ALAMIN MAZRUI:
Swahili Beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language, Identity.
(Ohio University Research in International Studies, Africa Series.) x,
0 89680 252 0.

Alamin Mazrui’s Swahili Beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language
and Identity, is a collection of texts previously published in academic
journals or edited books. In addition to Chapters 1, 2 and 4, whose prior
publications are mentioned in the acknowledgements, a version of
Chapter 3 has been published as “Transcending the boundaries of
Islam: written Swahili literature in the twentieth century” in Religious
Perspectives in Modern Muslim and Jewish Literatures, edited by
Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick (London, 2006). Bringing
these diverse papers together in a monograph enables the author to
revisit the issue of Swahili identity through the central concept of
hybridity.

Mazrui elaborates his understanding of hybridity, as applied to
Swahili culture, in the introduction to the book, entitled “Hybridity
reconfigured”. Departing from the habitual view of the Swahili as a
hybrid of Arab and African heritage, Mazrui redefines hybridity as a
quality inherent to all cultures in all times and attributes it with a new
potential. To him, the concept of hybridity challenges the “colonial
norm” (p. 2) of fixed, immutable identities – essentialism. The book’s
four chapters then focus on the different facets of hybridity in
Swahili culture.

Chapter 1, “The intercultural heritage of Swahili literature”, goes
through the historical development of Swahili literature. Sadly, the
text is replete with imprecisions and errors. For example, Mazrui
mentions Takhmisa ya Liyongo as one of the “celebrated tenzi of this
period of the early eighteenth century” (p. 17). However, Takhmisa
ya Liyongo is not an utenzi, although there is an utenzi (of a later
date) about Fumo Liyongo. The author of Takhmisa, Sayyid
Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir, lived around 1720–1820, so in the “early
eighteenth century” he was just born. The other tenzi from this period
listed by Mazrui, Utendi wa Katirifu (dated to the last quarter of the
eighteenth century by Knappert, but probably from the early
nineteenth century), Utendi wa Mwana Kupona (composed in 1858),
and Utendi wa al-Akida (composed in the late 1870s), likewise do not
fall into “the early eighteenth century”.

The exposé of Swahili poetry in this chapter is also very incomplete;
it discusses only utenzi and shairi as poetic forms and omits some of the
greatest Swahili compositions, such as Al-Inkishafi. In talking about
the beginnings of free-verse poetry in Swahili (p. 36), Mazrui does
not even mention its doyen, Euphrase Kezilahabi.

Mazrui’s discussion of Swahili prose contains problematic
statements. The title of Katama Mkangi’s novel Walenisi does not
mean “The Damned” (p. 39): Mkangi’s neologism, formed from
wale-ni-sisi, “those-are-us”, refers to an idyllic, utopian society on
another planet. Kezilahabi’s Gamba la Nyoka certainly does (explicitly!)
interrogate the validity of ujamaa ideology (p. 40). While Said
Ahmed Mohamed is a prominent representative of magical realism,
the short story “Arusi ya Buldoza” is not one written in this style
(p. 32); it would be more appropriate to name in this context his novels
Babu Alipofufuka and Dunia Yao. It also appears questionable to call
Wamitila’s complex magical realist novel Bina-Adamu! “socialist
literature” (p. 39).
Chapter 2, “Aesthetics of Swahili verse: between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’”, discusses the traditional prosody of Swahili poetry and the introduction and reception of free-verse poetry. The thrust of the chapter is ideological: Mazrui suggests that the resistance to innovations in the form of Swahili poetry is related to the fear of losing the distinct “Swahili identity”. In chapter 3, “Religion and the boundaries of Swahili literature”, Mazrui addresses the much-debated question of whether traditional Swahili literature was religious or secular. He concludes that it was the double bias, towards the written word and the racial bias privileging Arab over African (p. 88) that gave prominence to Islamic literature. Secular topics could be found in abundance in the domain of orality.

In chapter 4, “Translation and the (re)configuration of the Swahili literary space”, Mazrui draws attention to the curious fact that translations into Swahili, from the earliest texts such as Hamziyya (from Arabic) to translations of Shakespeare, have become part of Swahili literature and assumed an identity independent of the original texts. A striking example is the translation of Orwell’s Animal Farm. Mazrui shows how the text became relevant in East Africa because of the many ways in which Orwell’s allegory applied to the political situation in Tanzania and Kenya.

In my opinion, the book suffers from being a collection of texts published elsewhere over a span of twenty years. The question of identity and its manifestations in language and literature have already been approached through the prism of hybridity in the monograph Mazrui co-authored with Ibrahim Noor Shariff, The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People (Trenton, New Jersey, 1993; see “Introduction: the relativity of identity”). Chapter 1 is not systematic and exhaustive enough for a factographic historical overview of Swahili literature, and for a thematic or ideological discussion of Swahili literature, it abides too closely by the facts and does not develop any theoretical approaches or new insights into literary works. Chapter 2 would profit from an update with respect to the 1992 journal article on which it is based: it should mention the recent developments and innovations in Swahili free-verse poetry, such as the introduction of visual poetry by Kithaka wa Mberia. The most original contribution of Swahili Beyond the Boundaries is the analysis of translation (chapter 4, in part also chapter 3, containing a history of the translation of the Quran into Swahili). The numerous mistakes and omissions on the factographic side, and also a large number of typographical errors, severely diminish the book’s impact.

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