

Rare Swahili manuscripts at SOAS

Angelica Baschiera and Lutz Märten introduce one of the world's largest collections of Swahili manuscripts at the Archives and Special Collections of SOAS library

Al-Inkishafi, page 1, c. 1930 (SOAS MS47770a)

Swahili, a Bantu language of East Africa, is one of the most widely spoken African languages. Originally spoken along the East African coast from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, Swahili has an extensive literary tradition, and its written literature spans more than three centuries.

Swahili was originally written in Arabic scripts as evidenced by earlier manuscripts. The first contact between the Arabian Peninsula and the East Africa coast dates back to the 8th century and the first settlement of Arab communities to the 12th/13th century.

As a result of this socio-economic and cultural interaction an extensive body of Islamic religious literature in the form of manuscripts flourished in the coastal towns of Kenya and northern Tanzania and the islands of Lamu, Pate, Siu, Zanzibar and Kilwa.

The SOAS manuscript collection includes about 450 manuscripts dating from 1790 to the late 20th century. The earliest manuscripts were collected in 19th century Mombasa by the scholar and member of the Church Missionary Society Rev. William E. Taylor, who worked closely with local Islamic experts, and subsequently by scholars, editors and academics that had links with SOAS.

Some of the most prestigious examples of these manuscripts are the religious poems 'Hamziyya' (c. 1792) and 'Al-Inkishafi' (c. 1853) written in Arabic script and in old Swahili form. The 'Hamziyya' (MS 53823), as it is known among the Swahili, is an ode in praise of the Prophet Muhammed. The first line of each verse is in Arabic and the second line is the Swahili translation of the first. The Arabic part of the poem is known as 'Ummul-Kura' and was written by Sheikh Muhammad bin Said, known as Albusiry, a prominent Egyptian poet. The poem used to be recited from memory by professional singers from Pate, Siu and Bajuni.

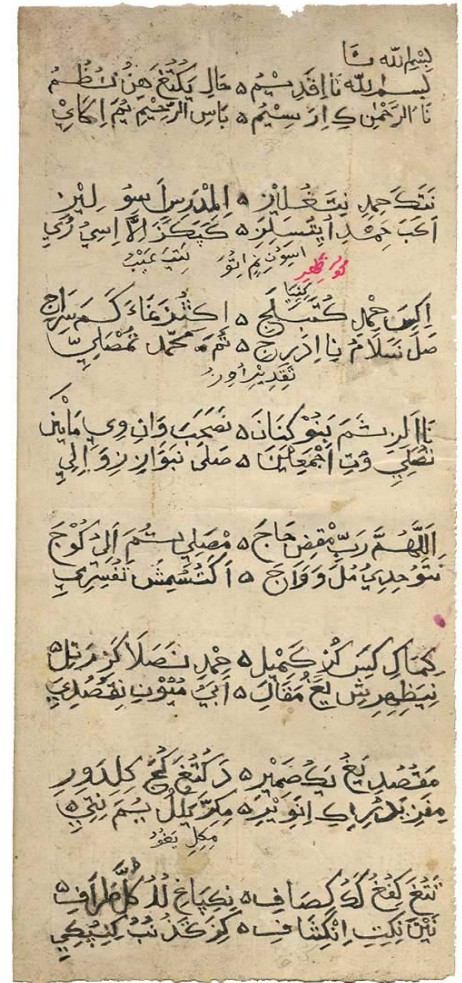
'Al-Inkishafi' (MS 256191), a religious poem known as 'The Soul Awakening', was composed by Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir, theologian and poet of distinction, and transliterated by Sir Mbarak Ali Hinawy, Liwali of Mombasa in the late 19th century who was also a religious expert and manuscripts collector. The poem is a soliloquy upon mortal defection and written at the close of an era which had seen the once great sultanate of Pate reduced to ruin.

In addition to religious literary material in Arabic scripts, Dr Alice Werner, lecturer in Bantu Languages at SOAS in the 1920s, began collecting and transcribing songs and poems by Fumo Liyongo, (MS 210012), the famous Swahili mythical hero who composed poems and songs that were originally transmitted orally.

While Alice Werner was in East Africa in the late 1920s, she met William Hichens, a colonial administrator who had a great interest in Swahili literature and who began collecting material with her help. His interest was in literary and historical documents and he created one of the first anthologies of Swahili literature, MS 53825.

Subsequent collectors were linguists and Islamic scholars from SOAS. Among them was Professor JWT Allen who, in collaboration with Sir Mbarak Ali Hinawy, collected a large corpus of Islamic religious poems that he deposited at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. Also, Dr Jan Knappert, a Swahili scholar and linguist who taught at SOAS in the 1970s, and Wilfred Whiteley, professor of Bantu languages at SOAS in the 1960s/1970s, both collected manuscripts, deposited them in the SOAS Archives and wrote extensively about them.

Finally, in 2000, the Swahili manuscripts project team at SOAS created the Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar collection. The late Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar was a Swahili scholar from Mombasa, who had been based at SOAS



from the 1970s until his death in 2008, with great knowledge of Swahili language, Islamic literature and history and the rare expertise to read the Arabic scripts of the northern Swahili dialects. His extensive collection of Swahili manuscripts was added to the SOAS Archives to form the collection named after him. For more information about the project visit www.swahilimanuscripts.soas.ac.uk

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