

ELISABETH LINNEBUHR. *SPRECHENDE TÜCHER. FRAUENKLEIDUNG DER SWAHILI (OSTAFRIKA)*. Katalog, Stuttgart: Linden-Museum, 1994, 58pp., illustr.

Women in East Africa appear to be in a unique position worldwide: their everyday dresses are not only significant in their habitual textile codes, but also as textures exhibiting meaningful verbal elements in complex density and seemingly endless variety. These textual elements are proverbs or proverbial phrases written in Swahili, which seem to interact with the colour and design of the cloth (termed *kanga*), being either abstract or figurative in ornament, which the female wearer may choose according to current personal and interpersonal dispositions. The paremiologist will find a treasury of signs, texts and contexts, which extend the conventional notions of literature and the verbal arts. It appears rather curious to the reviewer that the Swahili proverb cloths have only recently come into scholarly focus, perhaps because of the meanwhile more advanced studies in gender relations and popular culture (though, for instance, truck slogans as another medium of proverb-like sentences were already recorded some 30 years ago)

One of the first documents of *kanga* materials is the small exhibition catalogue of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, which was prepared by Elisabeth Linnebuhr. Her catalogue produces 44 black and white and 26 colour photographs in superb printing quality, which depict street scenes and portraits of persons wearing *kanga*-dresses, demonstrate items of the related material culture and document ten *kanga*-designs in plain topview. The onlooker feels much attracted to see more of these 'tropically' colourful cloth items with their sometimes rather enigmatic inscriptions. Could there ever be assembled a complete inventory of all the designs produced over a total of ninety years?

Linnebuhr's descriptive text includes an introductory history of cotton textiles in East Africa, her sources being travellers' accounts and German mercantile reports. Interestingly she emphasizes (referring, *inter alia*, to a personal communication with Abdillatif Abdallah) that the women themselves once took the initiative to get their favoured proverbs and aphorisms printed onto their outfits. The hypothesis is forwarded that the proverbs are related to the metaphoric language of the sexual initiation rites of the adjacent Bantu-speaking ethnic groups (p 15). Another chapter describes the material and meta-terminological aspects of the *kanga*; usages beyond the dressing function are also pointed out (e.g. as a hammock for babies).

The most difficult aspects of the *kanga* are connected with the proverbs themselves: with their literal meanings (not infrequently a proverb appears in grammatically shortened form) and with their actual sense, which particularly arises from selecting and wearing the cloth in a given social context. Methodologically worth reflecting is Linnebuhr's episodic approach, in which she refers to various situations of using a specific *kanga* which were narrated to her by Yasmin, her 28 year old informant. Quite a number of Linnebuhr's literal translations are not as elegant as could be expected from a proverb translation (e.g. "Laß dich nicht elektrisieren, so daß Du vergißt" with its Swahili text being invisible on the picture, p 31). Other translations are either

too narrow or too wide. Needless to say that for an academic edition a number of words would require a lexical discussion. One wonders whether the published Swahili proverb collections could not have been of advantage to the author.

The use of kanga among non-Swahili East Africans would be another interesting topic of future research. "For Giriama women the kanga inscriptions have only little importance" (Linnebuhr, p 30); from accidental experiences with Pokomo women, both Christians and Muslims, I can confirm the contrary.

The description on page 20 indicates three footnotes, of which the text (apparently source references) is lacking. One or the other passage remains obscure¹, while on the whole Linnebuhr's style is well to read and sensible. The museum can be congratulated for a technically well prepared catalogue, which I am proud to show to discussion partners.

Elisabeth Linnebuhr has opened the eyes of the academic to an object which otherwise every traveller in East Africa sees and is attracted to. Scholarly studies have to follow which should be more rigorous with regard to the poetics, pragmatics and politics of the dressing materials. Prerequisites for this are comprehensive documentation, good acquaintancy with women and depending on the research aim, interviews with designers, producers and sellers. Would this research not also include the veiling functions of the buibui?

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GUDRUN MIEHE UND WILHELM J. G. MÖHLIG (ED.), SWAHILI - HANDBUCH. UNDER EDITORIAL CO-OPERATION OF ELENA BERTONCINI-ZÚBKOVÁ, SAUDA BARWANI-SHEIKH AND LUDWIG GERHARDT. 1995, KÖLN: RÜDIGER KÖPPE VERLAG. 460 pp. DM 128.-

Advanced Swahili students as well as teachers of Swahili will surely appreciate the new German Swahili - Handbook published recently. This handbook fills a gap in Swahili teaching materials. Thirteen authors, each of them being a specialist in the given Swahili field, have been collectively working on the volume.

Individual contributions spread in 21 chapters deal with problems of morphology and syntax, as well as with themes which are either outside the province of a usual textbook, or not

¹E.g. "Der Entwurf des Kangadesigns ist ... symmetrisch aufgebaut. Ausgewogenheit verdeckt besser, weil sie verschlossen ist und gleichzeitig sich vom Hintergrund abhebt. In der ornamentalen Symmetrie versteckt sich eine Dualität, die Einheit zeigt und wird so zum Ausdruck einer zum Äußersten gesteigerten Ambivalenz. Solche Strukturen haben die psychologische Wirkung von Beschwörendem und Bannendem." (p 21)