

Abstract

As a nodal point in the ancient Indian Ocean trade that linked Northern Africa, the ancient Omani Empire, Yemen and many regions of Asia, the Swahili Coast remains a vital space in reading Indian Ocean contact histories. This paper critically engages with classical Swahili epics of war by contextualizing the epics and nuancing the poets' aspirations for liberty from powerful empires, empires driven by pervasive desire to conquer, consolidate territory, and exploit. The paper asserts that epics of war in which the oppressed, whose imagined piety is emphasized, turn their guns against conquerors greatly resonated with the Swahili at a time when they were submerged in, or had hardly emerged from, bloodstained conquests. The paper takes a trajectory that unsettles perceptions that classical Swahili epics are uncritical of imperial injustices. As a people whose bodies, civilisations, and habitat had been turned into a battlefield by invading military powers, the poetic craft of winding tales of war not only injected life in their traumatized existences, but also reveals the warring atmosphere that defined the Swahili in the years of conquests. The paper underscores the literary merit of in Mwengo bin Asumani's *Utenzi wa Tambuka* (1728), "The Epic of Tabuk," and Mwengo bin Faqihi's *Utenzi wa Rasi'lGhuli* (1855), "The Epic of Rasi'lGhuli" as it establishes how the epics respectively dissect histories of Portuguese and Arab conquests of the East African coast. This is achieved through emphasis on the value of geographical and historical contexts to the understanding of a work of art.