

Abstract

This article reads two 18th Century classical Swahili epics of war as coded critiques of empire. Here, Empire refers not only to Europe but also the Arab world's conquest histories on the Indian Ocean seaboard. The epics: Mwengo bin Athumani's *Chuo cha Tambuka* (1728), 'The Epic of Tabuk', and Mgeni bin Faqihi's *Utenzi wa Rasi'lGhuli* (1855), 'The Epic of Rasi'lGhuli', are typically read in terms of their religious content and have been deemed apolitical; that they are merely concerned with translating Arabic tales for Islamic spiritual purposes. Through a critical approach, the article asserts that the epics deeply reflect on East African conquests as they are written in the era of Swahili coast conquests by the Portuguese and the Omani Arabs. They portray the oppressed, whose imagined piety is emphasized, appropriating religious authority to launch revolutions against their conquerors. The article demonstrates that the epics are political strategies of liberation from militarily powerful empires bent on consolidation of territory and exploitation. The poetic craft of winding tales of war not only nurtured and sustained the revolutionary spirit, but also reveals the warring atmosphere that defined the Swahili in their efforts to imagine a community in the years of imperial incursions.