

Wissenschaftliches Teilprojekt C07

Arabo-Swahili Manuscripts in Practice: Rituals, Ceremonies, Liturgies and Healing

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Description of the project

The overall aim of this subproject is to investigate the manuscriptological aspects of Swahili cultural practices, exemplified by a study of eleven manuscript of a central text of the canon of Swahili Islamic literature, i.e. the qasida *Hamziyya* (QH), and to feed into a broader discussion on the production and uses of manuscripts in rituals and ceremonies. The manuscripts, accessed by fieldwork in the prior phase of C07, show widely divergent properties in design, language arrangement and annotative enrichment – monolingual Arabic, monolingual Arabo-Swahili, Arabic with Arabo-Swahili (and Arabic) annotations (e.g. Ms 003H), Arabic with inter-linear Arabo-Swahili poetic rendition (e.g. Ms 006H). This raises fundamental questions as to the relation of form and function: to what extent do their divergent forms reflect different ways of usage, tapping the spiritual power ascribed to the poem? In trying to find an answer, the corpus will be subjected to a multi-facetted functional analysis combining textual criticism and material analysis with contextual analyses which aim at reconstructing the life of the individual manuscripts and their position in a literary canon as could be derived from their place in collections. These analyses will be supplemented by recordings of *Hamziyya* performances in religious ceremonies and interviews with performers, manuscript owners, custodians and scribes.

Objectives

The *Hamziyya*, or more precisely the *Qaṣīdah al-Hamziyyah fī al-madā'ih al-Nabawiyah*, is a qasida, i.e. a panegyric poem in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, also known by its name '*Umm al-qurā'* 'mother of cities', which is based on an Arabic original composed in the 13th century by the Egyptian Sufi cleric Muḥammad b. Sa'īd al-Buṣīrī (1212 - 1294 CE) and poetically rendered into Swahili in the 18th century by Sheikh Aidarus b. Athman b. Ali Sheikh Abubakar of Lamu. It occupies a canonical position in the Swahili literary tradition and plays a significant role in the religious life of some Swahili people until today: it is regularly performed in the context of central occasions of Islamic life, e.g. during the holy month of Ramadhan and



Ms 003H: the Arabic text in bold provides ample space between the stanzas for word and phrase annotations in Arabic and Arabo-Swahili; copyist: Abi Bakar bin Sultan bin Athman, 1311 AH / 1893 CE; Sheikh Ahmad Badawy Hussein's private collection, Mombasa; Photo by Ridder H. Samsom.

Maulidi festivals where it is recited in veneration of the Prophet Muhammad by experts known as *mabingwa wa Pate* "experts of Pate". Due to its association with *baraka* 'blessing' it is also applied in lifecycle ceremonies such as circumcision and marriage, and in healing, e.g. for recital to women in labor. Apart from such usage in ceremonial contexts, there is evidence of Swahili scholarly engagement with the QH text, as reflected in Ms 003H which attests to a translational practice in the context of a transfer of Islamic religious knowledge. QH thus provides an excellent access to explore the production and the use of Arabo-Swahili Mss in a variety of cultural practices both in synchronic and diachronic perspective.



Ms 006H: interlinear arrangement of original Arabic text followed by a poetical rendition in Arabo-Swahili in stanza-wise alternation; copyist: Sayyid Uthman bin Maulana bin Abdul Rahman, Pate, 1330 AH / 1911 CE; Mwalimu Dini's collection, *Msikiti wa Juma* (Friday Mosque), Pate; Photo by Ahmed Parkar.

Swahili Manuscript Culture

With the arrival of Islam in the 8th century, literacy in Arabic and the Arabic script reached the East African coast. By the end of the 17th century writing Swahili in the Arabic script was well-established and had given rise to a deep-rooted literary tradition, producing a considerable number of manuscripts. Despite the sizeable corpus and critical text editions of various literary achievements such as *Hamziyya*, *Al-Inkishafi*, *Fumo Liyongo*, *Muyaka* and *Mwana Kupona*, there are, as yet, no established conventions of codicological research. In most cases the contexts of manuscript production and of manuscript usage remain unclear. Swahili manuscript studies are still in their initial stages: most of the scientific tools and data that are standard in other disciplines still have to be developed.