

**Katriina Ranne**, *The Image of Water in the Poetry of Euphrase Kezilahabi*. (Studia Orientalia 118) Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2016. ISBN 978-951-9380-90-2. 302 pp.

**Reviewed by Roberto Gaudio** (University of Naples “L’Orientale”)

Katriina Ranne’s book *The Image of Water in the Poetry of Euphrase Kezilahabi* is the only published monograph on this influential scholar’s works to date. The volume is extensive and at the same time very detailed. In fact, it focuses specifically on the image of water in Euphrase Kezilahabi’s works, especially his poems. Ranne’s book comes at a time of great critical attention to Kezilahabi and is one of the few easily accessible contributions regarding his poetry. As Ranne (2016: 22) herself points out, at the beginning of the 2000s the Russian scholar Frolova worked on Kezilahabi’s poetry, but her work is in Russian, a language not known to many Swahili specialists. In 1987 the Slovak scholar Elena Bertoncini Zúbková, who in 1968 founded the course of Swahili Language and Literature at the, published a translation into Italian (*Sofferenza*) of selected poems from the first collection of Kezilahabi’s poetry, *Kichomi* (Tearing pain, 1974). Another valuable contribution is Annmarie Drury’s 2015 *Stray Truths*, a translation into English of a selection of poems by Kezilahabi. Moreover, there are numerous studies on Kezilahabi, but they mostly treat his novels and are in the form of journal articles, not monographs. There are also still-unpublished monographs, like Ranne’s 2006 MA thesis, Lutz Diegner’s PhD dissertation (2006), Athumani Sakum Ponera’s PhD dissertation (2014), and my own BA and MA theses (2010; 2013) and PhD dissertation (2017).

This book is the culmination of more than ten year’s research by Ranne, which began, as far as I am aware, with her MA thesis. Ranne’s book consists of six chapters and two appendices, including translations into English of twenty-two poems. The image of water remains central throughout. The last appendix is a translation of *Oa* by one of the greatest Swahili writers of all time, Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy. The presence of classical Swahili poetry in a book on Kezilahabi may be considered as “strange” because, according to many scholarly studies, Kezilahabi’s corpus is regarded as antithetical to that poetry. This book dedicates a whole chapter to the image of water in Swahili classical poetry. In this way, the author focuses on water and describes what Karin Barber (2007: 5) defines as “textual tradition”. This focus is delineated in two chapters (on classical and modern Swahili poetry) without necessarily being compared with Kezilahabi. Nevertheless, she recognises a common ground with which the textual genre “is symbiotically linked” (Barber 2007: 5). In fact, in the conclusion, Ranne (2016: 226–227) connects these “different worlds”:

Kezilahabi’s references to “ekstasis” and “rapture” in connection to the eternal now resemble the Islamic view of how ecstasy can enable “momentary breakthroughs to eternity” during life on Earth (Böweing 1997: 65). [...] Through his extensive familiarity with both various African (including tradi-

tional Islamic Swahili) and Western philosophies and literatures, Kezilahabi has been able to gather ideas from different perspectives, from Islamic and Christian to secular. [...] Similarly, Kezilahabi's idea of purification seems to have drawn inspiration as much from importance of ritual cleansing in Kerewe culture as from the significance of purification in Christianity and Islamic Swahili poetry, while developing into his very own philosophy.

This passage summarises Ranne's approach, which is defined by a constant comparison of texts and observation that the poetic praxis is more complex than the ideological division in Swahili poetry (i.e. traditionalists and reformists). Moreover, through her analysis, she highlights how Kezilahabi's aesthetics go beyond a conventional and simplistic scheme of belonging to a singular identity.

Another interesting element in this volume is an interview by Katrina Ranne with Kezilahabi, in which Ranne collects important aspects of the life and thought of the Swahili poet. Drawing from this interview, Ranne also emphasises how water has inspired and informed Kezilahabi's life experience: from Nabili River and Lake Victoria, his places of origin, to Botswana, where he lives and teaches, with its constant scarcity of water. Quotations from this interview guide the reader through the entire work.

The core of this book is comprised by its theoretical framework and textual analysis. In the second chapter, Ranne clearly sets out both her theory on literature and her methodology of analysis. Her theoretical approach draws especially on Gaston Bachelard, Reuven Tsur and John Shoptaw, allowing the author to delineate her aim to analyse image and sound as "Matter, deeper than language". Her perspective is very interesting for anyone seeking to recognise the aesthetics of text. Based on Tsur's theory, Ranne considers sound giving semantic value to its smallest unit, like a vowel or consonant. Moreover, she extends the methodology of Tsur to non-European languages (Ranne 2016: 40–41):

Nevertheless, his [Tsur's] main focus can indeed be seen as very canonical and Eurocentric, and this is one of reasons why I argue that applying cognitive poetics to Swahili poetry is significant. Shoptaw (1994: 694) sees that while being very useful, Tsur's theory "limits our own receptivity to his approach"; my aim is to use many of the tools Tsur offers but in order to get a wider approach, combine his theory with the perspectives of Bachelard, nonconceptualism, and Kezilahabi's idea of language of Being.

Thus, Ranne's critical tools also take into account the idea of the language of Kezilahabi, which he first tackled in his PhD dissertation (1985), and increasingly in various articles published over the past twenty years. At the same time, Ranne (2016: 4) proposes an analysis that focuses more on Kezilahabi's creative texts, without paying too much attention to his huge academic production:

I definitely do not see Kezilahabi's theoretical works as the key to his poetry, but it is interesting to examine the theoretical works as well. In any case, the poet and the researcher can be contradictory, but it is not possible to fully separate them, either.

Here Ranne opens the possibility for Swahili literary critics to concentrate on the text itself, instead of being too tied to the authority of writer, as well as to the context or para-text. However, she adds a further layer of understanding by interviewing Kezilahabi, whose responses contribute to constructing the image of his life in relation to water.

In the last two chapters, Ranne closely analyses Kezilahabi's poems, making the image and sound of water emerge clearly. An example of Ranne's analysis is of the poem *Chai ya Jioni* (Kezilahabi [1988] 2008: 3):

“Baada ya hapo tujilambelambe utamuutamu” ‘After that, let us lick the sweet taste’.

The auditory landscape returns to quite a gentle style later in the poem, but changes into a harder one after the quoted first four lines. “Harder” phonemes, such as /i/ and /d/, are prevalent in the next two lines. Yet most striking is the occurrence of the vowel /o/, which is used six times in the last four-word line (and once just at the end of the previous line): “Imeshalika na imeanza kuoza / Na bado kidogo tutaporomoka” ‘[The rope] has already worn through and started to rot / After a short while we will fall down.’ The line is auditorily very repetitive [...] The repetition of the grapheme <o> is also a visual allusion: the grapheme is a circle, symbolizing the completing of life. (Ranne 2016: 209–210)

In the fifth chapter, the image of water is located in Kezilahabi’s rich body of work, also taking his novels into account and the Kerewe novel *Mr. Myombekere and His Wife Bogonoka* by Aniceti Kitereza. Within Kezilahabi’s corpus, Ranne recognises different liquids – like water, blood, and bodily fluids – putting them in relation to ethical questions. In the sixth chapter, Ranne focuses on the connection between water and life (time and life, being alive, vitality, desire and procreation, and death), introducing key elements of Kezilahabi’s thought. Here she relates broader philosophical issues to the images of water, including the perspectives of such African writers and thinkers as Daniel Kunene, Wole Soyinka and Birago Diop.

This book, therefore, constitutes an important resource for scholars and readers interested not only in Kezilahabi’s works, but in Swahili poetry, literary translation, and a literary approach to text in general. Lastly, this book is an example of how, starting from a very specific focus of analysis – water – it is possible to trace the set-up of a literary production overall.

## REFERENCES

- BARBER, Karin 2007. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- DIEGNER, Lutz 2006. *Die Ausweitung der Gesellschaftskritik in den swahilisprachigen Romanen von Euphrase Kezilahabi und Said Ahmed Mohamed*. PhD dissertation, University of Köln.
- GAUDIOSO, Roberto 2010. *Dalla soglia al profondo: Analisi della lirica di Euphrase Kezilahabi da Kichomi a Karibu Ndani*. BA thesis, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”.
- GAUDIOSO, Roberto 2013. *La voce scritta: L’oralità nella scrittura di Ingeborg Bachmann e Euphrase Kezilahabi*. MA thesis, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”.
- GAUDIOSO, Roberto 2017. *The Voice of the Text and its Body: The Continuous Reform of Euphrase Kezilahabi’s Poetics*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Napoli “L’Orientale” and University of Bayreuth (submitted April 2017).
- KEZILAHABI, Euphrase 1974. *Kichomi*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational.
- KEZILAHABI, Euphrase 1985. *African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- KEZILAHABI, Euphrase 1987. *Sofferenza*. Tr. Bertoncini Zùbková E. Napoli: Plural.
- KEZILAHABI, Euphrase (1988) 2008. *Karibu ndani*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.
- KEZILAHABI, Euphrase 2015. *Stray Truths: Selected Poems of Euphrase Kezilahabi*. Tr. Annemarie Drury. Michigan: Michigan State University Press.
- PONERA, Athumani Sakum 2014. *Ulinganisho wa Nathari za Shaaban Robert na Euphrase Kezilahabi*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Dodoma.
- RANNE, Katriina 2006. *Drops That Open Worlds. The Image of Water in the Poetry of Euphrase Kezilahabi*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Helsinki.
- RANNE, Katriina 2016. *The Image of Water in the Poetry of Euphrase Kezilahabi*. (Studia Orientalia 118) Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society.