

ALAMIN MAZRUI:

*Swahili Beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language, Identity.*  
(Ohio University Research in International Studies, Africa Series.) x,  
206 pp. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007. £15.95. ISBN 978  
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.

Alena Rettová

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## GENERAL

MARTIN CLAYTON and BENNETT ZON (eds):

*Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East.*

(Music in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain.) xvii, 347 pp. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. £60. ISBN 978 0 7546 5604 3.

There are elements of a patchwork quilt in this large volume. This, of course, is the nature of edited volumes, but makes for occasional frustrations. At the last