THE IDEA OF 'THE HOLY' IN SWAHILI*

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In English the word 'holy' contains several ideas, including that of being morally and spiritually clean; the adjective is used in various collocations, many having associations with Christianity—the list in the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary is fairly long.

It is sometimes said the Bantu languages have a preference for concrete words and a paucity of abstract concepts, and, indeed, there is no entry for 'holy' (or 'holiness') in the four monumental volumes of Guthrie's Bantu Languages (1971). However it would be quite wrong to deduce, solely on the selective evidence in Guthrie, that the concept of 'holy' is absent in the Bantu family of languages. The Swahili language is a member of that family and, as spoken by the Swahili people, may be described as an Islamic language. And so it is not in the least remarkable that Christian collocations of 'holy' such as Holy Ghost, Holy Orders, Holy Communion are not to be found in kiswahili cha kiswahili 'the speech of the Swahili people'. But what of the very word 'holy'? Is there a lexical equivalent in kiswahili cha kiswahili?

The word 'holy' and its equivalent in colloquial Swahili

The available evidence suggests that in the mid-nineteenth century, at the second coming of the European-Christians to the East African coast, there was no lexical equivalent for 'holy', or its near synonym 'sacred', in the spoken language of the Swahili people. To claim thus is not so much to comment on an apparent lacuna in the lexis of the Swahili language, but rather to remark on a conceptual difference in the Islamic and Christian use of language. This is because Swahili has other ways of expressing the idea that persons, books, places and times are 'holy', and it would be interesting to know if similar observations can be made of other Islamic languages. Here are half a dozen English collocations involving 'holy', and their lexical equivalents in kiswahili cha kiswahili:
i The holy One: the Qur'anic al-Qaddūs is employed untranslated in kiswahili cha kiswahili, since this is one of the ninety-nine 'beautiful names' for God—these Arabic names are the utterances of all Muslims everywhere no matter what their first language may be.

ii The holy Book: kitabu cha Mngu 'God's Book' (Arabic kitāb Allāh). The Swahili people, and indeed all Muslims everywhere, recognise four 'holy' books, namely:

Tauratī, revealed to the prophet Musa (Moses);
Zhāburi, revealed to the prophet Dauṭī (David);
Injili, revealed to the prophet Isa (Jesus); and, finally,
Kūrānī, revealed to the prophet Mūḥammad (see Mazru'i 1353/1934: 6). Kūrānī is sometimes followed by the adjective ṭukūṭī (in imitation of the Arabic karīm in the Qur'anic al-qa'rān al-karīm), but it is more usual for the Swahili noun kūrānī to stand on its own without any adjectival qualification.

iii The holy Prophet: mtume 'the messenger [of God]' (Arabic rasūl Allāh), or mtume Mūḥammad 'the Prophet Mūḥammad'.

iv A holy person: wali—without an adjective.

v Holy Mecca: in Swahili this is simply 'Maka' without an adjective (Arabic Makka al-mukarramah).

vi 'A holy day' or 'holiday': either siku k'uu 'high day' or idī 'a recurrent holy day'; the terms are almost synonymous, but not entirely so, for while every idī is a siku k'uu, not every siku k'uu is an idī. For example the non-Islamic holiday siku ya mwaka (the 'New Year's Day' of the Swahili year) is a siku k'uu but it is not an idī, of which there are only two: namely the Islamic feasts marking the end of the fasting month of ramadhani (Arabic ramadān), and the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, during the month of mfungo tatu (Arabic dhū 'l-hijjah).

While these examples are not exhaustive, it does appear that the concepts engendered by 'holy' in English, and by the consonantal root q d s in Arabic are absent in kiswahili cha kiswahili. The absence of 'holy' in Guthrie's Bantu Languages has already been noted.

takatifu, the early nineteenth century and the argument from silence

In Krapf's Swahili-English dictionary in four large manuscript volumes dated 1846-1853 (now deposited in the library of Rhodes House, Oxford), there is no entry for takatifu, although -takasa, -takata and -takatika are