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BOOK REVIEW: *Utenzi, War Poems, and the German Conquest of East Africa: Swahili Poetry as Historical Source*, by José Arturo Saavedra Casco

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José Arturo Saavedra Casco. *Utenzi, War Poems, and the German Conquest of East Africa: Swahili Poetry as Historical Source*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007. Pp. 323. Paper, \$29.95.

A common criticism in conference panels, Listserv discussions, and other public examinations of German colonialism in East Africa is that scholars in the metropole readily engage with German texts and archived documents, but meanwhile ignore Swahili texts or are unable to seriously analyze them without assistance. Nina Berman refers to the lamentable split within critical tradition whereby Germanists are more capable in other European languages, but tend not to pay the same kind of attention to languages and literatures of societies that Germans encountered during the process of colonization and imperialism. In her essay, "On the Relevance of Comparative Cultural Knowledge for German Literary Studies" in *The German Quarterly* (Spring 2005), Berman points out that literature and critical commentary about Germans written in languages other than German is crucial for our evaluation of texts about German colonialism. This echoes other scholars of postcolonial German studies at symposia and in print, such as Sara Lennox and Volker Langbehn, who call for deepened literary investigation into primary African texts. Fortunately, *Utenzi, War Poems, and the German Conquest of East Africa* functions as a response to these calls, albeit unintentionally and from a non-Germanist. José Arturo Saavedra Casco reads Swahili and not German, which opens up valuable new insight, while perhaps making us yearn for more bilingual German and Swahili researchers. To that end, Saavedra Casco draws attention to works by Gudrun Mieke and Katrin Bromber on Swahili poetry and administrative documents from the colonial era.

The monograph's introduction serves as a crash course on the genre under analysis, the *utenzi*, which is both a written and an oral tradition. They consist of four-line stanzas, with eight syllables per line, and only seldom deviate from this structure in the poems that Saavedra Casco

presents both in Swahili and in English translation. Utenzi originally functioned as epic narratives about the prophet Mohammed, but soon broadened in subject matter to include the martyrs of Islam, heroic deeds, and eventually the wars of pacification and rebellion fought between African peoples and the German colonial forces. They are well known, widely published in comparison to other African literatures, and largely ignored by scholars. According to historians Randall Pouwel and Jonathon Glassman, the strict rules of versification have limited the free expression of ideas in utenzi. One of the purposes of Saavedra Casco's book is to argue that utenzi can be used as an historical source to a far greater extent than these scholars have been willing to accept. Saavedra Casco relies heavily on a sociological approach and is mostly concerned with social history when he discusses the development of the utenzi genre. In the first chapter he defends this orientation and claims that most academic studies on utenzi have been made from aesthetic and poetological premises. The more stimulating contentions of the book emerge when Saavedra Casco undertakes ethnographic fieldwork and records conversations with poets' surviving family members. His objective, which he pursues painstakingly, is to piece together biographies to better understand utenzi writers and to uncover textual, veiled stances against the Germans.

The third chapter is of particular interest to German literary critics because of, among other things, Saavedra Casco's treatment of Carl Veltin's 1917 compilation *Suaheli-Gedichte*. Saavedra Casco sees such collections as ill-treated and misunderstood by some scholars. He takes issue with historian Marina Tolmacheva, who considers the religious character of the poems as a limit on their historical usefulness. The literary critics E. Kezilahabi, M. M. Mulokozi, and Ann Biersteker are among the authors who developed "resistance discourse" to characterize poetry written about German colonization, which Saavedra Casco considers positive

in that it views Swahili poetry as a source for the political positions of various poets. The negative aspect of the debate surrounding the poetic character of *utenzi* and resistance discourse, according to Saavedra Casco, is the relegation of the poetry written under German occupation to collaborationist and unreliable art. Collections such as Veltin's remain overlooked by many because they are branded partial and disingenuous. They are viewed as non-narrative descriptions or, at most, mere catalogs of German military powers by Swahili intellectuals. Saavedra Casco, inspired by the Polish academic Rajmund Ohly, convincingly counters: The poems are not by "bootlickers." He takes aim at notions that such *utenzi* cannot be a reliable source by pointing out the contradiction that scholars do not doubt the *usefulness* of colonial accounts by German officers. In the case of poetry written by coastal Muslim intellectuals, however, the prevailing assumption is that they are biased materials that should not be studied.

Information provided in the second and fourth chapters on the conflicts between coastal urbanites and inland ethnic groups would greatly serve historians, as well as literary critics interested in sociohistorical connections, especially when Saavedra Casco presents an anti-German alliance between the two demographics to illustrate that social class did not in itself determine one's position in the new colonial order. After this extensive historiography, literary critics will relish Saavedra Casco's protracted conclusion, a discussion of the *utenzi* genre from the colonial era into the twenty-first century, its specificity and uniqueness, and the emergence of *utenzi*-like narrative poetry in East African broadcast media. The visual montage on the dust jacket is a handsome departure from the usual academic volume, but the monograph would have benefited from better copyediting at Africa World Press. There are hastily written footnotes, redundant clauses in the main text, punctuation errors, dropped pronouns, and orphan parentheses. Nevertheless, for literary critics who have felt less relevant among historians at a

panel on German colonialism, or historians who have experienced the reverse, Saavedra Casco's book offers an example of effective mediation between the two disciplines.

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