed, by writers who made little ethnic connection to the language they were using. Indeed, contemporary prose, without question, may be seen as a reaction to these developments that occurred in this period and this new tradition's continued development cannot be properly understood without placing it in line with the works of this period. Which of these traditions--the ethnic or the non-

ethnic--will ultimately survive is at this writing an open question in Kenya. Editors, journalists and broadcasters, in the main, tend to use a Swahili language and edit a literature that is free from particularized cultural markers that would identify any one specific ethnic group within the broader context of the Swahili speaking community, while others--mainly costal writers, Islamic leaders and scholars from the coast--use, and may argue vehemently for, a Swahili language and literature that abounds with particular cultural referents to a specific Swahili ethnicity (e.g., Mombasa). It is in this use, they argue, that Swahili has lived so long, and it is in this use that its future lies.

It may be seen as well, in a general overview of these two corpora of prose, that, on the one hand, the Swahili ethnic prose traditions were, and continue to be, influenced in a number of ways by certain Islamic traditions, viz., the Qur'an and Ahadith, while the newer, non-ethnic Swahili prose traditions, appear to owe much in their development to European prose traditions. And further, it may be argued, that the modern Swahili novel most certainly comes, in the main, from this latter tradition, which Frye describes as the " Great Code," and traces its narrative development to features found in the Old Testament.

In many ways--both profound and superficial--these two Swahili traditions, the ethnic and the non-ethnic, illustrate such influences. It may be seen in the continued distinctive ordering of narrative structure, for example, in ethnic prose traditions, which, to the Western reader, often appears to be part of an

abstruse system of causality at work in the narrative. Such is most often not the case in the non-ethnic traditions which most often pattern their narrative structure after a system similar to that of European prose narrative form, a narrative structure which embraces a system of causality very familiar to Western readers.

And these two traditions remain distinctive in other regards as well. It is apparent that Swahili as a national language cannot at the same time also be an expression of a particular group's ethnicity, and thus one should not expect to find the same use of language in these two traditions. The two must be distinctive from one another: a national language must be one that is perceived as an acceptable medium of communication for all ethnic groups within a nation and not associated with any one particular ethnic body. Ethnic identity, the common values, symbols and histories that identify a group as distinctive from others, is primarily expressed in cultural referents, or markers in ~~its use~~ of language and in the literary structure of its traditions. Thus a national language, like Swahili, may find itself serving opposite functions to different groups of people. During this 80 year period, one may note that the 20th century witnessed a continuation of 19th century costal pockets of Swahili ethnic identities that were distinctive in value, symbol and history. These were distinctive identities that manifested themselves in particular dialects, genres and themes, or in language, literature and social value. One may only need to note the case of Mombasa and Lamu for example: historically, the two have

fought to maintain their respective Swahili ethnic identities by maintaining and enhancing these very elements. And today, like centuries ago, the residents of these two traditional Swahili communities, continue to maintain their ethnic ties to their histories through both sociolinguistic and literary means.

This then very briefly is why it can be argued that there are nations of Swahili within the political boundaries of Kenya. Clearly, there has been a desire to obfuscate ethnic distinctions on the one hand--in a sense to unite several ethnic groups in a neutral linguistic suk--and, at the same time, a desire by others, to whom the Swahili language is a mother tongue, a metaphor for its civilization, to maintain its distinctive ethnic identity through the cultural and ethnic referents in the language.