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**Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová and Seyni Moumouni
(eds.). 2014. Voices of Africa's Pasts. Bratislava:
Slovak Academic Press, 164 pages.**

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Era” instead of the correct “an Era” on p. 195. Perhaps, the roots of the separatist Casamance movement which affects Senegalese politics would have deserved a more profound explanation. In general, such trifles cannot change the firm opinion that Vlastimil Fiala’s annotated work is a valuable enlargement of our knowledge of African politics.

Jan Klíma

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There are many reasons to read and discuss this book offering eight contributions presented to the International Conference on *Sources for African history in African languages written in Arabic (Ajami), African and Latin scripts in Eastern and Southern Africa* that was held in Maputo in April 2012. The conference represented a step forward of the “Fontes Historiae Africanae Project” of the *Union Académique Internationale* based in Brussels. The project, started in 1960s, evolved through several shifts of emphasis and patronage to the current situation, in which the responsibility has been taken over by the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the directorship by the first editor of the book under review, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová. She tells the essentials of the story in the amply informative Introduction. Information on the project can be also retrieved from the website.

The book presents a great deal of fresh items of knowledge regarding Africa’s written patrimony from pre-colonial and colonial times. A considerable part of the papers deal with manuscripts in Arabic or Ajami, i.e., in African languages transcribed in Arabic script. In this respect, rich information on the available but still unexplored documents in West African languages (Hausa, Fulfulde, Songhay-Zarma, Gonja, Mampurle and Wolof) is provided by the co-editor of the volume, Seyni Moumouni. In addition to his general presentation of the importance of this wide but little known corpus of texts for historians, he pays special attention to the manuscripts preserved in his motherland Niger at the University of Niamey.

The respective chapter suggests a typology and chronological evolution of dated manuscripts (Islamic, Arab and African) and gives a detailed

account and analysis of some of them representing what the author terms a “palaeographic corpus.” This seems to be a promising step towards further research in this field, since a large part of the assembled manuscripts have not yet been analysed in detail. The Department of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts of the *Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines* in Niamey has been preserving a collection of over 4,000 documents in Arabic script written by African authors from a wide range of mostly Western Sudanic countries since the advent of Islam to these regions until today. An important challenge is the research of their dating.

Another kind of cultural links connecting Africa’s Sudanic belt with Arabic culture can be studied in manifold materials of popular imagination reflecting connections between them in the past history. In this field, Zuzana Gažáková (from Bratislava) has contributed rich results of her research on the famous *Sírat Sayf ibn Dhí Yazan*, which for centuries served as the founding legend of the Sayfuwa dynasty of the Kanem-Bornu sultans, governing the Chad area from the Middle Ages until 1846. Gažáková’s research covers the entire range of ramifications of the *síra* from Yemen and Ethiopia over large parts of Islamised Northern and Sudanic Africa in both historical discourse and popular narratives.

In accordance with the goal of the conference, however, the main regional emphasis was on Eastern and Southern Africa. This is clearly manifest in the regional focus of five contributions. Two of them deal with the use of the Arabic script in situations, writings and languages where this phenomenon may seem really surprising. This script is well known as a medium of the rich heritage of literature, in particular poetry, in Swahili, but less so as a means of communication with Africans used by the Portuguese in Mozambique. Liazzat Bonate (from Seoul National University), who is a pioneer in this line of studies, presents three letters in Ajami-type Swahili written by women and a non-Muslim African man to the Portuguese colonial authorities during the 1890s. We also learn that this was the concluding period of this type of correspondence because the “scramble for Africa” made the Portuguese abandon the Arabic script and local language for the official usage of the colonial power. An equally surprising issue is shown by Muhammad Haron from South Africa, whose chapter deals with an Arabic-Afrikaans text on ritual prayer. The combination of these two

languages in the final output of Ajami script is an interesting feature of the religious culture of the Cape Muslim community.

The last but not least set of contributions provides fresh information on non-Muslim sources. Demeke Berhane (founder of the Manuscript and Documentation Department at the Addis Ababa University) presents a survey of the dispersion of Ethiopian literary heritage all over the world, mainly in Europe and the USA. From the chapter, accompanied by coloured reproductions of specimens of Ethiopian texts and pictures, information can be learned not only about the present-day whereabouts of the precious codices and scrolls but also about the damaging policy of the once post-imperial Därg and Mengistu régimes. Historical manuscripts and artefacts were sold abroad regardless of their value for the country itself. Quite another type of sources is discussed in the chapter by Bernard Liesegang, a specialist (*inter alia*) in oral history. His study offers an analysis of the historical knowledge obtainable from Nguni praise poems, once composed in the mid 19th century, as preserved and recited in our day and age. The concluding contribution in the volume is from the editor Pawlikova-Vilhanová. It deals with early historical writing in Luganda, paying special attention to the trend enhancing Buganda's *ekitiibwa* (prestige, honour). At the same time, it shows how African historiography, in this case in Luganda, was conceptualising the past in its own situation between orality and literacy and in the face of the challenge of colonial rule and Western cultural impact.

On the whole, this volume deserves sincere welcome. Rich in new and well-presented bits of reliable information, well edited and published on high quality paper, it clearly reveals the diversity of sources that are still waiting to be identified and exploited for the study of African pre-colonial and colonial history.

Luboš Kropáček