THE WORD FOR "GOD" IN SWAHILI*

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The Swahili language originates in Africa; the religion of the Swahili people derives from Arabia. Such a marriage between an African language and a Semitic religion must be of interest to both the Africanist and the student of Islam. This paper attempts to examine the Swahili word for "God", showing how the inhabitants of Swahili-land, without in any way compromising their religious orthodoxy, have preferred to retain the indigenous African word, albeit adapted to accord with their Islamic belief, rather than to adopt a word of non-African, Semitic, origin.

Possibly the oldest recorded instance of the word for "God" in Swahili (an African tongue belonging to the Bantu family of languages) is to be found in an 18th century manuscript, where the word appears as Mulungu. This form of the word no longer survives in Swahili itself (for the /l/ has been effaced long since), but it may still be heard, for example, in the neighbouring Mijikenda languages (e.g. in Giryama); variations on Mulungu (e.g. Murungu, Mluku, Mulunguo, Muunguo) are to be found in a host of other Bantu languages and dialects.

For many centuries the religion of the Swahili has been the religion of Islam. On the other hand, only a handful of the Mijikenda peoples (who inhabit the country north and south of Mombasa) had embraced Islam by the middle of the 19th century—even though they had been in contact with Muslims since the 17th century. It follows that any 19th century definition of the word Mulungu as understood by the Mijikenda may well contain nuggets for the semantically minded prospector. Three passages have been selected in the hope that they will enrich, in varying

* For Mu'allim Yahya Ali Omar, scholar-extraordinary, to whom I offer this homage of my respectful congratulations on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday.
degrees, our meagre knowledge concerning the original meaning of Mulungu.

Probably the first European to enquire about Mulungu amongst the Mijikenda was the Reverend J. L. Krapf, 1810-1881, a Christian missionary from the Kingdom of Württemburg. In 1847, when visiting Rabai (north-west of Mombasa) he wrote: "Auf meine Frage, was denn die Wanika [i.e. the Mijikenda] unter dem Wort Mulungu verstehen, sagte Einer, Mulungu sei der Donner; Andere meinten, es sei der Himmel, und zwar der Wolkenhimmel; wieder andere glaubten, Mulungu sei das Wesen, das Krankheiten verursache; noch Andere hielten die schwache Idee eines höchsten Wesens unter Mulungu fest. Einige glauben, jeder Mensch werde nach dem Tod ein Mulungu" (English translation in note).3

Further observations concerning Mulungu were made by another Christian missionary, the Reverend Charles New, 1840-1875, who visited Ribe (a few kilometres north-east of Rabai) in 1863. Although he did not possess Krapf's linguistic talents, his observations are nonetheless instructive. He wrote: "[The Mijikenda] notions of the Supreme Being are very vague, though the idea of God is not lost to them. Yet it is a singular fact they have no other name for God than the word which they apply to the visible heavens. This word is Mulungu ... When asked what God is they look at you vacantly, and often declare that they do not know. When pressed upon the matter they point to the sky".4

New continues: "What [the Mijikenda] mean by [praying to God] is very difficult to ascertain, simply because they have no clear ideas about the subject themselves. The exorcism of evil spirits, the propitiating of the angry power, and the supplication of the unknown deity are all comprehended under the expression [praying to God], the object being to prevent, avert, or destroy the evil which Mulungu is supposed to inflict".5

The third observation is by the Reverend W. E. Taylor, 1858-1927. In 1898 and 1899 he was an itinerant Christian missionary amongst the Giryama (one of the nine miji comprising the Mijikenda who, in Taylor's time, inhabited the land north-west of Rabai and Ribe). Taylor wrote: "Mulungu is often popularly understood as (1) sky, (2) luck, (3) manes of father, etc. In the Giryama natural philosophy all things are supposed to have been created by the union, as if in marriage, of the Sky and the Earth; both are supposed by some to be living beings. Hence, probably,