Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová and Seyni Moumouni (eds)


*Voices of Africa’s Pasts* is a collected volume containing eight papers and an introduction. It is the outcome of the international conference “Sources for African history in African languages written in Arabic (Ajami), African and Latin scripts in Eastern and Southern Africa” held in Maputo in 2012.

The conference took place within the framework of the Fontes Historiae Africanae project of the Union Académique Internationale. This project aims to reconstruct and rewrite “African history from the African perspective […] as first and crucial stage of decolonising African history” (p. 5). The volume intends to contribute to that agenda by studying “historical sources whose existence had clearly tended to be ignored in the past” (p. 6). Pawliková-Vilhanová points out that particularly “the study of Islam and of the history, culture, and written traditions of the Muslim people of Eastern and Southern Africa has been until recently somewhat neglected” (p. 9). For countering such imbalance, the volume unites manifold contributions presenting one study from South Africa, two from Mozambique, and another each on Ethiopia, Uganda, and Niger. Two additional papers discuss more general issues. The conference has been already reviewed in *AASR (African Association for the Study of Religions) Bulletin* 36 by Muhammed Haron (May 2012, pp. 3–8), while Alessandro Gori also reviewed the same volume in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 111.1 (April 2016, pp. 90–4).

One of the two general papers is written by one of the editors, Seyni Moumouni. He presents a brief overview of Arabic script writing traditions in Africa describing attempts by organizations such as the ISESCO (Islamic Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Morocco) or the Ministry of National Education of Niger for the further development of such writing systems. He includes rare data such as statistics on learners’ attendance and educational outcomes from a case study conducted in the Tillabéri Region of Niger (pp. 20–2). Furthermore, the paper presents four samples of Arabic manuscripts in African languages, one each in Hausa, Fulfulde, and exceptionally in Djoula and Djerma/Zarma. It would have been useful however to indicate the ISO 639–3 codes of the sampled languages for people less familiar with the area (to prevent misunderstandings, since both Dyoula, a Mande language, as well as Diola, a dialect cluster of Atlantic languages, are idioms employed by
Muslims in Western Africa). When the four samples were sized down to fit on a single page, they unfortunately turned out too small to read. In his second paper Moumouni presents a brief but systematic overview on how manuscripts of Niger's Département des Manuscrits Arabes et Ajami (MARA) were dated, including some statistical data regarding that corpus.

Meanwhile, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová discusses the transition from oral to written history in the Buganda kingdom. The paper aims to demonstrate that “Africans were not passive recipients, [but that] the process of Westernization and cultural exchange was shaped by their choices and needs” (p. 157). Therefore, this paper touches only peripherally on Arabic script matters, with Arabic and Swahili languages in Arabic script having been used for a period in the Kingdom.

Muhammed Haron discusses a manuscript by Shaykh Ahmad Behardien (d. 1974), one of the writers of Arabic-Afrikaans literature from the Muslim South-African Cape community. The 70 folio manuscript Irshad al-Umma discusses jurisprudential and theological differences regarding the “Salat at-Thur,” one of the obligatory ritual prayers of Islam. In his analysis, Haron remarks on the different graphical styles of representing the original Arabic-language content in Afrikaans written in Arabic script, which occurs sentence-by-sentence or on face-to-face folios. He also briefly discusses the “Cape Muslim” vs. “Afrikaans” (p. 37) use of language (i.e. linguistic features of the register of such texts as opposed to the standard variety), such as the author’s choice to retain in the Afrikaans translation particular Arabic technical terms like faṣl (“chapter”), or lexical borrowings from Arabic like the conjunction yaʿnī (“which means”). With a higher degree of morphological integration, also Malay words such as batcha in kan gebatcha word (“can be read”) are frequently employed in the text. The latter discussion is reminiscent of what Kees Versteegh had termed “linguistic choices” in his recent publication in the volume The Arabic Script in Africa, edited by Mumin & Versteegh (2014, Brill: Leiden). However, Muhammed Haron termed such phenomena “socio-linguistic engineering” of texts.

Liazzat Bonate analyses three letters from the 19th century in Arabic scripts in Kiswahili from Mozambique. Interestingly two of them were written by (or on behalf of) local female rulers to representatives of the Portuguese colonial administration demonstrating “the co-existence of matrilinity and Islam” on the one hand “and the use of the Arabic script [which] constitute a long-term deep historical tradition” (p. 57) on the other hand. The letters are samples from a larger corpus, which was surveyed by Bonate with the assistance of Chapane Mutiuia and presented at 28th Swahili Colloquium, 31st May to 2nd June 2015 in a paper titled “Northern Mozambique Ajami Manuscripts: The