

## J.W.T. ALLEN - KISWAHILI SCHOLAR

John Willoughby Tarleton Allen, son of the distinguished Anglican missionary theologian Roland Allen, received a classical education at Oxford University before he first went out to Africa in 1927 to serve in the Gezira cotton-irrigation scheme in the Sudan. He was at first critical and mistrustful of Britain's role in the colonial Empire, but the dedicated service of some British officers in the Sudan so impressed him that he joined the Colonial Service himself in 1929 and served for nearly thirty years, first in the education service and from 1937 in the administration. Apart from a 5-year interlude as Deputy British Agent in the Western Aden Protectorate (1947-1952) this service was entirely in what was then the Trust Territory of Tanganyika. He retired a little early, when he was Deputy Provincial Commissioner, Lake Province, to become Warden of University Hall at Makerere, a post he combined with the Executive Secretaryship of the East African Swahili Committee. In 1965 he retired from Makerere and was appointed a Rockefeller Research Fellow of the University of Dar es Salaam, his duties being "the collection of manuscripts of literary, linguistic and historical interest of the Swahili speaking world and the editing, translation, cataloguing and publishing of such material." The original grant was for fifteen months, but this was twice extended. Periods followed as acting and substantive Director of the Institute of Swahili Research in Dar es Salaam. And at the close of his career Allen returned to Tanzania for three years, to devise and teach a very successful intensive Swahili course for the Danish government's volunteer training programme at Tengeru near Arusha. He was in his seventies before he finally retired from East Africa, but even then ill health did not deter him from pursuing his Swahili studies until his death at his home near Oxford on 6th April 1979 in his 75th year.

## John Allen's Work on Kiswahili Language and Literature

From his first arrival at the Government School in Tanga in 1929, where his scholarly clerk introduced him to Swahili, until the day before he died, when he was still at work, examining very early manuscripts discovered in Goa, John Allen's principal scholarly interest was Kiswahili and especially its great literary heritage. He distinguished himself by passing the Higher Swahili Examination during his first tour in Tanganyika; and on his first furlough in 1932 he obtained the Swahili Diploma of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where he discovered that his own preliminary collection of early Swahili manuscripts was already richer than theirs (Sadly this remarkable collection was left for safe keeping in a bank vault in Jersey and disappeared during the German occupation of the Channel Islands during the Second World War).

Transferred from Tanga to Dar es Salaam, Allen became the founder-editor of the Swahili newspaper Mambo Leo and also helped Sir John Gray and others to launch the scholarly Tanganyika (now Tanzania) Notes and Records. His Swahili knowledge was in constant demand by Government for official translations and for the preparation of legal documents (in which his profound knowledge of Shafi'i law and custom was also renowned). He was from its inception a member of the Inter-Territorial Language Committee - the precursor of the East African Swahili Committee. But throughout his career as a colonial servant, of course, most of his work for Kiswahili was as an amateur, and it was not until his post-colonial career that his impact on Kiswahili studies became most apparent.

The formal bibliography of John Allen's published work represents only a fraction of his real contribution to Kiswahili studies. Much important work lies hidden in the anonymity of government reports and translations, and in editorial notes and comments in Mambo Leo, Tanganyika/Tanzania Notes and Records and in Swahili, all of which journals owe him an incalculable debt for his work during their early years of existence. Even more valuable contributions lie stored in the memories of many grateful writers and scholars, for whom he frequently carried out such extensive research and editorial work that a less modest man would have claimed co-authorship. Of him could well be echoed his own tribute to the late Sh. Sir Mbarak

Ali Hinawy, KBE ("probably the greatest Swahili scholars"): "The gratitude of all students of Swahili is due to him, not only for the work that has been published under his own name, but for much in which his name appears neither on the title page nor sometimes even in the preface."

Allen himself was always scrupulous to acknowledge the slightest help, and to do so generously: "I have endeavoured throughout to acknowledge my debts to my predecessors, but not to draw specific attention to their mistakes. If I can produce a more accurate text or a better translation than they, it is only because I can build on the foundations laid by them and it is not for me to draw attention to points of detail where, as pioneers, they inevitably erred." It follows that John Allen would not approve any obituary of himself that did not record "the poets and scholars with whom I have discussed the principles of poetry and the rules of prosody" - notably Amri Abedi, Amina Mohamed Shekh, Alice Werner, Ernst Dammann, H.E. Lambert, Shaaban Robert, Mathias Mnyampala, Julius Nyerere, Margaret Bryan, Zeina Mahmoud Fadhil, Jan Knappert and Ahmed Shekh Nabhany; and above all "the late Sh. Mohamed Hemedi el Buhry, who introduced me to Swahili literature in 1930, and all the other members of his family, both living and dead, whom I have counted among my most valued friends."

Allen's own exacting scholarship is exhibited in such meticulous studies as his catalogue of the Kiswahili and Arabic manuscripts and tapes in the University College Library at Dar es Salaam and by his seminal studies of Kiswahili prosody. His interests were primarily in the literary value of Kiswahili and his desire to dispel the "widely held but totally erroneous belief" that it is "a primitive language incapable of carrying any high thought." His legal translations were painstakingly precise, but his translations of the Kiswahili literary classics were sometimes faulted by pedantic "linguisticians" (as he contemptuously termed them) in spite of his clear explanation: "I have made no attempt to produce a 'literal' translation. The works presented here are all in beautiful Kiswahili and deserve to be translated into the best possible English so as to convey something of their poetic value." He had very decided views about literary translation: "The first question to ask, before attempting to appreciate the literature of another people, is 'Do I appreciate my own? Do I read poetry and fine literature in my own language for pleasure?' ... The poet's work is to

express in words his own feelings... His work is great when the expression of the emotion is most evocative. If the reader has no emotions, this is all totally meaningless."

He was no linguistic conservative, despite his love of the classics and his constant desire to identify the earliest and purest versions of old poems. He delighted in the robust flexibility of Kiswahili, its Elizabethan power to seize upon good things in other languages and to make them thoroughly its own. Neologisms like "digadi" (singular of "mudguard") or "kwenye sheli" (a "petrol pump") were for him not degenerate corruptions, but evidence of a living and dynamic language.

For similar reasons he tremendously admired the originality of Shaaban Robert's best verse (much of which he saw through to posthumous publication for the benefit of Shaaban's heirs). He rejoiced, too, to welcome "a totally new verse form," when Julius Nyerere translated Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, using the standard 16-mizani line in an entirely new way to produce something "wholly Shakespeare and wholly African."

The publication of John Allen's most ambitious work, *Tendi* (Heinemann, 1971), which should have been a high point of his career, was in fact a bitter disappointment. For his confident hope was that these poems, so carefully transliterated by him from Arabic into Roman script, would bring to the ordinary modern Swahili reader a fuller conception of the wealth and beauty of this great literary tradition. The elaborate scholarly edition was published on the understanding that it would be followed by a series of inexpensive paperback texts of the poems, in Roman text without the English translations and shorn of most of the accompanying scholarly apparatus. These unvarnished texts, he was convinced, would achieve immense popularity throughout the Kiswahili-speaking world, where there is a public hungry for reading matter reflecting the rich variety of their African literary tradition. School children and college students and ordinary men and women in every walk of life would enjoy them, he was sure; and for any foreigner interested in the Kiswahili-speaking peoples they would provide an admirable insight into national characteristics. But, alas, it was not to be; his publishers lacked his imagination, and so his work has been condemned to moulder on a few scholarly shelves and in the depths of learned libraries, forever out of reach of the simple public to whom he had longed to give pleasure.

Unless and until those literary transliterations and translations of his are given to a wider public, John Allen's reputation is likely to rest above all on the prodigious collection of manuscripts and tapes assembled by him and his wife in Dar es Salaam from most of the important Kiswahili centres on the East African coast and its islands. He was often asked why he succeeded in collecting so much where many others had come away empty-handed; and his good-humoured explanations, in a report on his work for the Rockefeller Foundation, are worth recalling, for they reflect very clearly some of his most dearly held principles:

I have to point out that we had some qualifications that cannot be held by a visitor on a short term assignment. The Swahili has an ingrained respect for age and we were able to make contacts that would have been impossible for younger persons. Nor must our long familiarity with the coast be overlooked. It is perhaps unfair to other workers in the same field to have such advantages; but to have known scholars and poets who died thirty years ago, to find in a house a book written by myself twenty years ago and to have a name that is often recognized in a place that we had never visited before - all these help to break through the reserve of a highly cultured people, especially of those who have never before met a non-Swahili who can discuss their own literature with them and show for it the same affection that they feel themselves. It is also to be remembered that this is an exceptionally devout Muslim society, governed by strict rules of propriety and with a completely theocentric philosophy. The cultured people can converse with and become fast friends of a believer of a different faith, whose beliefs they consider to be unorthodox but intelligible. With an un-believer they feel that no genuine contact is possible.

When to this is added that a great part of the culture is in the hands of women and particularly elderly, even very old women,

everyone who knows anything about Islam will appreciate that a man is at a hopeless disadvantage. Many Swahili poets have been ladies of high rank and this may have something to do with the very high position of women in Kiswahili verse... Elderly people expect little scholarship from young persons: elderly ladies will not speak to a young man, nor even, until they are assured of his respectability, to an old man. My wife's fluent Kiswahili and gift for friendship enabled her to make friends with persons whom later she could introduce to me and with whom I have made lasting friendships; but without her help I could never have met them at all. Even with these advantages, patience is essential because the family treasures will not be hastily produced. And so also is scrupulous honesty. In the past unscrupulous persons have borrowed documents and not returned them, and the collector has to remove the stain left by their activities...

As this passage makes clear, John Allen was helped and supported at this and every stage of his career by his devoted wife, Winifred, a gifted natural linguist (and like himself an Oxford graduate) who has herself contributed much to East African education since she started the Tanga Girls' School in 1930. Her series of reading primers, Mwanzo wa Masomo, owe much of their continuing success and popularity to her own and her husband's deep understanding of Kiswahili that underlies the booklet's deceptive simplicity.

A full assessment of John Allen's significance as a Kiswahili scholar has yet to be made. Of his stature as a man there can be no doubt. When for the last time he was transferred away from his beloved Tanga Province, many hundreds of people signed a petition to Government asking that he be allowed to remain there. The Jumbe Mkuu of Gombero was asked to explain Allen's popularity and he replied: "This man has worked among us off and on for more than 20 years, and during that time we have learned two things about him: that he fears no-one but God; and that he never seeks anything for himself."

It is a fitting epitaph.

John Willoughby Tarleton Allen, M.A. (Oxon.)

Born: 14 November 1904 in Chalfont St. Peter  
(Buckinghamshire, England)

Educated: Marlborough College and Westminster School  
St. John's College, Oxford  
(Lit.Hum. - 2nd Class Honours)

Married: 29 September 1930 - Winifred Emma Ethel BROOKE

Children: Hubert (26 December 1931) - married, 3 children  
Edith (died in childhood)  
Margaret (18 March 1936) - married, 4 children  
Helen (22 February 1938) - married, 4 children

### Career

1927-29: Sudan Plantations Syndicate ('the Gezira  
scheme')

1929-38: Colonial Education Service, Tanganyika  
Territory

1929-32 - Tanga

1933-36 - Dar es Salaam

1936-37 - Malangali

1938-47: Colonial Administrative Service, Tanganyika

1938-39 - Tabora

1939-40 - Lindi

1940-42 - Newala

1943-44 - Tanga

1944-45 - Arusha

1945-47 - Pangani

1947-52: Colonial Administrative Service, Western Aden  
Protectorate

1947-48 - Political Officer

1948-52 - Deputy British Agent

1952-58: Colonial Administrative Service, Tanganyika

1952-54 - Tanga

1955-58 - Mwanza

1958-65: Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda  
Warden, University Hall

1965-70 University College, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

1965-68 - Rockefeller Research Fellow

- Director, Institute of Swahili Research

1972-75: Danish Government Overseas Volunteer Service  
Volunteer Training School, Tengeru, Tanzania

J.W.T. ALLEN: BIBLIOGRAPHY (TO 1972 - ANNOTED BY JWTA)

1. Maandiko ya Kizungu, Longmans, 1938  
The greater part of this edition was destroyed in the Blitz. After the war, a 'revised' edition was issued. I was neither consulted nor informed, and can accept no responsibility for the new edition.
2. Arabic Script for Students of Swahili, Supplement to Tanganyika Notes and Records, 1945.  
(see also No. 30 below, which was issued while the book was still in print)
3. Utenzi wa Kiyama, Special Supplement to Tanganyika Notes and Records, 1945. Translation and notes by Roland Allen: text edited by JWTA. (later revised and incorporated in No. 37 below)
4. "World Literacy", Tanganyika Notes and Records No. 17, 1944
5. "Rhapta", Tanganyika Notes and Records No. 27, 1949
6. Utenzi wa Vita vya Wadachi Kutamalaki Mrima, East African Literature Bureau, 1955. By Hemedi Abdalla, text edited with Translation and Notes by JWTA.  
(the second edition has some minor corrections; the third and fourth editions are reprints only)
7. Utenzi wa Kutawafu Nabii, Supplement to Journal of the East African Swahili Committee, No. 26, 1956. Translation by Roland Allen: text edited by JWTA.
8. Nikahi, by Ali Hemedi, Government Printer, Dar es Salaam, 1959: Translation by JWTA. (In the Swahili edition my work was no more than to correct some typing errors and to check the text with the author's son).

9. "The Collection of Swahili Literature and its Relation to oral Tradition and History", Tanganyika Notes and Records No. 53, 1959
10. Utenzi wa Abdirrahmani na Sufiyani, East African Literature Bureau, 1961 (this has been twice reprinted and on each occasion my list of corrections has been overlooked)  
Translation by Roland Allen: text edited by JWTA.
11. "The East African Swahili Committee", Recorded Sound, No. 2, 1961
12. Habari za Wakilindi, East African Literature Bureau, 1962 (in collaboration with William Mbago, who helped with obscure words and supplies most of the pictures).
13. The Kilindi, East African Literature Bureau, 1963 (translation of No. 12 above: the English is wholly my own)
14. "The Bible in Swahili", Swahili, No. 33/2, 1963 (p. 125)
15. "The Complete Works of the late Shaaban Robert, M.B.E.", Swahili, No. 33/2, 1963 (p. 128) (in the same number of Swahili (p. 35) "Utenzi wa Isa" was written by me; but it was not intended for publication in this form and I gave instructions for my name to be deleted in all copies)
16. "A Note on Dr. Nyerere's Translation of Julius Caesar", Makerere Journal, No. 9, 1964.
17. Utenzi wa Seyyidna Huseni bin Ali, East African Literature Bureau, 1965
18. "Muslims in East Africa", African Ecclesiastical Review, 1965
19. "Documents in the Files of the Institute of Swahili Research", Swahili, No. 35/1, 1965 (This was the first serious attempt to build a catalogue of Swahili literature: see 35 below.

There were previous fragmentary attempts in earlier numbers; but they are no longer of interest)

20. Review: L. Harries, Swahili Prose Texts (O.U.P. 1965), Swahili, No. 35/2, 1965
21. Letter: Answering H. Van 'tVeld in previous number, Swahili, No. 36/2, 1966
22. Note on preceding, Swahili, No. 37/2, 1967  
(p. 230)
23. "Swahili Prosody", Swahili, No. 37/2, 1967  
(p. 171)
24. Editorial: Swahili, No. 38/1, 1968
25. "Utenzi wa Hiawatha", Swahili, No. 38/1, 1968  
(this and No. 23 above were revised and incorporated in No. 37 below)
26. Review: Marcel van Spaandonck, Practical and Systematic Swahili Bibliography, Brill of Leiden, 1965; and Alberto Mioni, Cahiers d'Etudes africaines, No. 27, pp. 485-532, Mouton and Co., 1967, Swahili, No. 38/1, 1968
27. Review: Alfons Loogman, Swahili Readings, with Notes, Exercises (sic) and Key, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1967, Swahili, No. 38/1, 1968
28. "The Collection and Preservation of Manuscripts of the Swahili World", Swahili No. 38/2, 1968
29. Review: A.H.J. Prins, The Swahili-speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast, International African Institute, 1967, Swahili, No. 38/2, 1968
30. "Arabic Script for Students of Swahili", Tanzania Notes and Records, No. 69, 1968  
(see No. 2 above. The book is out of print and at the time of his death plans were in hand for a better edition)

31. Review: Whiteley, Swahili: the Rise of a National Language, Methuen, 1969, Azania, Vol. IV, 1969
32. "Muhammad bin Abubekr bin Omar Kidjumwa Masihi", Afrika und Ubersee, No. LII, 1969 (with Ernst Dammann)
33. "Utenzi wa Qarneni", Swahili, No. 40/1, 1970
34. "Mbwe, Mbwa and Mbwana", Swahili, No. 40/1, 1970
35. "Shakespeare in Swahili", Afrika und Ubersee, No. LIV, 1970
36. The Swahili and Arabic Manuscripts and Tapes in the Library of the University College, Dar es Salaam, Brill of Leiden, 1970
37. Tendi, Heinemann, July 1971  
 (I am responsible for the greater part of this work. The translations are my own, except that in No. 6 I have used my father's translation - No. 3 above - modified to fit the revised text. Part I, except for Chapter 6, is my own; so are sections 3 and 5 of Part II. 1 and 2: I owe an immense debt to Bi Amina, whose knowledge of the subject is outstanding; but her grandson and I are responsible for the final form, because she knows neither Roman Script nor English. 4: when we had worked separately almost to completion Abud and I met; we collated our work and found few points of difference. It is impossible now to divide the responsibility. 6: as with 4, Ibrahim and I worked alone and met when the work was almost complete. Our versions differed greatly, because I had reduced the poem to what I believe to have been its approximate original length (see p. 430). Ibrahim persuaded me to restore the additional verses, so making this edition much more similar to that of 1945 - no. 3 above).

38. Diwani ya Shabaan, Nelson, 1964 et seqq. By Shaaban Robert. (Maelezo ya Mkusanyaji describes my part in this. Although I declined the title of Editor, a considerable amount of editorial work was involved in arranging the papers. In later printings the biographical sketch was to be omitted in favour of a better note obtained by JWTA from the poet's brother Yusuf Ulenge.)