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IN 'THE HISTORY OF THE MAZRŪ'IS IN EAST AFRICA' BY SHAYKH AL-AMĪN B. 'ALĪ AL-
MAZRŪ'Ī

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Source: *Sudanic Africa*, Vol. 12 (2001), pp. 15-32

Published by: [Centre for Middle Eastern Studies \(University of Bergen\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25653355>

Accessed: 03/07/2014 06:57

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'THE HISTORY OF THE MAZRŪ'ĪS IN EAST AFRICA'
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IBRAHIM E. SOGHAYROUN

*Shaykh al-Amīn al-Mazrū'ī and his impact on East African
Islam*

It is the purpose of this paper to evaluate Shaykh al-Amīn's intellectual legacy to East Africa through the study of this manuscript. This is in fact the first serious attempt by an East African intellectual to embark on history writing.

Even here in the area of historiography, Shaykh al-Amīn's influence can be discerned in the writings of Shaykh °Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ al-Farsī. The writings of Shaykh al-Farsī, and to a lesser extent Shaykh Muḥammad Qāsim al-Mazrū'ī and their impact will illustrate the extent of Shaykh al-Amīn's influence on the intellectual scene in East African Islam.

Shaykh al-Amīn left a very important legacy in the social, educational and religious development in the Muslim community on the East African coast. In fact it could be said that he was the initiator of a new revivalist and modernist movement of Islam on the coast. There is no doubt that the teaching of Shaykh al-Amīn will always be considered a landmark in any history of the development of Islam in this part of the world. Shaykh al-Amīn al-Mazrū'ī is regarded as the leading exponent of Islamic 'modernism' in East Africa, not least in his pioneering of the writing of religious topics in Swahili. One Western scholar described him 'as an Islamic leader who saw the necessity for East African Islam to develop in a

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certain independence from its Arabian peninsula roots through the use of Swahili rather than Arabic as the medium for the teaching and propagation of Islam',¹ being a prolific author of numerous text books. In fact he was behind the first Swahili textbooks on Islam ever to be disseminated in East Africa.²

It was as a keen social observer and analyst who sought Islamic prescriptions that Shaykh al-Amīn's self-portrait emerges in his writings. His radicalism, too, stems from his reluctance to confine his readings to the standard manuals of his day, which were the staple of the East African 'ulamā'. He reached out beyond the traditional intellectual centers of Hadramawt and Oman. He read modernist theology and jurisprudence coming out of al-Azhar and Egypt in general, subscribed and contributed to Egyptian magazines that were preoccupied with the plight and decadence of Islamic societies. In contrast, the other East African 'ulamā' continued paying homage to the Hijaz, the classical sacred meadows of East African Islam. Shaykh al-Amīn read Egyptian journals and magazines voraciously and kept in touch with the leading issues of his day that were being thrashed out in the Egyptian media.

That Shaykh al-Amīn was greatly influenced by the ideas of Rashīd Ridā, Muḥammad 'Abduh, and by proxy, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, is a well-known fact.³

Shaykh al-Amīn was an indefatigable reformer who fought elements in Islam from outside. In a number of his articles in *al-Is'lāh*, he constantly sought to show that Islam was not responsible for the backwardness of Muslims, but it was the betrayal of Islam by Muslims that was responsible for the state of affairs. As a champion of women's education,

- 1 J.M. Ritchie, *The History of the Mazrui Dynasty of Mombasa*. Oxford 1995, 11.
- 2 A.I. Salim, *Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast*, Nairobi 1973, 167.
- 3 F.H. Elmasri, 'Sheikh al-Amin bin Ali al-Mazrui and the Islamic Intellectual Tradition in East Africa', *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, viii, 2, 1987, 230-1.

pan-Islamism and as a public educator, Shaykh al-Amīn fought for the teaching of Arabic as a language and also religious education within the secular school system; he published privately newspapers for the dissemination of his ideas in the 1930s. In trying to achieve these ideals, Shaykh al-Amīn worked variously as a school-teacher, public lecturer, pamphleteer and journalist of sorts.⁴

Some important Arab-Swahili links revealed in the study of the manuscript: Arab immigrant groups from Oman and Southern Arabia

Although the manuscript concentrates mainly on the history of the Mazrū'īs in East Africa, it comprises considerable material pertaining to other groups that played an important role in the history of the area, such as the Nabāhina, the Yaariba (Ya'rubīs) and, of course, the Būsa'idīs. This is in addition to the Ḥaḍramī Arabs or 'Washihiri' as the early immigrants from Southern Arabia are called. For instance an Omani family, the Nabhānī, had arrived on the coast in the thirteenth century and established a ruling dynasty in Pate after marrying into the local Muslim ruling family. According to the Pate Chronicle, the dynasty embarked upon a series of conquests during the fourteenth century which led to the subjugation of the whole of the Lamu archipelago and Malindi, and spread Nabhānī influence as far north as the Benadir, and as far south as Songo Mnara (near Kilwa), where a great mosque dating back to the fourteenth century, still known as the Nabhānī mosque, has been discovered.⁵

In Arab societies, who one's father was and the identity of one's ancestors carries great weight. Hence such a work on genealogy and kinship can be of great use. An Arab society like the Mazrū'īs can be easily followed from their

4 *Ibid.*, 234.

5 Salim, *Swahili-Speaking People*, 21.

place of origin in Oman⁶ to the regions where they intermarried with important African families, carving out new places for themselves in local societies. No less often, the migrant married the daughter of a ruler ensuring a place for his descendants even higher than his own. Thus they were able to take over existing political structures, generally with the acquiescence of the population, or create new states, small enclaves, island realms, or coastal village-states. Shaykh al-Amīn confirms this phenomenon in his account of the accession of the first Mazrū^cī *liwali* in the following:

Nāṣir b. °Abd Allāh was accounted a man of determination and bravery, and kindly dealing, and justice by his subjects. His good fortune was to earn the love and respect of the people of the town; and when he wished to marry, the notables of the town offered him their sisters, and he chose the sister of Shaykh b. Aḥmad al-Kabīr [i.e., Senior], one of the descendants of the former kings of Malindi, and he married her, and had by her a daughter who was the mother of Mubārak b. Gharīb al-Mazrū^cī. (ms, 20)

Children of such dynastic marriages created a new class of Bantu-Arab *muwalladūn* in East Africa.

Internal factional struggles in Oman and their impact on East African Arab and Swahili communities.

The Mazrū^cīs were an Omani Arab tribe who were brought to Mombasa by the Ya^crubī Imam of Oman, Sayf b. Sulṭān in about 1110 AH (1698 AD) to garrison the fort after the expulsion of the Portuguese. As long as the Ya^crubīs were in power in Oman the Mazrū^cīs maintained their contract and allegiance to the Imam. However, the relationship between Mombasa and Oman changed abruptly when Aḥmad b. Sa^cīd, the founder the Būsa^cīdī dynasty, wrested power from the declining Ya^crubī state in 1741 and declared himself Imam of Oman. This situation gave the Mazrū^cīs a good opportunity

6 Ritchie, *History of the Mazrui*, 20-1. See ms, 6.

to sever their links with Oman. In conformity with Arab practice the Mazrū'īs did not feel morally obligated to continue to honour the original contract after one of the contracting parties, the Ya^crubīs, had lost power. Armed with this argument and the knowledge that the Imam was too involved in internal warfare to pay any real attention to the East African coast, Muḥammad b. °Uthmān (the second *liwali*), declared Mombasa independent of Oman sometime after 1735. Shaykh al-Amīn defended his ancestors in his book, criticising the statement of some European writers that the Mazāri^ca were rebels who had revolted against their king (ms, 11-12).

On the political level, an objective interpretation would, however, ascribe wariness of the (new) Oman Arabs to the 'old' Arabs who had been coastalized, 'Swahilized', caused by the strong spirit of independence within such established ruling families as the Nabhānī in Pate and the Mazrū^cī in Mombasa. Indeed, during the rest of the eighteenth century, Pate and Mombasa, rather than Oman, enjoyed the greatest influence on the northern coast: Mombasa from the Sabaki river southwards and Pate from some point north of the Sabaki.

But whilst the Mazrū^cīs consolidated their power during several generations of governors who successfully defied Būsa^cīdī Oman, Pate suffered a gradual sapping of strength, racked as it was by internal factional struggles. The ambitious Mazrū^cīs were not averse to taking advantage of this disunity to further their influence in Pate. It was not until 1822 that Sayyid Sa^cīd countered this influence by sending a fleet to aid the opposing side. The Mazrū^cī nominee in Pate, Aḥmad Fumoluti al-Nabhānī, was forced to withdraw and, thereafter, Pate remained in the hands of the Būsa^cīdī (ms, 41-2).

Moreover, the economic factor in the conflict between the Mazrū^cīs and their allies in Mombasa, and the Būsa^cīdī sultanate of Zanzibar, should be considered. The Mazrū^cīs, the Miji Kenda and the twelve Swahili tribes had a strong common interest in retaining control of the economic activities of Mombasa and its hinterland despite the repeated military attempts by Sayyid Sa^cīd to make the island an economic

appendage of Zanzibar.⁷

The Struggle against the Portuguese

The Mazrū'ī history also throws light on the Portuguese and their policy during the period of their domination of the East African coast. It reveals East African resistance and the role played by the Imams of Oman during the Ya'rubī state in the liberation of their co-religionists and their joint struggle with the local population in the final expulsion of the Portuguese. Several parts and extracts from the manuscript show the close ties between Oman and East Africa, to the extent that a delegation representing African and Swahili tribes went to Oman to seek support. Thus the twelve tribes of Mombasa and their allies, the Miji Kenda tribes of the surrounding mainland, had succeeded in expelling the Portuguese from the island. As Mombasa was the last stronghold of the Portuguese, this meant their final expulsion from the whole of the east coast of Africa. Ever since 1698 when Sayf b. Sulṭān al-Ya'rubī, Imam of Oman, succeeded in overpowering the Portuguese in Mombasa, the Ya'rubī Imams of Oman had considered themselves overlords of all the coast. Fearing another Portuguese attack, the inhabitants of the coast recognized and welcomed this overlordship. In this context Shaykh al-Amīn provides interesting detailed information relating to the formation of the Mombasa delegation and their journey to Oman in the following:

After the people of Mombasa had driven out the Portuguese from the town, Shaykh b. Aḥmad al-Malindī and Mwishali b. Ndao al-Tanganī set out for Oman in company with one person from every Mombasa tribe, and one delegate representing every 'Zanji' tribe and appointed by it. And the tribes of the 'Zunūj' who sent their men as delegates to Oman were the Wa-Ribe, Wa-Chony, Wa-Kambe, Wa-Kauma, Wa-Jibana, Wa-Rabai, Wa-Giryama, Wa-Duruma, Wa-Mtwapa, Wa-

7 M.H. 'Abdul 'Aziz, *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry*, Nairobi 1979, 23.

Shimba, Wa-Lungu and Wa-Digo. This delegation set out to put before the Imam Sayf b. Sultān what happened in Mombasa concerning the Portuguese. When they arrived there the Imam welcomed them with kindness and liberality and treated them with the utmost honour; and when they returned he equipped them, and transported them with three ships, whose names were Kabras, Malaki and Falaki, with splendid gifts and presents and sent with them Muḥammad b. Sa'īd al-Ma'arī as *liwali* of Mombasa. (ms, 21-2)

Forms of social integration:

It would appear that right from the start the Mazrū'īs intended to establish themselves not as foreign rulers, but as local overlords of Mombasa and the rest of the coast. They appear to have had an active desire to belong fully to their new-found homes. They gradually intermarried with the native inhabitants, and assimilated Swahili culture. Shaykh al-Amīn referred to this phenomenon in his account of the first Mazrū'ī *liwali*, Nāṣir b. 'Abd Allāh (ms, 20).

The sixth *liwali*, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Uthmān, who died in 1814, was reputed to have been a Swahili poet of some standing himself and a close friend of Muyāka, the most popular Swahili poet in nineteenth-century Mombasa. At the turn of the eighteenth century, most of the Mazrū'īs in Mombasa were second or third generation settlers. Thus they were able to identify, at least in part, with some of the aspirations of the indigenous inhabitants of the island and the Nyika hinterlands, and even pose as champions of Mombasa independence. The Mazrū'īs seems to have had stronger alliance especially with the *Thalātha ṭā'ifa* or the 'Three tribes' (*Miji Mitatu*) of Mombasa, known respectively as the Changamwe, Kilindini and Tangana (ms, 55).

The Mazrū'ī governors recognized Swahili and Miji Kenda chiefs, and would do nothing of importance without their consent. They were always obliged to share their fortunes with these indigenous inhabitants. This spirit of social integration had been confirmed by contemporary European ob-

servers.⁸

A modern European scholar, Lyndon Harries, commenting on this form of integration, had this to say:

The important thing about the dispersed Arabs who migrated to East Africa ... is that they lost their culture and failed to establish another Arabian Culture. ... Except for exclusively religious purposes, they lost what is perhaps the most binding factor of Arab culture, their language. They became Africanized: they changed their diet, they adopted customs that were new to them. African customs, African dances, and an African language.

Harries continued:

But we should never lose sight of the African element, the people of the land. ... The Mazrui resistance in Mombasa to the rule of the Muscat Arabs at the beginning of the 19th century was in large measure due to the influence of the twelve tribes [*Tis^ca tā^ʿifa* and *Thalātha tā^ʿifa*] of the Mombasa region, people with early Perso–Arabian connexions, but who were now the people of the land. When Abdallah b. Ahmad al-Mazrui [the seventh *liwali*], the Mazrui governor of Fort Jesus, sent a messenger to Muscat to tell the Sultan, Sayyid Said, ‘You will not get the fort save by the muzzle of a gun and a sword’ Abdallah had the people of the land behind him. The most prolific and perhaps best loved Swahili poet, Muyaka b. Hajj al-Ghassany, expressed the continued defiance of the people towards the Sultan in his many poems. It is doubtful if any Arab would have appreciated the poems of Muyaka unless he was heart and soul on the side of the resistance movement and on the side of the people of the land.⁹

It would seem from evidence that *Muyāka* was in close relationship with three *Mazrū^ci* governors of Mombasa. These were *Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ^cUthmān*, and his sons *^cAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad* and *Sālim b. Aḥmad*. According to Guillian,

8 W.F. Owen, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar*, London 1833, II, 154.

9 L.P. Harries, ‘The Arabs and Swahili culture’, *Africa*, xxxiv, 1964, 225-6.

liwali Aḥmad was governor for thirty-four years and died in 1814, °Abd Allāh reigned as governor from 1814 to 1823, and Sālim ruled from 1823 to 1844. The period of governorship of these three *liwalis*, from which Muyāka received inspiration for his patriotic songs, was characterized by the resistance of the people of Mombasa against Omani domination.¹⁰

Another aspect of social and religious integration that came as a result of intermarriage, was the wide conversion of the Mazrū°is into Sunnī Muslims. The Mazrū°is were originally an Ibādī Omani tribe when they had first come to East Africa around 1698. Such intermarriage took place with people of predominantly African stock and the vast majority of African Muslims were, and still are, Sunnīs.

Moreover, Shaykh al-Amīn was inheriting old feuds that had existed between his family and various of the Būsa°idī ruling family. The Mazrū°is of Mombasa had to resort to other types of leadership roles and more subtle forms of resistance under the guns of Fort Jesus, which had passed firmly into Būsa°idī hands. When the fort fell to the Būsa°idī forces in 1837, Shaykh al-Amīn's grandfather Shaykh °Abd Allāh b. Nāfi° al-Mazrū°ī and his sons, Aḥmad and °Alī b. °Abd Allāh (the author's father), fled to Mecca. There they converted to Shāfi°ī Sunnism from the Ibādī beliefs prevalent among Omani clans, and studied for about nine years under various Shāfi°ī °ulamā°. Later the author himself was sent to Zanzibar to study under two renowned Shāfi°ī °ulamā°, Sayyid Aḥmad b. Sumayṭ and Shaykh °Abd Allāh Bākathīr al-Kindī.¹¹

In this context and under such circumstances, the sultans of Zanzibar have always had to reckon with the predominance of Sunnīs in their territory, though they themselves were Ibādīs. This is why the sultans have had two chief *qādīs*, one Sunnī Shāfi°ī and one Ibādī.

While this conversion doubtless was due to their Shāfi°ī

10 °Abdul °Aziz, *Muyaka*, 116.

11 R.L. Pouwels, 'Sh al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui and Islamic Modernism in East Africa, 1875-1947', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xiii, 1981, 331-2.

masters, and an equally plausible explanation centres on Mazrū'ī resistance to the claims made by the Būsa'īdīs to the spiritual leadership of the Ibādī community. Therefore, a Mazrū'ī renunciation of Ibādism has to be taken as a disguised rejection of Būsa'īdī governance, in effect, as well as direction over the spiritual lives of East Africa's Omani/Ibādī community. In a recent publication, Ali Muhsin Al Barwani maintains that despite the drastic actions against the early conversions during the reign of Sultan Barghash (1870-88), 'The Sunni faith spread like prairie fire among the Ibadis of Omani origin in East Africa, until practically all the Barawanis and the Mazruis became Sunni. So also have become many of the Mandharis, the Maamaris and even a large portion of the Al-Busaidis including some members of the Royal family.'¹²

The author's methodology and treatment of his subject

The work is written in good Arabic. This is natural by virtue of the author's upbringing and his study under famous scholars both in Mombasa and Zanzibar. From them he received his proficiency in Arabic and the religious sciences. As both teacher and Muslim reformer, one way in which he was interested in preserving Islam against cultural erosion was by promoting the study of Arabic.¹³ Nevertheless, the intention to write a version of this history in Kiswahili is also mentioned in more than one place in the text, but this was unfortunately prevented by his demise, a fact which shows his recognition of its advantage to the larger circle of the Swahili-speaking population (ms, 49). This fact is contrary to what has been claimed by one scholar that this monograph written in Arabic, rather than Swahili, was essentially meant for the consumption of a very restricted Arabic-reading audience in East Africa.¹⁴

12 A.M. Al Barwani, *Conflicts and Harmony in Zanzibar (Memoirs)*, Dubai 1977, 131.

13 Pouwels, 'Sh al-Amin', 332.

14 Elmasri, 'Sheikh al-Amin', 229.

The book is mainly divided into two parts; the second and the major part consists of nine chapters, each dealing with the reign of the nine Mazrū^cī governors of Mombasa. In so doing the author adopted a little of the prosopographical approach which aims to seek new historical facts through family origins and marriage connections, and a 'who is who' style of investigation. This technique is useful in Islamic studies because much of the biographical source material is presented in the same way.¹⁵

His sources, or at least the sources he refers to explicitly, are mainly European and colonialist; Major Pearce, The East African Red Book, Captain Owen, Lyne, Hopley, and Lieutenant Boteler are all British. In addition, he refers to Arabic sources like the Omani newspaper *al-Najāh*, which was published by Shaykh Abū Muslim al-Rawāhī, and *Tuhfat al-a^cyān* by Shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī. All these external sources, both European and Arabic, are properly referenced and quoted alongside local traditions and older manuscripts and oral accounts transmitted from older Mazāri^ca generations.

Having read widely the European works on East Africa, which often disagreed with his own family's traditions, as well as of his own community with regard to Mombasa, he tried to make his treatment critical in the modern sense. His readiness to quote sources sets the present work in a very favourable contrast to the other Arabic histories of East Africa. Perhaps this could be considered an important step in the development of a new type of historical writing by consulting different sources including archaeological evidence. This is well illustrated in his account relating to the date of the governorship of Muḥammad b. ^cUthmān b. ^cAbd Allāh, the second *liwali* (see ms, 24-35).

This quality of quoting sources and his critical treatment is what makes 'The History of the Mazrū^cīs in East Africa' such a remarkable contrast to the more traditional chronicles

15 B.G. Martin, 'Notes on some Members of the Learned Classes of Zanzibar and East Africa in the Nineteenth Century', *African Historical Studies*, iv, 4, 1971, 525.

like the 'History of Pate' and *Kitāb al-zunūj*, which are disorderly in their chronology, mingle historical events with what appears to be legend, gossip, exaggeration, and false or very questionable etymological and linguistic statements.¹⁶ In this respect also Shaykh al-Amīn's work is by far superior to the more traditional chronicles such as the anonymous chronicle of Kilwa, *Kitāb al-sulwa fī akhbār Kulwa*.

Another characteristic of this work is the ability of the author to make use of contemporary Arabic poetry, Swahili popular poetry and local traditions as sources of local history. This is evident in the poems of two prominent poets that are quoted and included by the author in his account of certain crucial episodes in his History. These were Muyāka b. *al-hājj* al-Ghassānī who lived and composed in Mombasa between 1776 and 1840, and Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn b. Shaykh 'Abd Allāh al-Qaḥṭānī al-Wa'īlī (1790-1860).

Swahili poetry in the nineteenth century developed a written poetic tradition moving towards the secular. Everyday issues of social and political importance were captured in verse and preserved for posterity in the Arabic Swahili alphabet. The leading spirit behind the popularization of the more secular poetic tradition was Muyāka b. *al-hājj* al-Ghassānī. Muyāka produced poems with unmatched mastery of the topical issues of his period¹⁷ and became the most celebrated poet of the Mazrū'ī rule of Mombasa during the first half of the nineteenth century. During the rivalry between the Mazrū'īs of Mombasa and the sultanate of Zanzibar, Muyāka's poetry played a significant role in inspiring the Mazrū'ī faction in military combats. His verses abound in metaphor and many of his poetic statements have become proverbial.¹⁸ That is why Shaykh al-Amīn found it necessary in his *History* to make an attempt to recreate something of the historical and cultural atmosphere of Mombasa in the period in which

16 Ritchie, *History of the Mazrui*.

17 A.A. & A.M. Mazrui, *Swahili State and Society*, London 1995, 120.

18 'Abdul 'Aziz, *Muyaka*, 9.

Muyāka lived. This is conveyed to us in his description of the reign of the seventh *liwali*, ‘Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad, who succeeded his father in 1814. Trouble started soon after °Abd Allāh had become governor of Mombasa Fort garrison and the overlord of Pemba and Pate. Sayyid Sa°id asserted his claims over Mombasa and the other centers of Swahili coast. Characteristically, °Abd Allāh refused to acknowledge the overlordship of the Omani ruler. Oral tradition related that °Abd Allāh sent a man called Ḥusayn b. °Alī b. °Ā°ish al-Junaybī to Sayyid Sa°id with the message, ‘You will not get the Port save by the muzzle of a gun and a sword’. °Abd Allāh further showed his defiance by sending Sayyid Sa°id a coat of mail, a cooking pot, and a ladle (ms, 62-3). The consequence of this insolent defiance and the predictions of Muyāka as shown by the verse below, are described by Shaykh al-Amīn in the following:

... there was in Mombasa at that time Bwana Muyāka b. *ḥajj* al-Ghassānī, the noble Swahili poet, a man of shrewdness and insight, and the people sent to his club, and asked him what would be the possible result of the *liwali*’s action. He remained silent for a moment with eyes cast down. Then he raised his head and recited two stanzas of poetry, the literal translation of which is as follows:

Jenebi, the creator of puzzling contraptions has taken a long and deep plunge.
 When he rises to the surface again, great trouble will have been stirred.
 The great city of Mombasa will have an awful lot to do.
 Tell the twelve Tribes not to stay calm and complacent.
 At the start of the north-eastern monsoons the gunpowder horns must be dangling
 on the waists!
 At the start of the north eastern monsoons when the wind start to blow, you will
 see the mighty hawks of Ra°s al-Khayma!

The summer of the year 1238 AH had hardly begun when Sayyid Sa°id’s fleet cast anchor in the waters of Mtanga Wanda, composed of thirty ships filled with 4,000 soldiers, and Ḥammād b. Aḥmad al-Būsa°idī in command of them, and they camped there’. (ms, 62-3)

Arabic poetry as a source of local history is represented in this work by one of the popular religious leaders in Zanzibar

and East Africa during the nineteenth century. This is Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn al-Qaḥṭānī, who after 1837 became Shāfi'ī *qāḍī* or judge at Zanzibar, first under Sayyid Sa'īd and then under Sayyid Mājīd. Shaykh al-Qaḥṭānī was born at Brava but lived for long periods at Lamu and Mombasa. His earlier allegiance had been to the Mazrū'īs of Mombasa; he wrote a number of poems in Arabic praising them. He wrote poems not only in Arabic, but also in Swahili. A number of them have been collected by Lyndon Harries, who gives him much credit for spreading the 'northern' Swahili poetic conventions of Lamu to Zanzibar and elsewhere. Jan Knappert regards Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn as one of the greatest Swahili poets of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ In addition to poetry in Arabic and Swahili, Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn was an expert in Shāfi'ī law and had many students. Moreover he was an amateur historian, as is clearly shown by his long documentary poem on the siege of the Fort of Mombasa.²⁰ One of the poems, in which he calls the Mazrū'īs 'shaykhs of Kahlān' (a reference to their ancestor, Zayd b. Kahlān), is included by the author in his account of Sālim b. Aḥmad, the ninth *liwali* of Mombasa. Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn, being a contemporary of the latter, also wrote the above-mentioned longer and important poem that shows him in a typical mood of historical reminiscence. This is the poem that was quoted by Shaykh al-Amīn as testimony in support of what he related concerning the event of the siege of the Fort by the forces of Sayyid Sa'īd. Introducing this poem, Shaykh al-Amīn made this comment:

... a (*qaṣīda*) of the learned historian Muḥyī 'l-Dīn b. Shaykh al-Qaḥṭānī (God have mercy upon him) in which he includes a narration of this event as he witnessed it with his own eyes. The reader will read the clear truth from the tongue of that reliable witness, so we set it down here as we have transcribed it, after comparing it with a number of copies (ms, 86).

19 Jan Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, London 1979.

20 Martin, 'Notes', 531-4.

The two poems of Shaykh Muḥyī 'l-Dīn quoted by Shaykh al-Mazrū'ī not only provide historical data, but also throw light on the self-image of the Mazrū'ī and Būsa'īdī rulers in East Africa.

The question of bias in the author's treatment of his subject

As the subject of this book mainly concentrates on family and tribal history, one would feel that the author adopted a defensive attitude from the beginning. It seems to me that one of his aims of writing the monograph was an attempt to refute certain allegations that were constantly repeated in the European sources dealing with the history of the area.

Shaykh al-Amīn's defensive attitude in support of the independence of the Mazrū'īs is not convincing to the student of the modern history of Oman. Such a spirit of independence would only lead to the weakening and the disintegration of the state. Tribal wars and dissensions had already resulted in the total collapse of the Ya'rubī state. Therefore, it was only natural that Sayyid Sa'īd as a state builder would not tolerate such secessionist tendencies in the Omani empire. It seems that, as a Mazrū'ī, the author inherited old feuds which had existed between his family and the Būsa'īdī ruling family as far back as the 1730s.

The author also keeps silent about certain incidents or details that belittle the Mazrū'ī *liwalis*, or show their position to be more insecure than he would like to believe.²¹ The insolent defiance to Sayyid Sa'īd by 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad, the seventh *liwali*, is a case in point (ms, 62-3).

But on the whole, it may be said that Shaykh al-Amīn treats the evidence with due respect, making the most of what favours his ancestors as far as he legitimately can. It is part of the merit of this work that the author seeks to start from a neutral standpoint in ascertaining and evaluating the actions and policies of the Mazrū'ī *liwalis*. According to

21 Ritchie, *History of the Mazrui*, 11.

Shaykh al-Amīn, the Mazrū'ī *liwalis* were very real and human people, men and leaders of no small calibre, and they had reasons for their actions which he seeks to interpret and to clarify. In evaluating the amount of bias in this work one tends to agree with the general appraisal given by the Rev. James Ritchie in the following words:

In subjects such as the one dealt with in this work one may expect a certain amount of bias: but bias on the part of one who writes from within must be set against the inevitable bias, smaller or greater, of those who write 'from without', whatever may be the motive of the writer, or the occasion which caused him to write, or the interest strategic, scientific, commercial or other—which he has in view. The editing and comments on this work therefore, by entailing a comparison with other available accounts, will, it may be hoped, make easier the defining of the balance of bias, and thus help the historian to arrive at a knowledge of the events as near the truth as it may be possible to get.²²

In conclusion, however, it remains to be mentioned that the study of the history and culture of the Muslim peoples of the East African Coast has been somewhat neglected. The period of history tackled by this Arabic manuscript, so poorly known in so many respects, may still be studied advantageously in the outlying regions on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts, and particularly on the Comoro Islands. In addition to the rich manuscript literature in Swahili, there is known to be considerable heritage of Arabic writing in Zanzibar and Lamu, but so little of it has been accessible to the wider world of scholarship.

Although the Zanzibar revolution of 1964 will always be seen as an historical watershed in East Africa, there are enough historical fragments and documents and persons living who can give useful oral accounts to make a reconstruction of the preceding era both feasible and attractive. This can be done most effectively through the media of Arabic and Swahili,

22 Ritchie, *History of the Mazrui*, 7.

and should be attempted before much material is lost permanently.

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