

James de Vere Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press; 1993).

The fact that James de Vere Allen's *Swahili Origins* reflects a life's work is clearly evident in the scope of its scholarship. Edited and prepared for publication by John Middleton (whom Allen asked to take on that task before Allen passed away in 1990), *Swahili Origins* is notable not only for its thoroughgoing examination of a seemingly narrow topic (as Allen states, "how the Swahili began"), but also for the way in which Allen locates the problematics of the entire nexus of Swahili historical and cultural studies within various larger historical contexts (of which Western constructs of "Africa" are only the most apparent).

Swahili Origins begins by addressing the elusiveness of Swahili identity, for the numerous ways in which different Swahili peoples describe themselves (e.g., Wamvita, Wapate, Wakilwa, etc.) is symptomatic of the difficulties encountered by historians who study them: how does one approach and write a history of a group of people who, despite linguistic and cultural affinities, seemingly have no shared history as such? Allen inverts this equation and locates the deficiency not with the Waswahili but with historians: "[T]he inability to discern any historical experience shared by all Swahilis is in large measure due to our failure to look at them as a historic people at all" (2). He forcefully argues his point that this failure is due, in large part, to late 19th- and early 20th-century Western preconceptions regarding how African peoples were to be categorized, namely into "tribes." The Waswahili do not fit, neatly or otherwise, into what a "tribe" should be:

They were regarded as inferior on two separate and not entirely compatible grounds: first, because they were 'cross-bred' Arab and African, a 'half-caste' or 'mongrel' 'race', and it was held that such races must be in some sense inferior to 'pure-bred' ones. Secondly, they were regarded as inferior in so far as the 'superior' Arab blood in their veins had been diluted by the 'inferior' Africans.

Allen thus addresses, both directly and indirectly, one of the defining problematics of Swahili (and African) studies: namely, the myopic imposition of European notions of identity (race, tribe, etc.) on Europe's Others, thus leaving no discursive space for difference and always rendering those Others as always already known. One obvious example of this in the case of Swahili studies is the (now finally

outmoded) "African or Arab?/African or Asian?" debate, one which Allen largely avoids addressing on the terms it sets for itself.

Rather than accede to a "tribal" or genealogical approach to the history of Swahili peoples, Allen instead approaches the Waswahili as a "highly permeable population whose common factor is cultural in nature" (14). Specifically, he defines the locus of Swahili identity as the settlement (*mji* or *majengo*) rather than the "tribe" or political unit; and from the outset, he explicitly defines his approach as one of inclusiveness:

[I]t is not only the dominant groups who concern us but the whole community: the elites, but also those who lived in and around the settlements and were enmeshed in their economies; imams and householders, but also the labourers and slaves who built the mosques, houses and tombs, even if they did not (or not yet) pray in the mosques, or were destined to be buried in unmarked, non-Islamic graves. . . . We are interested here in those who stood among the crowd to watch and listen, whether at religious celebrations such as *maulidis* or on civic occasions such as the *zinguo* ritual, as much as in the protagonists on such occasions. (13)

In pursuing such an approach, Allen eventually arrives at a definition of Swahili identity which itself relies not so much on identity per se, but rather on affinity (a much more fluid and flexible construct, much as, Allen argues, "Swahili-ness" has been throughout its history). And in its foregrounding the ideas of affinity and place, Allen's definition of "Swahili-ness" manages to account for its various elements of ethnicity/ies, culture/s, religion/s, and class/es without becoming bogged down in those contradictions and paradoxes of "Swahili identity" which may never be talked away.

Allen's inclusiveness extends to his historical method, particularly in his insistence that any and all evidence, from whatever source, regarding the history of the Waswahili be accounted for, rather than simply ignored when such evidence presents difficulty. In outlining the historical basis for his hypothesis, Allen sifts through a vast collection of resources, ranging from Swahili, Segeju, and Shirazi origin traditions and metaphors, all manner of written accounts by outsiders regarding the Swahili peoples and other related and/or neighboring groups (accounts not only from explorers and colonialists of the past 400 years, but also, for example, Chinese accounts from the 14th century and Mediterranean and Red Sea traditions regarding trade routes), archaeological evidence of numerous Swahili settlement sites (many still in existence and some, like Mombasa, now thriving urban centers), and numerous articles (many of them recent) by both Western

and African historians. And more. For students and scholars in any aspect of East African history, Allen's notes at each chapter's end are a wealth of information.

There is no doubt that many will disagree, and necessarily so, with any number of the aspects of *Swahili Origins*. Other historians will dispute the resources Allen uses, and/or the conclusions he draws (despite Allen's lengthy disclaimers in his rather defensive conclusion). Allen's obvious disdain for what he calls (after J. Spencer Trimingham) the "Arab racial myth" and its impact on past and contemporary notions of Swahili identity seems designed to provoke (perhaps severe) disagreement. So, too, with the distinction he draws between what he terms the Shirazi and Arab-Wangwana "modes of dominance." For all of that (and indeed because of that), *Swahili Origins* is an invaluable contribution to Swahili studies, African studies, even the more contemporary fields of cultural and postcolonial studies. The tremendous energy Allen invested into his attempt to synthesize all of his materials and resources itself speaks volumes of the worth of his scholarship. *Swahili Origins* may be disliked, but it cannot be ignored; and the further discussion which this book will provoke may be the ultimate tribute to Allen's life's work.

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