

manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures

ISSN 1867-9617



Publishing Information

One Text, Many Forms – A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts

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First page of an Arabic *Qas ʿida Hamziyya* manuscript, copied by Abī Bakr bin Sulṭān Aḥmad in 1311 AH/1894 CE, with annotations in Swahili and Arabic. Private collection of Sayyid Ahmad Badawy al-Hussainy (1932-2012) and Bi Tume Shee, Mombasa.

Translations and Copy-editing

Carl Carter, Amper Translation Service

Print

optimal media GmbH, Röbel/Müritz
Printed in Germany

www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de

ISSN 1867-9617

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Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Universität Hamburg
Warburgstr. 26
20354 Hamburg

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Article

A Network of Copies: Transmission and Textual Variants of Manuscript Traditions from the J. W. T. Allen Collection (Dar es Salaam)

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to examine what exactly ‘textual practices’ – such as transmission, collecting, copying, transliterating and translating a handwritten text – tell us about variability and adaptation, and secondly, to question the idea of ‘one text – one original archetype’.¹ The text I shall refer to is the poem of Yusuf, son of Yaqub, known in Swahili as *Utendi wa Yusuf* (but also *Hadithi ya Yusufu*, ‘The story of Yusuf’), *Kisa cha Yusufu*, ‘The account of Yusuf’ or *Utenzi wa kisa cha Nabii Yusuf*, ‘The poem of the story of the Prophet Yusuf’). The story was inspired by earlier Muslim texts such as Sura 12 from the Qur’ān and Tha’labī’s prose text *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* (‘The Prophets’ stories’), which was originally adapted in the *utendi* form, an important Swahili poetic genre, and Arabic script in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. While geographically speaking, its manuscripts are all from the northern Swahili coast, the story has also travelled and been re-adapted across the centuries, so DVD copies are not only sold in shops in Lamu and Mombasa now, but in Mozambique as well. Furthermore, Mwalimu Evaristo M. Mahimbi edited the first *utenzi* adaptation of the story of Yusuf based merely on the biblical account in Tanzania in 1975 CE.² The beginning of a comparative study of tales about Yusuf from the Swahili region can be found in Ridder Samsom’s dense article from

1997 CE, in which he underlines the widespread nature of the story and points out the far-reaching network of texts and scholarship related to ‘Yusufism’ (*Yusufukia*) that is so promising: *kwa hakika elimu ya Fasihi Linganishi (Comparative Literature) ingeweza kuanzisha elimu peke yake ya ‘Yusuf’, tuseme ‘Yusufukia’. Lakini maudhui yenyewe yanaanzia wapi na kuishia wapi? Maudhui yenyewe ni ya kilimwengu [...]* (‘Indeed, comparative literature can initiate an exclusive study about Yusuf, let’s say a Yusuf-ism ... However, where does this topic begin and end? This is a worldwide topic ...’).³ My focus in this paper will be on the several manuscripts in Arabic script listed under the label of *Utendi wa Yusuf* in J. W. T. Allen’s catalogue and in the East Africana Section of the Library of the University of Dar es Salaam, which I consulted in September 2016.

At the core of the paper, I shall consider variants and versions of the texts, including formal and textual variants as well as incomplete copies of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscript from Allen’s catalogue from 1970. My interest in variants and versions is imbued and inspired by the concept(s) of textual instability. As pointed out by Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge, Zumthor’s concept of *mouvance* as the ‘mobilité essentielle du texte médiéval’⁴ has been fundamental to Cerquiglini’s *Praise of the Variant*.⁵ Rather than trying to build stemmata, the ‘new’ philologists have begun treating each manuscript as a cultural artefact (and not a deficient aberration of an original version), including the most recent reworkings of earlier material, also placing emphasis on the editing of the whole manuscript. Before I consider the variants here, I shall introduce the reader to Allen’s Swahili

¹ The idea for this paper was conceived on the occasion of the CSMC Workshop ‘One text – Many forms: A comparative view of the variability of Swahili manuscripts’, held in Hamburg in April 2017. On that occasion, I presented and started posing some of the new and necessary questions that had emerged on the verge of my PhD submission and that required further consideration. The presentation, entitled ‘Visually pleasant texts or imperfect copies? The many ways to copy the “Story of Yusuf”’, intended to address the question of the relationships between manuscript copies. My heartfelt thanks to the organisers for having invited me to participate, and to Clarissa Vierke, Ridder Samsom, Abdilatif Abdalla and Antonella Brita for their useful remarks during my presentation and afterwards.

² Mahimbi 1975.

³ Samsom 1997, 91–92. My own translation (AR).

⁴ Zumthor 1972, 171 quoted in Quinn and Lethbridge 2010, 92.

⁵ Cerquiglini 1989, engl. transl. 1999.

manuscripts collection in order to delve into Lamuan textual practices, which show that the act of penning a Swahili poem should not be reduced to the hand-made product of a single person, but rather a social practice rooted primarily in people's own memory and transferred to paper by a network of craftsmen. I will proceed by shedding some light on the entangled *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscript traditions listed in J. W. T. Allen's catalogue and further investigated by myself as a way of re-problematising the transmission and stemmatics of *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscripts.

1. The transmission and collection of Swahili manuscripts on the Swahili coast before the -Second World War

If texts were written down, they were not intended for publication and reading, but rather for conservation and performance.⁶

In the nineteenth century, Europeans 'discovered' the Swahili manuscript tradition and started to study it. Well-known authorities on Swahili language and poetry in Arabic script facilitated the awareness, copying and collection of such manuscripts in what were mostly British and German academic circles.⁷ In the course of collecting material, the British scholar and Anglican priest William Taylor, who spent ten years on the Swahili coast (mostly in Mombasa), came into close contact with reputed Islamic scholars and poets like Mwalimu Sikujua bin Abdallah and Sheikh Muhammed bin Ahmad al-Mambassy.⁸ The scribe and poet Mwalimu Sikujua (died in 1890) contributed greatly to collecting the poetry of the famous poet Muyaka bin Haji, which the scribe had mostly copied in Arabic script and annotated in the late 1880s for a volume that Taylor planned to publish along with his own transliteration in Latin script and translation. A record of these activities is preserved in a *shairi* verse by Sikujua himself:⁹

*Kingozi cha K'ongowea chote tulikikusanya;
Hawa kukipangalia, na fasiri kuifanya;
Maana hamtajia pamoja na kumwonya,
Na yeye akanandanya maanaye akapata.*

⁶ De Kreij 2015, 18.

⁷ Vierke 2010, 51–60.

⁸ Abdulaziz 1979, 4.

⁹ Abdulaziz 1979, 68.

We collected all the Kingozi of Kongowea (Mombasa);
Then I began arranging it and interpreting its meaning.
I told him (Taylor) what it meant and explained to it
to him carefully,
And he followed and understood it well.

The activity of 'collecting' (*-kusanya*) and interpreting the meaning (*-fanya fasiri*) of the poetry written in the dialect of Mombasa, formerly known as *Kongowea nda mvumo* ('Kongowea the famous')¹⁰ reflects common practices of copying Swahili compositions and translating them for those early scholars who arrived and stayed on the coast.¹¹

Another well-known figure was Muhammad bin Abubakar Kijuma, who also copied manuscripts of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* several times. Kijuma played a key role in introducing Swahili poetry to European scholars. More frequently than any other scribe at that time, he was commissioned by European missionaries and scholars such as Alice Werner, Ernst Dammann and William Hichens to write and copy poems, which ended up in important European collections in Berlin, Hamburg and London.¹² He had a whole network of clients whom he communicated with both in person, like Alice Werner and Ernst Dammann, and through written correspondence, like Carl Meinhof and William Hichens. Alice Werner had visited the coast before World War I broke out and, thanks to the assistance of Muhammad Kijuma in Lamu (and Abu Bakar bin 'Umar es-Sawiyy in Siu), she came to possess several manuscript copies, on which she based some of the earliest publications of important Swahili poems such as the *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* ('The Poem of Mwana Kupona'), *Ayubu* ('Job') and *Hadithi ya Mikidadi na Mayasa* ('The Story of Mikidadi na Mayasa').¹³ Like Alice Werner, Ernst Dammann also particularly benefited from Muhammad Kijuma's consultancy. After his arrival on Lamu in 1936, Dammann undertook research not only on the *Utendi wa Tambuka* ('The Poem of Tambuka'), but also on numerous other poems preserved in manuscripts that

¹⁰ Sacleux 1939, 437.

¹¹ The W. E. Taylor Collection, which includes Muyaka's poetry as well as prose and letters, is now stored in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

¹² For an overview, see Mieke and Vierke 2010.

¹³ Regarding the *Ayubu*, the poem about Job, Alice Werner was able to buy a manuscript that was 'an imperfect copy of the *Ayubu*' – although more complete than Steere's in terms of the number of stanzas it contained (197 instead of 46). Later on, she also obtained a complete copy of the poem – from Muhammad Kijuma – on which she largely based her own edition (Werner 1921–1923, 85. Also see Mieke and Vierke 2010, 26).

Kijuma had supplied him with or that the German scholar commissioned from him even after he had left the island, such as the *Utendi wa Yusuf* ('The Poem of Yusuf'), *Utendi wa Mwana Esha* ('The Poem of Lady Aisha'), *Kufa kwa Muhammadi* ('Muhamad's Death') and the acrostic poem A I U.¹⁴ In the case of poems in manuscripts that were in a particularly poor condition, like the *Utendi wa Isbani* ('Isbani's Poem') (also known as the *Utendi wa Qatirifu*), personal letters attest to the scribe Kijuma's efforts to hand-copy poems that another scribe had already been paid to copy.¹⁵ This shows some of the intricacies involved in the process of copying, which subsumes the scribe's wish to emulate a text while imitating it, that is, to render a manuscript a better copy than the previous one. Kijuma hand-copied a manuscript that had already been copied in the past; what the recipient would have received was therefore a 'copy of the copy', albeit a more refined copy of a poorer version.¹⁶

The sharing of manuscripts and the collaboration between master poets and scribes from the coast point to the existence of a Swahili coastal network of copying and commissioning, comprised of local poets and copyists in collaboration with missionaries and scholars. Copying for different scholars contributed to the wide dissemination of Swahili manuscripts in Europe. Furthermore, at the time, Kijuma's manuscripts – adapted to European preferences, tastes and reading habits – started to reflect the commercialisation of manuscript production: to a large extent, he earned a living by copying manuscripts.¹⁷

In most of the cases where the author of a manuscript was unknown, copies of the anonymous manuscript continued to be copied either by well-known scribes or sometimes even very young assistants. In 1936, for instance, Ernst Dammann's wife Ruth copied several manuscripts by adopting the same method that primary-school children

often use when replicating script: although she was not even acquainted with the Arabic script, she put a piece of transparent paper over the 'original' manuscript and copied it by tracing the shape of the Arabic letters with a pencil.¹⁸ Some of the copyists were very young, actually: the scribe who copied the *Utendi wa Nabii Yusuf* ('The Poem of the Prophet Yusuf') in 1964,¹⁹ for instance, was said to be only 15 years old at that time.²⁰

Before starting to compare variant readings, I would like to highlight John W. T. Allen's collection and his specific network of people who contributed to the collection of Swahili manuscripts after the Second World War.

1.1 Allen's catalogue and the Lamuan network: poets, agents, scribes and assistants at work

Literary works 'are fundamentally social rather than personal or psychological products'.²¹

John W. T. Allen studied in Oxford, joined the British Colonial Service and served in Tanganyika and the Western Aden Protectorate. It was with the East Africana Section of the Library of the University College of Dar es Salaam that he started to build up a huge collection of Swahili manuscripts. Thanks to his wife Winifred Ethel Emma Brooke, he collected and purchased pre-European Swahili manuscripts all along the East African coast and on the Comoro Islands. Apparently, they were a 'unique and most effective team: they both carried further their study of Swahili, he especially as a trained classical philologist, she as someone who could enter deeply into the lives of the womenfolk who are the guardians of some of the greatest achievements of Swahili civilization and refinement of culture'.²²

¹⁴ The Arab Sayyid Ahmed, known as 'She', was another local expert that Kijuma introduced to Ernst Dammann and from whom he obtained manuscripts in exchange for recipes – for cakes! (For more on the acrostic poem, see Miehe and Vierke 2010, 65–68, 82, 94.)

¹⁵ Kijuma's letter 7 (Miehe and Vierke 2010, 89–93).

¹⁶ *Na thendi inshallah utapata wa Isbani nimepata kwa mthu umerarukaruka; Nimempa mapesa awandike kwa khati yake; kisa mimi ninakili kwa khati; lakini imewekwa sharti name nimwandikie mngine nimekubali* – 'As far as the tendi are concerned – if God wishes – you will get Isbani's. I got it from someone and it is completely torn. I gave him money so he would write in his own handwriting so I can finally copy it in [my own] handwriting. A condition was set that I should write another one for him; I agreed.' (Kijuma's letter 7, in Miehe and Vierke 2010, 89–93).

¹⁷ For further criticism on Kijuma's figure, see Vierke 2010, 41–60 and Abou Egl 1983.

¹⁸ This is the case for the Berlin manuscripts Hs. Or. 9954 and 9955, for instance, which contain Bwana Zahidi Mnungumi's poems (Miehe 2010).

¹⁹ Ms. 603, Allen 1971, 35, 114.

²⁰ Personal communication by Ustadh Mau (February 2018, Lamu)

²¹ Mcgann 1983, 43–44, quoted in Driscoll 2010, 42–43.

²² As Wilkening has attested, 'manuscripts were not necessarily bought but mostly borrowed and microfilmed for a honorarium so that families did not have to part with their treasure' (Wilkening 2000, 240–243). Being surrounded by experts who share a manuscript with 'other' scholars, thanks first and foremost to the appreciation of their own literary treasures, is not something that happens very often, especially nowadays when manuscripts' owners or poets may not want to display or be able to share what is kept in their house by inheritance. This is also the reason why I wanted to shed light on this network of 'beautiful minds' and hardworking people without whom the textual criticism of classical tendi would be much more difficult, if not impossible.

The East Africana collection of the University Library of Dar es Salaam contains Kiswahili and Arabic manuscripts. Over 1,180 titles of manuscripts have been microfilmed at the time of writing this article and around 890 Kiswahili and Arabic manuscripts are yet to be labelled, typed and microfiched.²³

John W. T. Allen²⁴ started his work as Rockefeller Research Fellow at the University College of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1965 under the project title ‘The Collection of Manuscripts of Literary, Linguistic and Historic Interest’. The result of his three years of cataloguing, editing, translating and publishing some of the huge trove of Swahili manuscripts he was able to access is recorded in his catalogue, which was published in 1970.²⁵

During my short stay in Dar es Salaam in September 2016, a plethora of manuscripts, typescripts and microfilm copies of the *Utendi wa Yūstufu* that emerged from the dusty but tidily arranged and numbered brown paper envelopes were kindly made accessible to me by the librarians. My consultation of Allen’s catalogue in the East Africana section of the University of Dar es Salaam Library proved that there are many versions of the poem which used to be part of private collections.²⁶

Their importance is also reflected in the post-World War II activity of the Swahili manuscript collection.²⁷ Allen’s research started with a first check of those manuscripts that were already part of the collection of the University of Dar es Salaam Library, as Allen himself reports: ‘We spent a month in Dar es Salaam making a check of the manuscripts already in the collection. It was necessary to examine every manuscript to ascertain whether it was a good copy, so as to avoid duplication, or a corrupt copy of which a better one would be valuable’.²⁸

However, it was especially on the island of Lamu, and with the co-operation of an exceptional, erudite local network, that he was able to access so much additional manuscript material, amounting to 7,000 microfiche frames in all.²⁹ The initial frustration that Allen and his wife felt after arriving on Lamu in December 1965 disappeared when Ahmed Sheikh Nabahany, the clerical officer of the district of Lamu at that time, introduced them to his grandmother, Amina Mohamed Sheikh.³⁰ She had an unparalleled talent: even when Allen was unable to obtain a reliable copy of a particular manuscript, she was able to retrieve the text from memory. One such example is the ‘copying’ of the *Utendi wa Ngamia na Paa* (‘The Poem of the Camel and the Gazelle’), which was first published by Dammann in *Dichtungen in der Lamu-Mundart des Suaheli* (‘Poems in the Swahili Lamu Dialect’) (1940). In Allen’s introduction to his second edition, the author relates the story as follows: ‘We were unable to obtain a reliable manuscript of the poem; but with Dammann’s edition to refresh her memory, Bi. Amina binti Sheikh Nabhany of Lamu was able to reconstruct the complete poem with confidence, remembering it from early childhood, and it is interesting to note how often Dammann notes a probable lacuna which she has been able to fill’.³¹

This hints at the important role of women in preserving Swahili poetic traditions. The main contacts through whom Allen was able to gather and collect manuscripts were, indeed, elderly women, the custodians of the knowledge and culture of Swahili poetic manuscripts. The master poetess Zaharia binti Maimun, for instance, and a woman called Asiya with whom Winifred (Allen’s wife) was in close contact, used to visit them and provide them with the manuscripts they had ordered along with others that they had not expected to get. In fact, Zaharia binti Maimun became Allen’s agent and made an effort to provide him with manuscripts not only from Lamu, but from Pate as well.³²

²³ University of Dar es Salaam Library: <https://library.udsm.ac.tz/index.php/east-africana>, accessed on 1 September 2018.

²⁴ John W. T. Allen (1904–1979) mainly gathered Swahili manuscripts on the East African coast in the 1960s. Alice Werner (1859–1935) started collecting even earlier and was followed by Ernst Dammann (1904–2003) and William Hichens (?–1944). For a more detailed discussion of the early British scholars and their successors, see Miehe and Vierke 2010, 18–33.

²⁵ Allen, J. W. T. and Dar-es-Salaam. University College (1970), *The Swahili and Arabic Manuscripts and Tapes in the Library of the University College of Dar es Salaam: A Catalogue* (Leiden: Brill).

²⁶ On the importance of private collections, also see Varvaro 2012, 49.

²⁷ As attested in Miehe and Vierke, the post-war period is characterised by the Swahili Committee’s increasing efforts to secure their poetic heritage. ‘In particular, the Committee’s Journal played a more and more important role in this respect. Here, as well as in the supplements to the Journal and in the later series ‘Johari za Kiswahili’, scholars like Harold E. Lambert (1893–1967), John W. T. Allen (1904–1979), and later on Jan Knappert (1927–2005) made the manuscripts accessible to the public, which were collected and kept in the Committee’s library’ (Miehe and Vierke 2010, 30).

²⁸ Allen 1968, 113.

²⁹ Only the *Utendi wa Mikidadi na Mayasa* was not obtainable on Lamu. According to Allen, the poem was ‘totally unknown’ there. He was unable to find anyone who had ever heard about it or possessed a copy of it (Allen 1970, 269). The discovery of the *Utendi wa Qiyama* (‘The Poem on the Judgment’) was another story: its sources came not only from Lamu, but from different areas, from versions ascribed to Saada binti Maawia el Maawy on Lamu, to another witness in the Pemba dialect, ascribed to Hemedi Abdalla (Allen 1970, 429–432).

³⁰ Allen 1968, 113–114. The poem edited by herself and Ahmad Sheikh Nabhany was published in *Tendi* (Allen 1971, 55–71).

³¹ Allen 1971, 77.

³² Zaharia binti Maimun, daughter of Bibi Khadija Muhammad al-Rudeyn, is also among the people to whom Ibrahim Noor Shariff was particularly grateful for having collected compositions and sung them for him (Shariff 1988, ii). The talent Swahili women have when it comes to recalling poems

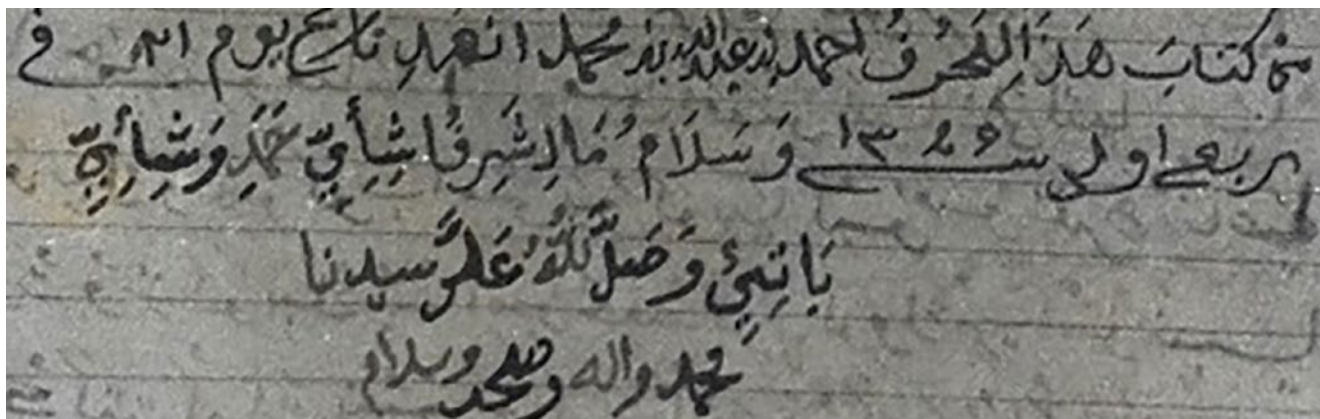


Fig. 1: Colophon of manuscript 352 from Allen 1971, 21 (*Utenzi wa Yaaqubu*).

Somehow the network of people he was introduced to over the years formed a local team that helped him regarding the circulation of Swahili manuscripts. The owner of a manuscript would make his or her manuscript copies (*nakala*) available to those who asked about them. The lender, in turn, would either copy the manuscript him- or herself (*kunakili kwa khati*) or share the copying task with a professional scribe (*mwandishi*) or a young person in order to produce a copy of it. The manuscript would only have been sold to Allen once the cycle was completed.³³

In the lucky event that a manuscript is preserved in its entirety and includes a closing colophon, it is often possible to retrieve some names and spot traces of the manuscript-copying chain. The sample excerpt is from ‘*Utenzi wa Yaaqubu*, manuscript 352’. The colophon includes the date of composition, 1329 AH (1911 CE), along with the names of two people and a reference to the provenance of the manuscript itself (Fig. 1):

by heart also extends to the *Utendi wa Yusuf* ascribed to Kijuma. As Abou Egl states, for instance, ‘the mother of Bi. Maryamu M. al-Bakariy used to recite the *Utendi wa Yusuf* by heart’ (Abou Egl 1983, 223). Bi. Maryamu M. al-Bakariy was Mama Rukiya, the mother of Zena Mahmoud, Asiya Mahmoud and Maryam Mahmoud, the following generation of poetesses and custodians of Swahili *tenzi* on Lamu. Abubakr Mukhsin Seyyid Ali, a contemporary *mwimbaji* (‘singer’) and madrasa teacher on Lamu, affirmed in an interview I conducted with her that the most talented poets and musicians in Lamu are women. Despite their prowess, they do not want to appear in public, however. I visited Bi Khadija Ahmed, who was living in the Riyadhah area of Lamu at the time, and Bi Ridhai Sufiyan, who was living in Pate. They both composed poems on commission.

³³ According to Ustadh Ahmed Abdulkadir, a local poet and scholar, the payment for writing an original manuscript was 30 shillings and it was ten shillings for making a copy (*malipo yaalan kwa msuwada asili ni shilingi 30 na kwa kuandika upya ni shilingi 10*). Ten shillings was a huge amount in the 1960s. As a rough comparison, in 1975 when Ustadh Mau was already married, three daily meals would have cost twenty shillings. Personal communication, March and September 2018.

Transcription: *Man kataba hadha alkharufu Ahmad bin ‘Abdallah bin Muhamad An‘adi tarehe yaum ۲۱ Rabi’a awali sanat ۱۳2۹³⁴ wa salamu / Mali Sharifu Shehe Hamadi wa shehe Pate / wasalla llahu ‘ala Sayyidna Muhamadi wa alihi wa sahbi wa salam*

Translation: The one who wrote this manuscript is Ahmad bin ‘Abdallah Muhamad An‘adi. Date: the 21st of the third month in the year 1329 (AH); greetings. The owner of this manuscript is Sharif Shehe Hamadi, the son of the Sheikh of Pate. Peace be upon our lord Mohammed and his family and companions.

The two names mentioned in this colophon have two different roles ascribed to them: while the first one, Ahmad bin ‘Abdallah Muhamad An‘adi, was the person in charge of copying the manuscript, as the Arabic words *kataba hadha alkharufu* (‘he wrote this manuscript’) clearly indicate, Shehe Hamadi wa Shehe Pate was the manuscript’s owner, which the noun *mali* (‘property, possession, goods’) tells us. Besides these two figures, it is also relevant to mention the role played by Zaharia binti Maimun, who brought the manuscript to Lamu for Allen from Pate.³⁵ As is evident here, no reference to the poem’s author can be discerned in the colophon – it is almost as if he or she turned into an anonymous and invisible figure once the poem had been composed. The words *Man kataba hadha al-kharufu* refer to Ahmad bin ‘Abdallah Muhamad An‘adi as being the

³⁴ The decimal number of the date in the colophon looks like the number ‘2’ rather than its Arabic form.

³⁵ However, it is also possible that, despite the Pate origins of She Hamadi, he had already settled on Lamu by 1911, when the manuscript was copied. She Ahmadi wa Pate lived on Lamu; his house was visible from those of nearby Zaharia binti Maimun and Asia; they were all neighbours.

scribe who hand-copied the poem, but it does not actually refer to its author, who likewise cannot be identified with the manuscript's owner. Thus, the author is not mentioned, whereas the scribe and the owner of the copy are. The author's name – which would make us think about the 'original/archetype' issue if it were provided – is not an aspect which seems to have mattered in this handwritten copy. This exemplar is a witness to the fact that the text has been transmitted and handed over to other people – such as the owner and the copyist. As emphasis was put on owning or copying the text, the role of the author and the issue of the original became irrelevant.

To sum up, then, I have highlighted the network of people involved in copying texts, pointing out that people often had various roles, being scribes and poets at the same time. Even those who are widely known as just the 'owners' of *tendi* often have multiple roles, such as Ahmed bin Abdalla 'Boke', who is said to be not just the owner of a copy, for instance, but also the author of several manuscripts, like *Loho ya Kihindi* and *Shairi la Shilingi*.³⁶

2. The *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscripts' list in Allen's catalogue: entangled traditions

The Yusuf manuscripts listed in J. W. T. Allen's catalogue which I have been able to go through are the following, listed here according to the original labels and numbering (provided in brackets).³⁷ Allen provided the poem's first line in italics; he also included the prosodic pattern for some of the manuscripts listed, e.g. '8.4.656 –a' where the first number ('8') refers to the number of syllables (*mizani*). In an *utendi* composition, every manuscript line (*mstari*) contains four verses (*vipande*) of eight syllables each. The second number, '4', refers to the four verses making up a manuscript line, whereas the last number, '656', refers to the number of stanzas (sing. *ubeti*, pl. *beti*) occurring in the *utendi* poem. The letter '-a' denotes the vowel of the final rhyme (*bahari* or *kina cha utendi* 'rhyme of the *utendi*' or *kina cha kikomo* 'end-rhyme') occurring at the end of each *ubeti*'s manuscript line. What is missing in this prosodic label, but is worth

pointing out here are two further important components featuring the *utendi* metre: the caesura between the verses, namely *kituo* (pl. *vituo*) – which is sometimes represented in manuscripts by a symbol like a small reversed heart or is graphically absent – and the division of the manuscript line in two 16-syllable half-lines, namely *mishororo*.

Below in Table 1, I have listed all the versions of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* found in Allen's catalogue. Besides outlining prosodic information, the catalogue also provides the first line of the poem and refers to other publications of it.

Table 1: J. W. T. Allen's list of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* (from Allen 1970, 114).

<p><i>Yusufu</i> and / or <i>Yaaqubu</i> 'The manuscripts given this title are extremely complicated'.³⁸</p>
<p><i>Yusufu, Ut wa (Yaaqubu na) (1)</i> <i>Mwando wangu kukutubu</i> 8.4.656 –a Pub. Knappert, Four Swahili Epics Ms. 118; [182] 183, p. 104; 351; 352 pp. 1–32; 438</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (2)</i> <i>Kwa kuli kuitukuza</i> So described at the end of Ms.; perhaps meaning part II</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (3)</i> <i>Taani niwakhubiri</i> 8.4.1700 –a Ms. 333, pp. 1–12; 353; 708</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (4)</i> <i>Bismillahi qahari</i> 8.4.621 –a Ms. 603, pp. 1–87</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (5)</i> <i>Siyo yako</i> Ms. 333, pp. 117–243 Perhaps a continuation of 'Yusufu 2'</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (6)</i> No beginning or end, but in the same hand as 708 Ms. 354</p>
<p><i>Yusufu (7)</i> <i>Namshukuru Muweza</i> 8.4.620 –a By Said Karama Pub. Coronation Printers, Mombasa, 1964 No Ms.</p>

³⁶ These poems were originally ascribed to Kijuma in Allen's catalogue (1970, 87, 106), but according to the singer who performed these poems, Zainubu I-Abideen of Mombasa, this authorship still needs to be confirmed (Abou Egl 1983, 245–246). As for Abdalla Boke, he was a famously rich man 'throughout the period of economic decline in Lamu' (Romero 1997, 143). The nickname given to him by the British administrators was a pejorative one, meaning 'someone touched in the head'.

³⁷ Allen 1970, 114.

³⁸ Allen 1970, 114.

Some of the manuscripts are ascribed to different copyists and scribes, while in other cases, the scribes and copyists are unknown. Before delving into a comparative analysis of textual variants of excerpts from these documents, it is worth offering a short overview of the mechanisms involved in the production of these copies, namely their textual transmission (*Überlieferungsgeschichte*), specifically focusing on the period of the 1960s, when J. W. T. Allen started collecting Swahili manuscripts.³⁹ Taking this transmission into account allows us to better understand the striking presence of at least seven witnesses (complete and incomplete) of the Yusuf story from the East Africana Section in Dar es Salaam, to which we should add the further witnesses attested in libraries in Europe, chiefly Hamburg, Berlin and London.⁴⁰ This certainly makes the story one of the most widely copied versions of the classical *utendi* manuscript compositions.

The witnesses are so different that it is obvious they do not go back to a single original source. Rather, as Driscoll has pointed out, ‘[...] we are obliged to view them as representing separate versions or redactions’.⁴¹

Taking Allen’s list in account, I felt the need to consider some aspects which I concluded from it. It seems that Allen subsumed the manuscripts into different groups using different numbers and titles (in bold) to label them (e.g. ‘Utendi wa Yaaqubu na Yusufu (1)’, ‘Yusufu (3)’, ‘Yusufu (4)’, etc.). Thus, I started to have a closer look at the groups of texts which may have belonged to the same text tradition – because of the same incipit – and could be derived from the same hypothetical archetype. I chiefly focused on the three following groups: ‘Utendi wa Yaaqubu na Yusufu (1)’, ‘Yusufu (3)’ and ‘Yusufu (4)’. As table 2 shows, I have grouped them under Roman numerals (I, II and III) and indicated the first line/half-line (*kipande*) of the poem. The three groups show three different versions of the story of Yusuf. I have grouped the manuscripts according to their

‘closeness’ in terms of story-line. The richest tradition (I) houses three manuscripts and two typescripts, the second tradition (II) houses three manuscripts, and the third tradition is represented by one manuscript.

Table 2: Diagram of three selected manuscript groups from Allen’s catalogue.

Groups – created by the author	Group I	Group II	Group III
Allen’s label	<i>Utendi wa (Yaaqubu na Yusufu) (1)</i>	<i>Yusufu (3)</i>	<i>Yusufu (4)</i>
Poem’s first half-line	<i>Mwando wangu nakutubu/ kukutubu</i>	<i>Tanena ni wakhubiri</i>	<i>Bismillahi Qahari</i>
Texts	Ms. 351, Ms. 352, Ms. 182, Typescript 183, Typescript 118	Ms. 333, Ms. 353, Ms. 708	Ms. 603

2.1 The manuscripts’ recension

Group I: Mwando wangu nakutubu (Mss. 351, 352, 182, 183, 118)

Ms. 351 has 63 pages and is 760 stanzas long, which makes it one of the longest available manuscripts ascribed to Muhamadi Kijuma to date. The manuscript, which does not have a title, opens with the *basmala* at the very beginning (Fig. 2). It includes a colophon containing Kijuma’s signature and the date of its composition, which is written as follows: *tammati 12 jumad at-thani, Sanaa 1309 [ﷲ] bi yad Muhammad bin Abubakar Kijuma*, i.e. ‘[The poem] finished on 12 Jumad at-Thani 1309 AH [Wednesday, 13 January 1892 CE], by the hand of Muhamad b. A. Kijuma’. Unlike two further manuscripts written by Kijuma which were composed deliberately for Western scholars,⁴² there are

³⁹ It was in the 1930s that Allen started pursuing his interest in the topic of Swahili literature in Arabic script. However, at that time and until after the war, he ‘did little more than collect one manuscript of an unedited poem at a time and [did] not look for another until [he] had finished with it. Not until about 1953 did [he] begin to realize that there was serious danger of this culture being largely lost to posterity if urgent steps were not taken to preserve it’, Allen 1970.

⁴⁰ See Raia 2017, 210–211 for a complete overview and list of all the manuscripts on the *Utendi wa Yusuf*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the manuscripts listed in Dammann’s catalogue and the SOAS catalogue.

⁴¹ Quoted from Driscoll 2010, 87. For further discussion, see the chapter on classical philology entitled ‘Ci fu sempre un archetipo?’ (‘Was there always an archetype?’) in Pasquali 1934-XII: 14–21.

⁴² *Qissati Yusufu* Hs. Or. 9893 no. 375; Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Dammann 1993, 166–167) and *Hadithi ya Yaaqubu na Yusufu* Seminar 1465 H73, no. 3, Library of the Institute for Asia and Africa, University of Hamburg (Dammann 1993, 33–35).



Fig. 2: The first two pages of Ms. 351, *Utendi wa Yaaqubu*.



Fig. 3: The opening page of Ms. 352, *Utendi wa Yaaqubu*.

no references to any commission. The date of composition, which it is possible to obtain from the colophon, qualifies Manuscript 351 as Kijuma’s earliest copy. Furthermore, the stanzas’ arrangement is typical for Kijuma: each stanza occupies one line, and the *vipande* are divided from each other by the common symbol of a reversed heart marking the caesurae (*vituo*). The monosyllabic end-rhyme also stays the

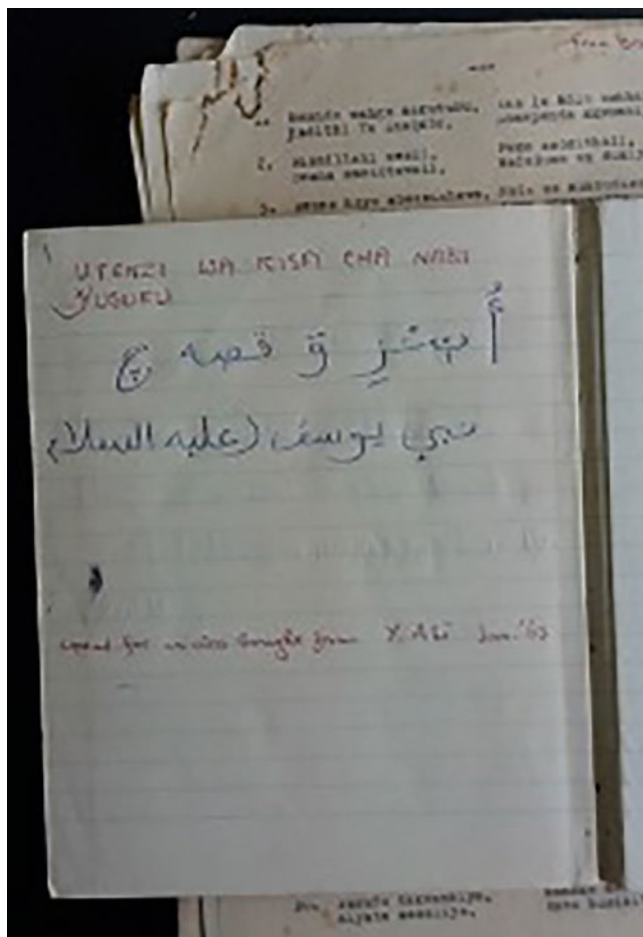


Fig. 4: The opening page of Ms. 182, *Utenzi wa Kisa cha Nabii Yusufu*, found together with typescript 183 in Roman script (shown in the background).

same and is rendered by the Arabic letter *alif*. The stanzas’ numeration in Latin numbers roughly every ten stanzas seems to have been added later in blue ink, most probably by someone else.

Ms. 352 is 36 pages long (Fig. 3). It spans 590 stanzas and includes 20 Qur’anic quotations. Although there is no title piece and the opening only consists of the *basmala*, Manuscript 352 includes a closing colophon in which the date of its composition, 1911 CE (1329 AH), is mentioned along with the names of two people, Abdalla bin Muhamad Anhadi and Sharifu Shehe Hamadi from Pate. The poem’s layout features one stanza per line, although there is no particular ‘stop’ (*kituo*) sign between the *vipande*, hence it gives the general impression of each stanza being one full line. The monosyllabic rhyme *-iya* is also rendered as *alif+ya* here, and the handwriting appears quite clear and well vocalised despite the fact that no variant signs were adopted to distinguish the vowels /e/, /i/ and /o/, /u/.

Ms. 182 was written down in two exercise books and takes up 209 pages (20 × 16 cm). There is also a typescript copy (manuscript 183) in the same paper folder as the two notebooks (manuscripts 182.1 and 182.2). Allen states⁴³ that this was obtained from Yahya Ali in 1963. The manuscript's title (Fig. 4), written in Swahili in Arabic script in blue ink, reads as follows:

مَالِ سَلَا هِي لَعْفَسُو يَبْنَ چ هَصِقَ وَ زَنْتُ أ

Utenzi wa Kisa cha Nabii Yusuf, peace upon him.

The following page, before the poem starts, is occupied by the quotation of the well-known sura 12:3, written by the same hand and in blue ink. The typed transcription in Roman script that corresponds to it (in manuscript 183) was made by Sharifu al-Badawy from Mombasa and contains fewer stanzas; it does not start with the quotation from sura 12, nor the *basmala*. Manuscript 182 is the same text used by Knappert for his edition.⁴⁴ He had already noted the similarity to the typescript prepared by Badawy for the East African Swahili Committee the same year. The layout of this manuscript splits each verse over two lines: the first 16-syllable half-line (*mshororo*) of the stanza is followed by the second one below it. Generally speaking, the stanzas seem well arranged, are aligned centrally on each page on which they appear and are each numbered with Latin numerals. Sheikh Yahya's handwriting is clear, although it seems very elementary: the letters look bigger, squarer and less stylised than Kijuma's, and the Swahili vowels /o/ and /e/ are differentiated in Arabic script by using the inverted *damma* sign and the vertical *kasra*.

Typescript 118 is a further transcription in Roman script obtained from Sharifu Abdirahman al-Badawy in 1963. 65 pages in length, it has 648 stanzas without any Qur'anic quotations. Unlike typescript 183 above, the stanzas in this typescript (118) are arranged according to the common pattern based on one manuscript line (*mstari*) per line, which could lead to a misconception of the *utendi* stanza as a quatrain.

Group II: Tanena niwakhubiri (Mss. 333, 353, 708)

The authors of the manuscripts belonging to this group are all unknown. However, this manuscript group, *tanena niwakhubiri*, can be considered to transmit another branch of the story's tradition.

The first witness I will briefly introduce is manuscript 333 (with its constituent parts). Ms. 333 is a 243-page poem that Allen obtained from a woman called Asia on Lamu in 1965 and then microfilmed (Fig. 5).⁴⁵ The microfilm is divided into three sections, and manuscript 333 (called 'Yusufu 3' in Allen's catalogue) corresponds to the first 12 pages of it, although Allen's question mark shows that he did not actually know what the manuscript's contents were for sure.⁴⁶ The handwriting, which is not very legible on the first few pages, becomes clearer and slightly different on the following pages, giving room to the assumption that the manuscript may have been written by more than one hand.⁴⁷ There are no references to either the scribe(s) or the date of composition at the end of the poem, however. In Allen's catalogue (where it is named 'Yusufu 2'), a 30-page manuscript can be found on pages 86 to 116 of the microfilm. A second part of manuscript 333's first 12 pages can be considered what Allen lists as 'Yusufu 2', which belongs to the same film. This assumption is supported by the fact that, despite the Swahili manuscript not bearing a title, this second part of manuscript 333 displays its own title on the top of the first page, where the number '2' occurs (supposedly meaning 'second part'). This part contains around 340 stanzas (351 if we include the last nine pages), and some stanzas seem to have been erased. The end-rhyme representation varies between *-ya*, *-yā* and *-wa*. The last three pages display different handwriting, thicker and less clear. There is also a third section of manuscript 333 that has been microfilmed. Listed in Allen's catalogue as 'Yusuf 5', this part is likely to be a continuation of the second part already described above. This third section is 126 pages long (117 to 243), and the first line provided in Allen's catalogue is *siyo yako*. For the following analysis, I will focus particularly on the first part of this tripartite microfilm, which is shown below:

⁴⁵ Allen 1970, 19–20, 114.

⁴⁶ Allen 1970, 20.

⁴⁷ Nonetheless, looking at the sample page of *Utendi wa Haudaji* ('The Poem of the Palanquin'), manuscript A1 (Vierke 2011, 456) leads us to believe that *Yusuf* manuscript 333 and the *Haudaji* manuscript were written by one and the same scribe.

⁴³ Allen 1970, 12.

⁴⁴ Knappert 1964, 6.



Fig. 5: The first page of Ms. 333, simply entitled 'Yusuf' in Allen's catalogue.



Fig. 6: The first page of Ms. 708, *Kaani niwakhubiri*.

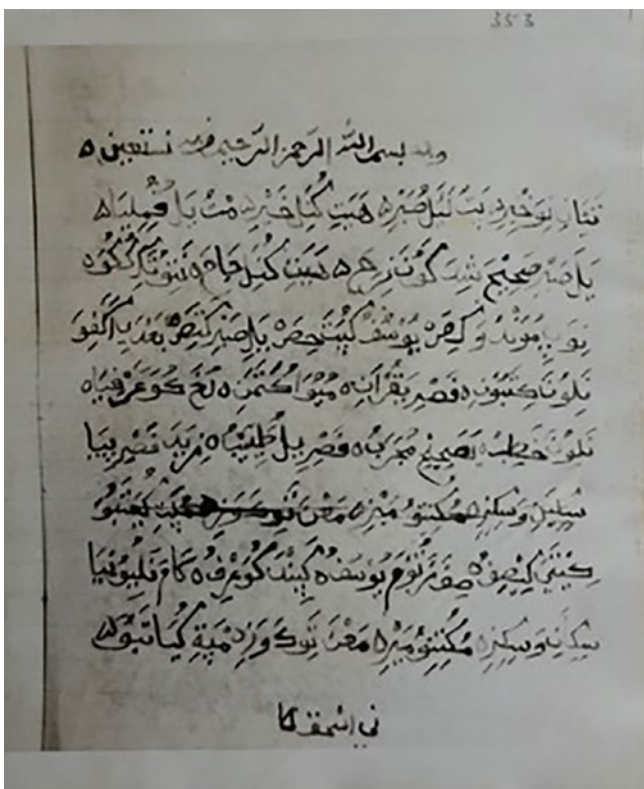


Fig. 7: The first page of Ms. 353, *Utendi wa Yusufu* (incomplete).



Fig. 8: The first page of Ms. 603, *Bismillahi Qahari*.

Ms. 708 is a further manuscript (Fig. 6), the pages of which were found together with manuscript 333. This manuscript was obtained from Asia in 1965, so she provided Allen with two different manuscripts that same year (the entire manuscript 333 and manuscript 708).⁴⁸ The poem contains 448 stanzas, although the reading of some of them is not very clear, which makes its numbering a difficult task.

The third manuscript belonging to this group is the longest and most complete copy: manuscript 353 (Fig. 7).⁴⁹ This document was obtained by Allen from Zaharia binti Maimun in 1965. Although it is also incomplete, it is 32 pages long and contains 484 stanzas, which makes it longer than the other witnesses.

Group III: Bismillahi Qahari (Ms. 603)

Obtained from Zaharia binti Maimun on Lamu in 1966, manuscript 603 in Arabic script occupies the first 87 pages of a 103-page notebook.⁵⁰ The structure of the introduction of this manuscript suggests ascribing it to Ustadh Said Karama, whose edited transliteration was published in Mombasa⁵¹ and whose introduction follows the same structure as the Arabic script version: the 620 stanzas that comprise the manuscript are prefaced by a *dibaji* ('prologue') in prose form, which occupies the first page and is indented and set in quotation marks – features very unusual in manuscripts in Arabic script. The *dibaji* is followed by the *maoni ya mtungaji* ('the author's opinion'), composed in *utendi* metre, which opens with *Bismillahi qahari* (Fig. 8). Compared to the published version, manuscript K also shares similar closing remarks, the *maoni ya msahihishi* ('the editor's opinion'), written in verse. In a similar way to manuscript 182, the stanzas in K are arranged in two 16-syllable half-lines, one half-line (*mshororo*) per line. The caesura between *vipande* is graphically represented by the commonly reversed heart, and each *ubeiti* is numbered by an Arabic numeral between brackets. The blue-ink handwriting sometimes alternates with black ink on sporadic pages at the beginning of the poem.

⁴⁸ Allen 1971, 41, 114.

⁴⁹ Allen 1970, 21, 114.

⁵⁰ Allen 1970, 35, 114. Somewhat like an Italian *zibaldone* (lit. 'scartafaccio', 'scribbling pad', 'heap of things'), the notebook includes a miscellaneous section: not only the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, but a further poem in Arabic script, namely the *Utendi wa Asha* (pp. 88–103); see Allen 1970, 35.

⁵¹ Karama, 1968.

3. Variants and versions

Zumthor, Cerquiglini and the 'new' philologists have all argued that textual instability (variance, mouvance, 'unfixedness') is so fundamental a feature of chirographically transmitted texts that rather than trying to bring order to this chaos we should celebrate it.⁵²

Variants and versions are two recurrent key terms which I am going to use in the following part of this paper, where I will venture to describe the complicated relationships between the manuscripts known as, or circulated under the name of, the *Utenzi wa Yusuf* (or also *Hadithi ya Yusufu, Kisa cha Yusufu, Qissat il-Yusuf* or *Utenzi wa kisa cha Nabii Yusuf*).⁵³ I intend to describe the variability in terms of orthography and dialectal features as well as the adaptation of the story in other rewritings and media, e.g. from paper to recorded versions, and in more or less complete copies.

The section is divided into three roughly equal parts. Firstly, in section 3.1, I am going to discuss dialectal and scribal variants and verse layout, looking not only at hand-copied manuscripts in Arabic script, but also at typed transliterations in Roman script. Secondly, I will focus on textual variants (section 3.2) where I will chiefly enquire about the narrative frame, e.g. the incipit, through which the poet-adaptor sets his or her story tradition.⁵⁴ For this analysis, I will take the *tanena niwakhubiri* manuscripts group into account (Group II) along with a recorded version – less well known and never analysed before – which will allow me to compare a specific text with its new medium of adaptation. To conclude, this chapter will also entail a note on some apparently 'incomplete copies' (section 3.3) which, in line with Cerquiglini's *Praising the Variant*, are worth being analysed and fit the context of this paper well.

⁵² Quinn and Lethbridge 2010, 141.

⁵³ The section where all the extant sources on the *Utendi wa Yusuf* are listed in Allen's catalogue indeed opens with the author himself claiming the following: 'The manuscripts given under this title are extremely complicated', Allen 1970, 114.

⁵⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into a comparative analysis of the narrative variations. To find out more about adaptation as a form of amplification, see the comparative textual analysis undertaken for three manuscripts of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* edited in Raia 2017, 103.

3.1 Formal variants in Arabic script

The first and most common type of variant in philology is what is known as a ‘formal variant’, which may be a graphic, phonetic or morphological variant of the shape of a single word within the text.⁵⁵ The following variant readings belonging to this category are from three different exemplars which are from Group I (manuscript 351, manuscript 352 and manuscript 182): while manuscript 351 and manuscript 352 are two microfilmed manuscripts (Figs 9 and 10), manuscript 182 is a 209-page notebook (Fig. 11).

The excerpts below contain the first stanza of the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, and as I will show, while the content and meaning are almost the same, the three excerpts have different handwriting and the scribes copied and adapted Arabic letters to Swahili based on their own choices and skill. The images below show the first manuscript line (*mstari*) of the *Utendi wa Yusufu* in the three different manuscripts. The first two scribes structured the poem by *kipande* (8-syllable lines):

1. *Mwando wangu nakutubu;*
2. *Jina la Mola Wahabu;*
3. *Hadithi ya Yaaqubu;*
4. *Nimependa kuwambiya.*

In manuscript 182, however, Yahya Ali Omar arranged each stanza into two half-lines (*mishororo*) of 16 syllables each (two 8-syllable lines):

1. *Mwando wangu nakutubu/Jina la Mola Wahabu,*
2. *Hadithi ya Yaaqubu/Nimependa kuwambiya.*

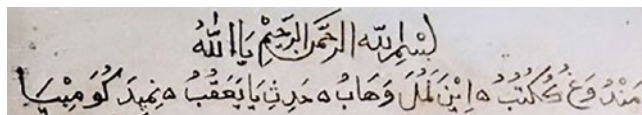


Fig. 9: Ms. 351, ('Yaaqubu, Ut. wa')⁵⁶, Muhammad Kijuma, 1309 AH/1892 CE; microfilm, Arabic.

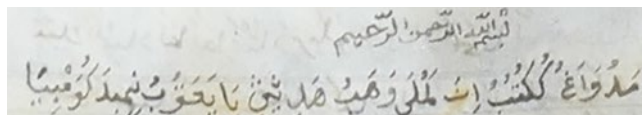


Fig. 10: Ms. 352, ('Yaaqubu, Ut. wa')⁵⁷, Abdalla bin Muhamad Anhadi, Sharifu She Hamadi (of Pate) and Anhadi Hamadi (of Pate), 1329 AH /1911 CE; microfilm, Arabic.

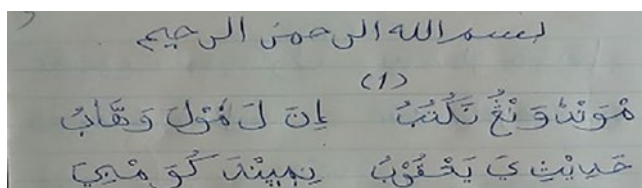


Fig. 11: Ms. 182, (Ut. wa kisa cha nabii Yusufu)⁵⁸, Yahya A. Omar; Arabic. Obtained from Yahya Ali Omar, January 1963.

Kiswahili written in Arabic script has no standard orthography and leaves room for variation. The different conventions in writing Swahili, which Knappert⁵⁹ has estimated at half a dozen, have allowed for the possibility of variant readings in the philological analysis of every Swahili composition in Arabic script,⁶⁰ nasals and glides are written sometimes, but not always, for instance. Vocalic differences between /u/ and /o/ and /i/ and /e/ are not indicated consistently. Arabic words are sometimes written according to their Arabic orthography or sometimes according to their Swahili pronunciation. As the samples show, each scribe (Kijuma, Anhadi and Yahya Ali Omar) wrote down the same stanza, adopting different conventions – some more or less helpful to readers, some more accurate than others – in which the idiosyncrasies of each scribe can be detected. In Table 3, the formal variant readings are listed accordingly by 8-syllable verse line (*kipande*).

⁵⁶ Allen 1971, 21, 114.

⁵⁷ Allen 1971

⁵⁸ Allen 1971, 12.

⁵⁹ Knappert 1989, 81.

⁶⁰ This is not only true of classical *utendi* compositions, which exist in many copies, or Muyaka's nineteenth-century *shairi* verses (Abdulaziz 1979), but also of the several *tumbuizo* attributed to Liyongo Fumo (Miehe 2004) and the eighteenth-century *gungu* songs attributed to Bwana Zahidi Ngumi.

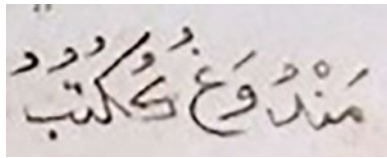
⁵⁵ Stussi 2011, 132–36.

Table 3: Formal variant readings in manuscripts from Group I.

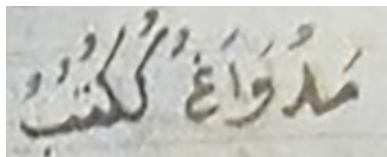
Kipande 1

Mwando wangu kukutubu ‘[this is] the beginning of my writing’

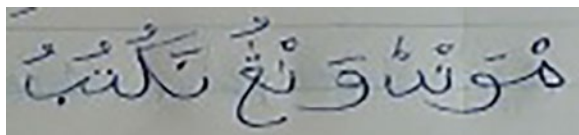
Variant reading: *Mwando wangu nakutubu* ‘I write the beginning [of my writing]’



Ms. 351



Ms. 352



Ms. 182

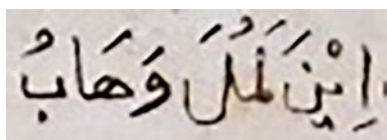
– The glide /w/ in *mwando* is represented as وَم , comprised of و , preceded by م + *sukūn*, exclusively in Ms. 182; the nasal compound /nd/ in the same word (*mwando*) consists of just د in Ms. 352, whereas in Ms. 351 and 182, a ن appears before the د .

– The nasal cluster /ng/ in the possessive adjective *wangu* is rendered only as غ in mss. 351 and 352. In Ms. 182, the compound is rendered as ن غ . In Ms. 352, the scribe has placed ا between the و and غ in *wangu*.

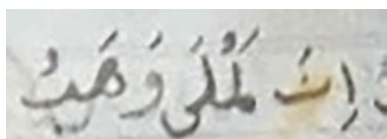
– The infinitive prefix *ku-* in the verb *kukutubu* in mss. 351 and 352 corresponds to a different prefix in Ms. 182: *na-*, which yields a first person singular in the present-A-tense form. Morphologically speaking, both readings (*kukutubu* / *nakutubu*) are feasible.

Kipande 2

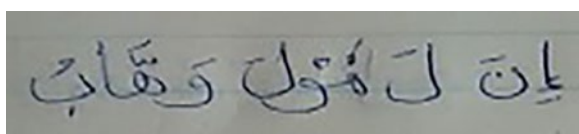
Jina la Mola Wahabu ‘In the name of God, the Giver’



Ms. 351



Ms. 352



Ms. 182

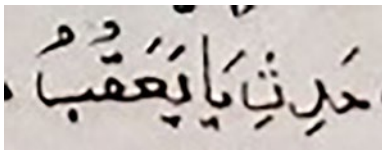
– In all the three texts, the Kiamu form ‘ina’ is used instead of the standard ‘jina’. Whereas in Ms. 351 /i/ in *ina* is spelt ا + *kasra*, where ا is followed by the long vowel ي , in Ms. 352 it is not. Ms. 182 reads *alif hamza* ا + *kasra* rather than a simple ا .

– the syntagma *la Mola* is only written as two morphologically separate words in Ms. 182, where an isolated ل precedes the noun *Mola*. In Ms. 352 it is written as one word, with the consonant ل attached to *Mola*. In Ms. 351, in place of ل , the reader is tempted to read ن , which would yield a slightly different translation: *ina na Mola*, ‘the name and God’.

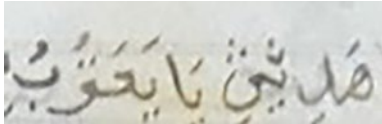
– Only in Ms. 182 is the vowel /o/ in the word *Mola* precisely rendered by a *dhuma ya kupinduwa*, or ‘overturned *ḍamma*’, while Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 have a simple classical *ḍamma*.

– The Arabic word *wahhābu* accurately bears a *shadda* on the consonant ه of *wahhābu* in Ms. 182, whereas it is lacking in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352. The latter two also omit the long vowel *fatha* + ا .

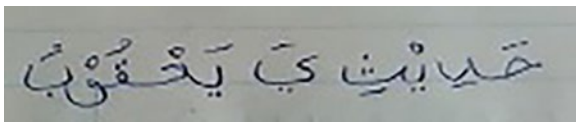
Mshororo 2 ('second half-column'); kipande 3
Hadithi ya Ya'aqubu 'The story of Ya'aqubu'



Ms. 351



Ms. 352



Ms. 182

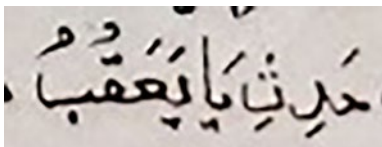
– For the word of Arabic origin *ḥadīth*, in Ms. 352, the copyist uses *ḥ* instead of *ḥ*, while the copyist of Ms. 351 omits the long vowel *ī*. Still, all three variants have *hadithi* with a *kasra* under the *ḥ* which makes it a Swahili word and not an Arabic one.

– The Arabic name *Ya'aqubu* is only spelt correctly in Ms. 182; the possessive concord *ya* ('of') is rendered by the isolated single consonant *y* in Ms. 182, whereas in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 it is rendered by *y + ʾ* (أي). The 'incorrect' spelling in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 may have been influenced by the need for eight syllables. Interestingly enough, the 'correct' spelling in Ms. 182 only has seven syllables.

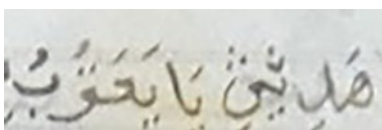
– In Ms. 352, the *qāf* and *wāw*, which are both found in the name *Ya'aqubu*, overlap in the writing: *و* has two diacritics on top, which could make the letter look identical to *ق*; thus the character seems to represent two Arabic consonants in one.

Kipande 4

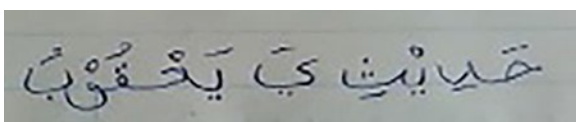
Nimependa kuwambiya 'I want to tell you'



Ms. 351



Ms. 352



Ms. 182

– The voiceless occlusive /p/ in *nimependa* is rendered by the Persian *pe* پ, whereas Ms. 352 merely opts for the Arabic ب.

– The nasal cluster /nd/ is clearly spelt as *n + d* only in Ms. 182, whereas the nasal is omitted in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 (phonotactically speaking, this is better).

– The vowel /e/ is rendered by *kasra* in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 and as such is indistinguishable from /i/; in Ms. 182, on the other hand, the copyist usually wrote the vowel as a vertical *kasra*, namely *kasiri ya kusimama* 'an upright kasra', to distinguish it from the vowel /i/, although he did not do it in this line.

– The *bahari* (last monosyllabic end rhyme) *-iya* is rendered by *y + ʾ* in all cases in Ms. 351 and Ms. 352 (أي), but only by *y* in Ms. 182 (ي).

Manuscript 182 is one of the most recent exemplars and the one that best respects a set of rules for writing Swahili in Arabic script, which became established in the second half of the twentieth century on the basis of the Swahili used in Mombasa.⁶¹ Indeed, its accuracy is particularly apparent in the rendering of nasal clusters and glides, in the separation of the possessive connector from the noun (e.g. *la* written in isolation in *jina la Mola* v.2, or *ya* in *hadithi ya Yaaqubu* v.3), which might reflect the influence of Swahili orthography on Latin script, and in the correct transcription of Arabic proper names such as *Ya'aqūbu*. After all, it was in the course of the twentieth century that an effort was made to establish some conventions for writing Swahili in Arabic script: the rendering of the vowels /e/ and /o/, the representation of homorganic nasals in front of plosives, the velars g and ng, the voiced fricative v, aspiration and the differentiation between dental and alveolar plosives.⁶²

While the relationship between the tradition of a text and the evolution of its orthography is not necessarily straightforward and does not need to be a conscious decision,⁶³ the introduction of specific new 'Swahili' definitions (such as *damma kupinduwa*, 'an overturned damma' and *kasra ya kusimama*, 'an upright kasra', shows the scribes' conscious effort to deal with the Arabic alphabet, and the meta-vocabulary speaks of their familiarity with it.

3.2 Variants in framing the story

In the following, I will consider other witnesses under the title of *Utendi wa Yusuf*, namely those that differ from the manuscripts analysed above more substantially, going beyond variants at the level of the single line. The further witnesses, which I am going to analyse here, come from Group II and can be grouped together because of the incipit in their first 8-syllable line (*kipande*): *tanena niwakhubiri*. The story is still about Yusuf and in *utendi* metre, but in totally different words.

⁶¹ Frankl and Omar 1997.

⁶² Knappert 1989, 81, Frankl and Omar 1997, 61.

⁶³ Pasquali 1934, 17. My own translation from the original Italian version: 'Che peculiarità ortografiche non provano nulla è risaputo. Specie da filologi greci e romanisti, che hanno osservato come un testo si modernizzi nell'ortografia senza che per questo bisogna sopporre l'opera conscia di un amanuense; l'ortografia dipende almeno altrettanto dal tempo della copia che da quello degli originali da cui furono copiati: essa non appartiene alla tradizione se non là dove contrasta con le abitudini delle scuole scritte, dunque arcaizza'.

Rather than exploring the formal variants in this group of witnesses, an interesting element I would like to underscore in this paragraph instead is 'the narrative frame in which the story's transmission is set', looking particularly at the preface – the *dibaji* – of three manuscripts. From the very beginning (stanzas 4–5), the anonymous composers inform the audience of the story that they are about to tell in all three witnesses in this group (Mss. 333, 708 and 353) (Table 4).

The two manuscript lines (*mistari*) convey the desire to understand what has been read or heard from the Qur'ān. There is a clear reference to the Qur'ān as the inspiring source that has prompted the composer to explain/translate (*fasiri*) the story in order to make people aware of it (*kuarifiya*). As the transliteration shows, what stanza five says in manuscript 708 and manuscript 353 is different to what can be found in manuscript 333.

Two moments of 'interpretation/translation' are highlighted in manuscript 708 and 353: *fasiri ilo twayibu* and *ziyada fasiri piya*. The usage of the verb *fasiri* twice invites an in-depth understanding of the meaning of *fasiri* in Swahili, which does not actually mean 'translate', but rather 'explain, interpret, comment on'. As Talento has suggested, 'the verb *kufasiri/kutafisiri* ('to translate') also referred to a variegated series of re-writing processes' and while it was used interchangeably with *kutarjumi* until the nineteenth century, in recent times the latter mostly hints at 'simultaneous interpretation'.⁶⁴

Beyond the variant reading offered in stanza five by the manuscripts belonging to the same tradition, it is generally possible to see from this very early incipit how the manuscripts starting with *tanena niwakhubiri* put the story into a different context of reception (*textus receptus*). While the poet refers to an 'original' Arabic text and the Qur'ān, in the manuscripts from the *mwando wangu nakutubu* group, the poet expresses his pleasure (*kupenda*) in telling the story as an author or adapter here: *Hadithi ya Ya'aqubu / Nimependa kuwambiya*, 'The story of Ya'aqub, I want to tell you'. Furthermore, while in the manuscripts from *tanena niwakhubiri*, there is a focus on the *Sifa za thumwa Yusufu* ('The praises of the prophet Yusuf' – st. 5) right from the beginning, in the *mwando wangu nakutubu* group the focus is on Ya'aqub, Yusuf's father, it being entitled *Hadithi ya Ya'aqubu* ('The story of Ya'aqub' – st. 1), which the poet wishes to narrate.

⁶⁴ Talento 2013, 86.

Table 4: Comparison of prefaces (*dijabi*).

	St. 4
	St. 4
Ms. 333	
	St. 4
	St. 5
Ms. 708	
	St. 4
	St. 5
Ms. 353	
Transliteration, stanzas 4–5	
<i>Naliona kitabuni / fasiri ya Qurani / moyo ukatamani / ili kuarifiya</i>	St. 4 – Mss. 333, 708, 353
<i>Kitaja kisifu / sifa za thumwa Yusuf / kapenda kuarifu / kama niliyosikia</i>	St. 5 – Ms. 333
Variant reading of st. 5	
<i>Naliona Khatwibu / ya swahili mujarabu / fasiri ilo twayibu / ziyada fasiri piya</i>	St. 5 – Mss. 708, 353
Translation, stanzas 4–5	
I saw it in the book and the Qur’ān’s translation; my heart desired to let you know.	St. 4 – Mss. 333, 708, 353
I praise the prophet Yusuf’s qualities; I love to tell you what I heard.	St. 5 – Ms. 333
I saw Khatwibu. He tried to interpret properly and translate it all	St. 5 – Mss. 708, 353

On the one hand, there are variant readings in the manuscripts belonging to the same *tanena niwakhubiri* manuscript tradition (e.g. st. 5 in Ms. 333, which differs from manuscripts 708 and 353) which show altogether different attitudes adopted by the poets/adapters to the poem. While setting the story within an Islamic frame of reference hinting at the Qur'ān is a narrative device that is very common in most of the classical *tendi*, not citing the Islamic pedigree at the beginning is rather unusual. This reveals a certain degree of freedom that the poet avails himself of in reshaping the story right from its incipit. The attention in the *mwando wangu nakutubu* manuscripts is more focused on the poet's appropriation of the story and his own pleasure in telling it to his audience. It seems that whereas the Qur'ān is without any doubt the source which inspired the Swahili poet/interpreter to write it down in Swahili verse form in the *tanena niwakhubiri* manuscripts, in the *mwando wangu nakutubu* group the poet puts some distance between himself and the prior sources – as if making references to specific texts was not an important concern for him. Within the *mwando wangu nakutubu* group the poet/adapter does indeed seem far less concerned with historical reliability: his major intention is to depict the story in vivid terms.

3.2.1 From a written to a sung version: the *Bismillahi Qahari* (Ms. 603)

A process of re-enacting the Yusuf text can also be found in chanted versions. To what extent is a text effected by transformation and variability if it is performed orally? Does a process of *tafsiri* take place for a singer as well (a *mwimbaji*)? Furthermore, is the work of a singer comparable to the interpretation which a composer goes through from the original to his/her own Swahili text?

In the following, I will briefly focus on the *Bismillahi Qahari* (Ms. 603), which belongs to the third manuscript group I have selected from Allen's list. In addition to the original manuscript in Arabic script and its version in Roman script, there is another late version of this poem composed by Karama and sung by Muhammad Abdalla Kadara, which has been recorded on a compact disc.⁶⁵ Born in Lamu but now living in Mombasa, Kadara's original name is Muhamad Abdalla Bakathir. His father was a poet and businessman on Lamu. Kadara himself is mainly a singer,

but he also composes poems on commission. He regularly visits and spends his afternoons at the Bwana Radio Service in Kibokoni (Mombasa) where I had the chance to meet him in February 2018.

Like most *tendi* recorded on CDs, the recitation opens with the singer stating both his own name and that of the poem's author, along with information on where to buy the CD version that is about to start. At this point, the performer already defines implicitly what he is in relation to this text: neither the author nor a scribe who copied the text. Rather, he re-enacts it using his voice – albeit with a certain amount of liberty towards the text. The singer – although allegedly relying on a copy of the *utendi* while recording his own version – does not chant the same amount of stanzas found in the written copy of the poem. While scanning the poem and setting it to a melody (*kutia sauti/maadhi*), he skips one or more stanzas even though the performer knows the poem and has read it at least once before recording it.⁶⁶ Like a scribe who dictates the poem to himself before writing it down,⁶⁷ Kadara may have tested and selected the right melody for the poem and then decided on certain editorial measures such as dropping particular stanzas, changing a word to modify the rhyme, and the *volens nolens* repetition of a line.

In the case of this sung version, on the one hand, these editorial interventions might be due to some constraints of the recording, such as the necessity to fit the sung version of the poem within the time constraints of the cassette or CD.⁶⁸ On the other hand, further variations such as the singer changing the words and (in so doing) the meaning of a line could be seen as an independent decision made by the singer himself,

⁶⁶ Kadara in my interview with him in Mombasa, February 2018.

⁶⁷ In philology and to explain the presence of mistakes within texts that have been transmitted, self-dictation or inner pronunciation of a text is considered one of the four stages that take place while copying: visual perception of the letters, memorisation, self-dictation and reproduction, see Isella 2009 and Stussi 2001, 86.

⁶⁸ The master copy from which I obtained the sung version of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* by Kadara on Lamu consists of two CDs lasting 45 minutes each, making a total duration of 90 minutes. Before the advent of CDs, recording on cassettes created some constraints for singers. The young *mwimbaji* Abubakr Mukhsin Sayyid Ali of Lamu told me how he had had to struggle to find the proper tempo for recording the *Ramani ya Maisha ya Ndowa* or *Haki za Watoto* written by Ustadh Mau on 60- or 90-minute cassettes. To avoid wasting money on more than one cassette, the *mwimbaji* had to adapt the length of the poem to his rhythm, which in turn had to fit the available tape length.

⁶⁵ A video recording of the *Qissati Yusuf* by Malim Yahya also exists. The reading was organised by Ridder Samsom at SOAS in 1997. In 2016, Samsom kindly gave me a copy of this recording for my private use.

who somehow felt like the new author of that sung version.⁶⁹ In Kadara's recorded version, in the first 30 stanzas alone, I noticed that he has skipped the following verses: st. 3, 6–12, 18–21, 24, 26 and 28–33. In addition to this, the attentive listener who has Karama's handwritten version at his or her disposal will notice that in stanza 13, while the 'original' version reads *kisa hicho maarufu* 'this is a famous story', the recorded version recites *nina kisa maarufu* 'I have a famous story'.⁷⁰ Moreover, in stanza 27, the second *mshororo* of the poet's version reads *na mwilini hana kovu, uzuri umezidia* 'On his body he (Yusuf) has no scar; his beauty has grown', whereas the singer's version recites *na mwilini hana kovu, uzuri amezidia* 'On his body he has no scar; he has increased in beauty'.

As in the *bismillahi qahari* manuscript, where the composer (Karama) refers to writing down the meaning of the story while changing its language (*Maana ni kikutubu lugha kuwafasiria*, st. 12), in the sung version the singer, Kadara, engages himself in transforming the written version. *Tafsiri* and *kutia sauti* are both practices through which re-appropriation and transformation are enacted and a text takes on a new form and life.

Conclusion

The aim of my paper was to reflect upon the variability of one text. Beginning with considerations on manuscript collection and arrangement, I first sought to present some implications of transmission and copying practices. I put my focus on the network of people involved in preserving a text, which can be put in several forms (from a manuscript to a memorised version and then to a microfilm) by different agents in the course of its transmission, like the manuscript's owner, the poet, the scribe and the collector. Texts are always acted out, and not only writing but memorisation is an important way in which they are transmitted from one generation to the next.

In a further section of the article, I focused on the internal variability of texts. In transmitting and copying the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, we saw how the various copies allegedly belonging to the same text tradition, such as the *mwando wangu nakutubu* manuscript group, are shaped differently in terms of scribal

conventions, although they relate the same story in the same metre. The handwritten form of each manuscript represents the craftsmanship of a known or unknown young apprentice or an experienced scribe shaping letters, glides and vowels and formatting the poem in different ways. Regardless of whether we are confronted with several copies ascribed to the same author or we are dealing with copies ascribed to different copyists, the poet-scribe always re-shapes the poem. Formal orthographic variants mainly concerning the adoption and adaptation of Arabic script to render Swahili sounds, as well as the *utendi* stanza layout vis-à-vis typed versions, have clearly shown how difficult it is to trace a fixed set of conventions among scribes. Variability even increases if a manuscript has been copied by more than one hand, as in the case of manuscript 333.

The plethora of *Utendi wa Yusuf* exemplars does not merely reflect the different aesthetic conventions adopted by the scribes, but also differences in the way of framing the story and showing its transformation. This latter issue has allowed me to talk about other versions, redactions and traditions of the story of the same prophet, Yusuf. Examining the second manuscripts group – *tanena niwakhubiri* – has illustrated how much each manuscript enacts a 're-performance' in which the alleged author – known or unknown – commits himself or herself to understand the meaning of the story (*kufanya fasiri* 'to translate') and conveying it to his or her own audience in order to make it known. A re-formulation or re-writing of something already said or written is involved. What is important to stress here is that the *Utendi wa Yusuf* text has always undergone a process of form-giving and changing which has concerned and affected the text's language and metre, its interpretation (*tafsiri*) and writing (*kutubu*) as well as its voicing.

Side by side with the figure of the poet/adaptor committed to producing a copy of the poem, I have also introduced the figure of the singer/adaptor committed to giving voice to a written text and editing it at his own liberty. Such a re-performance must also be seen as another form in which the story is re-formulated and transmitted.

Accordingly, the task of deriving all versions from one archetype is a utopian task. What has emerged from the overview of the different *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscript groups is a mosaic-like scenario, showing how much the texts have diverged as they were written down and re-written over the

⁶⁹ This free new adaptation of the lines was not well received by the 'original' author of the poem. Ustadh Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir (Mau) told me he was not entirely pleased with the fact that the *mwimbaji* Muhammad Abdalla Kadara had changed some of his poems here and there (Mau, March 2018). It goes without saying that the *maoni ya mtungaji* ('the poet's opinion') is completely omitted in the sung version.

⁷⁰ Karama 1994, 3.

centuries.⁷¹ It is interesting to consider that, up to now, it is often only in well-known and well-copied manuscripts commissioned by Europeans in the first half of the twentieth century, where we find a particular care of the scribe or composer. The latter put much effort into embellishing the colophon of the manuscripts, which is missing in the other manuscripts which were not written on commission and which this paper has been focused on. For instance, the colophon of the *Qissati Yusufu* (Fig. 12) by Muhamadi Kijuma written for Ernst Dammann reflects how much European scholars have imposed their expectations and needs on Swahili manuscripts, whereas for a local audience, the meaning and the importance is not on paper, but in the (memorised) living text. This also explains the abundant presence of incomplete copies (e.g. Mss. 333, 353): these manuscripts did not only waste away over time, but show that it was not important to be complete on paper or to be faithful to a paper copy, as Kadara's practices of singing and the abundance of scribal variants have indeed shown.

The 'carelessness' evident in written copies is a sign revealing that manuscripts did not circulate very far. As Samsom has attested, '[t]he manuscripts, books, papers and other items that make up a specific collection are in the Swahili context normally perceived as belonging to the family'.⁷² And the facts contributing to the dissolution and

disappearance of many collections of manuscripts in East Africa may also hold true in the case of the *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscripts. These include '... the falling apart of extended family structures safeguarding the common heritage, a very weak tradition of paper conservation in a devastating climate, [and] a general absence of preservation practices'.⁷³

The hope is that other philologists – while immersed in catalogues, archives and household collections – will feel inspired not only to look for the most reliable copy of a classic text, but also for its many other fascinating exemplars.



Fig. 12: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. Or. 9893 *Qissati Yusufu*, 375; p. 1 (detail from the colophon).⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ms. 351 is dated 1309 AH/1892 CE, which makes it the first existing manuscript to be attested, whereas the latest manuscript version is Ms. 603, which dates back to 1384 AH /1964 CE.

⁷² Samsom 2015, 208.

⁷³ Samsom 2015, 208.

⁷⁴ Dammann 1993, 166–167.

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LIST OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM DAMMANN'S CATALOGUE (1993) CITED IN THIS ARTICLE

Hs. Or. 9893 no. 375 *Qissati Yusufu* – Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage)

Seminar 1465 H73, no. 3 *Hadithi ya Yaaqubu na Yusufu* – Universität Hamburg, Asien-Afrika-Institut (Institute of Asian and African Studies)

LIST OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM ALLEN'S CATALOGUE (1970) (DAR ES SALAAM LIBRARY, EAST AFRICANA SECTION) CITED IN THIS ARTICLE

Ms. 118 *Ut. wa Yusufu*

Ms. 182 *Utenzi wa Kisa cha Nabii Yusufu*

Ms. 183 *Ut. wa Yusufu*

Ms. 333 *Yusuf?*

Ms. 351 *Ut. wa Yaaqubu*

Ms. 352 *Ut. wa Yaaqubu*

Ms. 353 *Ut. wa Yusufu* (incomplete)

Ms. 354a *Ut. wa Yusufu* (incomplete)

Ms. 438 *Ut. wa Yusufu* (incomplete)

Ms. 603 *Ut. wa Nabii Yusuf*

Ms. 708 *Kaani niwakhubiri*