

In This Fragile World

# Islam in Africa

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# In This Fragile World

*Swahili Poetry of Commitment*  
*by Ustadh Mahmoud Mau*

*Poetry by*

Ustadh Mau (Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir)

*Translated and edited by*

Annachiara Raia  
Clarissa Vierke

*In collaboration with*

Jasmin Mahazi  
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Cover illustration: Ustadh Mahmoud Mau in front of his books

Back cover illustration: The madrasa al-Najah where he studied

Photos from Ustadh Mau's private archive



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FIGURE 1 Ustadh Mahmoud Mau at the British Institute in Eastern Africa in Nairobi, 2009

## Foreword

First and foremost, I wish to profoundly thank God for giving me the honor of writing the foreword to this book. God has been kind to me, and my prayers have been answered with the publication of this book. The readers, without a doubt, may wonder exactly how my prayers have been answered with this publication. In 2012, I presented a paper on Ustadh Mau's work entitled "Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir (MAU): Mshairi mcheza kwao lakini asiyetuzwa" ("Ustadh Mau: The Unsung Poet at Home," published in 2017).<sup>1</sup>

This book answers those prayers, for the writers of this book about Ustadh Mau's works have not only made him known at home, but exposed him to a worldwide audience.

It has not been an easy task for me to write this foreword. This is not because I have nothing to say about Ustadh Mau, but rather because what I would have said has already been written in great detail by the writers of this book, thus providing the reader with extensive information about him and his works. Despite this, I have been able to write briefly about him due to my having grown up in Lamu and my personal engagement with him.

I do not wish to repeat what is already written about Ustadh Mau in this book. However, my experiences with him may make this inevitable to some extent. I have known Ustadh Mau since my primary-school days in Lamu. My friends and I used to pass by his bakery and take in the sweet scent of his confectioneries while he worked in the bakery. Another, earlier memory of him is when I used to sing his *Kimwondo* poems<sup>2</sup> in the 1970s, during the electioneering periods when Madhubuti and Mzamil were vying for the Lamu parliamentary seat. Because our family supported Mzamil, we used to recite Ustadh Mau's poems in favor of him (the poem *Amu*, "Lamu," presented in this volume is also about the politics of that time).

When I left Lamu to enter high school, it is as if, for some time, I forgot Mau and his works until many years later, when I began teaching at the university. A student of mine from the coast of Kenya gave me a copy of two of Mau's narrative poems. After reading them, I became curious to read more of his works,

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1 Rayya Timammy, "Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir (MAU): Mshairi mcheza kwao lakini asiyetuzwa," in *Lugha na fasihi katika karne ya Ishirini na Moja. Kwa heshima ya marehemu Profesa Naomi Luchera Shitemi*, ed. Mosol Kandagor, Nathan Ogechi, and Clarissa Vierke (Eldoret: Moi University Press, 2017), 231–242.

2 Assibi Amidu, "Lessons from Kimondo: An Aspect of Kiswahili Culture," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 34–55. See also Kai Kresse's contribution in this volume.

analyse them, and have a book published; that is when the title of the above-mentioned essay came to mind: Mau was a poet whose works were unknown or not acknowledged in his home country of Kenya. This excludes his hometown of Lamu and the Swahili people there; it includes non-native speakers of the Kiswahili language, many of whom might not have been aware of his works, or if they were, might have ignored them or considered them “just some Swahili poetry whose main concern is Islamic religious teachings.” However, on reading the poems in this book, one is inclined to believe that Ustadh Mau’s poetry is more than just the propagation of religious teachings. Being a Muslim, Ustadh Mau draws his philosophy and worldview from Islam but, as Clarissa Vierke and Annachiara Raia have shown, there is more to the writer’s poems and his poetry than religious pedagogy. The two writers have been very successful in exposing Mau as a great, multifaceted artist, and thus have fulfilled my wish of seeing his works published, thereby contributing to the great tradition of Kiswahili metrical poetry.

When I decided to study Mau’s works, I wanted to meet him so that I could interview him about his works. I traveled to Mombasa and mentioned this to my father. Coincidentally, Mau had traveled to Mombasa and met my father, who told him of my intention to meet him. I was so humbled when he came home with my father to meet me instead of me going out to meet him. Such a great but humble soul! I talked to him at length, and he made a promise to supply me with all the works of his that he could lay his hands on. And whenever he composed a poem, he would send it to me along with books, magazines, journals, and essays on the Kiswahili language and its literature. I have nothing to repay him for his generosity and his trust in me; my prayer is that God showers him with His abundant grace. Ustadh Mau has also been an important advisor to researchers (especially foreign ones), and has gladly guided many in their research without expecting recompense of any kind. Mau has also been active in offering his poetry as a service to the community, and has composed works both for individuals in need of topical poems for marriage ceremonies, the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), and funeral ceremonies, as well as for social service groups in order to publicize their missions and visions. I warmly remember how, when my daughter was set to sit her KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) exam, Ustadh Mau composed and sent her a poem wishing her success in the endeavor. What I wish to reiterate is that Ustadh Mau is a selfless man of the people: always ready to offer advice and guidance, and all this without hesitation or red tape.

I have a lot to say about Ustadh Mau and his poetic works. But my task here is to write a foreword to this book. The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a second part featuring some of his poems. I have opted to

summarize the contents of the chapters all together—i.e., the introduction by Raia and Vierke, who have each contributed two chapters, and the chapters of Mahazi, Kresse and Kadara who each wrote one chapter—because they all have written about Mau’s poetry. The introduction and the first four chapters talk about Ustadh Mau. The chapters describe Mau’s life and works at length: he is a husband, father, a teacher, a sheikh (religious leader/scholar), and, first and foremost, a renowned poet of Lamu. All the writers revisit his life history and acknowledge the fact that he was the first sheikh or religious scholar to deliver the Friday sermon in the Kiswahili language in order to reach a wider audience of Muslim adherents. In these chapters, we learn what inspired the writer, his experiences, and his challenges, and how he contributed to the well-being of Lamu residents and how they affected him and his poetry in turn. Mau is portrayed as a self-made scholar through his reading of works by scholars who had a great and lasting impact on him and his life as a poet. His home library is described in great detail, and his love for books reiterated.

An important characteristic of Mau’s works and sermons, as mentioned by all the writers, is his eagerness to educate and guide Lamu residents to pursue an education for their own economic well-being. He feels it is his incumbent duty as an artist to impart morals as he draws his inspiration from the day-to-day life of the Lamu people. Some of the themes he engages in are the AIDS scourge, drug abuse, politics, and the effects of adopting negative foreign cultural traits. Religious instruction is also a central theme in Mau’s poetry, as evidenced by the traditional structure of his narrative poems, which start and end with thanksgiving and prayer. Mau believes that poetry and the arts are a powerful medium of mass education, but he is saddened by the lack of a reading culture in his society. The Lamu people are accustomed to the oral word, which is the reason why most of his works are not published, but recorded in audio and video formats. Since traditional poetry is sung, word of mouth is more effective than the written word (at least in traditional society), while the meaning of the words is clearer when uttered or sung by talented balladeers. The editors of this book have explained why Mau’s poems are recorded in audio and video media and sung by talented artists (see Raia’s contribution on the *Wasiya wa mabanati* in this volume); as Abdilatif Abdalla puts it, “[M]ore than the fact that words in a poem have sound and meaning, they also portray certain images, feeling, smell and taste and these will only be realized when the poem is read or sung aloud rather than have it pasted on paper.”<sup>3</sup> The writers of

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3 Abdilatif Abdalla, “Dibaji II,” in *Shuwari*, ed. Haji Gora Haji, Flavia Aiello, and Irene Brunotti (Paris: DL2A Buluu Publishing, 2019), 30.

this book have successfully portrayed Mau as both the servant and representative of his people.

The chapters by Vierke, “How Ought We to Live,” and Raia, “*Wasiya wa mabanati* in Search of an Author,” analyze one narrative poem and three others, viz. *Haki za watoto* (“Children’s Rights”), *Mama msimlaumu* (“Don’t Blame My Mother”), *Mlango* (“The Door”), and *Wasiya wa mabanati* (“Advice to Young Women”). The characteristics of Mau’s language feature in each chapter. He writes in the Kiamu dialect in order to “preserve” it for future generations, not forgetting that it was the language of most classical Swahili poets. By using his mother tongue, Mau is able to command a powerful diction, full of figures of speech and imagery. Despite this, his language is simple, fluid, as his objective is to reach his audience without any impediments. Mau’s poems are a testimony to his coastal origin and environment; thus, many poems feature themes related to the sea and marine life and economy, like the poems *Amu* (“Lamu”) and *Jahazi* (“Dhow”). This quality is what distinguishes great poets from ordinary poets. It is evident that Mau is very familiar with both his social culture and his geographical environment, as evidenced both by the form and themes of his poetry. Ustadh Mau lives his culture and is an active participant in its daily life.

The writers have explicated Ustadh Mau’s use of language and how he employs metaphorical language whenever he treats issues intended only for a particular adult audience, thus adding to the aesthetic and thematic appeal of the poems. In the poem *Ukimwi ni zimwi* (“AIDS Is a Monster”),<sup>4</sup> his language enables the reader to see the disease for what it is, that is, an ogre “eating away” at human life and comfort. He has explored the different verse meter and genres, like the *Dura Mandhuma* and the *Tathlitha*, among others. In other poems, he has used a dialogic style in which two or more characters interact, as in *Jilbabu* (“The Veil”) and *Wasiya wa mabanati* (“Advice to Young Women”).

Concerning the second part of the book, which consists of different poems of Ustadh Mau, I would like to laud the editors for their efforts in this making this selection. It would have been an uphill task for any reviewer or critic to choose from Mau’s many beautiful compositions. The book comprises twenty compositions: five narrative poems and fifteen poems in other forms and styles. These have been picked from a total of fifteen narrative poems by Ustadh Mau,<sup>5</sup> while his shorter verses are more than eighty in number. I congratulate the editors on

4 [Remark by the editors: This poem is not included in this volume.]

5 See the list in Ahmad Abdulkadir Mahmoud and Peter Frankl, “Kiswahili: A Poem by Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulkadir, to Which is Appended a List of the Poet’s Compositions in Verse,” *Swahili Forum* 20 (2013): 1–18, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:15-qucosa-137405>.

accomplishing the difficult task of choosing which verses should be included in the anthology and which should be left out.

The writers have categorized the poems into five parts: social themes comprise the first part, in which they include poems about Lamu, while the second is about education and its importance to society. The third part features poems on generosity and mercy; then follow verses about his life experiences, and last, poems about supplication. Another valuable contribution of the volume editors is that every verse has an introduction and analysis, enabling the reader to understand the background of the composition, and hence its message, in a better way. Lastly, the verses have all been translated, thus enabling the non-Kiswahili speaker to understand them.

Ustadh Mau's pictures form part of this volume, thus enabling those who haven't met him to at least have a glimpse of this great Lamu poet. There is much more to say about Ustadh Mau and his works, but let me not preempt your curiosity, for you will get the full picture as you read this book. Finally, I wish to laud the editors for this great endeavor. Let us all celebrate this book.

*Rayya Timammy*

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# Abbreviations

Abr.	Arberry, Arthur, J. <i>The Quran Interpreted</i> <sup>1</sup>
Am.	Kiamu dialect
Ar.	Arabic
Baj.	Kibajuni dialect
Bak.	Bakhressa, Salim K. <i>Kamusi ya maana na matumizi</i> <sup>2</sup>
Eng.	English
Krp.	Krapf, J.L. <i>A Dictionary of the Swahili Language</i> <sup>3</sup>
Kak.	<i>Kamusi Kuu ya Kiswahili</i> <sup>4</sup>
Kiung.	Kiunguja dialect
KNUT	Kenya National Union of Teachers
lit.	Literal meaning
Mau	Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir Mau
meth.	methali “proverb”
Mv.	Kimvita dialect
Nab.	Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany <i>Kandi ya Kiswahili</i> <sup>5</sup>
OUP	Oxford University Press
Qur.	Qur’ān
RISSEA	Research Institute of Swahili Studies of Eastern Africa
Scl.	Sacleux, C. <i>Dictionnaire swahili-français</i> <sup>6</sup>
Std.	Standard Swahili
stz.	stanza (Sw. <i>ubeti</i> )
syn.	synonym

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1 Arthur J. Arberry, *The Quran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

2 Salim K. Bakhressa. *Kamusi ya maana na matumizi*. (Nairobi [etc.]: Oxford University Press cop. 1992).

3 John Ludwig Krapf. *A Dictionary of the Swahili Language: With Introd. Containing an Outline of a Swahili Grammar*. (London: Trubner, 1882).

4 John Mwaura Gicharu, Benjamin Nyangoma and Chris Oluoch. *Kamusi Kuu ya Kiswahili* (Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers Limited, 2015).

5 Nabhany Ahmed Sheikh, *Kandi ya Kiswahili* (Dar es Salam: Aera Kiswahili Researched Products, 2012).

6 Charles Sacleux, *Dictionnaire swahili-français* (Paris: Inst. d’Ethnologie, Univ. de Paris, 1939).

## Notes on Contributors

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### *Clarissa Vierke*

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### *Kai Kresse*

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### *Jasmin Mahazi*

holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGS MCS, FU Berlin) on the textual corpus and social dimensions of vave oral poetry and its ritual performance. Currently she is an associate researcher at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin working on a matrifocal anthropological study of oral archives and embodied knowledge practices along the Swahili coast.

### *Kadara Swaleh*

is Research Fellow at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, Germany from April 2021 in a transnational group project titled De:link:Re: link focusing on transnational infrastructure projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He is concurrently pursuing a Ph.D. at Freie Universität Berlin

in the Cultural and Social anthropology Institute, examining the impact and repercussions of China's BRI projects in Mombasa, Kenya. He is published in peer-reviewed journals and contributed to book chapters on diverse topics like Islamic proselytizing, inter-faith relations, Swahili culture, Swahili poetry, and women's rights in Islam.

*Rayya Timammy*

Ph.D. is Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics, Languages and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Nairobi. For the last 17 years, she has been the chairperson in the Department of Kiswahili. Her areas of specialization are Kiswahili Language and Literature and Muslim Women issues. Prof. Timammy is also a Kiswahili fiction writer and composer of poems.



FIGURE 2 Ustadh Mahmoud Mau during a reading at Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth, 2015