

REVIEW

Un autre regard sur l'histoire congolaise. Les documents arabes et swahilis dans les archives belges (1880-1899). Fontes Historiae Africanae. Ed. by Xavier Luffin. 2020. Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 391 pp., ISBN 978-90-7565-263-5.

The edited collection “*Un autre regard sur l'histoire congolaise*” indeed offers – as the book title promises – a different, and above all, deeper perspective on Arabic and Swahili archival documents in Belgian archives. Xavier Luffin, Professor of Arabic Literature at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), provides with this work in French the only (to the author’s knowledge) comprehensive catalogue of transcriptions/translations of early Arabic and Swahili documents in what is now the east of the DR Congo. While the editor has discussed selected documents from various locations in the Congo Basin such as Stanley Falls, Marungu, and Uele in previous works (Luffin 2007, 2014, among others), his critical archival studies in the present anthology combine earlier selections with new in-depth insights, culminating in a more comprehensive work dealing with correspondences at the beginning of King Leopold’s (II.) colonial activities in the two last decades of the 19th century. The aforementioned “*autre regard*” [other view] lies in a change of perspective on historical events: Instead of looking at specific documents through a historical-sociolinguistic lens, for example, the selected texts speak for themselves as historical testimonies, offering insights into formulaic language and recurring structures, different styles, multilingual codemixing practices, and intertextual relations between correspondences of the same authors or signers.

Above all, the editor’s focus on both Arabic and Swahili documents (most of them in Arabic script) makes the work a valuable resource for scholars of various disciplines, providing access to very different textual genres. Luffin’s compilation consists of “*lettres, contrats, accords diplomatiques [...], cahiers personnels, ouvrages [...], qu'ils soient manuscrits, lithographiés ou imprimés, mais aussi planches utilisées à l'école coranique, amulettes, etc.*” (p. 12) [letters, treaties, diplomatic agreements [...], personal notebooks, works [...] whether handwritten, lithographed or printed, but also tablets/boards used in the Koranic school, amulets, etc.].¹ The documentary value of the annotated catalogue is enhanced by the fact that few linguists, anthropologists, and historians currently² address the history of the periphery of what is now the DR Congo – including the territories of the former Zande dynasties or the Lado Enclave in the borderlands of Congo, Uganda, and South Sudan (except perhaps Leopold [2005], several

¹ All rough translations from French to English were added by the present author.

² Older studies such as Stigand’s (1968[1923]) study of Lado, Czekanowski’s (1924) ethnography, or well-known sociohistorical studies such as Evans-Pritchard’s (1971) history of the Azande or Southall’s (1956) study of Alur society can be mentioned here, but lack the critical potential and temporal distance found in recent works.

REVIEW

works by Michael Meeuwis' on missionary endeavors in northern Congo, and some others). It should be noted, however, that not all of the texts in this collection are exclusively from north-eastern Congo; most of the texts written in Arabic script originate from (1) the Uele basin, (2) the Lado Enclave (as the areas furthest north and northeast), (3) Maniema and present-day Kisangani along the Lualaba/Congo River, and finally, furthest south, (4) the Marungu on the shores of Lake Tanganyika (p. 32). The great distances between these four areas (see the map provided by the editor, p. 371) reflect the wide sphere of influence of Arab-Swahili culture and language in eastern Congo toward the end of the 19th century – and the interactions of Arabs and Zanzibaris with Leopold's officers, missionaries, and Belgian authorities in general.

The book is divided into two parts: The first part contains an outline of the historical and cultural context of the documents' creation and dissemination (pp. 15–56), while the second part presents the main collection of various textual materials, their transcriptions and translations, including extensive metadata on their origins (where these were available) (pp. 57–357). These two main parts are preceded by a (brief) overview of applied transliteration of Arabic letters and an introduction, and followed by three appendices, figures, and a bibliography. The overall structure of the volume is well chosen and reader-friendly; the arrangement and organization of the documents is logical and allows a specific search for the regional origin and archiving institution of each text. Even with a rudimentary knowledge of Arabic, the selected documents and their transliteration and translation are accessible to the reader through the careful and thoughtful editing, and their valuable metadata (also the fact that the Arabic texts are vowelized may help the interested reader). Below I discuss parts of the content and the nature of the selected documents in the collection.

The first part provides an essential and sound historical introduction ("Le contexte historique et culturel"), that not only clarifies the context of the selected and transcribed texts, but has much more to offer: In addition to a profound historical outline, especially of the Arabic presence in the Congo before the turn of the 20th century, the reader is offered a comprehensive overview of the power dynamics at a crucial point in history. At the end of Arab slave raids in Central Africa and on the brink of a brutal new chapter in Congolese history, the Belgians are expanding their colonial projects and attempting to build an exploitative system of injustice. During this period of appropriation and change, the two predominant languages of wider communication in much of eastern Congo are Arabic and Swahili; these languages then become "*outils de la colonisation*" (p. 28) [tools of the colonization]. Luffin succeeds in guiding the reader through the complex sociopolitical history of these two languages (and of some others, too) with meticulously researched expertise. This section also includes information on the acquisition of the documents, their origins, and the emblematic structure of the Arabic letters (including the recurring "*formules épistolaires*" [p. 35], letter-specific formulas).

REVIEW

The documents found in the second part are listed “*selon les fonds d’archives auxquels ils appartiennent, c’est-à-dire généralement sous les noms des officiers de l’EIC qui les ont ramenés en Europe, classés par ordre alphabétique*” (p. 13) [according to the archives to which they belong, i.e., generally under the names of the officers of the EIC who brought them back to Europe, classified in alphabetical order]. However, it must be added that not all documents are in Arabic or Swahili only: Strictly speaking, 24 texts are in Arabic, 49 in Swahili, 24 in French with some Arabic words interspersed, 3 in English and another 3 in both Arabic and Swahili. In total, the collection comprises 103 texts, mostly written in Arabic script and in different languages. As mentioned earlier, the selected texts come from many different regions and span great geographical distances.

Each document is labeled, numbered and “inventoried” according to a specific system of acronyms: 1. archive/institution; 2. army officer/collector; 3. document number; thus resulting in inventories such as MRAC.STA.1 = Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale; Archives H.M. Stanley; text no. 1. The rich metadata – when available – include (1) category of document (letter, treaty, etc.), (2) author, (3) scribe, (4) recipient, (5) date, (6) place of writing, (7) language, (8) material, (9) comments/evaluation. These parameters help contextualize the documents, most of which are several lines long, a few of which consist only of one or two lines and some of which are of considerable length (especially if they already contain translations of several letters). Among other annotations, useful additions have been added by the editor, such as “*ajout au crayon dans le coin supérieur droit*” (p. 190) [addition with pencil in the upper right corner], which give the reader an idea of the original appearance of the documents.

The appendices contain – in addition to a timeline of the most important events at the end of the 19th century and some reprinted documents in their original form – a useful list with detailed biographical information on the most central historical protagonists of the era.

The only optional addition in (foot)notes or comments that the reader will miss are explanations of dialectal variation for both the Arabic texts and the Swahili used in the documents (as briefly listed in the introduction, p. 47-48). It is understandable, however, that the nature of the collection does not allow these aspects to be fully covered. Swahilists in particular are undoubtedly very intrigued by these earliest attested Swahili sources especially in the north and northeast of the Congo, partly because the emergence and spread of Swahili as a lingua franca in the northern parts of the former Belgian colony has not been clarified beyond doubt (cf. Deans [1953] who traces language policy decisions of missionaries; for an alternative scenario regarding the spread of Swahili in the northeastern Congo, see Nassenstein & Dimmendaal (2020: 836). In particular, explanations for the regiolectal differences in Maniema, around present-day

REVIEW

Kisangani and further northeast in Ituri could potentially be underpinned by considering finer-grained contact processes that occurred from the time of the earliest so-called explorers.³

While most of the Swahili texts in Luffin's catalogue appear to be largely held in ECS (East Coast Swahili) or a writing style with a high proportion of retained ECS forms and structures (as also noted by the editor, see p. 48, who calls this "*la variante de Zanzibar*"), some texts show highly interesting exceptions to this alleged norm. These show non-standard forms "in the making" possibly indicating evolving regiolectal forms and simplified structures still found in contemporary Congo Swahili varieties. For example the document MRCA.STA.1 written by Saidi bin Sabiti in Stanleyville/Kisangani in 1890 (pp. 190-191), already exhibits certain features (invariable agreement, no *mu*-syncopation as in ECS, loss of *vi*-adverbial forms, differences in locatives, etc.) that are characteristic of the Swahili used in Kisangani to this day (based on the present author's observations):

watou yoté 'all people' (p. 190) – ECS *watu wote* (contemp. Kis.Swah.: *batu yote*)

motou mozoi 'good person' (ibid.) – ECS *mtu mzuri* (contemp. Kis.Swah.: *mutu muzuli*)

ana faniza muzuri sana na warabou 'he behaves well towards the Arabs (treats them well)' (ibid.) (contemp. Kis.Swah. adv. *muzuli* instead of ECS *vizuri*)

na olaya (ibid.) – (locative *na* may have originated from a precursor of today's Lingála)

As these few highlighted examples from a letter to Henry Morton Stanley intend to demonstrate, the present collection can serve as a valuable resource for future research and further work in variationist studies. Likewise, Arabists concerned with contact varieties of the region such as Juba Arabic and Kinubi may find these historical testimonials a valuable contribution.

As a reviewer of this book, one can express the same wish as the editor of this most interesting and rich collection, namely the following: "*Nous espérons que les historiens travaillant sur l'Afrique centrale en général, et sur le Congo en particulier, s'approprieront ces textes, car ils permettront certainement d'affiner la lecture de l'histoire sociale, économique, politique et culturelle de la région*" (p. 13) [We hope that historians working on Central Africa in general, and on the Congo in particular, will adopt these texts, as they will certainly help to refine the reading of the social, economic, political and cultural history of the region]. It may be added

³ See, for example, some of the Swahili texts found in Czekanowski (1924), which clearly show early traces of simplification and contact-induced change.

REVIEW

that linguists⁴ should also make profitable use of this collection for future in-depth studies of Arabic and Swahili in the region.

Nico Nassenstein

References

- Czakanowski, Jan. 1924. *Forschungen im Nil-Kongo Zwischengebiet, Recherches dans le territoire intermédiaire entre Nil et Congo*, 2 Vols. Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann.
- Deans, William A. 1953. Congo-Swahili, a lingua franca of Central Africa. *Bible Translator* 4(2): 77-82.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1971. *The Azande: History and Political Institutions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Leopold, Mark. 2005. *Inside West Nile: Violence, History and Representation on an African Frontier*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Luffin, Xavier. 2007. On the Swahili documents in Arabic script from the Congo (19th century). *Swahili Forum* 14: 17-26.
- Luffin, Xavier. 2014. Swahili documents from Congo (19th century): Variation in orthography. *The Arabic Script in Africa: Studies in the Use of a Writing System*, ed. by Meikal Mumin & Kees Versteegh. Leiden: Brill. pp. 311-317.
- Nassenstein, Nico & Gerrit J. Dimmendaal. 2020. Bunia Swahili and emblematic language use. *Journal of Language Contact* 12 (3): 823-855. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19552629-01203008>.
- Southall, Aidan W. 1956. *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination*. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd.
- Stigand, Chauncey H. 1968 [1923]. *Equatoria. The Lado Enclave*. London: Frank Cass & Co.

⁴ The selected texts, of course, also have literary value – despite their different genres, styles, and lengths; scholars working in the discipline of African Literatures will also benefit from them.