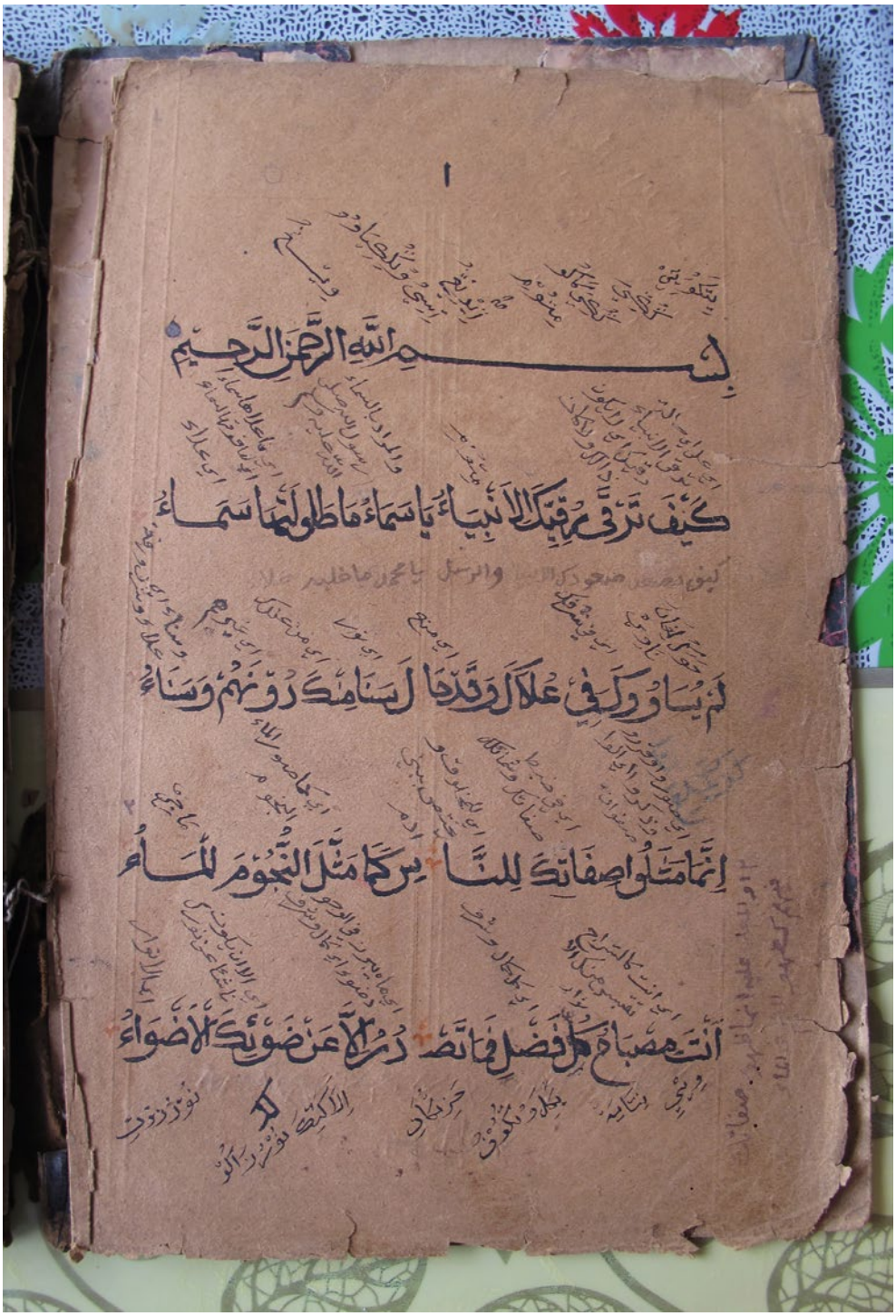
manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures ISSN 1867–9617



Universität Hamburg
DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF MANUSCRIPT CULTURES
DFG

Publishing Information

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

Edited by Ridder H. Samsom and Clarissa Vierke

Editors

Prof. Dr Michael Friedrich
Universität Hamburg
Asien-Afrika-Institut
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 / Flügel Ost
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel. no. +49 (0)40 42838 7127
Fax no. +49 (0)40 42838 4899
michael.friedrich@uni-hamburg.de

Prof. Dr Jörg H. Quenzer
Universität Hamburg
Asien-Afrika-Institut
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 / Flügel Ost
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel. no. +49 (0)40 42838 7203
Fax no. +49 (0)40 42838 6200
joerg.quenzer@uni-hamburg.de

Editorial Office

Dr Irina Wandrey
Universität Hamburg
Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Warburgstraße 26
D-20354 Hamburg
Tel. No.: +49 40 42838 - 9420
Fax No.: +49 40 42838 - 4899
irina.wandrey@uni-hamburg.de

Layout

Nora Harms

Cover

First page of an Arabic *Qas īda 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

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

2 | **One Text, Many Forms: A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts**
Ridder H. Samsom and Clarissa Vierke

ARTICLES

13 | **Writing in Swahili on Stone and on Paper**
Ann Biersteker

29 | **Swahili Manuscripts from Northern Mozambique: Some Notes on *Ajami* Correspondence Letters**
Chapane Mutiua

53 | **Arabic-Swahili *Hamziyya* Manuscripts: Observations on Two Testimonies of the Text**
Ahmed Parkar

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

87 | **Writing Songs, Singing Texts: Orality and Literacy in Swahili Manuscripts**
Clarissa Vierke

105 | **Contributors**

Article

Writing Songs, Singing Texts: Orality and Literacy in Swahili Manuscripts

Clarissa Vierke | Bayreuth, Germany

1. Introduction[1]

The aim of this article is to consider how much a Swahili manuscript can tell us about the oral or written nature of a text. How much is a text a product of writing? How much is it rather a documentation of an oral performance? How much does a poem 'live' in the manuscript? And what can the text and manuscript tell us about the oral nature of a composition? Are there some written clues – some textual evidence – about the performance of a text? I will specifically take variability – the many forms of a text – as a hint at the latter.

I base my argument on different poetic genres from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Swahili manuscript production flourished. It seems reasonable to assume that Swahili poetry fundamentally relied on oral performance, as it also does nowadays to a large extent: most of the poems were not read silently by individuals, but rather performed out loud; some of them are never actually committed to writing (or only fortuitously). In fact, we do not have any secondary sources that could tell us how poetry was once performed and written on the East African coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nor do we have any paper evidence from the seventeenth century or earlier.

Thus, I will attempt a kind of 'textual archaeology' here and try to interpret the evidence from the manuscripts and texts in a bid to understand the extent to which compositions are shaped by their oral presentation as well as by writing. By looking at the manuscripts in this way, I hope to find some written clues about the repertoire and resources poets and copyists had at their disposal and how they used to compose, copy and preserve texts. I will first argue that Swahili manuscripts show traces of oral performance. Secondly, the dependence on oral performance differs greatly from genre to genre. The extent to which a text is tied to paper can vary a great deal, not only from culture to culture, but also within one culture or language. Thirdly, as I will show in the last part of the paper, writing does not simply replace memory and sound as a form of preservation and communication. As I will show, reading, copying and even composing drew very much from oral reception and oral techniques.

This paper has been inspired by our recent work on Swahili dance poetry from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a genre that was committed to manuscripts chiefly towards the end of the nineteenth century. Together with a group of scholars,[2] I have been working on a text edition of poems in this genre as exchanged between the charismatic political leaders of the city-states of Northern Kenya, chiefly Pate, Lamu and Mombasa. As opposed to the narrative *tenzi* (sing. *utenzi*)[3], which is another mainly narrative genre I had previously worked on, these poems seemed so fragmentary and polyphonic as to constantly evade interpretation. Not only do the voices change from one stanza to the other, but the poems also make broad reference to musical instruments and their sounds. The poems are far more auditory than visual. The dynamic presence evoked in these texts seems to find an echo in their mercurial nature on the manuscript page, on which I have chiefly concentrated in this article.

[1] Clarissa Vierke was a Petra Kappert Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures from 1 April 2017 to 30 June 2017. This article is based on a previous version presented at the workshop entitled 'One Text – Many Forms', held at the Centre on 21 and 22 April 2017 and co-organised with the researchers of subgroup C07 of the Sonderforschungsbereich 950, 'Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa', Universität Hamburg. I am very grateful for all the generous support I have received from CSMC. I thank Annachiara Raia and Ridder Samsom for comments on the text and Kristen de Joseph and Carl Carter for proofreading it.

[2] The group includes Abdilalif Aballa, Mahmoud A. Abdulkadir, Ann Biersteker, Annmarie Drury, Jasmin Mahazi, Gudrun Miehe, Ahmed Parkar, Annachiara Raia, Ridder Samsom and Farouk Topan. Stefanie Kolbusa and Natalie Kontny participated in one of the three workshops held in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The last one took place at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures. All the translations of the Mngumi poetry below are a joint product of the working group.

[3] Singular *utendi* and plural *tendi* are used in the Northern Swahili dialects of Lamu and Pate.

In the following, I will try to explore these aspects in more detail. To make the contrast clearer and to show the variability of manuscript usage, I will start by describing aspects of the *utenzi* genre, which is far more biased towards the written page, before turning to poetry of a more oral nature.

2. Written poetry

The *utenzi* is a poetic genre that was predominantly used in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to narrate the battles that took place during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime or recount the stories of the prophets, such as Yusuf and Musa.[4] These creative and poetic adaptations in Swahili, which mainly drew from Arabic prose source texts, became particularly popular in the course of the nineteenth century.[5] The production of manuscripts containing *tenzi* poetry reached a (final) peak in the first half of the twentieth century, fostered by the demand of philologically inclined European scholars working on Swahili poetry.

The writing of Swahili manuscripts did not start in the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, writing Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script was a well-established practice.[6] A local, intellectual elite of Islamic scholars, mostly *ulama* of Hadramy origin who were well trained in Arabic, started translating important Arabic poetry into Swahili, like the *Qaṣīdat al-Hamziyya*, the *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* and the Mawlid *Barzanjī*.[7] They intended to foster Swahili as a written language of learning because they sought to pass on Islamic ideals, doctrines and new forms of piety to a broader public. A vernacular literacy started to flourish, and Swahili manuscript production in Arabic script, mostly containing poetry, became a marker of coastal Swahili identity.

Some poetic genres, like the *utenzi*, were and still are more strongly tied to the written form and co-existed with other genres, like *nyimbo* ('songs'), which have hardly ever been committed to paper. Although *utenzi* was also meant to be recited, chiefly at wake services, it is strongly linked to writing and its representation on the manuscript page. I have shown in the past that its textual nature is shaped by the written medium, but in what follows, I will summarise a few points to underline this idea in contrast to the more orality-based poems.[8]

2.1 The text evokes writing

Tenzi often highlight their own written character. In the first stanza of the *Utendi wa Katirifu* ('Utendi of Katirifu'), [9] which is printed below, writing utensils are evoked such as a stylus (*kalamu*), good 'Syrian paper' (*karatasi ya Shamu*) and a writing tablet (*kibao*) on which 'cords of woven silk' (*upote wa hariri*) stretched parallel to each other provided the writer with a grid to follow the lines:

Akhi, patia kalamu,	'O friend, obtain for me a stylus,
Na karatasi ya Shamu	And some Syrian paper;
Na kibao muhakamu	A writing tablet well chosen,
Na upote wa hariri	And some cord of woven silk'

The utensils, on the one hand, echo the Swahili material culture of manuscript writing and seem to reflect a process of composition by writing. However, on the other hand, given that this kind of evocation recurs in many *utenzi* manuscripts and is also recited in performances, it has become a formulaic way of marking the beginning of the text rather than reflecting the actual situation of writing.[10]

2.2 The written text as a unified text

Unlike many other genres where meta-information about the text like the author and the date of composition is not included, the *utenzi* presents itself as a self-contained text that does not depend on a knowing audience. Often the author's name, date of composition and number of verses are printed at the end of the manuscript, as shown in the following sample stanzas:

[4] See Raia 2017 for an in-depth comparison of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā* 'the Prophets' stories' and the *Utenzi wa Yusuf* depicting the life of Prophet Yusuf. For an overview of the relationship of the so-called *maghāzi* tradition – focusing on the Prophet's battles and those of his companions – to Swahili *tenzi*, see Vierke 2011, 420–424 and Abel 1938 for a detailed study.

[5] According to Jan Knappert in 1958, the oldest manuscript still existing (that of the *Utendi wa Tambuka*) dates back to 1728, although this has been called into doubt (e.g. by Zhukow in 1992). However, since 2011 the manuscript has been reported missing at the holdings of the library at the Asia-Africa Institute at the University of Hamburg. Most remaining *utenzi* manuscripts date back to the nineteenth and twentieth century.

[6] The oldest Swahili writings that have come to light are a number of letters found in Goa dating back to 1724 (Omar and Frankl 1994). Arabic writing in Arabic on the Swahili coast dates back to an even earlier period. For instance, the Lamu chronicle reports that early 'Arab' settlers on Lamu exchanged letters in the seventh century (Hichens 1938).

[7] See Vierke 2014; Samsom 2015, 202; Vierke 2016, 228.

[8] Vierke 2014; Vierke 2011, 212–227.

[9] Hichens 1939, 121.

[10] Vierke 2011, 217.

Name of the composer: *Mezoandika, yuwani / mwane Saidi Amini / wa Saidi Uthmani / kabila Mahadalia*
'The one who has written it, know it, is the daughter of Said Amin, the son of Said Uthman of the tribe Mahadali'.[11]

Date of the composition: *Na hijira ya rasuli / alifu na mia mbili / na ishirini na mbili / idadi imetimia*
'And it is 1,222 years after the Prophet's hijra'.[12]

Number of stanzas: *Na baitize yuani / zilizo karatasani / ni alfu kwa yakini / bila moya kuzidia*
'Know that the verses which are on the paper are exactly one thousand without one more'.[13]

The meta-information provides the *utenzi* with categories that make it identifiable and single out the manuscript from numerous instances of performance. The counting of the stanzas, for instance, hints at the written nature of the text; counting is hardly possible while reciting. There is a fixed association between the author, date of composition and the text, which makes it different from other versions of the text and instances of performance. A sense of textual unity also attends the *utenzi's* narrative nature: the *utenzi* typically presents a coherent, closed and plot-driven narrative with an inaugurating formula, an introduction, a main part and an end. Narrative closure is a constant of this form of writing, which contributes to its self-contained nature.

By using terms like fixity or unity, I do not mean to suggest that when an *utenzi* is copied, it is reproduced in exactly the same way on another piece of paper. Stanzas are often omitted or added, and there is a substantial amount of variation at the stanza and word level. The text is variable and is constantly re-enacted in processes of performing and copying it (see below). Yet adding meta-information to each text categorises the individual manuscript; it singles it out from the chain of transmission, reinforcing the idea of an original text by referring to the author and date of composition (and sometimes the copyist, too) as well as by providing the original number of stanzas or the number of stanzas in the copy.

Fig. 1: The first page of the *Utendi wa Haudaji* (MS 279888-7, SOAS), showing its method of representing rhythm visually.

2.3 The utenzi's *notions of prosody as related to writing*

In writing, sounds become visual signs. The temporality of speech, the rhythm, is translated into a spatial arrangement: prosodic units like verses become lines in a manuscript, and pauses are marked by space or, for instance, punctuation or indention. The *utenzi* shows a familiarity with translating speech time into a spatial form. The symmetrical form of the first manuscript page of the *Utendi wa Haudaji* ('Utendi of the Palanquin') printed below already suggests a regular rhythm.[14]

In the extract shown above, each *utenzi stanza* (*ubeti*; pl. *beti*) corresponds to one manuscript line (*mstari*) (see below as well). Space has been used systematically to mark further prosodic breaks: each *utenzi* stanza (*ubeti*) consists of four *vipande* (sg. *kipande*), i.e. verses of equal syllable length, that yield four strings of words separated by spaces. Accordingly, the manuscript is divided into four columns visually. The Arabic script ensures the equal length of the *vipande*. The 32 syllables required for each ubeti ideally correspond to 32 consonants per written line; the eight consonants per *kipande* (verse) are represented by eight syllables.[15]

[11] *Utendi wa Fatuma* ('Utendi of Fatuma'), Dammann 1940, 140; my translation.

[12] *Utendi wa Fatuma* ('Utendi of Fatuma'), Dammann 1940, 140; my translation.

[13] *Utenzi wa Abdurahmani na Sufiyani* ('Utendi of Abdurahman and Sufiyan'), El-Buhriy 1961, 118–119.

[14] For a critical edition of the *Utendi wa Haudaji*, see Vierke 2011.

[15] This makes the stanza in Arabic script differ from its representation in Roman script. Apart from the different shapes of the letters, the main reason is that certain phonemic differences are not marked in Arabic script – pre-nasalised consonants like *mb* and *nd* are not differentiated from b and d in Arabic script, for instance. This is in line with verse prosody: both count the same in terms of metrics.

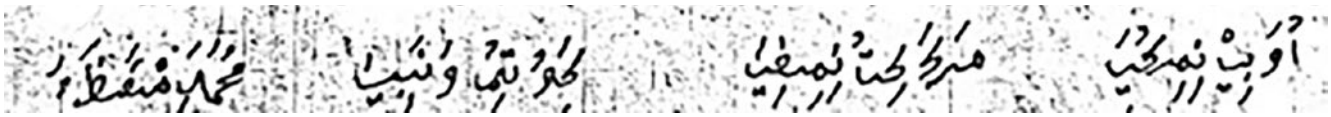


Fig. 2: A manuscript line from the *Utendi wa Haudaji* (MS 279888-7, SOAS corresponding to a stanza (*ubeti*) comprised of four parts (*vipande*). [16]

> *Uwambie nimekuya / Maka kwethu nimengiya /*
> *kwa utume wa nabiya / Muhamadi mfadhaa.*
> 'Tell them that I have come, I have entered our home,
> Mecca, on an errand for the Prophet, the excellent
> Muhammad.'

Furthermore, as Steere has pointed out, the rhyme at the end of each *kipande* is 'to the eye more than to the ear'.[17] The rhyme – which consists in the sameness of the last syllable, such as the *ya* at the end of the first three *vipande* in the example above (i.e. *nimekuya, nimengiya, nabiya*) – is more of a visual than an audible hallmark. Since it is not emphasised in Swahili, it is the sameness of the written letter that marks it.[18] The rhyme of the *ubeti* is the same for the first three *vipande*, but varies from stanza to stanza, while the rhyme at the end of the *ubeti* runs throughout the whole poem (in the example above, it is *aa*, which can also change to *wa, ya* or ʿa). In contrast to older genres where the last letter is not emphasised, the *utenzi* enforces a certain strictness on the end rhyme, which seems to have been conditioned by its representation in written form. On a manuscript page, the uniformity of the end rhyme enhances the sense of visual symmetry.

In short, the concept of prosody is strongly linked to writing. Even units like rhyme – typically a sound feature – correspond to letters, and the syllabic metre (*mizani*) is a measure of letters. This also corresponds to its form of recitation: the *utenzi* is typically performed on the basis of a written text, which the performer chants half by reading the text and half by remembering it – an aspect that I will consider more specifically in the last section.

3. 'Oral poems' written on paper

As I have tried to show, the *utenzi* very much lives on paper and in written form, a fact that becomes particularly obvious if one compares it to other genres like the *utumbuizo* and the *shairi*, which I will look at below. As far as we know, the *utumbuizo* is one of the oldest Swahili genres, which, to my knowledge, is no longer used to compose poetry nowadays. Most of the works of this genre to have survived are archaic poetic texts in an old language. Although dating of the texts is difficult, there is a considerable gap between the composition of *tumbuizo* and their commitment to paper: the *tumbuizo* manuscripts that have survived mostly date back to the nineteenth century, while some *utumbuizo* traditions, like those associated with the ancient hero Fumo Liyongo, are considerably older.[19] Thus, as opposed to the *utenzi* genre, which seems to have been written from its onset and has adapted themes from written Arabic texts, for the greater part of its history, the *utumbuizo* was a genre of oral poetry. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did European interest in the local traditions stimulate the locally felt need to preserve what by then already appeared to be an endangered tradition. Still, the manuscripts often bear traces of the rather oral nature of the poem, which I will consider below.

3.1 The incongruence between the audible and visual text

First of all, no writing conventions have been established to set prosodic units apart in *utumbuizo*. Unlike the *utenzi*, there is no neat analogy between the written and prosodic line, as we can see in the manuscript of the *Utumbuizo wa Kikowa* ('The Kikowa Meal'),[20] a poem associated with Liyongo. Spacing is not used, but the scribe does use three small circles arranged in the form of a triangle to mark prosodic boundaries. These are used inconsistently, however: while they mark the end of the first line, for instance, the scribe does not use them at the end of the second line. Below, I will use the first two lines to illustrate this inconsistency as well as the fact that the line breaks are arbitrary. Accordingly, there is also no neat end rhyme, which serves as a visual hallmark to denote the end of every poetic line in the *utenzi*.

[16] See Vierke 2011, 500, stanza 102; also see Vierke 2014, 329–334 on the representation of prosodic units on a page.

[17] Steere 1870, xii.

[18] Also see Abdulaziz 1996, 416.

[19] His life remains a topic of controversy; he has been variously suggested to have lived before the thirteenth century (Shariff 1988, 53), the sixteenth century (Knappert 1979, 68) and the seventeenth century (Freeman Grenville 1973), for instance.

[20] Miehe et al. 2004, 36, 37, 89–93. Manuscript MS 47754, Taylor Collection, SOAS, University of London.

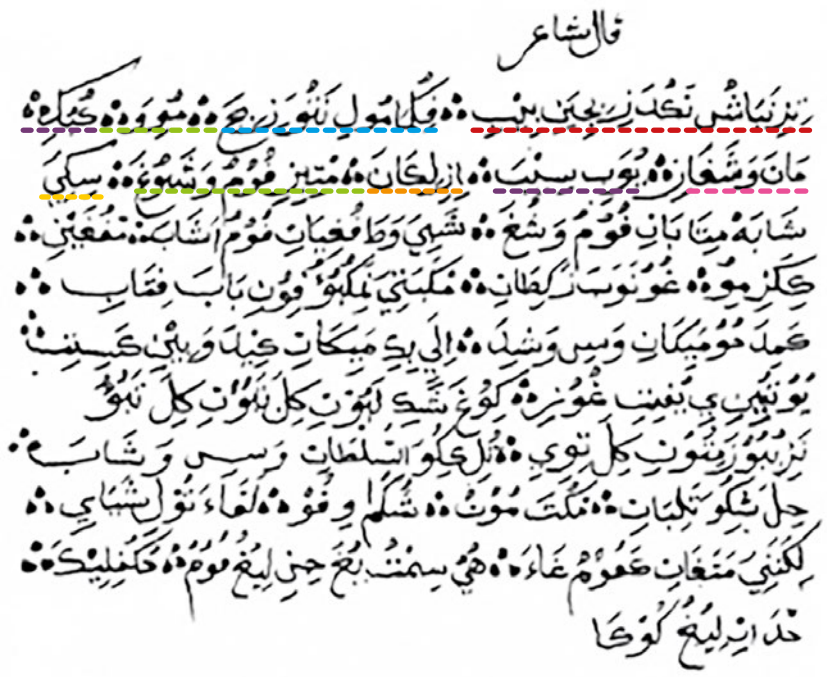
Manuscript lines	
Transcription of the units according to how they are depicted in the first two lines of the manuscript[21]	*1. T'eze na Mbwasho na K'undazi pijani phembe / vikomamule na towazi pija / muwiwa / kumbuka /* *2. Mwana wa shangazi / yu wapi simba / ezi li kana / mtembezi Fumo wa Sha(u)nga / sikia*
Prosodic units	*T'eze na Mbwasho na K'undazi* *pijiani phembe vikomamule na towazi* *pija muwiwa kumbuka Mwana wa shangazi* *yu wapi simba ezi li kana mtembezi* *Fumo wa Sha(u)nga / sikia* Let me dance with Mbwasho and K'undazi Strike for me the horns, the long drums and the cymbals, Strike, you who owe a debt, so that I may remember (my) cousin. Where is the mighty lion? He is like an inveterate wanderer! Fumo of Shanga, reckon well…

Fig. 3: First page of the *Utumbuizo wa Kikowa* (MS 47754, SOAS) and a closer analysis of the first two lines. The coloured text shows the incongruence between prosodic units and the parts of the manuscript visually demarcated by three circles.

[21] The slash (/) corresponds to the three circles in the manuscript.

I have marked the units that conclude with the visual caesura – the three circles – in different colours; one can see at a glance that they are of very different lengths. *T'eze na Mbwasho na K'undazi pijani phembe* (marked in red), for instance, is the first unit of the manuscript and concludes with three circles. In the manuscript above, I have used the respective colour to underline the part that corresponds to the transcription. If one compares it with the actual rhythm, which I print under 'prosodic units' above (where each colour corresponds to the visually marked units of the manuscript), one can see that the first prosodic unit is not delimited in the manuscript: *t'eze na Mbwasho na K'undazi* is not separated from *pijiani phembe* by three circles, although it comprises a prosodic (and syntactic) unit that is even marked by rhyme (*-zi*). The same holds true for the part underlined in blue: there is no marking of the metrical and syntactic break, although there is a clear break after *towazi* and before *pija*, as indicated. The green and purple part, by contrast, consists of just one word: here the scribe used more visual breaks (three circles) than the metre requires. Moreover, the line break severs a metrically and syntactically meaningful unit, namely *kumbuka Mwana wa shangazi* 'so that I may remember (my) cousin'; *mwana wa shangazi* 'my cousin' (literally 'the child of my paternal aunt') appears at the beginning of the second line.

I take this as evidence that the visually accurate representation of the text in the manuscript, including the systematic use of visual caesurae (the three circles) and line breaks, did not matter very much, as the use of these features appears to be rather random. The poem's prosody is hardly captured on the page, even though the reciter would have needed to know how to sing the piece. Unlike the *utenzi*, where the manuscript seems like a guide on how to read the text rhythmically and where to pause, a great deal of knowledge about prosody and performance is required for the *utumbuizo* that cannot be inferred from the paper.

3.2 The indeterminacy of text and authorship

The impression that the oral dimension of the text is hardly represented by the manuscript is also echoed in the indeterminate nature of the poem. The songs ascribed to Fumo Liyongo are different to *utenzi*, which present a self-contained, consistent and coherent narrative. The authorship has not been marked for many of the *tumbuizo*: in the manuscript above, *qala shair* ('the poet spoke') suffices as a title to set the poem apart from others, and the poems often shade into each other. Not only the authorship, but also data such as the number of verses and the date of composition has been omitted, just like text-structuring devices such as opening formulas, introductions and conclusions. The single text found in the manuscript seems far less defined and more like a momentary constellation that could easily morph into a different one in another context or on another page.

Furthermore, the Liyongo songs hardly display a coherent narrative: the audience is thrown into a scene with a multitude of voices, as even the brief example above shows. One is left wondering who the person is who is talking. Who wants to dance with Mbwasho and Kundazi (in the first line above)? What kind of debt is the poet talking about? Whom does the 'mighty lion' refer to? In contrast to the *utenzi*, where the audience can gradually get all the information they need to understand the narrative, the *tumbuizo* hardly relate a plot; instead, voices and themes seem to be spliced into each other. The polycentric *tumbuizo* loosely add up to a cycle of songs: vaguely interlocking and often held together by similar characters or tone, or by occasions of recitation now unknown to us, rather than by a narrative driven by cause and consequence – a stark contrast to the *utenzi*, which gradually guides the audience into the story and explicitly introduces the characters that will accompany their journey to its successful end.[22]

The *utumbuizo* conveys the voice of a narrator whose words can only be understood in light of a larger narrative embedded in a specific situation (of performance) that is not implicit in the words themselves. Although nowadays the *tumbuizo* are mostly obscure, even on the northern Swahili coast, people on Lamu can still give prose accounts of different episodes of Fumo Liyongo's life – the gigantic hero who defied all his enemies. While connecting the songs with the episodes is difficult now, previously the audience must have been able to make sense of the songs in light of the overall story of Liyongo, as told, for instance, in the prose version recorded by Steere on Zanzibar in the second half of the nineteenth century.[23] Furthermore, it is also possible that the *tumbuizo* were once interspersed within a larger prose narrative.

However, I tend to think that one does not necessarily need to assume a previously unified and plot-driven text,

[22] Vierke 2011, 284–288.

[23] Steere 1870; see Miehe et al. 2004, 5 as well. There is also an *Utenzi wa Fumo Liyongo*, which is a more recent poem, however, and also makes an effort to create a consistent narrative from the anecdotes and fragments (Abdalla 1973).

which now only seems to exist in a few fragmented songs. Rather, considering the context of an oral culture, where culturally essential texts are common knowledge, I think that a narrative account was neither deemed necessary nor valued. The audience would have taken great pleasure in listening to and decoding new, creative allusions to and evocations of episodes, enjoyed the dynamics of the many voices and relied on their cultural knowledge to interpret the texts.

Furthermore, the *utumbuizo* has certainly been shaped by the context and practice of combined dance and poetry performance, to which the poems also make reference. As opposed to *tenzi*, which insist on writing materials, *tumbuizo* typically start by calling for dance, music and instruments, as we see for instance in the *Utumbuizo wa Kikowa* above. The narrating voice demands to dance – 'Let me dance with Mbwasho and Kundazi' – and asks the musicians to 'strike … the horns, the long drums and the cymbals'. *Kucheza* 'to dance' and ngoma 'dance', which are reinforced by reference to the instruments used, like the drums, horns and cymbals, imply more than the involvement and rhythmic movement of the body; they also set the ground for poetic competitions in which only men of high social standing could participate. Poetry provided a platform where questions of debt, marriage alliances and political leadership were addressed, but only in a highly allusive and metaphorical form that is hard to understand nowadays.

3.3 The fluidity of poetry in performance: nineteenth-century mashairi *poems*

Similarly, this also holds true for *shairi* (pl. *mashairi*), a genre that is younger than the *utumbuizo*. This was adapted from Arabic and flourished in Mombasa and the northern parts of the Swahili coast at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It seems to have shared features with the *utumbuizo*, like its metaphorical and enigmatic language, for instance, but it also had a link to a tradition of dialogue verse or verbal duelling. Dialogic *mashairi* offered an arena to playfully act out rivalries between neighbourhoods and dance associations by solving riddles based on word play, but they also served to negotiate burning social issues. The most prominent example is the *mashairi* exchanged between Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassany, the court poet of the ruling dynasty of the Mazrui in Mombasa, and Bwana Zahidi Mngumi, the political leader of Lamu at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They hurled provocative lines at each other, which anticipated a violent confrontation, the Battle of Shela, where Lamu surprisingly defeated the strong coalition of Mombasa and Pate.[24] Zahidi Mngumi earned an enduring reputation, and the poems he exchanged with his opponents became popular throughout the region. They also made their way into chronicles[25] recorded in the nineteenth century as well as poetic anthologies preserved in manuscripts, like the ones presented below showing the first six stanzas. In this selection, Bwana Zahidi Mngumi is calling on his fellow Lamu men to gather for a dance, where they can reach an agreement to band together and fight the common enemy from Pate. Bwana Zahidi Mngumi underlines his certainty: he sees through the plans of the enemies (stanza 4). He knows that war is going to come, but Lamu is prepared for the fight and to protect its citizens: 'we have closed the doors' (stanza 1).

In the first manuscript (HH), which the renowned scribe Muhamadi Kijuma (*c.*1885–1945) copied for Ernst Dammann, the scribe makes an effort to write in a way that is easily decipherable for his European client. He separates the stanzas, each composed of four half-lines (*vipande*), from each other with a line.[26] The inverted heart divides each line into two *vipande*. The stanza is presented as a quatrain in the transcription below. In the second manuscript (SBB), written by an unknown scribe, indentations are used to mark off stanzas, and circles (or hastily drawn inverted hearts?) have been added to separate *vipande*.

The transcription of each manuscript is included to highlight their variations. They start with the same stanzas. SBB has an additional stanza not found in HH. In stanza four, HH and SBB start to differ in terms of how the stanzas are ordered.

[24] Biersteker and Shariff 1995.

[25] See the Lamu chronicle, for instance (Hichens 1938).

[26] The scribe Muhamadi Kijuma, who copied an enormous number of Swahili manuscripts for chiefly British and German scholars, adapted his style of writing and also introduced some calligraphic elements to please his European clients. His style is markedly different from that of other scribes.

Fig. 4: Example of a 'war poem' by Bwana Zahidi Mngumi: the first page of the poem *Nenda wa Asha Hamadi*, as written by Muhamadi Kijuma on commission for a European scholar (MS 1219 H56, Universität Hamburg, Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen; labelled 'HH' below). The second manuscript (Hs. or. 9954, State Library of Berlin, Oriental Department; labelled 'SBB') was written by an unknown scribe.

<table>
<tr><th>HH</th><th>SBB</th></tr>
<tr><td>1. Nendra na Asha Hamadi – wakhubirini malenga
Ayao napije hodi – milango tumeifunga
tumeikomeza midi – na magogo ya kupinga
kupa hirimu kutanga – kivuza kilicho ndrani</td><td>1. Zizi na Asha Hamadi – wakhubirini malenga
Ayao napije hodi – milango tumeifunga
tumeikomea midi – na magogo ya kupinga
kupa hirimu kutanga – kivuza kilicho ndrani</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Go with Asha Hamadi/Zizi and Asha Hamadi, proclaim to the master poets
Anyone who comes should say ‘hodi’, we have closed the doors
We have bolted the doors and [put] logs [there] to block the way
So those outside will wonder and ask [themselves] what is inside</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. Ya mshabaha vurungu – avumizapo muyumbe
khusi zenu matawangu – nazandamane na phembe
tukeshe yothe makungu – kula mwenye lake ambe
maneno tusiyafumbe – wala tusiyakhizini</td><td>2. Ya mshabaha vurungu – avumizapo muyumbe
khusi zenu matawangu – nazandamane na phembe
tukeshe yothe makungu – kula mwenye lake ambe
maneno tusiyafumbe – walau tusiyakhizini</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">It is like a wind instrument, when the messenger blows it forcefully
Your clapping, beautiful women, should accompany the horns
Let us stay awake the whole night, so everyone may speak out frankly
Let us not speak in riddles nor hold back our thoughts</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">No corresponding stanza in HH</td><td>Thathasa patu mpambe – patanisha zibod
Avumizapo muyumbe – siwa yetu ya Mreo
Na yand5amane na phembe – mishindro iwe thangao
Tukumbuke yapitao – mapotofu ya zamani</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strike the cymbal, beautiful lady, beat with the braided palm leaves
When the messenger blows our siwa from Proud Lamu
It should accompany the horn, the sound should announce [the dance]
Let us remember the past, the past stupidity/evil</td></tr>
<tr><td>3. Tukumbuke ulimwengu – umezozinga duniya
kizazi na moya fungu – kupindruliyana niya
kuzengeleyana phingu – kutiwa wenye kutiya
kula mthu mwenye haya – achambiwa mtiyeni</td><td>Tukumbuke ulimwengu – umezozinga duniya
kizazi na moya fungu – kupindruliyana niya
kuzengeleyana phingu – kutiwa wenye kutiya
kula mthu mwenye haya – achambiwa mtiyeni</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Let us remember how the ways of the world have changed
The descendants of the same clan betray each other
Putting each other into fetters, the shacklers are being shackled
Everyone involved is told: ‘Imprison him!’</td></tr>
</table>

After the third stanza, which is found in both manuscripts, the arrangement of stanzas varies, as shown below.

HH	SBB
4. Kimbelembele waume – cha wakokota zisiki *Taka nasi kitwandame – kwa ukhadimu wa nyuki* *pindrani kisitwegeme – kwa muomo wa bunduki* *tufiliye yetu haki – tusiwekwe tuli duni*	*Kula mwenye mbovu niya – mwenye dhamiri nasi* *Rabbi tatuhukumiya – twokowe zethu nafusi* *kwa auni ya Jaliya – aliyo yuu Mkwasi* *kufuata mfuasi – hilo halipatikani*
Rush on, men, the way people drag tree stumps They want mishap to befall us, let us move forward like the diligent bees Let us strive so that misfortune will not befall us through the barrel of the gun Indeed, let us fight to the death for our rights so we won't be regarded as worthless	All those with evil intentions and ill will towards us, God will judge them for us and may He save our souls, By the help of God, the Most High, the Self-Sufficient, To follow the follower – that will never happen!
5. Kula mwenye niya mbovu – ngwampindrukiza yeye *mwoka kiwana cha ivu – nale na aliyo naye* *aifanyao mwelevu –penye uwinga akae* *asikome mayutoye – afiliye mayutoni*	*Kula mwenye niya mbovu – ngwampindrukiza yeye* *mwoka kiwana cha ivu – nale na aliyo naye* *aifanyao welevu –penye uwinga akae* *asikome mayutoye – afiliye mayutoni*
Anyone with an evil intention, may God turn it on him The baker who ruined the bread, let him share it with his companion The one who pretends to be clever, let him remain in ignorance May his regrets be endless, may he die with them	Anyone with an evil intention, may God turn it on him The baker who ruined the bread, let him share it with his companion The one who pretends to be clever, let him remain in ignorance May his regrets be endless, may he die with them
6. Kula mwenye mbovu niya – mwenye dhamiri na sisi *Rabbi tatuhukumiya – twokowe zethu nafusi* *kwa auni ya Jaliya – aliyo yuu Mkwasi* *kufuata mfuasi – hilo halipatikani*	*Kimbelembele waume – cha wakokota zisiki* *Takanani ktwandame – kwa ukhadimu wa nyuki* *pindrani kisitwegeme – kwa muomo wa bunduki* *tufiliye yetu haki – tusiwekwe tuli duni*
All those with evil intentions and ill will towards us God will judge them for us and may He save our souls, By the help of God, the Most High, the Self-Sufficient, To follow the follower – that will never happen!	Rush on, men, the way people drag tree stumps They want mishap to befall us; let us move forward like the diligent bees Let us strive so that misfortune will not befall us through the barrel of the gun Indeed, let us fight to the death for our rights so we won't be regarded as worthless.

Like many other poems ascribed to Bwana Zahidi Mngumia and his opponents, the poem was copied many times and was also memorised until quite recently. The different sources vary considerably, not only in terms of the length of the poems and the sequence of the lines, but also in terms of the ascribed authorship found in the sources.[27]

The following table is meant to present these variations in a simplified schematic form, which allows us to take more sources into consideration. The column at the far left gives the name of the poem. Apart from *Nenda wa Asha Hamadi*, I also refer to another poem, *La Kutenda Situuze* ('Don't Ask Us What We Should Do'), since in one source, DA, the stanzas of the latter are part of *Nenda wa Asha Hamadi*. The 'Verse' column lists the beginning of the stanzas. In the top row, abbreviations like HH (also found in Fig. 4) and FA stand for the various sources of the poem.[28]

[27] Also see Miehe 1976.

[28] Apart from three manuscripts in Arabic script (HH, FA and SBB), I have also taken published and unpublished editions and notes based on manuscripts into consideration:
HH = manuscript, Universität Hamburg, Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen, MS 1219 H56;
FA = manuscript written by Faraj Bwana Mkuu, Nabahany Collection, Mombasa;
SBB = manuscript, State Library of Berlin, Oriental Department, MS Hs. or. 9954;
DA = transcript (of SBB) by Ernst Dammann with notes and stanzas added by Ahmed Nabahany, DEVA Bayreuth.
MA = unpublished booklet: Maawy, Ali A. A. (n. d.), *The Lamu Hero: The Story of Bwana Zahidi Mngumi (1760–1832)*.

Table 1: An overview of stanza variation in the sources of *Nenda na Asha Hamadi*.

Poem	Verse	HH	FA	SBB	DA	NA	MA	SHA	BSH
Nenda na Asha Hamadi	*Nenda na Asha Hamadi*	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*	*1= ?*	*1= SAA*	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*
	Ya mshabaka vurungu	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2
	Tatasa patu mpambe		3	3	3	2	3	3	3
	Tukumbuke ulimwengu	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	Kimbelembele waume	4	7	7	7	5	7	7	7
	Kulla mwenye nia mbovu	5	6	6	6		6	6	6
	Kulla mwenye mbovu nia	6	5	5	5	6	5	5	5
	Tuna konde za asili					7	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*	*1 = ZM*
	Mla shokowa la Pemba	7	8	1	8	8	2	2	2
	Phani shauri Suudi		9	2	9		3	3	3
La Kutenda Situuze	*La kutenda situuze*	1	1	3 = ZM	10	1 = AJ	1 = SAA	1 = SAA	1 = AJ
	Hela tunda kwa dalili	2	2	4 = AJ	11	2	1 = AJ	1 = AJ	2

As Table 1 shows, these differ first in terms of their length: *Nenda wa Asha Hamadi* has seven stanzas in HH, but nine in FA, for instance. Secondly, they also differ with respect to the order of stanzas. Thirdly, the boundary between texts, i.e. the question of where one poem ends and the next one starts, is not clear: in DA, for instance, *Nenda na Asha Hamadi* is one poem of eleven stanzas. However, in many other sources (HH, FA, NA and BSH), the last two stanzas are part of a separate poem, *La Kutenda Situuze*. The colours are additionally meant to mark the different textual boundaries. In MA and SHA, the two stanzas of *La Kutenda Situuze* do not form one poem, but should be attributed to two different authors. The attributions of authorship vary considerably as well: what is clearly attributed to Zahidi Mngumi (ZM) in some sources is attributed to Sheikh Ali bin Ahmed (SAA) or Abubakari bin Jabir (AJ) in others.

In order to understand the text's life beyond the manuscript, parallel or prior to it, one must consider the degree of variation it exhibits. First of all, the poems were very popular in Lamu as well as in Mombasa; in fact, they may have changed by being repeated aloud and copied so often.[29] As I will try to argue below, copying, like recitation in performance, does not preclude variation, but on the contrary, it fosters it. In the context of their oral performance, which has to be kept fluid and where the text takes shape on the spot, the performer

NA = unpublished paper by Nabahany, Ahmed Sheikh (n. d.), *Mapisi ya Bwana Zahidi Mngumi aliyekuwa mwenye mui yaana raisi wa Kiwandeo* (Lamu).
CHI = Chiraghdin 1987, 13.
SHA = Shariff 1988, 119.
BSH = Biersteker and Shariff 1995, 21, 22.

[29] See Miehe 1976 for a detailed comparison of poetic lines attributed to Muyaka bin Haji or Zahidi Mngumi.

rearranges lines. The compact nature of the poetic line, which is a clearly defined syntactic, semantic and metrical unit, makes it more easily detachable and reusable in another context: the lines stick in the mind of the poet, who can make use of them again. This is even more so for the stanza: according to local poetic conventions, the *ubeti* needs to adhere to the rule of *kutosheleza* ('to be self-contained').[30] It is a compact unit that is apt to be rearranged within new texts and contexts. Furthermore, given the polyphonic nature of the poetry, there is no narrative sequence that could be destroyed by rearranging stanzas or leaving a stanza out. This is in line with what Barber highlights as preconditions for detaching the text from a specific context and making it repeatable so that it can be performed in a new context; Barber considers this a form of 'entextualisation'.[31] In her view, the lack of deictic definiteness in time, space and, as one might add, the sequence of events driven by cause and consequence contributes to the lack of definite reference, i.e. the text's 'deliberate indeterminacy' along with the strongly allusive or metaphorical nature of the text.[32] They foster the extraction and rearrangement of the text in a new context where stanzas can acquire new meaning.[33]

Accordingly, lines and stanzas also 'slip' easily from one poem to another, making the boundaries between the texts unclear. The poet (and the performer and copyist as well) relies on a repertoire of poetic lines and formulas that ideally fit the metrical environment. Therefore, the question of authorship becomes elusive because poets rely on their stock repertoires and take lines from one context to use in others, so for them and for the audience, the idea of original authorship does not exist as it does for the *utenzi*.

The line between the performer, scribe and composer becomes blurred in such a context. In this case, poetic speech, even if it is written down, is full of preconceived lines that are taken over wholesale. The *mashairi*, which originate in a context of oral performance, namely *kujibizana*, or dialogic poetry, have to be composed on the spot in the context of performance, and the poet has to give a swift reply to his or her opponent. He or she therefore makes use of quotes and recycled formulas and builds on the words of his or her predecessor and other poets. It is also possible that Zahidi Mngumi took over stanzas and verses from his opponents and vice versa. Moreover, after his death, in writing down, copying or re-performing his poetry, performers and scribes may have added lines that other sources attribute to other poets. We also find many of Muyaka's lines in the aphorisms collected by William Taylor, where it is often not even clear whether the aphorism is a line quoted from Muyaka bin Haji's poem or, conversely, if Muyaka bin Haji quoted a line that was already in circulation.[34]

Thus, to conclude, the largely oral performance of the text – where the text only takes concrete shape in performance, and where the poet relies on a repertoire that he or she can ideally rearrange – corresponds to the undetermined nature of the text, which appears obscure as its meaning lies somewhere other than in the words as such. On the one hand, it largely depends on interpretation, and on the other, its indeterminacy also allows for textual variability, i.e. the rearrangement of the text. This fluid but formulaic nature of the text is echoed by its presentation in writing as well as by textual variability from one manuscript to the other. Most of the time, unless written for a European audience, a manuscript is of a secondary nature, documenting some lines whose collocation appears random: they may easily end up in a new constellation in the next document. Authorship is also variable. In Kenya, I have occasionally heard people quarrelling over authorship and the fact that 'poets steal from other poets', attributing this to the present-day lack of care and concern for old poetry. Yet I rather think that the fluidity of lines can be attributed to the performative aspect of the poetry and the obscure language full of *mafumbo* 'riddles' that emerges from and contributes to it. The poem is quite deliberately formed from a reservoir of existing lines and imagery. On the manuscript page, the poem becomes a written poem, but in a much more restricted sense compared to the *utenzi*. Memory and knowledge of the text play an important role, such that accurate marking of prosodic units, punctuation, line breaks and spacing, not to mention a full account of the story, are not deemed necessary. In a context where the rearrangement of lines to build a powerful poetic statement is more important than questions of authorship, not only textual boundaries but also questions of textual length become relative. Each text exists only as a momentary constellation of poetic lines.

[30] Abdulaziz 1996, 416.

[31] Barber 2007, 22.

[32] Barber 2007, 91.

[33] Barber 2007, 72–74.

[34] Taylor 1891.

Lastly, the minor importance attributed to the manuscripts is also echoed by the hasty writing style in manuscripts that were not commissioned by European scholars: the orthography in them is inconsistent. Nor do calligraphy or ornamentation play a role, as we notice in the following lines attributed to Fumo Liyongo, which Mwalimu Sikujua wrote towards the end of the nineteenth century, where words have been crossed out and letters written down in a hurry. Furthermore, the weak manuscript conservation practices on the Swahili coast[35] could also be considered indicative of the minor importance attributed to Swahili manuscripts. In this sense, Swahili manuscripts are also treated differently compared to the carefully adorned and valuable Arabic books and manuscripts from the coast, which are often better preserved. Thus, at the same time and in the same place, there were fundamentally different conventions for writing Arabic and for writing Swahili. Arabic and Swahili texts depend on different ideas of literacy: while in a Swahili literary environment each Arabic text is essentially a written text, and thus the written word is cherished, only some aspects of Swahili texts, which are part of a bigger oral tradition, are presented in the manuscripts.[36] A reader needs a great deal of predictive knowledge about the text to be able to access it.

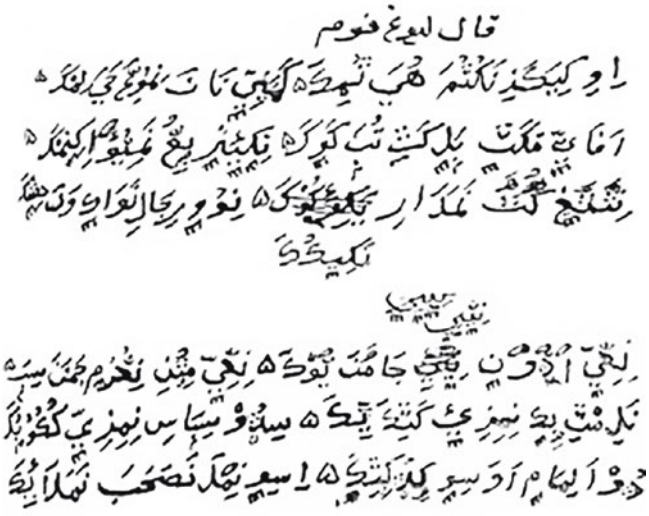


Fig. 6: Example of a hastily written, unadorned Swahili manuscript page of the *Utumbuizo wa Dhiki* ('Song of Agony'), most probably written by Mwalimu Sikujua (MS Nabahany Collection, Mombasa).

4. Copying as a 'scribal performance'

I would like to argue for Swahili manuscripts' inclination towards orality by considering one more aspect that has not been explored with respect to Swahili poetry: oral techniques as used in reading and copying manuscripts. The basic idea is that copying a manuscript in this predominantly oral context is different from copying in the sense of deciphering manuscripts word by word, letter by letter, and reproducing the same signs on paper again. Rather, in copying, the scribe or copyist voices the text, performs it and thereby introduces variation.

I am drawing on Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's Visible Song, a study of Old English manuscripts, in which she considers the many variants that occur in the texts as traces of the residue of oral practice. In copying texts, scribes refashion them, because the copyist recasts the text in his or her own voice before writing it down. Accordingly, a text changes from manuscript to manuscript similarly to how the text changes from oral performance to oral performance. The copyist relies on techniques known from the context of oral performances. In a similar vein, Doane describes a 'scribal performance' in the following way:

> Whenever scribes who are part of the oral traditional culture write or copy traditional oral works, they do not merely mechanically hand them down; they rehear them, 'mouth' them, 're-perform' them in the act of writing in such a way that the text may change but remain authentic, just as a completely oral poet's text changes from performance to performance without losing authenticity.[37]

In such contexts, the idea of unfaithfulness to the text or of textual corruption does not make any sense. The scribe does not reproduce a visual sign on paper, but is foremost a reader who reads aloud, makes sense of the text and later 'translates' his voice into visual signs again.

There are several 'traces' of this technique of revoicing found in the manuscripts, which I will consider below.

[35] Samsom 2015, 207

[36] O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990, 19 highlights a similar contrast between Old English vernacular literature and Latin texts; while Latin was predominantly a written language, never spoken, Old English was a spoken language as well as the language of commentary – and this dichotomy is also reflected in the writing style.

[37] Doane 1991, 80, 91.

4.1 Dialectal variation

A scribe may adapt the text to his own dialect, for instance. In the Swahili context, there a host of examples of dialectal variation in different versions of the same text. On the one hand, Kiamu – the dialect of the city-state of Lamu in Northern Kenya, which turned into a cultural and literary centre in the course of the nineteenth century – became a prestigious literary register that was also used to write poetry well away from Lamu. In Northern Mozambique, for instance, poems in Kiamu were not only circulated, but local poets also made a deliberate effort to use Kiamu features in their poetic compositions. On the other hand, particularly in the rival city-state of Mombasa, texts and stanzas composed in Kiamu were adapted to the local Kimvita. Even in the venerated poem of *Al-Inkishafi* – composed on Pate by Said Abdallah Said Ali bin Nasir bin Sheikh Abubakr bin Salim – the famous scribe and copyist Mwalimu Sikujua from Mombasa did not stick to the mostly Kiamu forms of the text, but brought in his own dialect, as echoed for instance in sound features (alveolar instead of rhotacised *nd* and *nt*) as well as in forms like *ikomile* 'it has finished' (stanza 23) or the class prefix *vi-*, for instance in *vitwa* instead of *zitwa* 'heads' (stanza 35), the form normally used in Kiamu.[38] Sometimes, scholars referred to his manuscript version as a 'southern recension' (Taylor 1915) whose divergence from the northern version stirred some discussion.[39] Even so, it was hardly a deliberate effort to produce a Mombasan version of the text, as Kimvita, the Mombasan dialect, is not used exclusively or consistently. While in his edition, Hichens dismisses the many variants as false 'corrections' or 'copyist errors' or gap-fillers, I rather consider them to reflect the scribe's practice of recasting the text in his own words.[40] Therefore, not only variations from different dialects are introduced but also transpositions or interpolations of lines, which Hichens notes as mistakes.

4.2 Quoting sound

Furthermore, the way of writing Arabic words and lines embedded in Swahili poetry, i.e. not according to Arabic orthography, but according to local pronunciation, can be considered further evidence of the practice of voicing text. For instance, the lines quoted from the Quran in the Swahili version of the 'Story of Yusuf' (*Utenzi wa Yusufu*) appear to violate Arabic orthography.[41] Muhamadi Kijuma, the scribe, seems to have quoted the Quran by heart, whereby he 'corrupted' the Arabic lines. This seems to suggest that he did not refer to the Quran in order to copy from it and adhere to its conventional orthography, but quoted the lines from memory, i.e. how he remembered the sound.[42]

4.3 Half-reading the text

There are further hints of practices linked to an oral culture. O'Brien O'Keeffe suggests that rather than copying lines word by word, scribes of Old English verse half-predicted the text while writing it down.[43] Thus, the copyist only half-read the text and 'guessed' the rest of the text, which is possible because the text is so dependent on formulas. Thus, the reader and copyist used his or her 'knowledge of the conventions of the verse to "predict" what is on the page'. [44]While working on old manuscripts with the poet and scholar Ahmed Sheikh Nabahany, I often saw him copying an *utenzi* in a similar way: he started reading a stanza, but often would not finish reading it – as I saw his eyes moving away from the paper – instead adding the rest of the line or stanza from memory. This technique is possible because many lines and stanzas make use of formulas that ideally fit the metrical pattern of the *utenzi*, so if one knows the beginning, one can fill in the rest of the line. In the line *kwa dunia na akhera* 'in this world and the hereafter', for instance, he would only have to read kwa dunia to be able to add *na akhera* from memory, just as he could add whole lines from the many stock phrases he had memorised. He also offered to 'fix' lines that had become unreadable in such a way.

The variants in *Nenda Asha wa Hamadi* listed above provide another example. On the one hand, one finds variants that simply come from reading the manuscript in different ways. In stanza four (see above), for instance, Nabahany, who transliterated the manuscript in the 1980s, read *kimbelembele* as *kipilipili*, which can be attributed to a different reading of the Arabic script. (In Arabic script, there is often no difference marked between *be* and *pe*, nor are nasals marked.) *Nyuki*, which Nabahany transcribed as *nyoki*

[38] See, for, instance, the editions by Hichens 1939 and Taylor 1915.

[39] See for instance, Hichens 1939, 108.

[40] Hichens 1939, 109.

[41] Raia 2017, 146 and Raia forthcoming.

[42] In a similar way, many Arabic loanwords figuring in the text do not appear in their Arabic orthography, their standardised visual shape, but how the poet hears and writes them.

[43] O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990, 40.

[44] O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990, 40.

and Maawy as *wanyoki* in the second line of the same stanza, is a similar example, as the reading of vowels as well as that of word boundaries is subject to interpretation.

On the other hand, however, there is another kind of variability found in the first line of the same poem: other sources do not say *Nenda Asha wa Hamadi*, as we find the manuscript (HH) written by Kijuma, but *Zizi na Asha Hamadi* (CHI and BSH) or *Zizi Asha na Hamadi* (MA). These are all variants that could hardly come from copyists reading the letters differently; rather, they hint at processes of half-reading, where the obscurity of the reference – who is or who are Zizi and Asha? – fosters variability in reading, and hence reformulation. These variants are also possible within the metrical framework of the verse.

A copyist not only copied a manuscript, but also made considerable use of his reservoir of formulas. The poet half-reads the text and then fills in the gaps, thereby producing variants in many cases. Lexical variation, where we find certain words replaced by others, can be considered as evidence of this. Consider stanza three of *Nenda Asha wa Hamadi*: the second half-line of *Tukumbuke ulimwengu – umezozinga duniya* 'Let us remember how the ways of the world have changed' appears as *ugeukao duniya* in the manuscript from Berlin (SBB): here the copyist used a synonym of *-zinga*, namely the verb *-geuka* 'to change, to turn'. In stanza four (see above), *tusiwekwe tuli duni* 'so that we won't be regarded as worthless' appears as *tusiweke cheo duni* 'so that we won't have a low rank' in many sources (SBB, MA, NA, SHA, BSH, FA); in DA, it even takes the form of *tusiwe kishindoni* 'so that we may not quarrel'.

When considering Swahili poetry, I have often been struck by the enormous amount of textual variation that exists. Multiple versions of one text are never the same, even if they were copied again and again by the same copyist.[45] The copyist can add or omit lines or stanzas, but he or she also introduces variation at the level of the line or stanza. Still, generally speaking, variants do little to alter the basic narrative or theme of the text and, as I hoped to show here, are often based on formulas. Variants emerge, conditioned and restricted by the metrical, syntactic and semantic framework of the stanza, and often consist of pre-existing strings of words that are part of the poet's mental vocabulary. Therefore, the practice of copying is similar to the oral performance of a text, in which the performer essentially resorts to stock phrases that he can adapt to the context of performance. In both cases, literal faithfulness to a previous text is not the primary concern: neither the written document nor the previous oral version is more authentic than the current oral version or document. No effort is made to reproduce a text verbatim, either in a performance of it or in copying.

On the one hand, one can consider formulaic techniques as being conditioned by the necessity to keep the oral presentation fluid and, accordingly, also as a way to cope with the idiosyncrasy and variability of handwriting and the lack of a standard orthography, which also turns reading and copying Swahili manuscripts into a difficult task. The scribe necessarily resorts to the practice of improvisation, which he knows from contexts of oral performance. This view would be in line with the functional perspective that dominates the debate on oral formulaic theory. However, it fails to recognise the active role of the scribe and his or her engagement with the text. In this context, copying does not mean reproducing the poem mechanically, but 're-voicing' the text. The reader also contemplates the text. Copying is thus not a dull technique with which to reproduce a text, but rather an inspiring and stimulating exercise in the same vein as memorisation and recitation, which are both appreciated.[46] Learning the Quran by heart, for instance, is not only a way of preserving the text, but a form of contemplation, which implies that understanding comes gradually, through repetition, which continuous engagement with the text renders possible. Similarly, for Swahili poetry, the copyist appropriates the text, and the variability echoes this active engagement with it. Apart from variability at the level of the stanza, copyists also often add stanzas in an effort to reformulate the scene. *Tenzi* in particular tend to grow over time, as the scribe, in voicing the text, contemplates scenes and ideas; while pondering them, he amplifies them by adding more details or stressing certain sentiments, for instance.[47] The scribe recites and rethinks the pre-existing text in writing and reshapes it, which is easily conflated with composing.[48]

[45] This became most clear to me while I was working on the manuscripts copied by Muhamadi Kijuma, who copied many poems several times to sell them to European scholars, in particular William Hichens in London and Ernst Dammann in Hamburg.

[46] Furthermore, as Samsom 2013 argues, writing as such might also be considered an adequate way of not only preserving, but also venerating the divine text.

[47] See Raia 2017, 103–117 and Vierke 2016.

[48] O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990, 41 also underlines the similarity between reading, copying and composing because formulaic language plays an important role in all of these activities.

5. Conclusion

A main idea of this paper is to underline the fact that writing is not a straightforward process, but can take on different roles and functions. On the one hand, it can be strongly linked with the very idea of the poem, such that prosodic features become visual features of the script. On the other hand, however, writing can be so entangled with orality that the question of what a text is, where it starts and where it ends becomes difficult to answer – and also reading is linked with memorisation. In the latter context, each version of the text is but a temporary constellation of parts, which recur in a different arrangement in the next manuscript and performance. Questions about the original text are elusive in this context since they imply the idea of erosion, namely of a unified text that gradually diverges over time. The samples of *tumbuizo* and *mashairi* taken into consideration here, however, suggest that the constant flux of preconceived strings of words and newly created lines, which then become part of a repertoire, is rather a rule of composition. In the Swahili context where not only the spoken word but the repertoire of poems is key, composing tends to be conflated with copying and reading anyway. In this sense, it is rather the *utenzi* with its strong emphasis on writing and fixity despite its own variability that is the more peculiar case. Probably also because it is clearly derived from a practice of adaptation or translation that emphasises the Arabic original, it more closely mimics the use, reading and writing of Arabic texts in the Swahili context

REFERENCES

Abdalla, Abdilatif (ed.) (1973), *Utenzi wa Fumo Liyongo*, Dar es Salaam: Chuo cha Uchunguzi wa Lugha ya Kiswahili, Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam.

Abdulaziz, Mohamad (1979), *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

——(1996), 'The Influence of the Qasida on the Development of Swahili Rhymed and Metred Verse', in Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (eds), *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 411–428.

Abel, Martin (1938), *Die arabische Vorlage des Suaheli-Epos Chuo Cha Herkal: Textkrit. Ed. u. Übers. Ein Beitr. zur Kenntnis d. legendären Maġāzi-Literatur (Zeitschrift für Eingeborenensprachen, Beiheft 18)*, Berlin: Reimer.

Barber, Karen (2007), *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biersteker, Ann, and Ibrahim Noor Shariff (1995), *Mashairi ya Vita vya Kuduhu. War Poetry in Kiswahili Exchanged at the Time of the Battle of Kuduhu*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Chiraghdin, Shihabuddin (1987), *Malenga wa Karne Moja: Utangulizi na Ahmed Sheikh Nabahany*, Nairobi: Longman.

Dammann, Ernst (1940), *Dichtungen in der Lamu-Mundart des Suaheli: gesammelt, herausgegeben und übersetzt von Ernst Dammann*, Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter & Co.

Doane, Alger Nick (1991), 'Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts: Editing Old English', in Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (eds), *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 75–113.

El-Buhriy, Hemed Abdallah Saidi Abdallah Masudi (1961), *Utenzi wa Abdirrahmani na Sufiyani: The History of Abdurrahman and Sufian*, edited by John Allen, Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau.

Grenville, Freeman (1973), *Chronology of African History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hichens, William (1938), 'The Lamu Chronicle', *Bantu Studies*, 12: 2–33.

—— (ed.) (1939), Al-Inkishafi: *The Soul's Awakening*, London: Sheldon Press.

Knappert, Jan (1958), *Het epos van Heraklios: een proeve van Swahili poëzie, tekst en vertaling, voorzien van inleiding, kritisch commentaar en aantekeningen*, PhD thesis, Leiden University, Alkmaar: Hofman.

—— (1979), *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse: A Literary History and Anthology*, London: Heinemann.

Miehe, Gudrun, Abdilatif Abdalla, Nassir Juma Ahmad Bhalo, Ahmed Nabahany, Angelica Baschiera, Clarissa Dittemer, Farouk Topan, Mohamed Abdulaziz, Said Ahmed Mohamed Khamis, Yahya Ali Omar, and Zeina Mahmoud Fadhil Al-Bakary (2004), *Liyongo Songs: Poems Attributed to Fumo Liyongo*, Cologne: Köppe.

—— (1976), 'Bemerkungen zur Muyaka-Rezeption in Lamu', *Africana Marburgensia*, 9/1: 33–58.

——, and Vierke, Clarissa (eds, 2010), *Muhamadi Kijuma: Texts from the Dammann Papers and Other Collections*, edited in collaboration with Sauda Barwani and Ahmed Sheikh Nabahany, Cologne: Köppe.

O'Brien O'Keeffe, Katherine (1990), *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Omar, Yahya Ali, and Peter J. Frankl (1994), 'A 12/18th Century Swahili Letter from Kilwa Kisiwani (Being a Study of One Folio from the Goa Archives)', *Afrika und Übersee*, 77: 263–272.

Raia, Annachiara (2017), *The Utendi wa Yusufu: A Critical Edition of the Swahili Poem of Yusuf and a Study of its Adaptation at the Swahili Coast*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bayreuth and University of Naples L'Orientale.

—— (forthcoming), 'Āya na Ubeti: Qur'ānic Quotations in Muhamadi Kijuma's Swahili Tendi Manuscripts: Citation Aspects and the Authorial Intervention', in Antonella Brita, Giovanni Ciotti, Florinda De Simini and Amneris Roselli (eds), *Textual and Material Craftsmanship: What Does Copying a Manuscript Mean*, Naples: Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo.

Samsom, Ridder (2013), 'Why write in the abandoned Arabo-Swahili script?', *manuscript of the month* 11/2013, Hamburg: CSMC <https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/mom/2013_11_mom_e.html>.

—— (2015), 'The Dissolved Collection of Sheikh Aliy Ahmed Abdallah al-Buhriy (1889–1957)', *Islamic Africa*, 6: 201–208.

Shariff, Ibrahim Noor (1988), *Tungo Zetu: Msingi wa Mashairi na Tungo Nyinginezo*, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Steere, Edward (1870), *Swahili Tales, as Told by Natives of Zanzibar*, London: Bell & Daldy.

Taylor, William (1891), *African Aphorisms: Or, Saws from Swahili-Land*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

—— (1915), 'Inkishafi, A Swahili Speculum Mundi', in Chauceny Stigand (ed.), *A Grammar of the Dialectic Changes in the Kiswahili Language: With an Introduction and a Recension and Poetical Translation of the Poem INKISHAFI, A Swahili Speculum Mundi by the Rev. W. E. Taylor, M.A.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 73–105.

Vierke, Clarissa (2011), On the Poetics of the Utendi: *A Critical Edition of the Nineteenth-Century Swahili Poem 'Utendi wa Haudaji' Together with a Stylistic Analysis*, Berlin: LIT.

—— (2014), 'Akhi patia kalamu: Writing Swahili Poetry in Arabic Script', in Meikal Mumin and Kees Versteegh (eds), *Arabic Script in Africa: Studies on the Usage of a Writing System*, Leiden: Brill, 311–331.

—— (2016), 'From Across the Ocean: Considering Travelling Literary Figurations as Part of Swahili Intellectual History', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28/2: 225–240.

Zhukov, Andrey (1992), 'The Dating of Old Swahili Manuscripts: Towards Swahili Paleography', *Swahili Language and Society, Notes and News*, 9: 60–68.

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

El-Maawy, Ali A. (n.d.), *The Reconstruction of the Early Struggles for Independence (1807–1873). The Lamu Hero: The Story of Bwana Zahidi Mngumi* (unpublished booklet).

Nabahany, Ahmed Sheikh (n.d.), *Mapisi ya Bwana Zahidi Mngumi Aliyekuwa Mwenye Mui Yaani Raisi wa Kiwandeo* (Lamu) (unpublished paper).

Nenda wa Asha Hamadi, MS 1219 H56 (University of Hamburg, Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen).

Utendi wa Haudaji, MS 279888-7 (Allen Collection, SOAS, University of London).

Utumbuizo wa Dhiki, (Nabahany Collection, Mombasa, now possibly kept at the Research Institute of Swahili Studies of Eastern Africa in Mombasa).

Utumbuizo wa Kikowa, MS 47754 (Taylor Collection, SOAS, University of London).

Ziza na Asha Hamadi, Hs. or. 9954 (State Library of Berlin, Oriental Department).

Transcript (of *Ziza na Asha Hamadi*) by Ernst Dammann with notes and stanzas added by Ahmed Nabahany (DEVA Bayreuth).

PICTURE CREDITS

Figs 1–2: © London, SOAS.

Fig. 3: © The author.

Fig. 4: © Universität Hamburg, Asien-Afrika-Institut (Institute of Asian and African Studies); Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage).

Fig. 5: © The author.

Fig. 6: © Nabahany Collection, Mombasa.