

Heritage of African Languages Manuscripts (Ajami).

Helmi Sharawy. 2005. Bamako: Institut Culturel Afro-Arabe. xiii + 538 pp.

The idea of the formation of The Afro-Arab Cultural Institute was already mooted in the late 1970s between The Arab League and the Organisation of African Unity which has subsequently been transformed into the African Union (AU). One of the main objectives was to closely cooperate in projects that are of mutual interest to the two organisations and “to stress the interaction between the African and Arab heritages in the fields of language, literature and arts as well as social and natural sciences” (5). Soon after it was officially inaugurated – according to Sharawy, reinvigorated (17) – during April 2002 under the directorship of Dr. Abdullah bin Abdel Rahman al-Dousary who wrote the preface (xi–xiii) to this publication, the Institute’s representatives got to work on specific projects of which this publication was one. This particular publication, which has been long in the making, is clear proof that early African Muslim intellectuals left behind a rich legacy that Africans can and indeed should feel proud of.

The compiler and editor of this significant work, which was officially launched at the joint Arab League Education, Culture and Sciences Organisation and Afro-Arab Cultural Institute two day seminar during November 2006, is none other than a seasoned Afro-Arab scholar, Dr. Helmi Sharawy, who has been the director of the Arab-African Research Centre in Cairo, Egypt. He has been passionate about the importance of exploring and excavating earlier materials and information that demonstrate the connection between the Arab and African worlds. Since the Arabic script was creatively employed by non-Arab scholars in the respective continents of Asia and Africa in writing the local

languages such as Persian (Southwest Asia) and Fulani (West Africa), it attracted the interest of scholars such as Sharawy. In his quest to identify the languages that successfully employed the script, he notes that more than 20 African languages made use of this script. This says a great deal about the scripts adaptability and also tells us about the creative African intellectual minds at work.

In Sharawy’s lengthy introduction, which appears in both English (1–30) and Arabic (alif to lam), he highlighted the fact that numerous sources such as those of Ibn Batuta and others have pointed to the variety of extant African literature that informs us about the African social history. Sadly, he observed, these literatures were totally ignored by the various European colonial masters. It was only when nationalist movements on the continent were emerging and became organised to challenge the hegemony of these powers that African intellectuals also “rediscovered their identity and their rich cultural heritage” that has only, of late, been globally acknowledged. This was tangibly demonstrated when former Malian president, Omar Konaré, then chairperson of the AU met with South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki has been a protagonist of the African Renaissance project, and co-sponsored in 2001 a joint project for the preservation of extant African Islamic manuscripts that are located in parts of the West African continent – by 2003 it was unanimously endorsed by the AU representatives as one of its important cultural projects.

The anthology of African manuscripts was compiled during 2003 and 2004 and was a special project undertaken by the editor in collaboration with the Afro-Arab Cultural Institute in Bamako, Mali. Sharawy dedicated the anthology to the late Dr. Moheiddeen Saber, former director-general of the Arab League Education, Culture and Sciences Organisation, with whom (and others) he had

been in constant dialogue over a period of 25 years regarding cultural dimensions of Afro-Arab relations. In his introductory piece Sharawy provided a background to the anthology's compilation and editing, and he discussed the context in which the interest in *Ajami* – Arabic scripted languages – manuscripts arose. He stated that over the years until 2002 about 20 conferences and seminars were convened to discuss the state of these manuscripts. Apart from the interest of African (and Arab) governments in this project, African civil society representatives have also shown their interest in making their input. In the case of South Africa, for example, the Jami'at ul-'Ulama of Gauteng held a joint "The Ink Road" seminar with Malian researchers during August 2002 and this has consequently resulted in collaborative efforts between the South African government and its civil society representatives on the Mali manuscripts.

This anthology, which is divided into 8 chapters of varying length, contains samples of manuscripts from different parts of the continent, and they cover a variety of themes. Before Sharawy inserted photocopies of each of the manuscripts in this anthology, he made sure that they were authentic. In his efforts to make certain that this was the case, he depended on earlier critical scholarship that assured and guaranteed the contents and manuscripts' validity and legitimacy. Sharawy, who crisscrossed the continent to view and select the materials, was somewhat amazed at the lack of interest by African academic institutions in preserving and archiving these rich socio-historic documents (23). These negative attitudes did not, however, dampen his spirits in pursuing his objective. In the end he managed to select 16 manuscripts that represented the following languages: Malagasy, Swahili, Hausa, Fulani, Wolof, Mandingue, Songhay, and Tamasheq.

Prior to presenting the photocopied manuscript, the editor gave a brief historico-cultural and geographic background to the language and its peoples. For example, in the first chapter Sharawy provided a general overview of the Malagasy language in Arabic and French respectively (33–43) before the appearance of the Malagasy manuscript. The manuscript was then followed face-to-face by its respective French and Arabic versions (47–100); the former was rendered into French by Ludvig Munthe, who also offered a transliteration (in the Latin script) of the Malagasy text. And the Arabic version was undertaken by Patsy Gamal; the latter's translation as indicated in the contents' page was not directly translated from Malagasy but from the French version; this is indeed a real pity since it is quite obvious that when translating from one language to another it is inevitable that certain nuances would be lost. In this instance, there is therefore still an urgent need for an Arabist to familiarize him/herself with Malagasy and provide a fresh and direct translation to the target language. Fortunately, the anthology only had one Malagasy manuscript as compared to others that had two and three respectively.

The second chapter and third chapter consisted of three manuscripts each; the former focused on Swahili (101–186), which incidentally was adopted as one of the AU's official languages during July 2004 for the East African region, and the latter on Hausa (187–280), which is a widely spoken West African language akin to Swahili. In both instances the introduction was in Arabic and English respectively. The format was the same as the first chapter; the only difference was the use of English instead of French and different translators were responsible for the translations into the respective target languages. Each of the other five chapters that followed the editor introduced the sets of manuscripts in Arabic and French. In fourth

chapter two (281–364) Fulani manuscripts were reproduced with translations in Arabic and French and the texts' transliteration. The same goes for Wolof (365–442) with three manuscripts in the fifth chapter, Mandingue (443–484) with two manuscripts in the sixth chapter, Songhay (485–516) with one manuscript in the seventh chapter and Tamasheq (517–538) with one manuscript in the final chapter.

As mentioned earlier, the manuscripts dealt with a variety of themes and genres such as historical documents and poems; whilst it might not be possible to elaborate on each of the included manuscripts in this wonderful anthology, it of interest to discuss at least one of the sixteen to give glimpse of the contents of this anthology. One fascinating manuscript is the well-known and widely distributed Swahili – Lamu/Mombasa dialect – poem entitled “Inkishafi” (“The Awakening [of the soul]”); said to be the oldest poem that was composed in this East African language. It was written by Bin Nasr (d. 1820) who lived off the Kenyan coast on the island of Pate. In 1972 Professor W. Hichens produced an English version – included in this anthology – of the 79 verse poem that was arranged in stanzas of four lines; this was in line with the *ruba'iyat* style (i.e. the Arabic metric tradition) prevalent in Arabic. The contents are very much likened to those penned by Muslim mystics because of its emphasis on the soul. This text will therefore be of relevance to those studying African poetry in general and Swahili poetry in particular.

Even though one of the shortcomings of this anthology is the limited number of manuscripts that has been included, its importance cannot be ignored by anyone interested in African studies. It is, however, assumed that editor and his team of contributors will be working on a complementary anthology that will include manuscripts

from other Arabic scripted languages such as Afrikaans. Nonetheless, the anthology plainly demonstrated that it is an important compilation that showed to what extent African languages have employed the Arabic script to make significant linguistic interventions. This sociolinguistic engineering feat, which has only been given global recognition during the latter part of the 20th century, is an achievement that subsequent generations on this continent must be informed about. The publication is indeed a significant compilation that should be considered seriously in academic programmes that discuss the origin, history and development of languages and literatures not only on the African continent but also elsewhere. It is indeed a timely work that will be of interest to all African social scientists.

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Onbedoelde land.

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Die kernkonsep van Bernard Odendaal se *Onbedoelde land* is kreatiwiteit, en sy teenhanger, destruktiwiteit.

Dit gaan in die eerste plek om die kreatiewe vermoë van die digter. In verskillende gedigte gaan dit om naamgewing as vorm van die kreatiewe vermoë en die verwoording in die gedig, “Heemkunde”, dit gaan om die digter wat lappies mens en wêreld tot gedigte stik.

Die kreatiewe sluit ook die mens se seksuele voortplanting in, vandaar die familiële gedigte in die bundel. Verder sluit dit iets in soos die verbouing van groente deur 'n