

REVIEW

***Life and Poems of Bi Zainab Himid (1920-2002) – in Swahili with English Translation. Maisha na Tungo za Bi zainab Himid (1920-2002) – kwa Kiswahili na tafsiri yake kwa Kiingereza.* Ed. by Sauda Barwani and Ludwig Gerhardt. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2012, 331 pp, 2 b/w photos, 8 facsimile reproductions, hardcover, size 18 x 26 cm, ISBN 978-3-89645-286-3.**

This remarkable volume, edited by Sauda Barwani and Ludwig Gerhardt, is the 30th contribution to Rüdiger Köppe Verlag's series *Verbal art and documentary literature in Africa*. The series, edited by Wilhelm J.G. Möhlig, gathers publications on a wide range of oral arts, products of popular culture and documentary texts from the African continent, including another book co-edited by Sauda Barwani and Ludwig Gerhardt, which collects autobiographical accounts by a number of witnesses of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution.¹

Within the field of Swahili studies, the present work represents a precious resource both for literary scholars interested in Swahili poetry and researchers investigating the social and historical developments of the Swahili communities. The volume consists of nine parts: *Acknowledgements*; a brief *Introduction* (written by Sauda Barwani and Ludwig Gerhardt); *Preface I* (Saad Yahya) and *II* (Said Ahmed Khamis); *The Life of Bi Zainab Himid as told by herself* (a long interview with Bi Zainab Himid by Sauda Barwani); and a collection of her poetic production divided into *Poems and songs / Love songs, Important events, Religious poems and Political epics*. Every part of the book is written in Swahili, followed or accompanied by an English translation. Furthermore, the book is enriched by some visual material: in the volume there are two beautiful black and white pictures, also reproduced on the back cover, which show Bi Zainab Himid with her school director and teaching colleagues, and on the front cover we find an image of Bi Zainab Himid and Sauda Barwani on a trip to Lamu. In the volume's section devoted to her verses, there are also eight reproductions of some of Bi Zainab Himid's hand-written lyrics and poems (in Roman characters).

The first preface, written by Saad S. Yahya, highlights crucial aspects of Bi Zainab Himid's life, such as her pioneering role as an educator and her social activism. The second preface is by Prof. Said Ahmed M. Khamis and focuses on Bi Zainab Himid as a writer of poems, after having remarked that "there are different Swahili poems written by women which are still hidden although from time to time they begin to be discovered" (p. 31).

¹ The volume is entitled *Unser Leben vor der Revolution und danach – Maisha yetu kabla ya mapinduzi na baadaye. Autobiographische Dokumentar - Texte von Sansibarischen Zeitzeugen* (2003), edited by Sauda A. Barwani, Regina Feindt, Ludwig Gerhardt, Leonhard Harding & Ludger Wimmelbucker.

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The conversation with Bi Zainab Himid is carried out by Sauda Barwani, a former teacher of Swahili at the University of Hamburg and a well known name amongst Swahili scholars, who had known the poet since her youth. The interview is subdivided into three parts and is semi-structured, leaving (a lot of) space to the flow of Bi Zainab Himid memories as she recounts her life since her childhood in Malindi, a multi-ethnic quarter near to the harbour in Zanzibar town, where she was born in 1920. Her self-narration testifies to the impact of western education on her life and on the whole Zanzibari community. Indeed, during colonial times, her family of Comorian origins found new social opportunities in western education (beginning with her maternal grandfather who studied in Germany). Colonial education was, after a while, extended to women and, in 1927, Bi Zainab Himid was amongst the first sixteen girls to enter the female primary school opened by the Sultan Sayyid Khalifa in Zanzibar town. At that time, however, only Arab girls were admitted to government schools, thus her father had to change her birth certificate. She went on with her education successfully and worked as a teacher and headmistress in Zanzibar town, Pemba and Makunduchi. Bi Zainab Himid's account reveals her active role in many spheres of social, cultural and political life. She collected school funds for children in need and participated in numerous women's associations and *taarab* clubs, such as *Shemsi Dhuha* and *Royal Air Force*. She was also a member of the East African Literature Bureau and travelled extensively in East Africa in order to attend committee meetings.

With regard to politics, Bi Zainab Himid was a supporter of ZNP (Zanzibar National Party) and, in 1963, she was the only woman who was elected to the committee for the preparation of the independence of Zanzibar (in charge of school celebrations). Soon afterwards the government was overthrown and Bi Zainab Himid lost some relatives during the turmoil, as she recalls in her vivid account of the revolution. Nevertheless, she continued to be involved in the official cultural scene. Indeed, President Karume invited her to collaborate with the newly founded *Culture Musical Club* by composing drama and poems and to celebrate the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in the presence of Julius Nyerere. Bi Zainab Himid's life, however, changed brusquely in 1967 - as she often evokes during the interview - when she and many others "capitalist" teachers were dismissed from school by the ministry of Ali Sultan.²

Up to this publication, the only compositions by Bi Zainab Himid available in book format were the two *tenzi* included in the volume *Howani mwana howani: tenzi za Zaynab Himid Mohamed*.³ The present collection, therefore, fills a gap as it provides readers interested in Bi Zainab Himid's verses with a rich repertoire of songs, poems and epics which is of great interest from a twofold

² These episodes are also reported in Ali Sultan Issa's recently published memoir, which appeared in a volume entitled *Race, Revolution, and the Struggle for Human Rights in Zanzibar: The Memoirs of Ali Sultan Issa and Seif Sharif Hamad*, edited by G. T. Burgess, Ohio University Press, 2009.

³ Edited by Saida Yahya – Othman, Dar es Salaam, Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, 2004.

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perspective: on the one hand, it proves the author's skills in crafting the Swahili language as spoken in Zanzibar, its conventional metrical forms and poetic imagery, and, on the other hand, it presents a local and female representation of gender dynamics, social issues and politics on the Zanzibar islands.

The section devoted to Bi Zainab Himid's love lyrics (*Nyimbo za mapenzi*) features many compositions which deal with, in an elegant but not much disguised form, various aspects of being in love, such as passion, reciprocal feelings, despair, regretting a bad choice, jealousy, co-wifeness, etc. Some of them, ending with the typical chorus lines, were presumably composed to be sent to *taarab* artists. One of these, entitled *Sijachoka* (I am not tired yet), was performed by the famous club *Nadi Ikhwan Safaa* and sung by the late Seif Salim.

Her poems composed for important events (*Matokeo maalumu*) testify to her deep interest in the Swahili language and in educational activities. They include a variety of compositions, some of them relating to community life, such as weddings and funerals, and others devoted to more official occasions, such as the celebration of ten years of the Institute of Kiswahili or the launching of "The Voice of Zanzibar" radio station. In this section, as well in the political poems and epics (*Tenzi za siasa*), there are many works of praise in honour of public figures, both from the time of colonial rule (such as Princess Margaret, the younger sister of Queen Elizabeth II, and Prince Jamshid, the last Sultan of Zanzibar) and after the revolution (such as Mwalimu Nyerere, President Karume and, more recently, President Ali Hassan Mwinyi and Sheikh Seif Shariff Hamad). Other political poems are devoted to parties and associations (TANU, ASP, Women's Organisation) or tackle social issues such as AIDS, hunger and education. The collection also features religious poems (*Mashairi ya Dini*) in praise of the Almighty and Prophet Muhammad.

In conclusion, this book is a fascinating reading for everyone interested in Swahili verbal culture and it will hopefully inspire further research activities aimed at exploring and circulating other unknown productions of Swahili written poetry, especially with regard to women's verses.

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