Prayers uttered down on paper: a stylistic analysis of Swahili devotional lyrics

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Abstract
In Swahili poetry, praising God through blessings and salutations finds aesthetic expression in a plethora of genres, particularly *mashairi*, *utendi* and *takhmis*. In this article, I will draw attention to a lesser-known rhymed poetic genre known as *gungu* "songs," in *shairi* verse form, dating to the turn of the nineteenth century. Different from other well-known, fully devotional Swahili compositions such as Sayyid Aidarus's *Hamziyya* or al-Būṣīrī's *Qasida Burda*, the texts that will be analysed are a selected group of short devotional quatrains belonging to a vast manuscript that otherwise chiefly comprises war poetry as well as dance and wedding songs. While, on the one hand, the presence of devotional lyrics in this extensive poetry collection attests to the legitimacy of religious subject matter in popular lyric poems, the verses also offer an opportunity to reflect on literary prayer (*dua*) and its architecture, lyrical tone and imagery, in comparison with longer classical Swahili religious compositions, where *dua* is also interpolated. Is there a set of shared Swahili or Arabic formulas for naming, praying to and praising God that can be found in all of these genres? Can the Qur'an be considered as the sub-text the poets drew on in making their texts speak of the divine? A stylistic analysis, looking at patterns, formulaic *dua* and devotional speech acts of these yet-unedited short devotional lyrics, will provide the criteria by which I will compare excerpts from other Swahili poetic genres, inquiring how Islamic prayer is woven in between their lines.

Keywords: Swahili poetry; Swahili manuscripts; *kuomba dua;* supplicatory prayer; Muslim devotions.

Muombwa ndile Mngu
Watu wote
Na Mtume
Muombwa ndile Mngu.

God is indeed the One to pray to
O People all
And the Prophet
God is indeed the One to pray to.[1]

Above all, Arabic religious poetry often becomes a prayer [..].[2]

1. *The Concept of Prayer in Islam and in Swahili*

Studies on prayers-manuals and practices in common use in the Muslim world and across the Indian Ocean have already highlighted the vastness of prayer-type names such as: *'ibāda*, *ṣalāt*, *sujūd*, *munājāt*, *duʿāʾ*, *dhikr*, *wird*, *waẓīfa*, *ḥizb* and *ḥirz,* as well as their dimensions of dialogue between human sender and divine receiver.[3] The supplications presented in this article are all prayers addressed to God for the blessings of oneself. More precisely, they are devotional verses which are recorded in a book manuscript in Arabic script, revealing how Swahili Muslim suppliants performed and addressed their personal prayers – mainly *duʿāʾ* - to God, by means of poetry.

As described by Louis Gardet, connected with the Semitic idea of the effective power of the spoken word, "to recite a *duʿāʾ* (Ar.), is to raise one's personal supplications to God."[4] Islamic devotional trends

1 Extract from a spirit song sung during the *p'ungwa* initiation and healing ceremony in Kenya in the 1960s. Farouk Topan, "Muslim Perceptions in a Swahili Oral Genre," in Kenneth W. Harrow (eds.), *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996, 104-116.

2 Emil Homerin, "Arabic Religious Poetry," in Roger Allen, D. S. Richards (eds.), *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 74-86: 82.

3 See in both these regards Constance Padwick, Muslim Devotions in the Muslim World: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996 [1961]; David Parkin and Stephen Headley Islamic Prayer Across the Indian Ocean Inside and Outside the Mosque, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

4 Louis Gardet, "Duʿāʾ," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, retrieved online 11 October2019from:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0195>.

insist on the *duʿāʾ* being regarded as a prayer of request "for wellbeing, especially the public weal of the Muslim community, and the personal spiritual well-being of oneself and others."[5] Beautiful *duʿāʾ* texts are abundant in Shīʿī works of piety, to name but a few, *Dua Kumail*, *Ziyarat Ashura* for Imam Hussein, *Dua Iftitah*, *Dua Simaat.*[6] Equally beautiful in their tone, language and architecture can be considered the verses presented in the present paper.

In addition to *qasida* (mono-rhyme poetry), *dhikr* (litanies), and *tawassul* (intercession), there are two main types of prayer-types in Swahili: *dua ya,* "supplication" (pl. *dua*), from Arabic *duʿāʾ*, notoriously addressed to God; and *sala* (pl. *salawati*), representing the prayer rites. With the expression *kuomba dua*, a Swahili devotee is enacting his or her supplication to God.[7] Whereas indeed *kuomba dua* means "asking (through) supplicatory prayer,"[8] the term *maombi* concerns a more general kind of request and prayer, which can be also directed to people, in contrast with *dua*, which denotes invocations and acts of supplication addressed intimately and exclusively to God.[9] However, the most striking contrast is less between *kuomba dua* and *maombi*, than between the highly formulaic *sala* and the much less formal *dua.*[10] It is worth citing David Parkin at length in this regard:

> While *dua* may be prayed at any time and anywhere and it is not accompanied by any bodily actions, *sala* must conform to the

5 Gardet, "Duʿāʾ."

6 Brian Altenhofen, "Shia Duas by Duas.org," in *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Cultural Studies,* retrieved online 29 September 2019 from: http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/shia-duas-duasorg.

7 As Parkin puts it however, among Swahili-speaking communities in East Africa, *dua* can also be raised towards deities and spirits who do not belong to the realm of Islam and be mediated by people like shamans (Parkin, Headley, *Islamic Prayer Across the Indian Ocean,* 5-6).

8 David Parkin, "Invocation: Salaa, Dua Sadaka and the Question of Self-Determination," in David Parkin and Stephen Headley (eds.), Islamic Prayer Across the Indian Ocean Inside and Outside the Mosque, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 137-168.

9 David Parkin also highlights how, if on one hand, *dua* means "requests which only God is asked for," with the expression *kupigwa dua* someone is rather seeking for personal revenge, as the expression means "to be asked bad things" (Parkin, "Invocation: *Salaa*, *Dua Sadaka",* 144).

10 Parkin, "Invocation: *Salaa*, *Dua Sadaka,*" 141.

> appropriate time of the day and, though it may be held outside the mosque, as is sometimes necessary, must include the necessary prescribed *rakaa*actions.[11]

The most well-known *dua* in the classical Swahili corpus is the *Dua ya kuombea mvua* ("Prayer for Rain"), composed by Sheikh Muhyi'l-Din b. Shaykh b. Abdallah al-Qalitany al-Waily in *takhmis* metre, and edited by Lyndon Harries in 1962. Nevertheless, *dua* can also be found at the end of long classical compositions such as3 *tendi* and unexpectedly, as the core of this article will show, also as isolated short *gungu* poems. In these devotional poems, penned down in Arabic script, the cohabitation of Qur'anic references and Islamic devotional acts, stitched together within a prosodic pattern in *shairi* verse form, make these texts special sources for the study of Muslim devotions and Islamic poetry among Swahili-speaking Muslims in East Africa. Before delving into the poems, I will provide a brief excursus about the roots of Islam in East Africa and the venues through which knowledge and poetry was learnt, set to memory and transmitted.

2. *Islam at the Swahili Coast: Vyuo and Wanachuoni*

A point of departure for discussing East African Islam is the Lamu archipelago with its old mosques and Shāfi'ī *ulamā'*. During an excavation in 1984, gold, silver and copper coins dating to AD 830, discovered in a mosque foundation on Lamu, attested to the earliest traces of Islam and Muslims in the region.[12] The Riyadha Mosque on Lamu Island – which is conceptually linked to its namesake, the Riyadha Mosque in Seiyun, Yemen – is, for instance, considered a "bastion of conservatism" but also "of tradition – in the most physical sense, as a keeper of texts (manuscripts and printed books) read by scholars in the past."[13] The race to record knowledge was strongly

11 Parkin, "Invocation: *Salaa*, *Dua Sadaka,*" 142.

12 Y. Abdulaziz Lodhi, "Muslims in Eastern Africa," *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 3,1, 1994, 88-98.

13 Anne Bang, *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940): Ripples of Reform,* Leiden: Brill, 2014: 37. Despite the popularity of the Riyadah Mosque on Lamu – founded by Salih b. 'Alawi Jamal al-Layl in the late nineteenth

encouraged by the thriving Sufi brotherhoods for whom Arabic script became "the accepted means of recording information."[14] Arabic script and the Arabic and Swahili languages were not only promoted as tools for reading and commenting on the Qur'an: in fact, as pointed out by Anne Bang,[15] by the nineteenth century, a text-based form of authority, a so-called "textualization of charisma," was promoted by Sufi orders. As Andrey Zhukhov attests, "A manuscript book (*yuo*, or *chuo*) became an integral part of the culture, a means of recording and fixation of the monuments of the Swahili literature."[16]

But why literature, and why poetry particularly? It is not by chance that the largest corpus of Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script comprises poetry.[17] First, the *sharif*-s (descendants of the Prophet) and the *'ulamā'* were not merely writers of books and translators of erudite oeuvres on Islam within the framework of their literary-theological tradition and that of the 'Alawiyya order; they were also the so-called *wanachuoni* (lit., "the people of the Qur'anic schools," the "scholars") and "Swahili poets themselves."[18]

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century – the oldest mosque on Lamu, dating back to 770 EGH (AD 1368), is Pwani Mosque, whose founder is unknown. Since 1985, the Pwani Mosque's imam, Ustadh Mahmoud Mau, has been delivering the Friday sermons in Swahili, which was a very controversial choice at that time; ultimately, however, the community approved of it, and nowadays almost all of the imams deliver their Friday sermons in Swahili. See Ahmed A. Mau and Peter J.L. Frankl, "'Kiswahili': A Poem by Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulkadir," *Swahili Forum*, 20, 2013, 1-18; Rayya Timammy, "Shaykh Mahmoud Abdulkadir 'Mau' (b. 1950): A Reformist Preacher in Lamu," *The Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 12, 2, 2015, 85-90. For further info on Lamu's Riyadah Mosque, see also "The Manuscript Collection of the Riyadha Mosque, Lamu, Kenya," retrieved 24 February 2019 from: https://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/blog/entry/the_manuscript_collection_of_the_riyadha_mosque_lamu_kenya/.

14 Randal Pouwels, "Swahili Literature and History in the Post-Structuralist Era," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 25,2, 1992, 261-283: 277.

15 Bang, Islamic Sufi Networks, 44, 109.

16 Andrey Zhukhov, "Old Swahili-Arabic Script and the Development of Swahili Literary Language," *Sudanic Africa*, 15, 2004, 1-15: 4.

17 Clarissa Vierke, "Akhi patia kalamu: Writing Swahili Poetry in Arabic Script," in Meikal Mumin and Kees Versteegh (eds.), *Arabic Script in Africa: Studies on the Usage of a Writing System*, Leiden: Brill, 2014, 311-331.

18 Farouk Topan, "Réseaux religieux chez les Swahili," in Françoise Le Guennec-Coppens et Pat Caplan (eds.), Les Swahili entre Afrique et Arabie, Paris: Karthala, 1991, 39-57: 42.

The earliest examples of Swahili writing come from *ʿulamāʾ*.[19] One such *ʿulamāʾ* figure was Shaykh Muhyi 'l-Din b. Shaykh b. Abdallah al-Qalitany al-Waily (AD 1724-1869), a well-known *mwanachuoni* from Barawa (Brava). A pupil of Somali scholars, Shaykh Muhyi 'l-Din had moved to Lamu, eventually spending the rest of his life there.[20] His works in Swahili, among them manuals on devotion and the science of *tawḥīd* such as *Elimuya Tabia na Sifa za Mwenyezi Mungu* ("The Science of Behaviour and Praise of the Almighty"), also included poetry: the *Duaya Kuombea Mvua* ("The Prayer for Rain") and the *Utenziwa Miraji* ("The Poem of the Ascension") are both ascribed to him.[21] Another example is Mwenye Mansab (AD 1828-1922),[22] one of the most respected *wanachuoni* on Lamu, who delivered lectures at Arraudha Mosque on the island. He was an expert on Islamic theology and jurisprudence as well as an expert calligrapher of Swahili in Arabic script and of poetry. Therefore, it certainly holds true–to quote Ibrahim Shariff – that Swahili social composition was "overwhelmingly Muslim" and that "literacy among the Swahili has been a phenomenon of the mosque and the Qur'anic madrassa [...] [T]he most literate among the Swahili were themselves students or former students of Islamic scholars who acquired their writing craft from the religious institutions."[23]

One of Mwenye Mansab's more famous pupils was Muhamadi Kijuma, and it is most likely that Mwenye Mansab inspired the young

19 Lyndon Harries, "The Arabs and Swahili Culture," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 34, 3, 1964, 224-229.

20 In Lamu, he took part in the war between the Mazrui and Seyyid Said in Mombasa, composing dialogue poetry and supporting the Mazrui clan, although it is recorded that after a short time he changed his position, joining the al-Busaidi clan.

21 Harith Swaleh, *Chaguo la Wanavyuoni,* Mombasa: Bajaber Printing Press, 2004.

22 Mwenye Mansab belonged to the descendants of the Hussein family, and his full name is the following: Sayyid Abu Bakar b. Abdulrahman al-Husainy. He lived for 94 years and was the teacher of many other important shaykhs on Lamu, like for instance Habib Swaleh b. Alawy Jamal al-Layl (AD 1844-1915); for further details, see Swaleh, *Chaguo la Wanavyuoni,* 43-44.

23 Ibrahim Noor Shariff, "Islam and Secularity in Swahili Literature: Overview," in Kenneth W. Harrow (ed.), *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991, 37-57: 41-42.

Kijuma to compose poetry and to start painting and writing "in his fine hand."[24] Kijuma, one of the most prominent figures of nineteenth-century Swahili poetry from northern Kenya, was born around 1855 and became Mansab's pupil in 1870. At the age of six he was sent to the Qur'anic school (*chuoni*), where he started reading and writing Arabic script and learning the Qur'an by heart. The Islamic upbringing that seeped into his poetic compositions is often very striking. In many of the compositions attributed to Kijuma, the poet/scribe would alternate between Swahili stanzas and Qur'anic *āyāt*. The Qur'anic references would simply rephrase the words of the poet while referring them to the reverential source par excellence – the holy words of the Qur'an.[25] However, in those days Islamic scholars and theologians not only memorized the Qur'an, it was also their habit to memorize Swahili compositions and to carry copies of these on their person. Sayyid Ali b. Abdallah Jamal al-Layl, the renowned scholar from Pate, was famous for keeping a copy of the *Inkishafi* in his pocket.[26]

The phenomena of the production and memorization of textual references from Arabic into new Swahili texts and poetry epitomizes how the poets were deeply inspired by the scripture and traditions of the Arab world (*Uarabuni*) through its script (*khati za kiarabu*) and highly esteemed civilization and culture (*ustaarabu*). Taken together, these components have significantly influenced the entire coastal belt since the eighth century when, according to current archaeological evidence, Islam was first introduced on the coast. On the other hand, Swahili poetry was never "entirely Islamic from its inception."[27] The need to render, interpret and translate into Swahili those Arabic

24 Abou Egl, *The Life and Works of Muhamadi Kijuma,* unpublished PhD dissertation, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1983: 25.

25 For further details, see Annachiara Raia, "Between the Lines: Re-citing Qur'anic verses in Swahili Manuscripts," in Antonella Brita, Giovanni Ciotti, Florinda De Simini, Amneris Roselli (eds.), *Textual and Material Craftmanship: What Does Copying a Manuscript Mean,* Hamburg: Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, 2020, pp: 329-377.

26 William Hichens (ed.), *Al-Inkishafi: The Soul's Awakening,* London: Sheldon Press, 1939: 8, 18.

27 Jan Knappert, *Swahili Islamic Poetry,* Leiden: Brill, 1971: 5.

texts (*chuo*, pl. *vyuo*) that were accessible only to the upper strata of educated *Waswahili* reflects a new orientation towards broader audiences on the Swahili coast for whom Arabic was not easily comprehensible;[28] at the time, the poets found it important to make crucial Islamic lessons available to the wider population of the coast. The Swahili *utendi* narrative poetry became the genre for conveying long narrative reflections on historical, moral and ethical beliefs in a specific prosodic pattern made of syllables (*mizani*), rhyme (*kina*), caesura (*kituo*) and verse couplets/hemistichs (*mishororo*). In other words, Islamic terms, concepts and practices were adapted, versified and "Swahilized."[29] In this article, I shall describe how Islam was imbued between the lines of these Swahili genres.

3. *Weaving Devotion Between the Lines*

Through the script and calligraphy impregnated in manuscript books (*vyuo*), the Arabic language has provided the vocabulary from which poets – whatever their level of skill – drew profusely for their own compositions, labelled *tungo* in a broad sense or, more precisely, *tenzi* (sing. *utenzi; utendi/tendi* in the dialect of Lamu) or *mashairi*.[30] It is entirely natural (as Ruth Finnegan also notes with regard to religious poetry "influenced" by an Islamic tradition)[31] that in Swahili and Chimiini poetry from the Lamu archipelago and Brava region, as in the case of the Hausa and Fulani in West Africa, the texts are impregnated with many "Arabic words and sentiments."[32] In "Swahili as a Religious Language," Farouk Topan likewise investigated the inspiring field of "transfer" of Islamic concepts and terms such as *rūḥ* (soul) or *rasūl* (messenger) into the Swahili language. He discusses, for instance, why Swahili retained the term *mungu* even after "the appearance of the Arabic *Allah*":

28 Pouwels, "Swahili Literature and History."
29 Lodhi, "Muslims in Eastern Africa."
30 It goes beyond the scope of this article to describe the roughly eleven existing Swahili verse forms. For further details, see Ibrahim Noor Shariff, *Tungo zetu: Msingi wa Mashairi na Tungo nyinginezo,* Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1988.
31 Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa,* Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976: 167-169.
32 Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, 167-69.

> The term m*ungu* would then have been one of the terms used among the proto-Swahili and the other coastal tribes to give expression to the identity of that godhood – be it the sky, heavenly vault, thunder or man's spirit after death" [...]. Perhaps feelings of closeness and intimacy evoked by this indigenous term explain its retention even after the appearance of the Arabic *Allah*. What was essential from the point of view of Islam was to invest *mungu* with the connotations of uniqueness and power as conceived in the monotheistic faith. Bringing it into a semantic relationship with *mwenyezi*[33] served the purpose.[34]

Beyond the semantic transfer of Islamic religious concepts through bantu words, what exactly makes it "devotional," and how does Swahili poetry speak of God and render prayers in the shape of a prosodic verse form? Above all, which prosodic scheme is employed? In the following paragraph I shall focus particularly on the practice of *composing God* in Swahili verse forms.

In the Islamic manuals on how to pray (*kuswala*), there is always a section on how to praise God. The *Kitabu cha Sala* ("The Book on Praying") by the Iranian Sayed Muhammad Mahdi Musawi, for instance, reads as follows:

> When you pray any kind of prayer (*dua yeyote*), start praying by mentioning the good names of God, the Almighty (*majina mazuri ya Mwenyezi Mungu*), and read with humbleness (*unyenyekevu*); and if you weep or emit a sound of crying (*sauti ya kulia*), it is much better since, with this act, you demonstrate that you pray to your God with pure intention (*nia*) and truth (*ukweli*), not like those who read their prayers without understanding anything (*bila kufa hamu yoyote*) of what they utter.[35]

We should also note that it is common practice for a Swahili poet to pray to God (*huomba Mungu*) at the beginning and/or conclusion of his or her composition; this is the norm among Swahili poets, and indeed it is very rare for a Muslim poet to deviate from this rule.

33 "A compound of Swahili and Arabic elements respectively: *mwenye* denoting 'possessor' and *ezi* (from 'power' and 'might'). The full phrase is taken to express the omnipotence, sovereignty and regality of the Almighty" (Farouk Topan, "Swahili as a Religious Language").

34 Topan, "Swahili as a Religious Language," 336.

35 Syed Muhammed Mahdi Musawi, *Kitabu cha sala,* Dar es Salam: Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania, 1967: 102, my translation.

Furthermore, as in Arabic devotional texts, in Swahili the opening *basmala* is one of the most recurrent phrases, signalling the start of the act of composing a poem (*kutunga*). The following are some excerpts from different Swahili verse forms illustrating the *basmala*, namely, the invocation *Bismi'l-Lāh,*"In the name of God":

Kwa yina la Mola wetu Ilahi
Nimeandiliza bismillahi
Na mbili ali-hamdu lillahi
Thumma swalawati na tasilima.

In the name of our Lord God,
I have made the beginning with *Bismillah*,
second: praise be to God,
then prayers and peace wishes.

(*Burda ya al Busiri*).[36]

Naanza kwa jinale bismillah lenye adhama
Na ar-Rahamani muandazi na ar-Rahima

I start with the name of God, with glory,
The Merciful, the Distributor and the Benign.

(*Kasida ya Hamziyya*).[37]

Bismillahi naikadimu,
Hali ya kutunga hino nudhumu;
Na ar-Rahmani kiirasimu,
Basi ar-Rahimi nyuma ikaye.

By Allah's name! First unto Him pray,
As this, my poem's riming, I essay;
And reverently His Attributes array –
Ar-Rahman, God the Merciful! Ar-Rahim, God Benign!

36 Knappert, Swahili Islamic Poetry, 170-71.
37 Jan Knappert, "The Hamziyya Deciphered," African Language Studies, 9, 1968, 52-81 (my translation). It is interesting to note, however, that the *Hamziyya* as

Nataka himdi nitangulize,
Alo mdarisi asiulize,
Achamba, "Himdi usitusize,
Kapakaza ilai siyo nduye!"

Foremost I crave His Glory to acclaim,
that none among the pious cry, of shame,
"Dost thou deny us Praise of Allah's Name,
And spread afar a sin that hath no twain!"

Ikisa himdi kutabalaji,
Ikituzagaa kama siraji,
Sala na salamu kiidariji,
Tumwa Muhammadi tumsaliye.

When Allah's Praise be sung, 'tis radiant, bright,
Refulgent o'er us as a lantern-light,
While prayer for peace and mercy we recite,
That peace the Prophet Muhammad may gain.

(*Inkishafi*).[38]

In all the excerpts cited above, the epithets of God, such as *ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim*, are always uttered in conjunction with the verb *himidi* ("I praise"), or the noun *ali-himidi* ("praise to"). The invocation *Bismi'l-Lāh* also appears syntactically linked to verbs for "compose" or "start to compose," such as *nimeandiliza*, *naanza* or *nitangulize*. Terms

rendered in the Chimiini language does not contain any opening *basmala* at all, whereas the first stanza of the *Hamziyya* by Sheikh Qasim reads as follows: *Jisi gani khpandra mitume anbiya/Darajayo e we kuzima Nabiya/Iluye ntaku kuzimu ya aliya/Hawapaandri darajaye wonte pia,* "How could the other prophets rise to your rank in Heaven, O Prophet, you are the sky? There is no higher sky than him and none of them can rise to his high position." See Alessandra Vianello, Lidwien Kapteijns and Mohamed Kassim (eds.), "Stringing Coral Beads": The Religious Poetry of Brava (c.1890-1975): A Source Publication of Chimiini Texts and English Translations, Leiden: Brill, 2018: 160-161.

38 Hichens, *Al-Inkishafi,* 148-191. Hichens' translation.

for prayers are also commonly part of these incipits, which mainly feature couplets comprised of *sala na salamu*, ("prayers and peace") or *swalawati na tasilima* ("prayers and peace wishes").

Swahili devotional poems addressed to God are also found in other prosodic forms such as *mashairi* and *tendi*. Some of the lesser-known verses to God, for instance, are those composed by Binti Shaykh Mataka and edited by William Hichens and Alice Werner in 1934.[39]

However, a poem does not need to overtly address God in order to be devotional. *Mwana Kupona* (The Poem of Mwana Kupona), *Ngamiana Paa* (The Poem of the Camel and Gazelle) and *Inkishafi* (The Soul's Awakening), for instance, are early Swahili poems – in *utendi* and quatrain form, respectively – composed on Lamu and Pate islands. Although they are both permeated with devotional sentiment, *Mwana Kupona* and *Inkishafi* were not performed on specific religious occasions such as the popular practices linked with the Maulidi,[40] nor are they scholarly poetry; they have been grouped into the western category of "religious poetry."[41] Nevertheless, the *Ngamia na Paa*, which is considered to be a kind of moral fable, has a substantial incipit consisting of sixty stanzas of divine eulogy.[42] Similarly, one

39 Binti Shaykh Mataka, better known as Mwana Kupona from the homonymous poem on Muslim wifely duty, was born in Pate in the first half of the nineteenth century and died in the 1860s. Her husband, Bwana Mataka, was the shaykh of Siu and belonged to a family of Arab-Portuguese origin. He settled in Siu after having escaped from the wreck of a vessel *en route* to Goa. When he died, Mwana Kupona married an Arab belonging to the Banu Umar; known as Shaykh Mataka, he was as powerful as a sultan. See William Hichens and Alice Werner, *The Advice of Mwana Kupona upon the Wifely Duty,* Medstead: Azania Press, 1934: 15-16.

40 On this, see Tom Olali, *Performance of a Swahili Poem during the Lamu Maulidi Festival,* South Bend IN: Sahel Books Inc., 2001: 97.

41 In the classification of Swahili *utendi* narrative poetry, Saavedra Casco groups *Mwana Kupona* together with *Utenziwa Kadhi Kassim bin Jaafar* under the category of didactic *tendi*, relating "instructions and recommendations for good behaviour"; meanwhile, *Inkishafi*, along with *Utenziwa Mtuni Utu*, is said to belong to the "philosophical" *tendi*, reflecting on "philosophical and moral" concerns. See Jose Arturo Saavedra Casco, *Utenzi, War Poems, and the German Conquest of East Africa: Swahili Poetry as Historical Source,* Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2007: 26.

42 See John W.T. Allen (ed.), *Tendi: Six Examples of a Swahili Classical Verse Form with Translations and Notes,* New York: Africana Pub. Corp., 1971: 80-87.

of the minor plots unfolding in the wifely-duty narrative of Mwana Kupona features the poet herself praying to God, a *dua* in this case: in this case, this is not an incipit but part of the main body of the poem, as it appears towards the conclusion of the narration, from stanza 66 to 90. The stanza opening the section reads as follows: *Tamati maneno yangu/Kukuusia mwanangu/Sasa ntamuomba Mngu/ Anipokelee dua* ("That is the end of my advice to you my daughter; now I will ask God to grant me a petition").[43] A formulaic rendition of a *dua* is contained in this poem in stanza 82; it reads as follows: *ya Allahu ya Allahu ya Rabbahu ya Rabbahu, ya Ghayata Raghbatahu nitika hukwamkuwa* ("O God O God, O Lord O Lord, O Fulfillment of all desires, answer me as I call upon Thee").[44]

Why is there always a need to weave such praise and prayers to God – in shorter or longer form – between the lines? Ibrahim Shariff claims that the act of writing or copying religious verse (as opposed to secular verse) for posterity, is a sign of the poets and scribes' devotion.[45] In this respect, R. Sean O'Fahey warns us to "be careful to distinguish between 'secular' in the sense of not being about overtly religious topics, and 'Western-influenced' or 'modern'."[46] What does hold true, however, is that through the act of writing or copying verses imbued with Islamic beliefs, the devoted poet/scribe was assuring himself of rewards (*thawabu*, from Ar. *thawāb*) from God and a seat in paradise (*pʰephoni*).[47] This "heavenly

43 Allen, Tendi: Six Examples, 66-67.
44 Harries, *Swahili Poetry,* 84-85.
45 Shariff, "Islam and Secularity in Swahili Literature."
46 R. Sean O'Fahey, "The Study of Swahili," in John Hunwick (ed.), *Arabic literature of Africa: Project and Publication Working Papers Series,* Evanston: Northwestern University, 2005, 1-54: 29.
47 See Farouk Topan "Projecting Islam: Narrative in Swahili Poetry," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*,14, 1, 2001, 107-119; Shariff, "Islam and Secularity in Swahili Literature," 42. As an interesting biographical note concerning Mwanye Mansab attested in the description of the Swahili manuscript poem *Kishamia* (MS 380739, Yahya Ali Omar Collection), reveals that with the expression *umejengewa nyumba* ("you have been built a house"), Mwenye Mansab would have been reassuring someone who had acted well, since "through good acts people earned themselves houses in heaven [...]. When asked once whether heaven must not be growing awfully crowded with houses, Mwenye Mansab

credit"[48] or divine recompense is explicitly mentioned, for instance, just before the concluding stanzas of the *Dua ya Kuombea Mvua* by Shaykh Muhyi'l-Din b. Shaykh b. Abdallah al-Qalitany al-Waily as well as in the *Mashairiya Kuomba Mngu* by Binti Shaykh Mataka, previously mentioned as examples of verses considered overtly "devotional."

15. *Twataka Amani ya ghdhabu zako Jabari*
Huku duniani na Kiama siku ya nari
Tutie p^{h}eponi tusakini katika dari
Utupe hisani wake wema wa kukhitari nao wilidani
Watu pambe mbele na nyuma.

We ask for peace from your wrath O Powerful One here on
earth and at the Resurrection the day of dread place us in
Paradise let us rest beneath that roof
Give us your favours choice woman and good together with
boy-servants to adorn us before and behind.

16. *Na mwenye kuomba kutendewa ni yake jaza*
Hata mwenye kwimba jaza yake yawa kutuzwa
Siuze muomba Muungwana mwenye maiza
Wallahi mi namba aombaye Mola Aziza kula
Matilaba yuwapewa na nyingi neema

And for the one who begs his reward is the granting of his
wishes even for a singer his reward is to be given gifts so
Let alone the supplicator of the noble and all-powerful God
by God, as for me I say he who begs of God Most High every
request he is granted with much grace.

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responded that not only did good acts build them, but bad ones tore them down, and in heaven as many houses were being demolished as were being constructed" (see "Material Information Kishamia" retrieved 12 January 2019 from: https://digital.soas.ac.uk/LSMD000016/00001/citation).

48 Shariff, "Islam and Secularity in Swahili Literature," 42.

(*Dua ya Kuombea Mvua*).[49]

9. *Nipa dunia hasana na akhera unijazi*
Yalo mema masikana nami na wangu wazazi,
Na wote musilimina umati wa Muombezi,
Milango ya iwe wazi tuingie Firdausi.

Give me a good life here and grant me an afterlife
All the good in this place, to me and to my relatives
And to all the Muslims of God's community
May the doors be open and may we enter in Paradise.

(*Mashairi kuomba Mngu*).[50]

In the above poems, the devotees (*wenye kuomba*) who are engaged in the act of begging make explicit reference to their recompense (*jaza*) through the imagery of gifts, health and bounty, paradise and servant boys. The desired reward concerns not only the *mwenye kuomba* himself, but also the whole community (*umma*), as the object pronoun (*-tu-*, "us") in the verbs show. Crucially, in the last line of the *Dua ya Kuombea Mvua*, the poet acknowledges that it is only through praying to God that His mercy can be obtained.

Prosodically, the forms in which the poets Shaykh Muhyi'l-Din al-Waili and Binti Shaykh Mataka have composed their verses exhibit two different schemes: as in the eighteen-stanza *dua*, the poet has introduced internal rhymes in each line (*kipande*) of the *takhmis* verse – usually absent in this verse form – and embedded a caesura dividing each line into *vipande* of six and nine syllables (*mizani*);[51] the shorter, ten-stanza *shairi* of Binti Sheikh is comprised of four lines of sixteen syllables each, also with internal rhyme – [a]b, [a]b, [a]b, [b]c – which, as attested to by Hichens and Werner,

49 Lyndon Harries, *Swahili Poetry,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962: 202-207.
50 Hichens and Werner, *The Advice of Mwana Kupona,* 83-84 (my translation).
51 Harries, *Swahili Poetry,* 202.

"adds to the attractiveness of the verses as well as to the difficulty of composition."[52]

To conclude this short introduction, in Swahili poetry God is entreated in the form of several different prosodic patterns, namely, free-standing *dua; dua* embedded in *utendi* compositions whether explicitly religious or not; and *mashairi*, whether overtly addressed to God or not. In other words, Swahili *dua* can stand as single compositions or form part of longer compositions.

In the following pages, I shall focus particularly on short *gungu* songs in *shairi* verse forms. Although the most prominent exponent of *mashairi* verse is Muyaka b. Haji al-Ghassany (1776-1840), who indeed wrote verses on secular topics, it is important to note that he did so within the context of a Muslim community.[53] As observed by Shariff, "the composition of Swahili secular verse has its roots many centuries prior to Muyaka's era. The art was so advanced by Muyaka's time and used by so many poets, such as iBwana Zahidi Mgumi of Lamu and Bakari Mwengo and Ali wa Athumani of Pate, that it could not have been invented by Muyaka or his contemporaries."[54]

It is exactly on these devotional *mashairi* songs allegedly belonging to the war poetry dialogues between the Lamuan and Patean poets that the following part of this contribution will focus.[55] Their prosodic form speaks of a dichotomy that is indeed blurred: they are devotional, but composed in a metre that has generally been used for secular topics.

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52 Hichens and Werner, *The Advice of Mwana Kupona,* 84.

53 Mohammed H. Abdulaziz, *Muyaka 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry,* Nairobi: Literature Bureau, 1979: 29.

54 Shariff, "Islam and Secularity," 43.

55 The texts analysed here have been transliterated, interpreted and analysed by the Zahidi Mngumi Workgroup, which has met regularly since 2015 in the framework of a workshop on the Zahidi Mngumi textual edition organized by Clarissa Vierke at the University of Bayreuth. It is needless to say that without the expertise in the language and feel for the poetic language on the part of poets Abdialtif Abdalla and Ustadh Mau, the writer Farouk Topan and Ahmed Kipacha, these texts would have never been made available for further philological investigation. Further, it is thanks to the sensibility of translators such as Annmarie Drury, Ann Bierstaker, Jasmine Mahazi and Clarissa Vierke that the Zahidi Mngumi Workgroup has been able to maintain the beauty of the texts also in translation.

4. *Form and Content of Eighteenth-Century Swahili Devotional Poetry*

The manuscript labelled SBB (Staatsbibliothek Berlin) Hs. Or. 9934 is said to have been produced in Lamu, an island of the homonymous archipelago off the northern coast of Kenya historically known as *Kiwa Ndeo* ("The Proud Isle").[56] In 1906, the manuscript was handed over to the Berlin state library, but its donor is thus far unknown.[57]

SBB Hs. Or. 9934 is a unique specimen of Swahili precolonial manuscript culture, if only for its size and the arrangement of its content. It contains 151 lyric poems and, with the exception of the last part of the manuscript, each folio contains three poems of three lines (*mstari*, pl. *mistari*) each.

More audaciously, perhaps, these 151 lyrical poems, bound together in one volume that also contains empty pages and some pages with illegible notes,[58] could be compared to the Italian *Il Canzoniere* or *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* by Francesco Petrarca, which contains 366 lyrics in one volume. The lyrics of *Il Canzoniere* can be grouped mainly into poems from before and after the death of Laura, the poet's beloved. They focus not only on the poet's love for her, but also on other topics, such as the corruption of the Papal Curia at Avignon, or poems commissioned by friends and relatives. Likewise, the main topics of the Berlin manuscript SBB Hs. Or. 9934 are war and dance songs for competitions, but curiously, wedding and religious songs also feature, particularly in the last part of the manuscript where the layout of the manuscript pages changes substantially because the poems are longer.

To identify the author(s) of every single poem contained in this

56 William Hichens, "The *Lamu Chronicle*," *Bantu Studies*, 12, 1938, 2-33: 3. It was on the northern Swahili coast, particularly islands like Pate and Lamu in the Lamu archipelago, that the jewels of early classical Swahili poetry were composed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As O'Fahey observes, "This may be related to patterns of trade on the Benadir coast in Somalia before the coming of the Omani hegemony that is in a northerly direction." See O'Fahey, "The Study of Swahili," 32.

57 See Gudrun Miehe, "*Kwamba uko Pate-Unga, nami niko Kiwandeo*: The Paths of Zahidi Mngumi's Powerful Poetic language from Indian Ocean Shores to the Western World," unpublished paper, Lamu, 2008.

58 Ernst Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften* [Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland, vol. 24], Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993: 82.

huge collection is challenging. First, the whole manuscript should rather have been conceived as a plurality of voices in dialogue with one another other. The verbal duelling poetry and dance songs represent a competition between Zahidi Mngumi, based in Lamu, and his contemporaries, the most renowned Swahili master poets from the city states of the northern Swahili coast, among them the poet and Islamic scholar Bakari b. Mwengo (1760-1830) from Pate, and Muyaka b. Haji al-Ghassany (1776-1840), the court poet of the Mazrui in Mombasa.[59]

Needless to say, analyzing texts that are part of a dialogue culture (*kujibizana*) requires and implies specific considerations not only with respect to text-editing practices, but also to the textualization of oral texts – which are meant to be chanted – and the networks of poets in these precolonial Swahili city states. As already pointed out by Gudrun Miehe in 2008, "We will see that there are differences among the editors not only as far as authorship is concerned, but also in respect of the order of the verses":[60]

The boundaries between the poems are often elusive. In particular, the boundary between wedding and religious songs, which occupy the last part of the 253-page manuscript, is not at all possible to draw at first glance because of the complex manuscript layout: what may appear to be one independent poem may in fact need to be split into two poems. For example, a song on a wedding celebration abruptly shifts to a devotional theme without any narrative link to the wedding celebration of the previous stanzas.

Hiyau hali uliyo ("The Way You Are"), for instance, is a 13-stanza poem appearing as a continuous poem on one manuscript page, but such a layout, in fact, suggests a tripartite structure made of three short poems. In support of this tripartite structure, there are also some lines (indicated below with a bold line by the author) that draw

59 For further details, see Ann Bierstaker, *Mashairi ya vita vya Kuduhu War Poetry in Kiswahili Exchanged at the Time of the Battle of Kuduhu* [African Historical Sources, vol. 7], East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996.

60 Miehe, "*Kwamba uko Pate-Unga.*"

boundaries between groups of stanzas, and each group stands as a poem on its own.

SBB Hs. Or. 9934 N. 248 p. 50, stanzas 1-13.[61]

My main subject of interest in the following analysis will be the three stanzas (8-10), starting with *Hukuomba mtu wako* ("I, your servant, beg you,"), addressed to God, where no reference to any battle – i.e., the previous topic – occurs. The last three stanzas (11-13), whose first line reads *Nipo mjao dhalili*, ("Here I am, your humble creature"), still resemble a prayer, although the chorus changes; these lines will also be analysed.

The poem *Tumika loho ya shamu* ("Be of Service, Syrian Tablet") is another example. It comprises fifteen stanzas, the last eight of which – starting with the line *Bwana mwezi umekwima niosheleze upesi* ("Lord, one month has passed, quickly fulfil my wish") – make a single devotional composition in contrast to the previous stanzas, which speak of a bride.[62]

A third text that I shall analyse below is a poem that is fully devotional from its incipit to the end; it occupies a whole page in the manuscript and is called *Bismillahi awali* ("At First, *Bismillahi*").[63]

All of the short devotional poems analysed below are in *shairi* form, and the poets are unknown. The only poem in the manuscript on which the name of an author appears is ms. Nr. 246, on page 50, a five-line poem whose first line reads *Autakao utezi* ("The one who requests the dance").[64] This poem is attributed to the poet Bwana

61 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 126-127.
62 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 127.
63 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 128.
64 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 126.

Zahidi b. Mngumi. We may deduce that the sequence of five poems (ataloguems. Nr. 248-252) following *Autakao utezi* – including the devotional ones analysed in this paper – can still be linked with the same poet, but this assumption requires further investigation.

As mentioned above and also observed by Lyndon Harries, unlike the *utendi* or *takhmis* prosodic forms, the *shairi* verse form owes much less of its subject matter to Arab sources and represents the popular medium for expressing themes that were "original."[65] The praises of God in these devotional parts of the *gungu* manuscript indeed do not follow any prior Arabic pattern, nor can the texts be seen as Swahili rewritings of Arabic religious texts like the *Maulidi Barzanji*, for instance, or some versions of the *Hamziyya* where the Swahili lines alternate with the "original" Arabic text.[66] However, as in the case of the *Maulidi Barzanji* and *Hamziyya*, it will also be shown that in these short lyric poems the poet's register fluctuates between sticking to Arabic – either by adapting its vocalization to common Swahili use, or by keeping close to the literal meaning of the original words – and using Old Swahili to accommodate the rhyme.[67]

65 Harries, Swahili Poetry, 208.

66 For a bilingual version of the Maulidi Barzanji, see Saidi Musa, *Tafsiriya Maulidi Barzanjikwa Tenzina Qasida,* Dar es Salaam: Lillaahi Islamic Publications Center, 1982. According to Abdallah Saleh Farsy, "when the Barzanji Maulidi first was introduced to East Africa, the Arabic was unvocalized and everyone was reciting it as it pleased. Finally, when some books arrived with proper vocalization, it was vocalized the way Sayyid Abdu'r Rahman was reciting it!" (Bang, Islamic Sufi Networks,124). In this particular case, with regard to the text's vocalization (irabu), we can already recognize the act of recreating or freely adapting earlier words, expressions and entire texts in accordance with local practice.

67 In the *Hamziyya*, in translating the poem from Arabic into Swahili, the poet Sayyid Aidarus bin Athman makes the text fit into a new rhyme scheme based on the letter *mim*, which reads as the syllable *-ma* in the Swahili text, although the title evokes the Arabic form of the *hamza* rhyme. Nevertheless, the Swahili poet decided to keep two lines per verse and fifteen syllables per line, following the Arabic pattern in this respect. Between the lines, untranslated Arabic words such as *li-anna* and *kalama* are interspersed with the old poetic dialect of Kiongovi, and all these elements together comprise the line. Stanza 6 reads as follows: *Li-anna niliko nina niya taka kutenda / Kitenzi cha siyi Hamziyah lake kalima*, "Because I am here with the intention wishing to make a versification, of this *Hamziyya* of (its) words" (Kineenewa Mutiso, *Utenzi wa hamziyyah,* Dar es Salaam: Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam, 2005:109; translation by Jan Knappert, "The Hamziyya Deciphered"; for the

As for the short devotional lyrics presented here, their rhyme scheme features an alternating pattern ([a]b, [a]b, [a]b, [b]c). Each stanza (*beti*) is printed in the space of a single manuscript line (*mstari*, pl. *mistari*), and takes the form of a quatrain of eight verses (*kipande*, pl. *vipande*) of eight syllables (*mizani*) each. Each eight-syllable verse (*kipande*) is separated from the others by three dots set in the form of a triangle (∴), which also marks the caesura (*kituo*) between the *vipande*.

The religious tone of these texts underpins a shorter, simpler and more intimate dialogue between the "lyrical I"/suppliant and his God. The poems should not be conceived as devotional texts with a didactic purpose, such as teaching how to be a pious Muslim; rather, they reveal a devotee-poet and his personal speech act to pray to God and ask for His mercy. In this respect, it is worth mentioning what D'Aguiar states about a poem's tone:

> A poem's tone is a property of the poet buried in the poet's architecture. Tone is tantamount to a point of view and an opinion held by the poet and not necessary for the poem's success but which forms part of the poem's overall impact on the reader.[68]

As will be shown, trust, desperation, compassion and humility are all sentiments found in these poems' lines, evoked by means of a common repertory of poetic syntax, register and images that depict the *mwenye kuomba* ("the one who prays") as humble, empty-handed and knocking at God's door by offering simple declarations of His divine majesty.

4.1 Hukuomba Mtumwako *(I, Your Servant, Beg You)*

Hukuomba mtumwako ("I, Your Servant, Beg You") is a three-stanza devotional *shairi* poem whose author is unknown. Indeed, the whole poem opens with the formulaic phrase *qala shairi*, "The poet said."[69]

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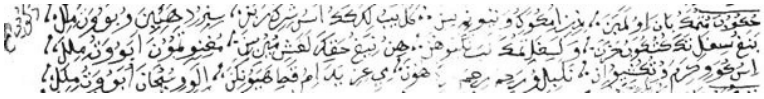
manuscript and its notes, see also page 2 of the notes found in MS 53821, Hichens Collection, SOAS Digital Library, retrieved 9 January 2019 from: http://digital.soas.ac.uk/LOAA000083/00001/2x).

68 Fred D'Aguiar, "'In God We Trust': Derek Walcott and God," *Callaloo*, 28, 1, 2005, 216-223: 217.

69 The presence of the standard Arabic verb *qāla* in these paratexts is exceptional, since it is not part of the Swahili lexicon differently from the Arabic noun *shā'ir*, from which Swahili *shairi* ~ *washairi*, "poet(s)," is derived.



SBB Hs. Or. 9934N. 248 p. 50, stanzas 8-10.

8. *Hukuomba mtumwako – Bwana iyu la mabwana*
Ni mwezi umekuwako – waniyuwa nami sina
Kula yambo liko kwako – uso shirika Rabana
Siniruḍi khaibina – upao watu milele.

I, your servant, beg you – the lord above lords
One month has passed – and you know I have nothing
Everything is yours – you, our Lord, who has no partner
Return me not empty-handed,
you who provide for people forever.

9. *Bwanangu singaliṭaka – kuṭukuwapo hazana*
Wala singaliṭamka – kwamba nakuyuwa huna
Hino ni yangu hakika – la ghushi moyoni sina
Mnginewe tʰamuona – apao watu milele.

My Lord, I would not have dwelt in sadness
Nor would I have mentioned it, had I thought that you had nothing
This is what I am certain of – I do not delude myself
That I will find anyone else, who provides for people forever.

10. *Isokuwawe Karima – uṭukushiyeo ina*
Nakwambile u Rahima – rehema zako huona
Mwenye ezi ya ḍaima – kaṭwi hayaonekana
Ila wewe Subuhana – apao watu milelele.

Except you the Generous, whose name is exalted
I am telling you: You are the Merciful.

I experience your compassion
You the ever-mighty, no other has ever existed
Except you, the Sublime,
who provides for people forever.

From the reading of this poem, it is already possible to deduce some qualities of the worshipper based on the way s/he prays to God, which is perfectly in agreement with the proper conduct, including such basics as the acts of (1) uttering God's positive epithets; (2) displaying humility and (3); confessing a deep involvement in the act of praying.

In *Hukuomba mtu wako*'s first stanza, both hemistichs open with *vipande* praising God above all: "the lord above lords" in the first line and "Everything is yours – you, our Lord, who has no partner" in the third one. Furthermore, the devoted poet is in a miserable state: s/he has nothing, as s/he claims in the second hemistich of the second line. The supplicant's prayer as embedded in the first hemistich – *waniyuwa nami sina* ("you know I have nothing") – is rephrased in the second hemistich, particularly in the first verse of the last line: *Sinirudi kahaibina* ("Return me not empty-handed"). The first stanza comes to an end with a final praise in the solemn verse *upao watu milelele* ("You who provide for people forever"). This *kipande* is rather the refrain (*kipokeo*) that also serves as a chorus in the second and third stanzas.[70] The second stanza suggests something like, "I am in sadness, but I trust in your help." This trust in not being abandoned increases mimetically in the third stanza with a particular declaration of love, in which the speaker claims the following: ***rehema*** *zako huona,*

70 The refrain slightly changes though: in stanza 8 it reads *upao,* represented with *wāw* + superscript *damma* (وُبَو); here the subject marker u- (2nd p.sg.) means "you." The same line in stanza 9 reads rather *apao,* represented with *alif* + superscript *fatha* (ابَو); here another subject marker is written down, a- (3rd p. sg), which denotes "s/he." Finally, stanza 10 is quite ambiguous in its reading, since the refrain recites *upao,* but is represented with *alif* + superscript *damma* (أبَو), which grammatically is not correct. For this case, we opted for considering the presence of *damma* rather than *fatha* a *lapsus calami* by the scribe and this is why our rendering has stuck to the third person singular.

"I experience (lit. 'I see') your compassion."

On the original manuscript page, another boundary marks the beginning of a new, still devotional lyric poem in *shairi* verse, but one in which the chorus changes. In contrast to the previous three stanzas, the next three depict a "humble creature" who assiduously invokes the name of God and asks what he wants (*nitakao*).

11. *Nipo mjao dhalili – niṭekese yangu nia*
Babu nimeikabili – mt^{h}u mwako hukwambiya
Uinuziye miwili – mikono k^{h}inyenyekea
Nirejeza mazoweya – kula walonipa bwana.

Here I am, your humble creature, I have clarified my intention
I am at your door, I, your slave, am telling you
I raise my hands humbly
Give me back what I am used to, everything with
which you provided me.

This Swahili stanza nicely mirrors a metaphor held dear in Muslim prayers: the beggar at the door (namely, *as-Sā'ilu bi'l-bāb*). Humility (*dhalili*) and true intention (*nia*) are two concepts woven into the first *kipande* of this second sub-poem. The Swahili term *nia* stems from the Arabic *niyyah*, which means "intention of the soul." Its presence in the above-mentioned lines shows how an Islamic concept theorized by all the Islamic juridical schools is invoked as a religious device in the prayer rite of the poem, used by the worshipper to render an authentic prayer, coming from his purified soul.[71]

The poem goes on, with the beggar standing at the door of God (*nimeikabili*). The term used for "door" in this prayer is the Arabic original *bāb* rather than the bantu equivalent, *mlango* (pl. *milango*). A recitational usage of language and words meant to keep the purity

71 "The ninth condition (for a valid prayer-rite) is the intention and its place in the heart. The outward saying of it is an illegal innovation. *Shurūṭu 'ṣ-ṣalāt*" (M. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, cited in Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions in the Muslim World*, 49).

of the Arabic supplication within the prayer-rite.[72] Still, the gesture of raising hands mirrors the proper position for petition *dua* "with outspread hands, palms outwards, as though to receive blessing, an ancient and natural gesture used in Babylonia and Egypt and Israel of old and common to all Arab lands,"[73] and, as these manuscripts reveal, performed also among the Swahili Muslim beggars.

Further on, we also observe a meta-textual comment in the second stanza, where a diegetic narrator utters: "The slave tells his master what he is in need of"; this reference reflects the content shaping the previous stanza as well as the second part of the same quatrain:

12. *Kwa bwana wake mtumwa – aṯakalo humwambiya*
Wala hapawi na ṯ͟hama – ziumbe wakamtia
Kumuomba siṯokoma – inshallah ṯ͟haṯemegeya
Ya Sayyiḏ͟i Ilahiya – niṯakao nipa Bwana.

The slave tells his master what he is in need of
Nor is he disgraced among his fellows:
I will not stop begging him, God willing I will rely on him
O Lord, my God, give me, Lord, what I request.

The last stanza can be considered the most evocative and eloquent. Here, the first hemistich displays an antithetic syntactic construction based on the anacoluthon of two parallel clauses, with the respective subjects of God and the humble worshipper. Two negations (*hato-*; *sito-*) are used to express positive intentions: as God will never push the humble suppliant away, s/he will never stop uttering His name.

13.1-2 *Hoyo* ***haṯonisukuma*** *–* ***siṯokwisa*** *kuliṯaya*
mbwa nyingi mno rehema – rehemaze ṯ͟haziṯaya.

72 In regard to prayers to be uttered in their original Arabic language or in translations, the imam with whom David Parkin worked on Zanzibar (Sheikh Saidi Saalum of the so called "Blue Mosque" in Zanzibar) explained as follows in reference to the recitational use of language for *salaa*: "If you try to translate the Arabic, it's endless and you lose the authentic purity (*twahara*) of these, God's words." (Parkin, "Invocation: *salaa, dua, sadaka,*"142).

73 Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, 13.

He will not push me away, I will never cease to mention his name
He is full of mercy, I will mention his mercies.

In the second line, God's mercy (*rehema*) is repeated in both *vipande*; in the latter, we can see that *rehema*, the object of the verb *ṯʰaziṭaya*, is placed before the verb, creating alliteration with the first *rehema* of the first *kipande*. Placing the verb at the end is a recurrent device used to accommodate the end rhyme in *-ya*.

The second hemistich of the same stanza instead contains other Arabic forms to express God's name and what lies in His power. In contrast to the first hemistich, in these two lines the praising escalates, yielding a final devotional climax.

13. 3-4 *Ya Muhuyil idhama – aso shirika Jaliya*
Allahu nifarijia – batini wayuwa wewe.

O Almighty, you, who give life to the bones, who are peerless,
O God, make it bearable for me, you know even what
is hidden in my heart.

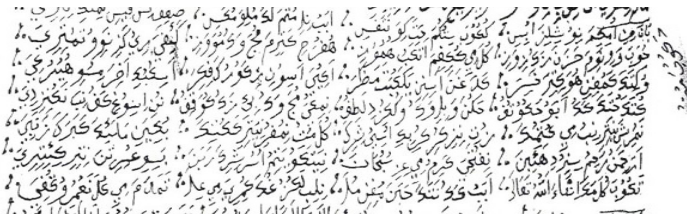
Muhuyil idhama is an Arabic stem form alluding to a passage of the *Sūrat Yā Sīn* of the Qur'an, verse 78, *man yuḥyī al-'iẓāma wa-hiya ramīm*, "[He says,] 'Who shall quicken the bones when they are decayed?.'"[74] The Arabic verb *yuḥyī*, "to give life," is rendered in its agentive form in the Swahili verse, and *idhama* makes explicitly clear the reference to the verse above. The use of *idhama* rather than *mifupa* (Swahili for "bones") can be traced to two textual reasons: to make a more salient reference to the Qur'an and thus to God's Word and, prosodically speaking, to comply with the stanza internal rhyme [*ma*], *e.g. suku**ma**, reheh**ma**, idha**ma**.*

As observed by Padwick with regard to Islamic prayer manuals, and also confirmed by my principal imam informant (Ustadh Mau, imam

74 Arthur John Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986: 455.

of the Pwani Mosque), *Sūrat Yā Sīn* is known among Muslims as "the heart of the Qur'an," as it is considered to be particularly beneficial because it speaks of the Prophet and his mission. As also explained to me by Farouk Topan, Muslims invoke the blessings of God through it on many occasions, one of which is to recite it to someone on his/her deathbed and also after his/her death. The reading of this *sūra* to a person on the verge of dying, will make the moment of their last breath unproblematic.[75]

4.2 *Bwana Mwezi Umekwima (Lord, One Month Has Passed)*



SBB Hs. Or. 9934 N. 249 p. 54 stanzas 8-15.[76]

This prayer is an eight-stanza lyric that follows the poem *Tumika loho ya Shamu* (Be of Service, Syrian Tablet); it addresses the bride, Binti Saidi, who rejected Mwana Khadija because of gossip. The poetic voice, that of Mwana Khadija, tries to persuade her by mentioning his noble lineage. From stanza 8, the poem is an entreaty to the self-sufficient God (*Moliwa Mkwasi*) by His humble servant and, like the poems analysed above, turns into a proper petition addressed to God, the provider, by His humble servant. The humility that in the previous two short poems was expressed with *mtu mwako* or *mjao dhalili* is here rendered by an independent Swahili noun of Arabic origin, namely, *ḍa'īf;* as the last line of the first stanza (stz. 1.4) reads: *Dhaifu niso kiyasi*

75 Together with the *Sūrat Yā Sīn* (36), the other two most recurrent suras of the Qur'an in devotional poetry are *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* ("Sincere Religion," 112) and the last three verses of the *Sūrat al-Baqara* ("The Cow," 2) (Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, 116). In a personal communication to the author (21 February 2019), Ustadh Mau, relates in Swahili: *Surati yasin aghlabi inasomewa mtu katika hali mahatuti yaani karibu yakufa. Waislamu wanaamini kuw amtu akisomewa yasin hufa bila shida nyingi wakati wa kukata roho.*

76 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 127.

nimetaka nitendeya ("I am weak beyond measure, I beg you, effect it for me"). This stanza (stz. 1.2) opens with an implicit promise of love between a poor preacher and God: *Kukuomba sitokoma hata kiwa na nafasi*, "I will not stop begging you even if I prosper."

The traits of a God who is indeed a provider without equal is well represented in the second stanza:

9. *Huwapa wawi na wema – hazana zako zi wazi*
Kula mwenye kukwegema – atakapo humuuzi
Hufurahi katerema mja wako mawazi
Kaifanya ndio kazi nawe utamtendea.

You provide for the good and the evil, your treasures are available
For each person who approaches you – when someone needs
something, you don't question him (her)
Your needy creature rejoices and exults
And keeps on begging and you will continue to provide.

In this context, where the role of being the provider is well demonstrated, the "lyrical I" also expresses the source of his request, and why he is requesting it of Him: *Kutaka hutaka kwako* ("To need is to need from you") in stz. 11.1 where a perfect alliteration is created by the use of the consonant *k*, repeated five times, and particularly the syllable *ka/ko*, repeated three times in just an eight-syllable *kipande*. The second hemistich of the same stanza embeds an allusion to God's command, which further escalates the praise:

11.3-4 *Nimekuya mja wako – mbee zako kuwakifu*
Nuni isiunge kafu – nipa na kuniziḍiya.

Here I am, your servant, standing before you
Before the command "be" sounds (it already is),
give me abundantly.

The second hemistich depicts the devotee having arrived before God. The eight-syllable *nuni isiunge kafu* is tantamount to the Arabic *kun*

fa-yakūn, a Qur'anic reference that the poet used and adapted into Swahili and to the eight-syllable *kipande* scheme. The saying refers to a command that should be effected even before the last sound of *kun* ("be") is pronounced. This Qur'anic reference is found in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* (36), 82, reading as follows: "His Command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be', and it is."[77] The reference to a Qur'anic verse also shows the free appropriation and re-entextualization of fragments of religious discourse taken by the unknown poet, who might have known the Qur'an or a number of its suras by heart. This command and its derivative formula is well known and commonly used among poets.[78] As a further example, it should suffice to cite the *Utendiwa Shufaka*, "The Poem of Compassion" (also known as *Chuo cha Utendi*),[79] which in stanza 249 alludes precisely to the command uttered in *Sūrat Yā Sīn,* verse 36, a verse that is also embedded in the poem in a citation that follows the stanza.

249. *Na katika Kuruani*
Mwisoni mwa YaSini.
Kudura yako Mannani
Alikokutubia:

And in the Qur'an
At the end of the *Sūrat Yā Sīn*
By your divine will, Giver.
where he [God] has written [for us]

In this excerpt from *Shufaka*, God's divine will, or *kudura ya Mannani*, is the way in which the poetic voice summarizes what verse 82 of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* will state soon afterwards: "His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be', and it is. So glory be to Him, in whose hand is the dominion of everything, and unto whom you shall be returned."[80]

77 Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted,* 455.
78 Ustadh Mau, personal communication, 11 January 2019.
79 Carl Gottif Büttner, *Anthologieaus der Suaheli-Literatur. Gedichte und Geschichten der Suaheli,* Berlin: Emil Felber, 1894, 26.
80 Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted,* 455.

Returning to *Bwana mwezi umekwima*, the climax of the above-cited stanza 11, becomes more emphatic in the last *kipande*, where the order "give me" (*nipa*) is followed by "and give me more" (*na kuniẓiḍiya*), in which the Swahili verb *-zidi*, literally "add" or "increase," is used.

Especially interesting is the stanza below which, because of its manuscript variants, lends itself to two different hermeneutic interpretations and thus, translations:

12. *Namrisha* ***niyatend^{r}e*** *– nipo mwenye kutumika* ***Zote nizikuṇḍekuṇḍe*** *– pweke usio shirika* ***Kula mtu nimfund^{r}e*** *– niyatende kwa kuṭeka* *Pokeyani malaika – kwa baraka za Nabiya.*	*Namrisha* ***ni tayari*** *– nipo mwenye kutumika* ***Zote ni zikurikuri*** *– pweke usio shirika* ***Kula mtu ni mghuri*** *– niyatende kwa kuṭeka* *Pokeyani malaika – kwa baraka za Nabiya.*
Give me an order, I will do it, I am at your service Let me carry out the command of You, who are peerless Let me teach everyone, I will happily do so Angels, support my prayer, with the blessings of the Prophet.	Give me an order, I am ready for it, I am at your service They are all insignificant creatures, you are incomparable Everybody else is a pretender, but I will happily carry out your command Angels, support my prayer, with the blessings of the Prophet.
Version A	Version B

The variant readings are found particularly in the second and third lines of the stanza. In the second line of each translation, we find a syntactic change of subject between the first and second *kipande*: version A features the speaker, *ni-*, as the first subject (*zote nizikuṇḍekuṇḍe*) and God as the following subject (*pweke usio shirika*), while in version B, the same line contains a third plural subject (*zote ni zikurikuri*, 2.1bis). The same pattern is repeated in the third line where, in version A, the speaker is the subject of the first *kipande* (*kula mtu nimfund^{r}e*, 3.1), as opposed to version B, where the subject is a third-person singular (*kula mtu*, 3.1.bis).

The most important message in this stanza unfolds at the end, where the supplicant entrusts his prayer (implicit in the line) to the angels (*malaika*) along with the Prophet's blessings (*baraka*). Thus, here it is as if the speaker is directing his prayer to the angels, who are already worshipping God in heaven, as attested in Qur. 21:20, "Glorifying Him by night and daytime and never failing";[81] the supplicant may furthermore be particularly addressing his or her own angels, *i.e.* those protecting him or her.[82]

Praising God in this poem is postponed until the last stanza, which is a mosaic of praise utterances woven together. It opens with *alhamdu lillah* and ends with the testimony of faith *la ilaha illa Allahu*; in terms of register, the noun *quwa* as well as the vocative *ya* are both items of Arabic vocabulary. These are used by the poet (1) for the sake of accommodating the rhyme pattern, since *quwa* rhymes with *-wa* (in contrast to the Swahili equivalent *uwezo*); (2) for the sake of the syllable count, since the line *Ilahi ... ilahi* without the *ya* would have made the *kipande* only six syllables, and thus defective due to the lack of two syllables.[83]

Beyond the syllables, the presence of the vocative *ya* also helps to create alliteration, renders the line more solemn and intensifies the catharsis of the whole invocation and praise of God.[84] In the middle

81 Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted,* 324.

82 Sūrat ar-Raʿd, 13:11 declares: "He has attendant angels, before him and behind him watching over him by God's command" (Arberry, The Koran Interpreted, 240).

83 The defective kipande would read i-la-hi i-la-hi (six syllables), vs. the correct kipande, yai-la-hi yai-la-hi (eight syllables).

84 This recalls the emotional take commonly found in *tendi* compositions where highly mimetic accounts take place through the usage of Islamic formula such as the devotional act of uttering *Lā ilāha illāʾllāh* (known as *Tahlil*). In the *Utendi wa Yusuf*, for instance, when Yusuf's brothers claim to their father that Yusuf was killed, stanza 147 reads it follows: *Nguo wakiziraruwa/Wachendʿa wakiumbuwa/La Ilaha illa huwa/Yusufu amepoteya*, "They were tearing the clothes apart, when they went depreciating themselves: 'There is no God except him: Yusuf got lost!'" By uttering the *tahlil* and embedding it within the *utendi* stanza, the poet makes the climax of the whole, dramatic stanza escalate. See Annachiara Raia, *Rewriting Yusuf. A Philological and Intertextual Study of a Swahili Islamic Manuscript Poem,* Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag (*Archiv Afrika-wissenschaftlicher Manuskripte* Band 12), 2020.

of the stanza, some of the previously stated attributes of God such as *pweke asio mithali* are combined with ones not yet mentioned, such as *Mwenye nguvuze na quwa* or *kwa alipendalo huwa*. The last stanza is solemn and warm-hearted, marking the speaker's conclusion of his love prayer.

15. *Alhamdu Lilahi nihimiḍiye Moliwa*
Pweke asiyo shabihi – Mwenye nguvuze na quwa
Ya Ilahi ya Ilahi – kwa alipendalo huwa
Nataka tena kupowa – La-Ilaha ila Allahu.

All praise be to God, thank you, my God
The only one who has no resemblance, who has
special power and might
O God, O God, what he wants becomes so
I want to be provided for again, there is no God but Allah.

4.3 Bismillahi awali *(At first, Bismillahi)*

SBB Hs. Or. 9934 N. 250 p. 55 stanzas.[85]

This last poem can be considered quintessential "heavenly poetry"[86] or – as the stanza itself puts it – "the best of prayers, the best of prayers,

85 Dammann, *Afrikanische Handschriften,* 128.
86 Jay Hopler and Kimberly Johnson, *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

to the Venerated": *Wasalaṯu afadhali swala njema Hashima* (stz. 1).

Taking a closer look, it is possible to see the types of content already found in the previous, shorter poems as well as new themes. This prayer indeed betrays a real tripartite structure, the same as is regularly expected for long narrative *utendi* poems, which are composed of a prologue (*dibaji*), the main story (*hadithi* or *qisa*) and the conclusion (*tamati*). Although comprising only thirteen *shairi* stanzas, *Bismillahi awali* exhibits several layers: a series of formulaic opening stanzas (1-7), the real prayer, the petition (8-11) and the final salutations and praises (12-13). What makes *Bismillahi awali* different from the previous devotional poems is that here it seems that the poet has a sufficient number of stanzas to properly pray to his God and his intercessors, whereas this had not found full expression in the previous texts. This might have been due to the lack of space on the manuscript page, which allowed the devotee-poet to go further in his *maombi*.

Still, concerning the *mise-en-page* of the *Bismillahi awali* manuscript, the heading of the manuscript reveals the context for which it was composed*: nilipomtaka Nana Miskiti binti Mohamed* ("when I wanted [to marry] miss Miskiti, daughter of Muhammad"). Thus, this is a poem praying to God with the wish of obtaining the object of the poet's love. What the heading of this manuscript page only hints at, finds expression in certain stanzas of the poem where the speaker explicitly utters his request.

In the introductory stanza from which the poem takes its title, *Bismillahi awali*, Swahili terms of Arabic origin – such as *himidi,* "thank," *salatu,* "prayers," *swala* "prayer," and *sahaba,* "companions" – are all fully vocalized in order to accommodate the syllabic structure of eight syllables per *kipande*. The promise to never stop praying to Him is also part of this poem and marks the end of the introductory stanza.

1. *Bismillahi awali nihimiḍiye Karima*
Wasalaṯu afadhali swala njema Hashima
Na sahabaze na Ali – Alaihi wa Sallama
Kukuomba siṯokoma – inshallah mzamikwawa.

Let me start in the name of God and thank the most Generous
The best of prayers, the best of prayers, to the Venerated Prophet
And his companions and progeny – peace be to him
I will never cease praying to you, if you, my lord, wish.

The image of the speaker begging God to not return him empty-handed is reiterated in this poem, in the second stanza, where a new attribute of God also appears, that of eternal refuge (*samawadi*). Further features of God are found in the second hemistich of the third stanza, where God's "shining" for his slave is described:

3.2 *Humwalia kama koja – likaṯoza miyangaza*
Ya nuru katika kiza – Jalilu Mzamikwawa.

You shine for him like a garland that gives out rays
of light in the darkness, O Revered One, my Lord.

Whereas in the opening stanza from the *Inkishafi* the quality of God shining like a lantern benefits all people, in the above lines of this lyric the tone is more personal and refers to the benefits of God's shining specifically over the worshipper, the *mwenye kuomba* of this prayer poem.

Beyond the attribute of shining, God is depicted in this heavenly poem as the healer. Just as in the first poem analyzed, *Hukuomba mtumwako*, where the speaker told his God how good he is in knowing what the poet keeps secretly in his heart (cf. stz. 13), here, too, the speaker, probably the same and/or the alleged Zahidi Mngumi, similarly refers to this feature: his God knows everything, all his problems, and he cares for him like a healer.

4.1 *Wayayuwa yoṯʰe piya – maudhiko yangu Rabi*
Ndʳiwe ṯwabibu Jaliya – wa kuniṯwibu qalibi.

You know everything, all my problems, my Lord
You are my healer, my Revered One, who heals my heart.

Towards the middle of the poem, stanzas 5 and 6, in a moment of intimate confession, the speaker asks to be forgiven, to be cleansed of his sins (*dhambi*, *makosa*). These stanzas precede the actual prayer and request, which will be uttered afterwards. This thus looks like an *actus contritionis* foreshadowing his prayer, such being possible through the invocation of Fatuma as intermediary between the earth and paradise, where the speaker hopes to find goodness, beauty and splendour.

5. *Pʰenḍa unighufiriye – dhambi zangu na makosa*
Kisa unijaaliya – kama nalozawa sasa
Nɗʳipo unisahiliye – maṯakwa yangu kabisa
Na mangine kufungasa – Jalilu Mzamikwawa.

I would like you to forgive me my sins and faults
Grant me to be as I was newly born
Thereafter make it easy for me to meet all my needs
And the later ones, O my Revered Lord.

6. *Binṯi Rasuli Ṯuma – walozawa ni Amini*
Niombee kwa Karima – yeo na kesho pʰeponi
Yanilie kwa wema – kwa urembowe na shani
Iwe kuni fayakuni – Moliwa Mzamikwawa.

Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, who was born to the Trustworthy
Intercede for me before the Generous God,
today and tomorrow in paradise
May all come to me in goodness, beauty and splendour
Let it be and it is, my God, my Lord.

The solemn verse from *Sūrat Yā Sīn*, *kun fa-yakūn*, is hinted at also in the last verse of stanza 6 above. Here, the Swahili pattern previously encountered in *Bwana mwezi,* namely *kafu isiunge nuni,* finds a reformulation built on another exhortative verb: no longer *isunge* ("may it not unify with"), but *iwe* ("let it be").

From stanza 7 onwards, the speaker will address his prayers to all Muslims and to the Prophet. The chorus is always the same: *Moliwa Mzamikwawa*. It is as if the speaker exhorted all his pious brothers to join in his prayer, so that his wish may be fulfilled and he may thus have a wife (possibly Nana Miskiti!) as well as children, good health, protection, a life full of joy, and a home.

8. *Na nyuṯʰe ajmaina – Isilamu waumini*
Siwaṯeni kulingana – kumlingana Manani
Nipate mke na mwana – atengeeo imani
Nili ḏuniyani – Moliwa Mzamikwawa.

And all of you, believing Muslims,
Cease not to pray and call upon God
So that I get a wife and a child (wives and children),
a wife who is devout,
While I am still alive in this world, my God, my Lord.

9. *Anipe mali ya kheri – na moyo mkinaifu*
Ya furaha na sururi – na nyumba iwe kunḏufu
Anivuwe na khaṯwari – kwa quwa yake Latwifu
Atutunge kwa luṯufu – Jalilu Mzamikwawa.

May he give me blessed wealth and a contented heart
A life full of joy and happiness, a gracious home
May he protect me from danger through his power, the Humble
May he gently take care of us, my Revered Lord.

As the stanzas above show, his petition is more emphatic and explicit than in the previous poems where, probably because of the lack of sufficient space on the page, the one who begs has hardly referred to his needs, but rather simplified his prayer with lines that only hint at God, who already knows his request. The poetic persona himself acknowledges by way of a metatextual comment that this prayer should come to an end:

12. *Ni mwiḍa wa kuwakifu – yasiṭake kuṭukiza*
Yakawatiya uchofu – au yakawaembeza
Wasiimbe kwa luṭufu – kwa huruma na mbuwaza (mbawazi)
Asaa kaniṭimiliza – Moliwa Mzamikwawa.

Let me stop here before this becomes annoying to you
Tiring to you or cloying
Before they fail to sing generously, with compassion and affection
Possibly, He may fulfil my wishes, my God, my Lord.

13. *Khaṭamṭu swala-Allahu – Sayyiḍna Muhammaḍi*
Nifuṭahiya Ilahu – ipowe yangu fuwaḍi
Waalihi swahabahu – hapa nami nimewaḍi
Nimesalimu Fariḍi – Jalilu Mzamikwa.

I have finished – God's prayer to the noble Muhammad
Open the door for me, God, so that my heart finds peace
And his progeny and companions – I am saying goodbye
I surrender it to you, the unique God, my Lord.

These last two stanzas of the poem constitute what in classical Swahili *utendi* compositions we may call *tamati*, conclusions in which the poet usually wishes for blessings from his God. Just as the poem started with the formulaic introduction *Bismillahi awali*, it ends with formulas such as *Khaṭamṭu swala* ("I have finished the prayer") and *hapa nami nimewaḍi* ("Here I am saying goodbye") by wishing for himself that God may open His doors.

5. *Conclusions*

The short poems of this huge manuscript - that mainly comprises dance and war poetry - can be considered as extemporary, "devotional" texts speaking to the divine. Each of the three texts analysed displays a mosaic of piety, where poetic syntax fitted to the shairi prosodic pattern is interwoven with themes of devotees' forgiveness-seeking (Ar. istighfār)

and refuge-seeking, as well as inner intentions, personal petitions and Qur'anic utterances.[87]

All the texts can be considered as fine examples of brief, climactic prayers uttered then written down on paper. The Prophet Muhammad is present in the texts, but not prominently; he is praised only once in *Bismillahi awali*, in connection with his supportive blessings together with the aid of the angels, or *malaika*. Fatima, who plays an important role particularly for Shia Muslims, is also a figure invoked for intercession by the *mwenye kuomba* or supplicant in order to get closer to Allah (*tawassul*). However, what is salient is that all the texts speak of an intimate, straightforward conversation with God. The references to saintly figures, such as prophets, *awliyā'*, *'ulamā'* and pious ancestors – which seem to be a feature of the *munājāh* of Ethiopian Islam, for instance – do not appear in these Swahili texts.[88]

Words are uttered and penned down from a stream of thoughts in what is tantamount to a heavenly activity. We have to imagine fragments of the Qur'an or other masterpieces – utterances such as *nuni isunge kafu* or *iwe nuni fayakuni* – as arising from an activity that goes beyond the rules of composing poetry (*sheria za kutunga mashairi*); although the verses respect the standard metrical norms, they sound, rather, like pre-existing utterances assembled together in a mosaic of devotional prayer.

We should also notice that each *mstari* contains an independent devotional utterance which is not necessarily semantically linked to the line that follows, though they are part of the same stanza. What rather unifies the stanzas comprising the *Hukuomba mtumwako*, *Bwana mwezi umekwima* and *Bismillahi awali* into one whole, more or less brief poem are the alliterations and assonances between the lines, as well as

87 In this regard, see for instance the so-called *disjuncta membra* comprised of (1) a traditional prayer to the Prophet; (2) Qur'anic verses; (3) blessings on the Prophet; (4) forgiveness-seeking; (5) refuge-seeking; and (6) cries of praise, all bound together in the prayer cited by Padwick (*Muslim Devotions,* xviii).

88 See Michele Petrone, "Devotional Texts in Ethiopian Islam: A *Munāǧāh* Invoking the Intercession of Prophets, Male and Female Saints and *'ulamā*," in Alessandro Bausi (ed.), *Essays in Ethiopian Manuscripts Studies,* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015, 259-272.

the rhyme pattern with internal and final rhyme and the refrain. The tone is always deeply imbued with the verse forms presented in this paper, such as *utendi*, *dua* and particularly, *mashairi*. The "lyrical I," or rather the worshipper, is in front of his God, and the beauty of the texts reside also in their capability to create a crescendo of devotionality on a limited page layout hosted by a huge book manuscript, where 151 lyrical war and dance poems are bound together in one volume and where only a tiny last portion speak of personal supplication prayer.

The limited space allotted to these devotional texts certainly constrains and draws boundaries on what in fact is neither free nor spontaneous speech. It has been shown here how the same formulaic utterances indispensable to a prayer rite poem, such as the *basmala*, epithets of praise or *āyāt* from the Qur'an, can be grafted onto different prosodic patterns and shortened or lengthened in order to accommodate the rhyme and syllable scheme.

In conclusion, based on the intimate conversations between God and the worshipper in these texts, some preliminary remarks on Swahili devotional poetic features and motifs can already be extrapolated.[89] God – whose name is uttered through a plurality of epithets, such as *ar-Rahmani, ar-Rahimi, Man(n)ani, Moliwa Mkwasi, M(u)ngu, Hashima, Karima* and *Mwenyezi* – has no equal, is unique and knows everything; to need is to need from Him, He who gives everything. *Rehema* and *baraka*, *sala* and *salawati*, *jaza* and *thawabu* – all these are addressed to Him or derive from Him.

On the other hand, the poetic voice of the humble servant (*mtu mwako*, *mjao dhalili* or *dhaifu)* expresses itself through the devotional act of composing *in the name of God* and the wish to not return empty-handed. Emblematic verses such as *kukuomba siṭokoma* ("I will not stop begging you"),[90] and *kukuomba siṭokoma hata kiwa na nafasi* ("I will not stop begging you even if I prosper"),[91] set the condition underpinning the devotee's prayer: the promise of eternal love.

89 This study might benefit in the future from further comparative research on devotional poetry from both the Horn of Africa and West Africa.

90 In *Bismillahi awali*, stz.1

91 In *Bwana mwezi umekwima*, stz. 1