

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

NO: 286.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we discuss Swahili poetry.

MUSIC: WALIMWENGU

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A Swahili song, "Walimwengu" by Sharmilla and the Black Star Musical Club. Well, in this programme we are going to discuss a new book called "Four Centuries of Swahili Verse - a Literary History and Anthology" by Dr. Jan Knappert, a lecturer in Swahili literature at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. Swahili poetry has a long and rich tradition in East Africa, especially along the coast, but it's only been collected and published in book form comparatively recently. With me to discuss "Four Centuries of Swahili Verse" is the book's author Dr. Jan Knappert, Nesor Malik of the BBC's Swahili Service and Ahmed Rajab of the magazine "Index on Censorship". Well, I'll begin with you, Jan. How did you come by the material for the book?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Ever since the beginning of the 17th century Swahili verse has been written in Arabic script and some of these manuscripts have strayed into various university libraries across the world. There are several here in London, there are some in Germany, some in Ireland and other places, and it is on these manuscripts that I worked 25 years ago when I began my studies in Swahili, after a degree in Arabic and Islam. I wrote my thesis on the early 18th century literature in Swahili on the Swahili epic tradition, and it wasn't until 1959, after my thesis, that I first came out to East Africa and met the Swahili speakers in the flesh, so to speak, and that was a great event, of course, to hear

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Swahili actually spoken as it's found in the books and in the traditions. Then in 1961 I got a scholarship at Makerere College to start actually collecting the manuscripts. I collected about 300 manuscripts in Swahili, in verse and in prose, mainly in Arabic script over the next three years.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, when did Swahili poetry begin?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

About 1600. We think that Liongo, the first known poet in Swahili, from whom we have no manuscripts, but he must have lived around 1580 hence the title of my book "Four Centuries". To give people the idea that there is history in Africa, there is even literary history in Africa, this wasn't known and this is still not accepted by everybody, but it's there. The Swahili have a long history, especially a long literary history, and this is the first time that this has been put together in one book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How did you arrive at this figure, this date 1580, especially as you say that you haven't got any evidence of the man's poetry?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Yes, well we have the evidence of chronicles and there is also the evidence of archeology. There were, for instance, the Sultans of Pate, who had chronicles written for them and the Portuguese were there in 1580, and there are tombstones of the period, for instances Mosques were built in this period.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, at this point I think I will turn to our two other colleagues, Nasor and Ahmed. I'll begin with you Ahmed, what was your reaction to the book when you read it?

AHMED RAJAB

First of all to comment on what Dr. Knappert has just said: I don't think I understand what he means when he says Swahili poetry began in 1580.

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

The Swahili language existed a thousand years ago. This has been established on the basis of some words that were written down by an Arab geographer, Al Masudy in the 10th century. So Swahili was spoken in Mombasa and other places a thousand years ago and probably they must have had songs and proverbs and stories, but we know nothing about them. So when I say it began in 1580, this

means that that is the oldest poetry we have preserved.

AHMED RAJAB

To talk about the book: In fact I found the book interesting especially on the history of the literary side of Swahili. I found it very interesting and I think it's the first time that material of this sort has been compiled in such a form. But glancing through the book I have a feeling that at times Dr. Knappert is paternalistic towards the Swahili. The book at times comes about, almost racist in tone, in the sense that, for example, the Swahili art of Ngalawa building is attributed to the Arabs and the Malays, the artistic skill and good craftsmanship in many trades is also attributed to the Asians. Even singing among the Swahili is attributed to the Portuguese, Dr. Knappert?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

I'm very sorry that you have the wrong impression, I am the very opposite of a racist and, perhaps I should have emphasised more than I did my admiration for the Swahili and I mean the Swahili themselves for what they have created. If you had read my previous book, "A Choice of Flowers", in which I collected a hundred Swahili songs, I say in the introduction that the Swahili are a race entirely on their own. They are perhaps a mixture of Arabs and Africans just as, let us say, the British are a mixture of the Norman-French and the Saxons, but they are something new, a new creation who have also created an entirely new culture and I admire them for that, that is why I wrote this book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I was going to, if anything, criticise Dr. Knappert for being too respectful of the Swahili, that is the impression I had got when I read the book because he seems to think that they are a race apart, as you say, he has described them as a people apart with their own language and all this, and he highly praises the poetry. I was just going to ask him somewhere along the line how he judges this Swahili poetry to be great?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Well, it is unique in Africa. There isn't anything like it in any other part of Africa. You, as it were, put the balance to Ahmed's question and it shows that I have to sail between the Scylla and Charybdis of criticism from both sides. I can never do right, can I? The problem is that I want to treat the Swahili as something special, a people with a special art because it has been played down, in Kenya especially. Those who know East Africa well will agree that Swahili are usually called 'coastal Arabs', even Swahili music has been called Arab music. Well I don't know any Arabic music that is similar to Swahili music, although I've looked for it, so there is this original culture and I want to put that on the map.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Well, Nasor at this point I think we will give you an opportunity to air your views.

NASOR MALIK

Well, first I read the book and I must congratulate Dr. Knappert for a fine work and collection and this is a follow up of another friend of mine, Dr. Harris, who also wrote on Swahili poetry in 1962, the history and all that. There is a little bit of difference between Dr. Knappert and Dr. Harris. Dr. Harris says that the Liongo poem which you quoted as 400 years, Dr. Harris tells us it is 300 years old, so there is a hundred years one way or the other. But it is old. But what I would like Dr. Knappert to tell me, how do they know that it is 400 years old when this poem by Liongo was written down by Muhammad Kijuma in 1913. They were written down in 1913 from oral tradition so how does one prove that actually it was 400 years old?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Well, we know that Liongo lived around 1580, 1600. That has been established on the basis of other traditions. A book came out in 1966, I think, written by James Kirkman after Lyndon Harris had written his book, so he couldn't have known this. In other cases manuscripts are dated. The manuscript of the Hamzia, the first Islamic poem in Swahili, is dated 1652, the manuscript of the Herikali, the first epic poetry in Swahili is dated 1728, all of course in Arabic dating.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Now, can we move over to the actual poetry itself. Perhaps we'd do best by reading an extract from, or a selection of the poetry. Nasor would you care to read it for us?

NASOR MALIK

Yes, I have Dr. Knappert's book here and there is this one on fire, the Poem of Fire. It's a modern one and in Swahili I'll read a few verses, not all of it. It reads like this:-

READING OF POEM IN SWAHILI

NASOR MALIK

Perhaps Dr. Knappert can read the English translation of this poem.

READING OF POEM IN ENGLISH

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Dr. Knappert this is a modern example.

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Does modern Swahili poetry owe anything to the traditional at all?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Yes, the form for instance. The form of this poem is entirely traditional. We find, for instance, Muyaka, the great poet who live around 1800 in Mombasa wrote in the same metre.

NASOR MALIK

And he wrote on things other than love and that sort of thing, did he not?

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Yes, on love and religion and about war and politics. He was very critical of the Sultan of Zanzibar, for instance.

AHMED RAJAB:

But this poem is unique in itself in the sense that it deals with nature, compared to the preoccupation of Swahili poets either with love or with politics or serious questions.

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Yes, Ahmed Nasir Juma, the poet, is a great friend of mine and one day I asked him, "Isn't there any nature poetry in Swahili? There is so much love poetry but little nature poetry". Then he produced this.

NASOR MALIK

Dr. Knappert will know that now they concentrate on politics rather than love.

AHMED RAJAB

In fact on that I was a bit disappointed in the book. Dr. Knappert in dealing with modern poetry did not talk, for example, on the Mombasa poet Abdullatif Abdulla who was jailed by President Kenyatta and who is, I think, the foremost poet. Dr. Knappert seems to think that his half-brother Abdu Nasir is the poet but I regard Abdullatif as the poet of today.

DR. JAN KNAPPERT

Abdullatif is a great friend of mine too, but you understand the book is already more than 300 pages and the publishers decided to stop at that and they cut off the rest. It was in fact more than 400 pages and so I hope to come back to the subject in a later book. You are quite right. There is a great deal of modern poetry that remains to be studied. In this book I concentrated on the history.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Well, I think at this point I should like to thank these gentlemen. I must make the point that we have, all of us, misunderstood Dr. Knappert's book to some degree or other and we'd do well to go and read it again, to concentrate on what he has said and do him justice.

Well, with me in the studio were Dr. Jan Knappert, author of a new book called "Four Centuries of Swahili Verse", Nasor Malik of the BBC Swahili Service and Ahmed Rajab of the magazine "Index on Censorship".

Well, that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. Don't forget to join me at the same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with more of that Swahili song we heard at the beginning, "Walimwengu" by Sharmilla and the Black Star Musical Club.

MUSIC: WALIMWENGU

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