

Xavier Luffin

Arabic and Swahili Documents from the Pre-Colonial Congo and the EIC (Congo Free State, 1885–1908): Who were the Scribes?

Abstract: A series of Arabic and Swahili documents dating back to the last decades of the nineteenth century and produced in what is today the democratic Republic of Congo are stored in several museums and archives in Belgium. They mainly consist of letters, lists, contracts and agreements, but also religious books and amulets. These documents raise many questions about the identity and the function of their authors: most of them were working as secretaries and translators, but in some cases they were also military chiefs or religious men. They also came from different geographical backgrounds : Arab and Swahili traders, local people, but also Sudanese, Chadians, Comorians, etc.

1 Introduction

Many documents written in Arabic, or in Swahili with the Arabic script have been produced in the Congo (Uele, Eastern Congo, Maniema, Marungu and Katanga) since the 1860s, when the Omani and Swahili traders started to settle in the Eastern Congo, and when Sudanese traders arrived in the Azande kingdoms. I will focus here on the documents produced between c. 1860 and 1908, which was the end of the Congo Free State (EIC, Etat Indépendant du Congo). The vast majority of these documents have not been preserved, and only a few of them can still be found in various Belgian museums and archives: the Royal Museum of Central Africa (Tervuren), the Museum of the Army (Brussels), the African Archives (Brussels) and the University of Liège Library. They consist mainly of Swahili treaties written in Marungu between 1884 and 1885, Arabic and Swahili letters and Arabic prayer books from the Azande kingdoms, written between 1897 and 1899, printed copies of the Quran, some handwritten prayer books, two *lawḥa* (wooden boards generally used to learn the Quran) found in Redjaf in the 1890s, dozens of Swahili and Arabic letters and contracts from the Stanley Falls and Maniema written between 1884 and 1893, printed *juz'* in Arabic found in Kasongo and Lukila in 1893, a printed book of

astrology in Arabic found in the Eastern Congo (no date), flags with Arabic inscriptions, and amulets.¹

Some other documents coming from the Congo are also located in the archives of the Foreign Office, in London, as well as in the French colonial archives. One could expect to find new data *in situ*, in Congolese mosques for example, as well as in personal and familial archives in the Congo and abroad, though no survey has yet been done. However, both the European and the Swahili sources show that the existing documents are just the tip of the iceberg: in his autobiography, Ḥamad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī, generally nicknamed Tippo Tip (c. 1840–1905) – a famous Swahili trader who used to travel in the Congo – often mentions the letters he used to send and to receive. This includes letters sent from as far as Tabora or even Zanzibar², and many European sources mention the frequent use of Arabic correspondence among the Sudanese, Omani and Swahili traders, as we shall see below. When the Belgian officer Louis N. Chaltin took the city of Redjaf, in February 1897, he found an important quantity of documents in Arabic, left by the Mahdist administration.³ He asked four Egyptian traders who were in the city to translate these documents, a process that lasted two weeks...⁴

The historical sources also show that Arabic and ‘*ajamī*’ documents have been produced in areas other than the Eastern Congo and the Azande kingdoms, where Swahili and Arab traders settled. For example, Charles Swan, a missionary who stayed in Garenganzwe, the capital of Msiri’s kingdom, between 1890 and 1893, writes about the presence of Arab traders in the capital, and he mentions the use of Arabic writing there.⁵ In 1895, another European missionary, Frederic Arnot, who visited the city at the same period, confirms this fact.⁶ Though still largely understudied, the local Arabic and Swahili documents should change the way we perceive the history of precolonial and colonial Congo. Firstly, it means that literacy was not introduced into the area by the Europeans, though this is still the dominant idea circulating in the literature about the history of the Congo. Secondly, they give us useful information about trade – some letters mention goods imported into the

1 Luffin 2004a, 149–170; 2004b, 145–177; 2007a, 186–215.

2 Bontinck 1974, 66, 99.

3 Redjaf, now in Southern Sudan, was the main city of Lado, which remained under the control of the EIC until 1910.

4 MRAC, Fond Chaltin, papiers Chaltin, RG 997/RG 1078, cahier 18, quoted in John Claeys, *Histoire de l’enclave de Lado, 1890–1910* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2013), 46–49 [MA Thesis, unpublished].

5 Swan, quoted by Verbeken 1956, 120.

6 Arnot 1893, 59.

Congo from outside, others deal with the ivory trade – as well as politics.⁷ For example, a letter written by ‘Ali b. Sālim b. Mājid al-Hirāsī in 1893 mentions the war against the Mutetela chief Ngongo Lutete, an important event in what has been called the ‘Arab campaign’, the war between the EIC and the Arabs and Swahili in the Congo.⁸ Thirdly, they also show how European, Arab-Swahili and local diplomacy worked in the area, since some of the preserved documents were directly sent to European officers by Swahili and Arab traders, or even by local chiefs. Finally, they are precious documents for the linguist, since many Arabic documents make use of dialectal Arabic.

These documents raise many questions about their authors: can we learn something about the identity of the authors? Did they come from the Congo or from outside? Where did they learn the Arabic script? Was Arabic their mother tongue? What were their official jobs and their social status? Were they occasional or full time scribes? Did literacy diffuse from the offices of the Arab-Swahili traders and Arab secretaries to the general population? For what types of communication was literacy used: commercial, diplomatic, religious? And if so, through what types of interaction? The documents themselves give us some information about the identity of the authors, but we have to focus mainly on the European sources (memoirs, travelogues, official reports, personal archives, etc.) and the local historical sources (Tippo Tip’s autobiography or Maisha (see note 2), for instance) in order to recount the careers of some of these scribes coming from Sudan, the Middle East, the Swahili Coast, the Comoro Islands or the Congo itself, working for traders, local chiefs and European officers.

2 Geographical and historical background

The first Muslim communities settled roughly at the same period in the Eastern and in the Northern Congo, during the 1860s. Regarding the Eastern part of the Congo, they were Arab (mainly Omani) and Swahili traders coming from the Eastern Coast of Africa, ruled at that time by the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar. During the early nineteenth century, Zanzibar had developed its trade with the African hinterland, going deeper and deeper into the continent, so that around 1850 the Muslim traders had reached the area of the Great Lakes, and around 1858 they had established a well-organized station in Ujiji, on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika. In the 1860s,

⁷ MRAC Historical Archives, Archives Rom, R. G. 1072, document no. 1.

⁸ MRAC Historical Archives, Archives Rom, R. G. 1072, document no. 4.

they had crossed the Lake and had started to found new settlements in the Maniema, their main stations being Kasongo, Kabambare and Nyangwe. Later on they went northward and they reached Kirundu and the Stanley-Falls, around 1882–1883. Among the numerous Arab-Swahili traders were the famous Tippo Tip (Ḥamad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī in Arabic), his brother Muḥammad bin Saʿīd al-Murjabī alias Bwana Nzige, as well as Ḥāmid bin ʿAlī alias Kibonge and Muḥammad bin Khalfān alias Rumaliza.⁹ These traders were in search of ivory and slaves, as well as other goods like copal, gum, palm-oil, parrots, etc.; they also introduced new goods in the area like fabrics, coffee, certain kinds of fruit-tree, etc. Progressively, their commercial network gave them more and more political power, and their influence became ever stronger. The local population was composed of various Bantu-speaking kingdoms and chiefdoms, like the Bangu Bangu, the Basongye, the Bakusu, the Bazula, the Benyemamba, the Batetela, the Basongola and the Barega.¹⁰ Part of the local population was attracted to the culture of the newcomers and adopted some of their customs: they started to dress like them, they converted to Islam, they adopted the Swahili language. They were called Wangwana in Swahili, as opposed to the Washenzi (literally the ‘Savages’), a term used in Swahili for the local Bantu population.

Regarding the North, the Muslim traders of the Uele were Arabs and Nubians coming mainly from Sudan, but there were also Arabs from Egypt and Chad. As in the east, they were mainly in search of ivory and slaves. Later, Muslim Africans from other areas of Sudan also joined them, mainly as soldiers. When they arrived in the Uele around the years 1860, they met with the Azande, a population speaking an Adamawa-Ubangi language.¹¹ There were other populations, politically and culturally under the influence of the Azande, such as the Nzakara, the Abandiya, the Amadi and the Avungara. The first contacts between the Muslim traders and the Azande were of different kinds. The chief Ngange for instance decided to trade with them, his brother Surūr worked for a Sudanese trader named ʿAbd al-Ṣamad¹², the chief Bazingbi married off one of his daughters to a trader called Idrīs¹³ and so did the chief Tikima to Zubayr, a Jaʿalī Arab originating from Khartoum.¹⁴ On the other hand, Ndoruma and Wando fiercely resisted the Arab traders who were forced to withdraw to their forts called *zarāʿib*.¹⁵

⁹ Ceulemans 1959, 42.

¹⁰ Vansina 1965, 248.

¹¹ Evans-Pritchard 1971, 70.

¹² Thuriaux-Hennebert 1964, 34.

¹³ Evans-Pritchard 1971, 290.

¹⁴ Gray 1961, 69.

¹⁵ Thuriaux-Hennebert 1964, 36.

During the 1870s, the Egyptian government took the decision to control the Bahr el-Ghazal and the activities of the slave- and ivory-traders. The authorities sent emissaries to the area, and some chiefs such as Tikima, Sasa, Semio or Wando became the allies of the traders. Around 1880, Nduruma, Sasa, Semio and Rafay, among other Azande chiefs, started to serve the Egyptian authorities and their European representatives, such as Lupton bey or Gessi. However, in 1881, the Mahdi rose up against the government in Sudan and the whole southern part of the country was disrupted by this event, including the Bahr el-Ghazal and the Uele, where the Azande chiefs once again found their autonomy.¹⁶

3 The ‘writers’

3.1 The Arab and Swahili traders

In the Eastern Congo, the Arab and Swahili traders used to exchange letters and sign commercial contracts. When they were the authors of their letters, they used the expressions *bi-yadi-hi* or *kataba-hā*, and in fact, most of them were able to write these documents themselves.¹⁷ Captain Stairs for instance mentions that ‘an important number of Arabs in Tabora are of pure race, coming from Muscat or other Arab localities. All of them can read and write and they speak intelligently’.¹⁸ There is no reason to think that this does not apply to the Arab communities of the Eastern Congo, and in fact, Tobback confirms that ‘almost all the Arabs [in the Eastern Congo] can read and write’.¹⁹ One should also note that the ‘Arab’ and Swahili traders who wrote and read these documents were of different origins. Stairs mentions that he carried a series of letters for two Baluchi chiefs established in Katanga, Kafindo and Uturutu, while other traders mentioned in the correspondence were originally from the Comoro islands, like Shanzi bin Jum‘a.²⁰ Concerning the Azande area, the Arab traders who circulated in the area also made use of written documents, as did the Egyptian officers based in Aequatoria. In 1892, the Belgian officer

¹⁶ Thuriaux-Hennebert 1964, 158.

¹⁷ Luffin 2007, 22.

¹⁸ Stairs 1893, 102.

¹⁹ Tobback 1894, 38.

²⁰ Stairs 1893, 159.

Jules Milz enrolled Sudanese soldiers who were formerly at the service of Emin Pasha. One of them had received several letters sent by the Mahdist, encouraging him to join their cause.²¹

3.2 Their secretaries

The Arab and Swahili traders often used the services of personal secretaries, who were both interpreters and translators. Shanzi bin Jum'a, who is mentioned in a Swahili letter stored in Tervuren, was described by some European sources as a secretary originating from the Comoro Islands, who also knew some French. A picture taken in 1892 shows him beside Rachid, and describes him as an interpreter.²² Tobback's list also mentions another Comorian, Ali Mchangama or Mabilanga, as well as 'a man called Abdallah Baruki: 'Abdallah Baruki. 23 years old. Rachid's clerk (*écrivain, cleric*). Sent to Bomokandi (1891) to be punished'.²³ Many European sources mention the presence of a secretary accompanying Tippu Tip, apparently one of his relatives: Sālim bin Muḥammad. According to Parke, Sālim was also fluent in English, he had visited London and had formerly worked as an Arabic interpreter for the British Force at Suakin, Sudan.²⁴ Actually, it seems that this man was more than a mere scribe. In 1888, Tippu Tip sent him to meet Stanley in Yambuya in order to deliver him a message. Later, he entrusted him the task of taking care of a whole caravan at the Stanley Falls.²⁵ He was also somehow the 'living memory' of his master. In his book *Five years with the Congo Cannibals* (1891), Herbert Ward gives a long description of Tippu Tip's life. He mentions that it was his secretary, Salim bin Muhammad, who had given him the information.²⁶ In the North too, some of the Egyptian officers and Sudanese traders had their scribes. The Belgian sources say that the Sudanese soldiers enrolled by the EIC in 1893 were represented by four persons: two officers, and two clerks: Muhammad Efendi Ahmad (Muḥammad Efendi Aḥmad) and Sadig Efendi (Şādiq Efendi).²⁷

²¹ Lotar 1946, 159.

²² Tobback 1894, 18.

²³ Tobback 1894, 19.

²⁴ Parke 1891, 490.

²⁵ Bontinck 1974, 136.

²⁶ Ward 1891, 173–190.

²⁷ Lotar 1946, 140.

3.3 Arab secretaries at the service of African chiefs

It seems that local chiefs sometimes asked the Arabs to write documents for them. Concerning the EIC, several Azande chiefs had secretaries in their service. Among the Uele documents that have been studied, some of them were sent by Arabs to Semio, as well as by Semio to Europeans and vice versa in the years up to 1893.²⁸ In 1891, Gustin says that Semio ‘cannot read nor write, but he has an Arab scribe or *katip* [sic].’²⁹ Raymond Colrat de Montrozier, a member of the French mission sent to the Haut-Oubangui and the Bahr el-Ghazal in 1898, confirmed this many years later. He depicts his meetings with the Azande sultans, some of them then settled in the French colonial territories. Concerning his first meeting with Semio, he says that ‘the *faghi* [sic] or secretary of the sultan is the first one to appear. After many obsequious and insincere salutations, he sits down between your seat and the sultan’s seat’.³⁰ Moïse Landeroin, a French military interpreter who knew Arabic, crossed the Azande kingdoms when he participated in the Marchand Expedition, which ended with the famous Fashoda crisis in 1898. He also states that Semio’s *feguih* ‘speaks Arabic rather well’.³¹ Unfortunately, these sources give neither the name nor the origin of the *fagi*, however Colrat de Montrozier mentions that, in the royal court, there were ‘former ascaris of the Egyptian government, caporals and sergeants, who participated to Lupton and Gessi campaigns [...] and Arabs from the Darfur’.³² At Rafay, the Arab traders seem to have come mainly from Waday.³³ In this case, it seems logical that this clerk came from the same area, Waday and Darfur.

According to Landeroin, the Azande sultan Tambura was accompanied by his personal ‘*feguih*’ when he visited him in 1897:

The Sultan [Tambura], his *feguih* who speaks well Arabic and the whole court look like real bandits [...]. In the evening, the *feguih* came alone. He is clever, he comes from Ouaddaï [Waday] and he is far more intelligent than the rest of the Court.³⁴

²⁸ See Abel 1954, 1385–1409; Luffin 2004b, 145–177.

²⁹ Salmon 1963, 20.

³⁰ Colrat de Montrozier 1902 (reprint 2004), 141.

³¹ Landeroin 1996, 63.

³² Colrat de Montrozier 1902, 144.

³³ Colrat de Montrozier 1902, 204, 209.

³⁴ Landeroin 1996, 74–75.

His name was Idris: he apparently originated from Waday, and he had lived in El Fasher (Darfur). He mentions that he traveled from there with books: the Quran, the Abu al-Ahsan book, *tafsirs*... he stayed in Kalaka (Waday) for two years, where he taught the Quran to the children and wrote amulets. Then, he had to flee because of the Dervishes heading to Kalaka. He went to Dango (Darfur), Dem Ziber (Bahr el-Ghazal), and then the Azande area. He eventually arrived in Tambura. Tambura told him that his *feguih* went to work for Ndoruma and he asked him to translate some of Zemio and Hajer's letters, then he asked him if he wanted to stay in his service. When Landeroin met him, he had been working for Tambura for eight years!³⁵ Landeroin mentions another *feguih*, called Feguih Ahmed, who had worked in the Shilluk and the Azande area, and who had been the friend of Idris: he was from the Kenana tribe, a subdivision of the Baggara around Tagale, Kordofan.³⁶ Another Azande sultan, Sasa, who spoke Arabic fluently³⁷, also sent a 'courrier' to Van Kerckhoven, though the French term is ambiguous: it may be a letter, or a messenger bringing an oral message.³⁸ Some sources also mention the presence of Arab advisers, like the ones at Mopoi's court in 1909: 'Two or three "dervishes" play the role of advisers. They have some influence, since he follows their rite. Mopoi also has a chaplet [*chapelet* in French, prayer bead] and "dervish" amulets'.³⁹

Another source mentions the identity of Mopoi's advisers: 'Hasan bin Muhammad, born in Aswan, and Mustafa Ben Bahekr [*sic*], from Berber (Sudan), expelled by the EIC authorities after that they served Mopoi for several years.'⁴⁰ However, there is no specific mention of the use of writing. Sasa too had Arab or Arabised (Arabicized) advisers.⁴¹ Whatever the case may be, all the letters found in the Azande area show a strong influence of Western Sudan/Chadian Arabic, which corroborates the observations about Tambura's *feguih*. Charles Swan, already quoted above, mentions the presence of Arab traders in the Garenganzwe between 1890 and 1893, as well as the use of Arabic writing at the royal court of Msiri. 'Some Arabs and Balukaluka who were composing armed bands looting the country had sent a letter in Arabic (I saw it but I couldn't read it) to Msidi [*sic*], saying that they were looting his land and that they intended to reach his capital to seize him and to bring him in their own country, as a trophy'.⁴²

35 Landeroin 1996, 279, 288.

36 Landeroin 1996, 210.

37 Salmon 1963, 27.

38 Lotar 1946, 102.

39 Salmon 1969, 17.

40 Salmon 1969, 25.

41 Salmon 1963, 41.

42 Swan quoted by Verbeke 1956, 120.

This short reference shows that the king received letters in Arabic, which means that he needed somebody to read and maybe to translate them (Msiri knew Swahili, but the language used in the letter is not mentioned). Another European, Arnot, who visited the city at the same period, says in his book entitled *Bihe and Garenganze*: ‘We found the chief sitting under the verandah of the queen’s large house, and on his right sat two Arabs, busy at work, writing their strange hieroglyphics.’⁴³

This short phrase can be seen as a reference to Arab secretaries. Of course, the text does not clearly mention that they were writing for the King. However, the fact that they stay in the queen’s house while writing their letters implies that these documents were somehow official letters. Other chiefs and kings outside of the EIC, at the same period, were renting the services of Arabic- and Swahili-speaking secretaries. Several sources mention that Mtesa, the king of Buganda, was fluent in Swahili, and that he was able to read and write in Arabic. However, he also had two personal scribes: Masudi, a man from the Swahili Coast who arrived in Buganda around 1870, and Idi, who came from the Comoro islands.⁴⁴ Edvard Gleeerup, Per Hassing and Norman Bennett mention that Rubeya ben Khalfan al-Harithi (Rub’ayya bin Khalfān al-Ḥārithi) – a Zanzibari trader with Omani roots, according to his name – was the secretary of the Nyamwezi chief Mpanda Shalo, the successor of Mirambo.⁴⁵ Actually, it seems that the chief asked Rubeya to manage his business correspondence with coastal traders as well as with the Germans.⁴⁶

3.4 The local Arab traders at the service of the Europeans

Many sources describe how European explorers and missionaries used official letters written by influential Arabs as a pass in order to be introduced into a city or even to get the authorization to cross a territory. Captain Stairs says that, before he left Zanzibar in 1891 with a caravan heading to Katanga, he met the Sultan of Zanzibar, Sayyid ‘Alī: ‘I explained to his Highness the purpose of my journey. Then I asked him to help me recruiting men and to give me letters demanding the people of Karema, Rua, Itawa and Katanga in order to assist me.’⁴⁷ Later on, he describes how he handed over these letters, for instance when he arrived in Tabora: ‘This

⁴³ Arnot 1893, 59.

⁴⁴ Oded 1974, 86.

⁴⁵ Bontinck 1974, 182.

⁴⁶ Pesek 2006, 401.

⁴⁷ Stairs 1893, 14.

morning I have sent my letters to the German chief of Tabora, to the governor (Luali) and to eight or nine of the main Arab chiefs of the place.⁴⁸

3.5 The ‘foreign’ secretaries at the service of the Colonial officers

The administration of the EIC was aware of the need for Arabic speakers in the Uele, due to the information given by the former explorers of this area bordering Sudan. So, the European administrators were accompanied by Arab secretaries recruited especially for their linguistic skills. At least five of them are known: Jacob Soliman, Ezekiel Matook, Joseph Inver, Doctor Sabbagh and Sélim Talamas. They are supposed to have translated the (oral) speeches and messages of the Arabs as well as of the Azande sultans and their messengers. We know that they had to give a written translation of the documents sent to – or intercepted by – EIC representatives. They also had to prepare the Arabic version of local contracts and treaties. However, their task often went beyond interpretation, Jacob Soliman for instance was appointed Resident at Ganda. What do we know about them?

Jacob Soliman was born in Cairo in 1866. At first, he was an interpreter of the Egyptian army and was based in Suakin (Sudan), with the grade of sub-lieutenant. Then, he was in charge of teaching Arabic to British officers in Cairo. In 1889, he started to work for the EIC. He arrived in Basoko and accompanied the Roget-Milz Expedition in 1890. In July 1893, he translated a contract into Arabic, drawn up between the EIC and some former Egyptian officers which confirmed their enrollment into the EIC. However, according to Delanghe, his translation seems to have been poor, and to the advantage of the Egyptians, stipulating clauses that were not in the original, such as the fact that the EIC had to give them arms and ammunition.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in November 1893, he was appointed ‘Résident’ at Ganda. He accompanied Van Kerchoven and Milz to the Nile, and stayed at Dufile in December 1893. He was killed close to Ganda during a battle against the Emir Arabi (Amīr ‘Arabī).⁵⁰

Ezekiel Matook was born in Bagdad in 1857. He had British nationality. He had been introduced by the Consul of Belgium in Alexandria and was recruited as ‘*commis interprète*’ (interpreter) of the EIC on January 6, 1894. He arrived in Boma on February 1 and was sent to Ubangi-Bomu, where he arrived in May 1894. In November, he worked for the leader of the expedition to the Haut-Uele. In April 1895, the

48 Stairs 1893, 95.

49 Lotar 1946, 154.

50 Coosemans 1948, 857.

Belgian officer Georges Bricusse met him in Ibembo. He says he had been sentenced to three years in prison for ‘bad things’. He finally went back to Boma in July 1895, and resigned in August 2 before heading to Antwerp.⁵¹ Bricusse thought he was an Egyptian, probably because he had been recruited in Alexandria.

Joseph Inver was born in Istanbul in 1872. He was an Arabic interpreter. He took part in the expeditions of Hanolet, Stroobant and Van Calster and reached Mbelle in April 1894. After a short stay in Europe in 1895, he joined the EIC again, and was supposed to accompany Dhanis from the Stanley Falls to the Nile, but he was killed in Mongwa in February 1897.⁵² Sélim Talamas, born in Alexandria in 1865, arrived in the Congo in the summer of 1894 as an official Arabic interpreter for the EIC. He served in Semio, Uele, and died in Bomu in October 1896. Lotar mentions him, but none of his translations has yet been found in the archives.⁵³ A last Arabic translator and interpreter was Doctor Sabbagh. We know nothing about his country of origin, but at the end of the 1860s, he was at the service of the EIC, where he translated Azande letters for Captain De Bauw in 1897.⁵⁴

When translators were not available on the spot, the European officers of the EIC sent the Arabic documents they received or intercepted to the European consulates established in Zanzibar, in order to have them translated.⁵⁵ The other colonial powers also used to hire the services of translators and interpreters. In the case of France, these interpreters were sometimes Frenchmen who had worked in Arabic speaking countries. This was the case of Moïse Landeroin (1867–1962), who had worked as an *officier interprète* (interpreter officer) in Tunis (1900), Niger (1900–1905), Niger and Chad (1906–1922). His own report of the Marchand Expedition (1896–99) has been published in French. In his diary, he explains how he translates letters, but also how he writes them – he mentions a letter of six pages sent to Semio! – and also that he needs the ‘Kazimviski’ [sic] – he means the A. Kazimirski’s Arabic-French dictionary published in 1860 and still useful today.⁵⁶

3.6 The local skills

In the Eastern Congo, the Belgian officer Dhanis had a secretary called Fundi Lubangi, as he mentions in his personal notes. The term *fundi* has several meanings

⁵¹ Salmon 1966, 64 n. 1

⁵² Coosemans 1948, I, 533.

⁵³ Lotar 1940, 157.

⁵⁴ Luffin 2004b, 157.

⁵⁵ Maréchal 1992, 3.

⁵⁶ Landerouin 1996, 88.

in Swahili, like ‘master of a craft, skilled worker, artist’ but here it clearly refers to his ability to write. Given his name, this man was probably a local secretary, but we cannot exclude that he was a Coastal Swahili or an Arab, since many Omani traders had an ‘African’ nickname. As we have seen before, several Western sources mention the good – or even very good – knowledge of Arabic among some Azande chiefs, like Semio or Rafay. In the case of Rafay, it even seems that all the notables, the soldiers and most of the men of his city were able to speak Arabic. However, were they able to read and to write Arabic? Lotar clearly says that Rafay himself was illiterate, but we can suppose that some had a certain knowledge of Arabic, though this is merely a hypothesis.

To begin with, many of them made use of religious documents written in Arabic: we have already mentioned amulets. We also know that copies of the Quran circulated in the area. According to Graziani, Sasa ‘bears a Quran in his hands’. Charles de la Kéthulle describes an Abanda chief called Bandassi: ‘he speaks Arabic correctly and he follows the Quran’s precepts.’⁵⁷ He is even a fanatic. His clothes are decorated with Quranic verses. At critical moments, he puts a cordon around his forehead with small leather booklets containing Quranic verses. The grip of his Remington and the hilt of his sword are also decorated with small copies of the Quran’.⁵⁸ Chaltin describes Mopoi in the same way in 1896: ‘He wears an Arab dress and a belt with bags containing passages of the Quran’.⁵⁹ However, the use of amulets or owning a copy of the Quran does not mean that their possessor had the ability to read them, and their role may have been merely symbolic. This hypothesis is reinforced by the description of Rafay amulets in de la Kéthulle’s report: ‘the sultan, the chiefs and the notables wear small leather booklets, hermetically closed, sometimes containing Quranic verses, though it mostly consists of blank paper free of any inscription’.⁶⁰

However, some letters among the set of Azande documents differ from the rest: the handwriting is very awkward and one of them is even practically unreadable. The content is in pure colloquial Arabic, different from the Middle Arabic used in the other documents. One of the letters had been deciphered by the EIC translator, Doctor Sabbagh, who declared in his comment that it took him a long time to decipher these ‘hieroglyphic characters’.⁶¹ Though we cannot exclude that they have been written by a bad secretary, we can reasonably assume that the author was an

⁵⁷ Salmon 1963, 53.

⁵⁸ Kéthulle 1895, 425.

⁵⁹ Lotar 1940, 251.

⁶⁰ Kéthulle 1895, 417.

⁶¹ Luffin 2004b, 157.

Arabic-speaking Azande, maybe the sultan Sasa himself. Concerning Katanga, we have already mentioned the presence of the Arabs in Msiri's Court and their role as scribes. One observation made by the Captain Stairs, again, may imply that Msiri himself was able to write. Stairs says that before his arrival in Msiri's capital, a messenger brought him three letters: 'They bring me a letter sent by Msiri, written in English by M. D. Crawford, a missionary and Mister Arnot's colleague, another, in Swahili, emanating from Msiri himself ('émanant de Msiri lui-même') and a personal message from M. Crawford.'⁶² Outside of the Congo, the most interesting case is that of Mtesa and his notables. Here is what Stanley says about Mtesa's court, where he stayed in 1875: 'Nearly all the principal attendants at the court can write the Arabic letters. The Emperor and many of the chiefs both read and write that character with facility, and frequently employ it to send messages to another, or to strangers at a distance.'⁶³

3.7 The occasional scribes

I already mentioned the Swahili treaties signed between local chiefs and Emile Storms, the representative of the *Association Internationale Africaine* (AIA) in the Marungu starting in 1883. Storms wrote both a book and an article in the *Mouvement géographique*, where he gives more information about the context surrounding the signing of the treaties, and it appears that the five chiefs who signed the treaties knew neither Arabic writing nor the Swahili language, since an interpreter was used to translate their conversations with Storms. This means that the production of 'ajamī documents, in this area and in this period, was apparently related to the presence of Swahili soldiers from Zanzibar among Storms's African soldiers.⁶⁴ Another document from Uele may bring to light the occasional use of the skills of other actors. Among the Uele documents that de Bauw brought back to Belgium, there is the copy of a letter sent to Semio. This letter is written in Swahili, or rather in a mixed language, a kind of Swahili-Arabic. The use of Swahili in this area and at this period is rather strange: the European sources dealing with the Azande sultanates never mention the use of Swahili among the Azande sultans or their men.⁶⁵ My hypothesis is that for some unknown reason De Bauw had no interpreter at hand at the time, so he asked one of his Zanzibari soldiers to write a letter in Arabic.

⁶² Stairs 1893, 183.

⁶³ Stanley 1899, 322.

⁶⁴ Luffin 2007a, 188.

⁶⁵ Luffin 2004b, 166.

This occasional scribe probably had a limited knowledge of Arabic, so he completed the ‘gaps’ with Swahili words. A final case of occasional translators is that of the Egyptian traders mentioned above, who had spent two weeks translating Mahdist archives for Chaltin, when he seized the city of Redjaf in 1897.

3.8 Clergymen and the Quranic schools

There are only a very few mentions of religious men in colonial testimonies. Concerning the East, Georges Bricusse met several Arab prisoners coming from the Eastern Congo (Kabambare, etc.) sent to Bumba, in 1894. He mentions the presence of ‘a priest’ among them: ‘Beau type également le grand prêtre – traits fins, œil intelligent, barbe grise.’⁶⁶ Bricusse mentions neither his name nor his origin, but we may assume that the man was an imam or a *faqih*. The same could be said of a man described in a letter in 1891 by Hinde, in Riba Riba, to Tobback: ‘I have seen the priest N’Djadi, he looks very kind and he goes to the [Stanley] Falls, he is the one who will give you your boat as well as this letter.’⁶⁷

Tobback himself wrote a list of the influential Arabs in the Eastern Congo in 1891. The list was published in 1893 in the *Congo illustré*, and describes Djadi-ben-Amisi as ‘Djadi-ben-Amici. His nickname: Kussu. A white Arab. 45 years old. He lives in the Falls. Very rich. Not cruel. A Muslim priest. He operates in the Lomami, the Lopori and the Uele. He stammers. He has 300 rifles.’⁶⁸ These clergymen had established Quranic schools in the area. An oral tradition quoted by Marechal says that Kalenda Njike, one of Ngongo Lutete’s sons, had studied at the Arab school of Kasongo.⁶⁹ In the *Congo illustré*, a detailed description of the Arabs in the Eastern Congo says that ‘the many children of the Arabs are raised with care. The scribe, a kind of secretary, is a part of the ‘home’ for any chief or notable, he or the sheikh (a Muslim priest) give them their first education, notions of reading and writing (almost all the Arabs can read and write). When the time came, the father found the occasion to send his best sons to the schools in Tabora, the [Swahili] Coast or Zanzibar. It seems that before the destruction of Nyangwe, there was a school there.’⁷⁰ A picture taken in Kasongo in 1904 shows a Quranic school⁷¹. Many details are interesting, like the use of the wooden tablets, the very young age of the pupils, and

⁶⁶ Salmon 1966, 46.

⁶⁷ MRAC Archives, RG 617.

⁶⁸ Tobback 1894, 19.

⁶⁹ Maréchal 1992, 315.

⁷⁰ Tobback 1894, 36.

⁷¹ Maréchal 1992, 277.

the fact that, in this case, both the children and their master all seem to be indigenous, not Omanis.

Arthur Detry was a judge who worked in the Congo between 1907 and 1918. He wrote a book about the Muslim community of Stanleyville, where he arrived in 1909, which is one year after the end of the EIC. Of course, what he describes about the use of Arabic at that time was the result of the previous situation, during the EIC period. Here is his description of the Kisangani's Quranic school: 'In Kisangani, the 'village arabisé' of Stanleyville, lives a great *mwaliimu*. This *mwaliimu* is the initiator, the one who's in charge of teaching the children how to write, as well as the Quranic precepts and the ancestors' customs. He is accompanied by a man almost as learned as he is [...]. The two men are assisted by 18 teachers who depend on them and follow their instructions [...]. The customs are handwritten. They write them in the Swahili language with the Arabic alphabet. The *mwaliimu* reads them and exposes them to the children. They are conceived as precepts, maxims and parables.⁷² He also mentions that the *mwaliimu* writes amulets, with a calam and red mud as ink, and that he possesses books written in Swahili. He says for instance that

all the written customs, specific to the Banguana, are called Uaguana and are divided in four books: the *Morahaabati*, the *Shamtilimanfi*, the *Kitabutchanusai* and the *Kazel Kule*. We can say that it is almost impossible for the European to get a copy of these documents. The only way to know them would be to gain the total trust of an instructed chief. This is not an easy task [...]. These customs are hand-written. They write them in the Swahili language with the help of the Arabic letters. The *Mwaliimu* read them and expose them to the children.⁷³

In another passage, he mentions other books that he calls *kanuni*; saying that they are of a juridical nature. 'We mention here several texts possessed by our Arabisés and which are copies of successive Kanuni, imposed by the conquerors during a series of forays.'⁷⁴ Another useful piece of information in Detry's book concerns the extent of writing in Stanleyville around 1910: 'We can affirm that all the Blacks who follow the [*mwaliimu*'s] teaching and have adopted Islam are able to write and read Swahili, often very purely'.⁷⁵ An interesting but obscure passage of de la Kéthulle's report about Islamic influence at Rafay possibly mentions clergymen mastering the Arabic writing: 'It is possible that the powerful sect of the Senoussis has extended

⁷² Detry 1912, 7.

⁷³ Detry 1912 7.

⁷⁴ Detry 1912, 173.

⁷⁵ Detry 1912, 9.

its propaganda as far as among the Azande, the Abanda and the Kreich. What is certain is that some initiated men (*initiés*) coming from Waday, Darfur and Kordofan live by the sultans. Some of these initiated men know how to read and write Arabic and they have some instruction.⁷⁶ As I mentioned before, the sources generally call the scribe *kātib*, but also *faḡīh*, the colloquial pronunciation of *faqīh*, which originally had a religious meaning. We can imagine that these men were initially clergymen, or clergymen and scribes at the same time, and that they were probably the makers of the sultan's amulets described by the Europeans. Finally, the Museum of Tervuren also contains two *lawḥa*, written on both sides, brought back to Belgium by Jean Uyttenhove (1873–1931), a lieutenant of the *Force Publique* who worked in the Lado area until 1906. The texts on the *lawḥa* are a list of the 99 names of God and a prayer, and the writing is related to North African writings, as shown by the use of the *qāf* with a dot under the graph, etc. This tends to indicate the presence of a Quranic school in the area.

4 Conclusion

The preserved Swahili and Arabic documents as well as the external sources mentioning them show that literacy was not something unusual in some parts of the Congo in the 1890s. The same sources also show that the Arabs and the Swahilis coming from the Eastern Coast were not the only people who could speak, read and write Arabic: people originating from the Comoro Islands or Baluchistan, for instance, were also literate, as well as some indigenous people. Some of the scribes had had long careers, sometimes starting outside of the Congo, and they were often at the service of more than one person. Their role was also multiple: they both read and wrote the correspondence of their chiefs, but some of them also made amulets, for instance.

On the arrival of the Europeans, knowledge of Arabic had started to circulate, though limitedly, in the local population: in the Uele basin, some Azande chiefs were able to speak, and even read and write Arabic, while in the East, one of Ngongo Lutete's sons had been sent to the local Quranic school. We know very few things about these Quranic schools, but we learn from the sources that they were already established in the 1890s, and probably earlier. Another point is the impact of the European presence in the area. When the representatives of the EIC were well established in the Congo, they started to challenge Arabic literacy, by promoting

⁷⁶ Kéthulle 1895, 407.

the use of Swahili in Latin script, as the British and the Germans did in East Africa. Even before the development of missionary schools, the process was under way: Jérôme Becker, a Belgian officer who participated in the first explorations of the Congo for the AIA, explains in his book that he taught the Arab trader Sefu bin Rashid how to write Swahili in Latin characters, in the early 1880s. He also says that at the same period, the sons of the Buganda chiefs came to meet the European explorers for the same purpose.⁷⁷ However, just before this period, the Europeans somehow contributed to the flow of Arabic literacy in the Congo, though only for a very short time, since they answered the letters they received in Arabic and Swahili in the same languages, and with the same Arabic alphabet. Some of them like de la Kéthulle even started to learn Arabic, while others like G. F. Wtterwulge in 1904 and G. Moltedo in 1905 wrote some phrasebooks containing words and sentences in Arabic in order to facilitate the communication between the EIC officers and the local population.⁷⁸ Moreover, the EIC enrolled translators from the Middle East in order to communicate orally and literally with local chiefs and traders, bringing new actors into this process. This, in addition to the numerous references to Arabic literacy in Western sources dealing with the Congo, also shows that the first Europeans who stayed in the Congo – travelers, EIC officers, etc. – did not try to hide the phenomenon, although history seems to have forgotten their testimonies.

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⁷⁷ Becker 1887, II, 49, 199.

⁷⁸ Luffin 2004, 373–398.

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