

Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur'an Translations: The Three 'Rods of Moses'

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1. Introduction: The One and the Many

Only four Swahili translations of the Qur'an had been published prior to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Two of them were considered heretical by the average Swahili-speaking Sunnī Muslim: one of these was by the Christian missionary Godfrey Dale (1861–1941) first published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London in 1923 as *Tafsiri ya Kurani ya Kiarabu kwa Lugha ya Kisawahili*. The other, printed in 1953 under the title *Kurani Tukufu, Pamoja na Tafsiri na Maelezo kwa Kiswahili* ('The Holy Qur'an with a Translation and Commentary in Swahili'), translated by Sheikh Mubarak Ahmad Ahmadi (Nairobi: East African Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission, 1953) was produced by the Ahmadiyya – who affirm the prophethood of Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) after Muḥammad's. The other two Swahili translations, *Qurani Takatifu* ('The Holy Qur'an'), translated by Sheikh Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy (Nairobi: The Islamic Foundation, n.d. (1950–69)) and *Tarjama al-Muntakhab katika Tafsiri ya Qur'ani Tukufu* ('An Interpretation of Selected Passages Being an Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an'), translated by Ali Muhsin Barwani (Abu Dhabi: Zayed Bin Sultan al-Nahayan Foundation, 1995), in spite of their shortcomings are generally accepted by many Muslims as adequate translations of the Qur'an. However over the last decade, at least six other Swahili translations of the Qur'an have appeared.¹ Some of these are presented as independent of each other and unconnected to the wider field of Swahili religious print products² but in other cases the new translations are polemically positioned in a discursive tradition, often as a critical response to earlier Swahili renditions of the Qur'an. This contribution does not focus on the content of

the Swahili translations as such, but on their discursive context and the shifting reactions to them.

Three books with the same title *Fimbo ya Musa* ('The Rod of Moses'), all published between 1970 and 2010, have been selected for the current study.³ Although the publications can be read as separate, individual products, and the authors do not refer to each others' works, the three books deal with the same subject, namely the perceived limitations of Swahili translations of religious texts, most notably the Qur'an. The books are discursive in the sense that they react to earlier works and others have subsequently answered their accusations in later pamphlets and books. All three writers opt to write in Swahili, even though they agree on its – and in fact any language's – insufficiency in accurately conveying the meaning of God's Word, as He revealed it in Arabic.⁴ Attention will be paid to three related topics. First, the contents of the books are considered with special emphasis on the role of language and the relationship between Swahili and Arabic. Second, this contribution deals with the question of religious authority and who is allowed and able to interpret the Qur'an and how this authority is constructed and contested. And finally, some tentative suggestions are offered concerning the readership of these Qur'an translations and the direction future research on Qur'anic translations in Sub-Saharan African languages should take.

The pragmatic focus on contents, the construction of authority and the intended or real audience in these three books moves away from the discussion found in most scholarly work on the impact and significance of vernacular languages as compared to Arabic in Islamic communities. Some scholars claim that vernacular publications are extremely important and may even lead to a kind of 'Swahili Islam' where all Islamic knowledge is available to anyone who is literate in Swahili. Lacunza Balda, one of the first to explore this trend in popular Swahili literature, and especially in Qur'an translations, supports this belief, seeing a significant role for Swahili in enabling individual interpretations of the sacred Islamic scriptures, bringing Islam to the forefront of political life and winning new converts.⁵ Others have emphasised the continuous and critical importance of Arabic in the transmission of Islamic ideas and stressed a lack of originality in Swahili religious books, even in the works of distinguished Muslim scholars. For example, the German Ernst Dammann (1904–2003) was not impressed by the work of Ali b. Hemed al-Buhriy (1889–1957) and concluded his review of al-Buhriy's book *Mafundisho ya dini* (in 1934) by stating, 'der Traktat in wissenschaftlicher und religiöser Beziehung nichts Neues bringt' ('in scientific and religious respects the tract offers nothing new').⁶

The Arabic versus Swahili debate appears to be a false dichotomy. Although there is an incontestable relationship between Islamic reform and Qur'an translations, as Loimeier and others have shown,⁷ social change within the Islamic world is certainly

not dependent on large-scale (printed) translations of the Qur'an. The assumption that the availability of particular texts in translation indicates some kind of change within a society should not be taken for granted. As Bang argues, following Lambek, it is the actual use, re-use, ownership, reading and interpretation of texts that should be at the forefront in the study of the social impact of texts.⁸ From this perspective one is struck by the fact that although, according to 'Orientalists' like Dammann, hardly any authentic contribution to Islamic knowledge is being made by the previously mentioned al-Buhriy, he is still being quoted and referred to as an authoritative source in defence of the argument for regional interpretations of Islam.⁹ The faithful transmission of authentic knowledge, and not its uniqueness and originality, is the primary concern for Muslim scholars. And this is something that is safeguarded in the process of reading Arabic texts and translating and applying them to local circumstances in a particular era for a specific audience. Swahili media tools are essential in facilitating this process in Eastern Africa. Apart from making Arabic sources available to the masses, these vernacular publications also demonstrate the existence of disagreement among the scholars and fuel local discussions.¹⁰

According to Swahili Muslim writers and authorities, there is no doubt that publishing Islamic texts in Swahili is never an end in itself but only a means of achieving a faithful transmission of the divine truth. The increased availability of affordable Qur'an translations and other religious materials has democratised access to otherwise inaccessible texts. This has led to the fear expressed by religious elites that, as noted by Brenner and Last, translations of the Qur'an into vernacular languages (in the cases they studied, Fulfulde and Hausa) would lead to popular movements being 'doctrinally aberrant from the point of view of the dominant *'ulamā'* class'.¹¹ Muslims opposing these translations often cite the effect of Bible translations leading to further sectarian and denominational splits within Christianity. Lamin Sanneh has argued that one of the main differences between Christian and Islamic reform movements is that the first used vernacular languages to adapt to local circumstances and transmit Biblical messages while the latter did not usually view languages other than Arabic as adequate to accurately transmit the meaning of Qur'anic revelation.¹² What Chanfi Ahmed¹³ rightly observes is that, despite the number of Swahili translations of the Qur'an and other religious vernacular texts, this part of Sanneh's thesis (the primacy of Arabic) still holds today. Although Muslim reformers in East Africa and elsewhere have always used vernacular languages to ensure their interpretation of the Qur'anic message is correctly conveyed,¹⁴ they have never seen Swahili as a substitute for Arabic. In fact all Islamic factions involved in missionary activities have continuously urged their audiences to study Arabic if they wanted to better understand the meaning of Islam. The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and translation into another language is not possible in the opinion of most Muslims, although communicating its meaning in another medium is not prohibited and is in

fact even encouraged.¹⁵ Therefore the importance of Swahili translations of the Qur'an should not be exaggerated, according to Ahmed.

Apart from the continuing Swahili versus Arabic debate, and the fears of the Muslim religious elite losing their monopoly on the interpretation of sacred texts, the intended, real or potential readership of these Islamic texts should also be taken into account when analysing reception of Swahili Qur'an translations. Joshua Craze, in an original analysis of Swahili pamphlet publishing in Tanzania – and in particular the Swahili translation of Sayyid Quṭb,¹⁶ indicates that most Swahili print materials are produced abroad or translated. He suggests that the significance of the rise in pamphlet publishing could be seen as replacing, supplementing or contesting the *madrassa* system and its religious authority.¹⁷ The reason for producing these pamphlets probably lies more in the need to express one's identity in a society where Muslims perceive themselves as marginalised, than in their actual instructional objective. Craze emphasises the attractiveness of modernist Qur'an *tafsīr* by Sayyid Quṭb within the political reality of present-day Tanzania, instead of pointing out its failure as a political project. Both Chesworth and Ahmed's work show that these pamphlets and Swahili Qur'an translations often cater for a non-Muslim public.¹⁸ In this context, it could be significant that the Ibādī commentator al-Kindy, in his introduction to his multi-volume Qur'an commentary entitled *Asili ya uongofu* ('Source of Guidance'), notes that he receives numerous responses from a Christian public. Swahili's development into a secular language has made it attractive as a medium for making accessible the Qur'an to a wider audience that does not otherwise have access to Arabic. But this exposure to a new public also revealed the vulnerabilities of the Islamic communities.

Analysis of the subjects, the construction of authority and the audiences in the three 'Rods of Moses' reveals more about how notions of Islam and being Muslim have been constructed over the last four decades. In recent years, extensive work on these local discourses has been undertaken by many scholars, such as Chanfi Ahmed, Anne Bang, Felicitas Becker, James Brennan, John Chesworth, Joshua Craze, Kai Kresse, Justo Lacunza Balda and Roman Lomeier, particularly on contemporary and historical developments in the fields of Islamic reform, education and scholarly networks in the Swahili-speaking world. Thanks to these works, much more is known about the ways in which Islam and Muslim identities have been shaped through local languages in a particular historical and spatial framework. In almost all of this work, actors are seen who are actively involved in the production of Islamic knowledge. The Qur'an plays an important role here. In the process of translating the divinely revealed Qur'an into Swahili, copies of which are easily accessible in cheap editions and on the internet, the sacred scripture has acquired new meanings and become the object of contestation and debate.¹⁹ What was considered a single, monolithic core text, that is understandable if translated by a religious expert, now appears to be a multi-interpretative minefield where clear guidance is hard to find. Quite a number

of this Swahili material consciously uses, adapts or criticises existing Swahili Qur'an translations for either polemical or edifying purposes, in what can be called a 'discursive tradition' (following Talal Asad).²⁰ The focus here is on the reception and interpretation of Qur'anic *tafāsīr*,²¹ as they have been read by the authors of the three different *Fimbo ya Musas*. A source-oriented analysis²² highlights what Muslim actors wrote, their participation in the political economy of knowledge and their (re)production of textual knowledge. This will be another step toward better understanding 'what the social factors are that mediate access to texts, who is able to read, and in what manner; who has the authority to represent what is written and how challenges to such authority are manifested'.²³

The title *Fimbo ya Musa* refers to Q. 20 of the Qur'an, *Sūrat ṬāHā*, in which Moses challenges Pharaoh's magicians. Moses' rod, in the shape of a snake, swallows the 'snakes' of the magicians, and by doing so makes a distinction between the clear signs of the one true God and that which is merely fabricated sorcery.²⁴ Similarly the books discussed below attempt to distinguish between truth and deception. All deal with the pitfalls of translating Arabic religious texts into Swahili, and the Qur'an in particular. The fear of deception cloaked in pious words, the danger of God's words being lost in translation, the truth hidden behind false appearances and veracity conquering magic are themes present in these works. The following sections describe the three *Fimbo ya Musas* against the backdrop of other contemporary works. The final section summarises the changes and parallels among the works, concerning topics, audiences and the way authoritative knowledge, based on the Qur'an, is constituted in Swahili Islamic discourse.

2. The First Rod of Moses Thrown at Abdallah Saleh al-Farsy by Ahmad Ahmad Badawiy

Background

Within a year of the publication of al-Farsy's complete *tafsīr* on the Qur'an, a book of about 60 pages was published by Ahmad Ahmad Badawiy, also known as Mwenye Baba.²⁵ Its title was *Fimbo ya Musa: Maonesho ya tafsiri mpya ya sheikh A.S. al-Farsy* ('The Rod of Moses: The Exhibition of the New Interpretation by Sheikh A.S. al-Farsy'); using verse – Arabic and Swahili – Badawiy explained his title:

Akija Nabii Musa / akatupa Fimbo Yake

Mchawi Hila hukosa / Yeye na uchawi Wake

When Prophet Moses / threw his stick

The sorcerer missed the trick / he and his sorcery

The reason behind the book was al-Farsy's failure to acknowledge problems concerning his new translation that had been raised in an official letter written by two

eminent scholars, Abdallah b. Ali al-Maawy and Sayyid Ali b. Ahmad Badawiy from the Riyadhha School in Lamu. Al-Farsy not only refused to accept their invitation to discuss the problems and objections of his fellow scholars but he, remarkably, also wrote a letter to the Tanzanian Muslim Council, Bakwata. He explained that only two groups were opposed to his new translation: the Riyadhha Mosque in Lamu and the 'heterodox' Ahmadiyya Muslims. Badawiy thus decided to publish this 'discriminating booklet' (*kitabu kipambanuzi*) in order to clarify the matter, just as Moses' rod clearly exposed the difference between truth and deception.

To paint a picture of this book on a broader canvas, the political and religious turmoil of the early 1970s needs to be taken into account. Both Kenya and Tanzania had been independent for less than a decade and it was only six years since the bloody revolution in Zanzibar and the massive exodus of Muslim scholars from the island. The East-African Muslim Welfare Society had been abolished in 1968, with the Muslim Council, Bakwata, that was perceived by many Muslims as foreign, being established in its place. Both the Ahmadiyya and the Twelver Shī'ī Swahili publishing machines were in full swing²⁶ and reformists were starting to publish booklets in which they opposed well-established ritual practices. A general threat from inside and outside the Muslim community clearly inspired Mwenye Baba in his writings. Earlier, in 1966, he had published a book in defence of the religious elite represented by the Lamu faction.²⁷ It was round this time that al-Farsy finalised his *tafsīr* followed by Mwenye Baba's critique on Farsy's effort in eleven chapters, as summarised below.

Content

Ahmad Badawiy's introduction rhetorically asks why, if Arabic commentaries are not able to adequately convey the real meaning of God's words in their own language, Shaykh al-Farsy attempts this in another language, namely Swahili.²⁸ The crux of his argument is borrowed from the Tanga scholar Ali b. Hemed al-Buhriy. Both were Muslim authors who were not against translating the Qur'an although (i) they claimed that any language will necessarily remain inadequate when it comes to convey the precise meaning; (ii) they feared that people would be discouraged from learning Arabic; (iii) they alleged that the Qur'an's message would get lost in translation; (iv) they were alarmed that respect for Arabic, and especially the name of God, would be compromised if vernacular publications, like newspapers, were used to wrap up fish and then thrown away; and (v) they considered all Islamic publications exclusively in Roman letters as superficial and secular and feared that this fate would also be shared by the Swahili Qur'an. In the first part of his book Mwenye Baba shows examples of mistakes, such as how Medinan suras are mentioned as being revealed in Mecca, while the revelation of Meccan ones is wrongly dated as Madinan.

Farsy's mistakes in the numbering of verses, in recording the frequency of particular Qur'anic words, spelling errors and incorrect references and even mistakes such as printing errors, received ample attention.

The second part (pp. 27–59) is more focused on content, with Ahmad Badawiy citing how an Arabic word or expression is translated inconsistently in al-Farsy's Qur'an *tafsīr* for no apparent reason. According to Mwenye Baba, this is an illustration of the inherent shortcomings of Swahili and the author suggests it would have been better if al-Farsy had produced a commentary or a rephrasing of the Holy Text instead of a word-for-word translation. According to him al-Farsy's footnotes offer only unclear explanations and too few references to the nuances found in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. What is worse is that, in some instances, al-Farsy's explanation is equivalent to that of his critics, the Aḥmadiyya, and opposite to the authoritative *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. Ahmad Badawiy gives examples of al-Farsy's (unjustified) generalisations such as 'there is no Qur'an commentator who ...' or 'there is no verse that ...' and provides detailed references to prove otherwise. Al-Farsy criticises many Muslims who are fond of *Sūrat Yāsīn* (Q. 36), or attribute spiritual qualities to particular prayers that, according to him, are based on weak and unreliable *aḥādīth*. Mwenye Baba replies with a quotation from a 'famous book which is accepted everywhere in the world'²⁹ as well as al-Farsy's earlier work, in which he was more positive on the same subject. Another of Badawiy's points of critique focuses on the presentation of the Swahili text: al-Farsy failed to translate some (parts of) Arabic sentences and words and, in other instances, incorporated commentary that should have been placed between brackets but are now presented as part of the sacred Arabic text. Mwenye Baba concludes with a second invitation, as a religious authority, to the author to discuss his book.

Discussion

More than half of the *Fimbo ya Musa* is devoted to printing errors and obvious mistakes that were corrected in later editions.³⁰ This illustrates the importance Ahmad Badawiy attaches to the sacredness of the religion embodied in the Qur'an when it is written and studied in Arabic. One of his points of critique is precisely the Swahili translation's formal appearance as a *msahafu* ('Qur'an'). What in a normal book of this size would be seen as an understandable lack of editing is unforgivable in the holy Qur'an: '*kitabu kizuri kama hiko chenye karatasi AALI na jalada la FAKHARI*' ('a beautiful book like this with top-quality paper and a splendid cover'). The holiness of both the religion (*dini yetu tukufu*) and the Qur'an (*si kitu cha mchezo*) can only be protected by restricting knowledge to the elite and making it restrictively accessible in Arabic books. Al-Farsy's Qur'an translation looks like a Qur'an but in reality is full of human errors. Through the lens of Moses and the magicians, this is interpreted as a contest between the real work of God and fake imitations.

It is not al-Farsy's authority and skill as a Muslim scholar that are brought into question; rather, the translation itself is seen as a threat. Although Ahmad Badawiy contests al-Farsy's theological ideas, for example his criticism of religious innovations, this is not the main issue. The major problem with a Swahili translation like al-Farsy's seems to be, in Badawiy's opinion, that people lacking the required fifteen ancillary sub-disciplines of Qur'an *tafsīr* cannot verify it. If no references are given to the 'accepted books' or to the opinions of the 'ulamā', then his interpretation is not based on authoritative knowledge but is merely 'personal opinion' (*ra'y*). The quotations from scholars Badawiy himself cites as authorities clearly betray his Šūfī background and the East African scholarly environment: *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* is often referred to as well as al-Farsy's teacher al-Amin b. Aly Mazrui, al-Haddad and Ali b. Hemed al-Buhriy.

His³¹ Arabic book *Nuṣūṣ al-ṣarīḥa* clarifies Mwenye Baba's ideas concerning the transmission of religious heritage but, as the title suggests, it only contains quotations and excerpts from authoritative works, no interpretation being offered. For example, his chapter on *ijtihād* (making independent decisions) contains only one Qur'an verse (Q. 59:5) and fifteen Prophetic traditions. Each offers narratives about people doing something according to the best of their knowledge, but not necessarily informed by the Prophet's practice or counsel. In each case, the narration ends with: 'he did not rebuke any of them', 'the Prophet laughed and did not say anything', or 'he was pleased with that and did not say anything'. Similarly, Ahmad Badawiy does not draw any conclusion nor give his own opinion.

The fact that Mwenye Baba publishes in Arabic in East Africa makes it clear that his audience is limited to his peers. At the back of the book he states in Arabic that the work is intended for 'those who know' in order to increase their faith and is not primarily meant to persuade or convert anyone. He quotes Q. 11:28, *shall we compel you to accept it when ye are averse to it?* However, when people want to know more, they should turn to the knowledgeable, as is stated in Q. 16:43, ... *men, to whom We granted inspiration: if ye realise this not, ask of those who possess the Message*. Badawiy interprets this category of inspired men as 'ulamā', the venerable (*ajilla*) and the pious. It becomes clear that his Swahili polemics are intended to persuade people of the truth but that religious knowledge should be mediated by the religious, educated elite, and only in Arabic.

This brings us to the potential readership of the translated Qur'an, which also includes non-Muslims.³² And here Mwenye Baba perceives the greatest threat of al-Farsy's Swahili translation. Badawiy's book is full of references to an ignorant public, and especially the 'enemies of our religion' (p. 10, p. 50) and those 'who are not Muslims' (p. 13). Those who do not know the distinction between deception and truth will be confused by this translation. And since the *tafsīr* is intended for those who know only

a little about the religion, these errors could potentially do a lot of damage (p. 32). Al-Farsy's *tafsīr* is thus liable to fuel their attacks and give them more ammunition to damage Islam.

3. The Second Rod of Moses Thrown at Saidi Musa by Nurudin Hussein al-Ghassany Shādhili

Background

About fifteen years later, another booklet called *Fimbo ya Musa* was published and offers similar criticism to that voiced by Mwenye Baba. Nurudin Hussein Mahmood Shādhili (1922–2007), head of the Shādhili/Yashrutiyya Ṣūfī branch, was born in southern Tanzania and although he was mainly educated there, he also lived in Egypt and Saudi Arabia for short periods.³³ In 1965 he was imprisoned for eight months on charges of planning to overthrow the Nyerere administration, despite his earlier support of the first Tanzanian and Catholic president.³⁴ In addition to his work as a religious leader, Shaykh Nurudin was also involved in the fish trade and established the Muslim Hajj Trust in the early 1990s. Apart from his criticism of the Aḥmadiyya Qur'an translation published in *Imani ya waislamu juu ya Nabii Issa* ('The Belief of Muslims Regarding the Prophet ʿĪsā'), he also wrote:

Maisha ya khalifa wa-tatu Sayyidna ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān kwa mashairi ('The Life of the Third Caliph our Master ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān in Poetry'), A biographical work in Swahili verse recounting the life of the third Caliph ʿUthmān (d. 35/656).

Ufafanuzi wa-bidʿa ('An Explanation of Religious Innovations'). It contains criticism of al-Farsy's work against *bidʿa*. Pp. 40. c. 1980.

ʿAbd al-Qādir fī idāḥ al-taṣawwuf. This Arabic Ṣūfī textbook was completed in November 1964 and first printed in Cairo in 1972 as a code of conduct for the *murīd* of the Qādiriyya and Shādhiliyya/Yashrutiyya brotherhoods. Pp. 152.

In his *Fimbo ya Musa* Nurudin presents a critical analysis of religious tracts that were published by Saidi Musa. In no more than fourteen pages, Shaykh al-Ghassany reviews three Swahili translations of basic *fiqh* books used in schools firmly rooted in the Shāfiʿī tradition and two compilations published and edited by Saidi Musa. Musa was born in 1943,³⁵ was a student of al-Farsy's and was the most prolific writer of Swahili Islamic booklets in the twentieth century, at least judging by the number of titles he produced, which is probably close to 200.³⁶ After leaving school, he worked in the Bora shoe factory from 1968 to 1992 and received most of his traditional religious education at the Qur'anic Vocational College in Zanzibar and later at the Muslim Academy where Abdallah Saleh al-Farsy was his most influential teacher.

Content

Nurudin uses his introduction for a personal attack on Saidi Musa, expressing his doubt about the latter's veracity. He accuses Musa of claiming the authority of the deceased al-Farsy and misleadingly using his name to sell his own 'expensive booklets'. According to Shaykh al-Ghassany, all the books discussed here are full of errors both in translation and in the legal decisions (*hukmu*) presented in them

<i>Safinatu-naja</i>	Written by the Hadrami scholar Salim b. °Abd Allah b. Samir in the mid nineteenth century. ³⁷ Criticism of this translation involves words that have been omitted. The Arabic word <i>dīn</i> is translated by Musa as <i>akhera</i> ('Hereafter') and not <i>dini</i> as the author claims is the only correct translation. Something that invalidates the ritual purity necessary for prayer should not be translated as <i>kitu</i> ('thing' or 'substance') because even breaking wind, which is not a 'thing', will have the same result. The practice of ritual cleansing without water (<i>tayammum</i>) should be performed with sand only, and not with clay as Saidi Musa's translation suggests. Nurudin concludes that it is extremely dangerous to teach children these heresies (<i>uzushi</i>).
<i>Risālat al Jāmi'a</i>	Written by Ḥabīb Ahmad b. Zayn al-Habshi (d. 1732). Shaykh Ghassany points out spelling errors and the incorrect translation of <i>mawla</i> (as 'emancipated slaves') and <i>barzakh</i> (as 'the period between death and resurrection').
<i>Kitabu cha saumu</i> ³⁸	Nurudin's major problem here is that Saidi Musa mentions that fasting on a Friday is <i>ḥarām</i> ('forbidden'), while it is, in fact, only <i>makrūh</i> ('discouraged').
<i>Durar al-Bahiya</i>	Written by Abū Bakr b. Muḥammad Shata' al-Shafī'ī (d. 1893). Saidi Mūsā is accused of assuming that God is the one who will ask for intercession on behalf of human beings. But God does not need to ask anything. In subsequent editions, he changed his translation in line with Nurudin's suggestion into ' <i>Allah ataidhinisha kushufaiwa ...</i> ' ('God will allow to be asked for intercession'), which thus keeps God's sovereignty intact.
<i>Kitabu utukufu wa-sala</i> [<i>na namna ya kuisali</i>]	Although published by Saidi Mūsā, the original text is by al-Farsy. Here Nurudin limits his criticism to al-Farsy's negative opinion of the <i>ṣalāt al-tasbīh</i> . ³⁹ Nurudin does not challenge the fact that the <i>ḥadīth</i> used to defend the practice is weak but states that acting upon weak <i>aḥādīth</i> can be part of <i>faḍā'il a'māl</i> ('virtuous acts').

By way of conclusion, Nurudin al-Ghassany gives his own views in the final chapter entitled *Maoni ya wengi pamoja na nasaha zetu* ('The Opinions of Many and Our Own Advice'). All Sheikh Said Mūsā's efforts to print books of *bid'ā*, poems and protective prayers, and to teach children topics like the list of teachers from al-Farsy to the Prophet and teaching about the food that the Prophet ate⁴⁰ are just keeping them busy (*kuwashughulisha*) while he neglects the most important task, namely the studying and memorisation of the Qur'an and teaching the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet. All Musa's mistakes endanger peace (*usalama*) and the religious worship ('*ibāda*) of Muslims, especially those with no deep spiritual knowledge. It also puts peace (*amani*) in jeopardy by disregarding the rulings of the Prophet. His advice is that the texts should be corrected or otherwise burnt and the Arabic text published without a translation.

Discussion

The content of Nurudin al-Ghassany's polemic shows many similarities with Badawiy's work. Both emphasise the importance of Arabic as a medium for religious knowledge. In one of his other books Nurudin states that 'the Qur'an contains Arabic words and [therefore] Arabs know better than non-Arabs'.⁴¹ Translations of the Qur'an, such as the one of the Aḥmadiyya, but also translations of basic textbooks by Musa, threaten society and confuse their readers' faith (*imani*) if they do not know Arabic. And just as Badawiy argues, the distinction between those who know and those who do not know (and now access religious knowledge through translation) is perceived by Nurudin as a threat.

In this second *Fimbo* new elements can also be identified. The most salient emphasis is Shaykh Nurudin's remark about 'endangered peace', which shows how he views the Islamic community as increasingly revealing internal fractures.⁴² Instead of only quoting sources within his own *madhhab*, Shaykh Nurudin also refers to the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Sābiq (1915–2000), whose work *Fiqh al-Sunnah* was intended as a response to these internal ruptures.⁴³ Traces of the *bid'ā* discourse,⁴⁴ which was already visible in the first *Fimbo* (such as the special qualities ascribed to *Sūrat Yāsīn*), are much clearer in the works discussed here. In 1977, al-Farsy published his books, which were later reprinted by Saidi Musa, about these unacceptable religious innovations. In the early 1980s, Nurudin al-Ghassany responded with his book *Ufafanuzi wa-bid'ā* in which he defended many of these acts, including the *tasbīḥ* prayer, rituals related to reciting the Qur'an and funeral practices. Apart from the obvious textual evidences, most of this defence lists, mainly, local scholars who condoned or even approved these religious acts. Saidi Musa responded in his book *Makatazo ya-bid'ā*, refuting one by one the arguments put forward by Nurudin. Their differences in opinion about the role and meaning of the Qur'an in all this become clearer. For example, while Nurudin assumes that sufficient blessings can be received from the divine and mystical character of the Qur'an,⁴⁵ Saidi Musa sticks to the more restrictive position that people should read and understand its message.

The miraculous recitation of the whole Qur'an in two minutes, as presented in one of Nurudin's poems, is taken apart in three pages by Saidi Musa who emphasises that the Qur'an should be understood rather than recited with little or no understanding.

The idea that the vernacularisation of Islamic knowledge endangers the Muslim community is to be found in several of Nurudin's works. To safeguard Islamic knowledge, one should rely on the personal authority and guidance of teachers and a *madrasa* system. Nurudin's book about the prophet Jesus ends with a warning that establishing *madrasas* is a way of performing good deeds and is therefore an Islamic duty, just like prayer, fasting in Ramaḍān, paying *zakāt* taxes and undertaking a pilgrimage. The idea that it is sufficient to read Swahili books is wrong: the reader should not only learn Arabic but should also seek knowledge with spiritual, knowledgeable leaders. In analogy to secular, medical educational systems the author claims that reading religious books is not sufficient. If that was the case, then all medical knowledge could be written down in books and one would become a doctor or surgeon by studying them, yet this is not possible without personal instruction.

This emphasis on the personal authority of teachers to transmit religious knowledge makes another of Nurudin's vicious attacks on Musa more understandable. In both the *Fimbo ya Musa* and in *Ufafanuzi* he denies the possibility that the late al-Farsy (who died in 1982) had anything to do with the works of his student Saidi Musa.⁴⁶ Nurudin has accepted al-Farsy's authority based on his early books and teachings as well as personal acquaintances, and quite often mentions him as a scholar of similar stature to al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui. By denying this important link with previous generations of scholars, Saidi Musa's ideas can be discarded as 'personal opinions' and not knowledgeable rulings. In Shaykh al-Ghassany's opinion, any attempt to translate the meaning of the Qur'an or religious textbooks into Swahili and circumvent the scholarly checks and balances within a system of personal tuition is dangerous.⁴⁷ The essential link between textual knowledge and knowledgeable scholarly interpretation is probably at the crux of this debate.

Shaykh Nurudin assumes that the audience for Said Musa's book can be found within the classroom, but the latter claims he is aiming at a wider public.⁴⁸

They are opposed [to these translations] because they see that when all Muslims know [the truth] they can't hide it again ... Those who think so are wrong because when the Qur'an is translated in Swahili together with its core texts ... this should not prevent people from studying [Arabic]. But now they can read a book wherever they are, like the bus stop, or at the *baraza* [sitting area outside traditional Swahili houses], when they rest at their fields, and not only in class. Translating the Qur'an and religious books into Swahili is a great help in the Swahili world.

Whether in or outside the classroom, obviously there is a market for the smaller theological treatises discussed in the book by Nurudin: all of them are now available in two or three different Swahili translations.

4. The Third Rod of Moses Thrown at Kassim Mafuta by Juma Mazrui

Background

The publication of the third *Fimbo ya Musa* more than two decades later shows how opinions on translations into Swahili of the Islamic legacy have clearly moved beyond the debate on the deficiencies of Swahili or the need of local scholarly networks to safeguard religious knowledge. When Muslim groups like the Shī'a, Ibādī and Salafiyya-oriented factions published their Swahili *tafāsīr* and commentaries in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the differences in theological interpretation of the scriptures became clearer. Even the more or less accepted mainstream translations of al-Farsy's and Barwani's *al-Muntakhab* were criticised. The first was too short and therefore lacked the finer distinctions of the discipline of *tafsīr*,⁴⁹ whereas Barwani was too careful about staying clear of all the factional disputes and thus lacked scholarly weight (*haina uzito wa elimu*).⁵⁰

With their emphasis on *tawhīd al-asmā' wa'l-ṣifāt* ('the Oneness in the names of God and His attributes'), the Salafiyya-oriented factions, in particular, point to several theological problems in this field that were not being sufficiently treated in existing translations. According to them, al-Farsy's rendition was not only lacking nuances but could actually lead people astray.⁵¹ The anonymous Salafiyya *Tarjuma ya Qur'aan*, which was recently published by al-Hidaaya, states that one of the important factors that inspired the translation was the lack of current Swahili translations in the field of theology and beliefs (*uwanja wa-itikadi*).⁵² It further states that a good command of Arabic is not sufficient to understand the word of God but that explanations from other Qur'anic verses, interpretations from Muḥammad and, finally, the pious ancestors of the first three generations are essential as well. In the pristine, formative era of Islam, Arabic was not corrupted by the tongues and ears of non-native speakers.⁵³ Belief (*kuamini*) and sound faith (*itikadi sahihi*) are essential prerequisites for both the reader and the translator.

The revival of second/eighth-century discussions in Islamic theology about God and His attributes in sub-Saharan Africa have left their mark on Swahili Qur'an translations and concomitant polemics. The problem of how to deal with God's unique, incomparable position as the only true Creator on the one hand, and the many Qur'anic descriptions that attribute human qualities (having arms or a face) to Him on the other, have been solved allegorically or literally. In most cases, Swahili *tafāsīr* have opted for an allegorical explanation. A verse like Q. 7:54, *God settled on His throne*, is interpreted in the two most widely accepted translations of al-Farsy and

Barwani as *God reigned from His throne*⁵⁴ to avoid any misinterpretation about God's act bearing any resemblance to that of man's. The second choice, a literal translation, is presented by Salafī translators who even avoid translating the name of God by rendering it in transcription (*Allāh*).⁵⁵

It is against this background that the third *Fimbo* should be interpreted. The Ibādī shaykh, Juma Mohammed al-Mazrui from Oman, has emerged as a clear representative of allegorical interpretation in yet another ambiguous issue, namely the visibility of God in the Hereafter. Mazrui published his *Hoja zenye nguvu juu ya kutoonekana Mwenyezi Mungu kwa macho* ('Strong Arguments to Prove That Almighty God Cannot Be Seen With Eyes') in 2001. It is deeply influenced by and loosely based on the Arabic book *al-Ḥaqq al-dāmmigh* that was written by the Grand Mufti of Oman, Ahmad b. Hamed al-Khalili, in 1988. It contains two further major Ibādī doctrines: the creation of the Qur'an; and eternal hellfire for Muslims who reject the basic elements of the creed.⁵⁶ Juma Mazrui has published more than ten books on different subjects: two works on the moon sighting controversy (contrary to the Salafī point of view represented by Zanzibari Nassor Bachu and the Sunna mosque), a book on prayer issues that attacks the Salafī prayer position, a book against the Shī'a explaining the so-called *ḥadīth thaqalayn*, and a series on the history of the Ibādī school. His works illustrate the importance of the Qur'an in supporting his claims and the need to have the linguistic and theological skills to interpret the words of God correctly within the context of other Qur'anic texts and sound Prophetic traditions. He is part of the review committee that oversees the Swahili Qur'an *tafsīr* by Saidi Moosa al-Kindy: *Asili ya uongofu*. In most of his publications, he emphasises the overriding importance of knowledge of Arabic linguistic disciplines (*fani za lugha*), the comparison of translation to the basics of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and the scientific research of *ḥadīth* traditions. All his works betray a sound belief in the powers of logical reasoning (*hoja za kiakili*).

The second position – the literalist translation of verses describing God's attributes – was put forward in 2008 by the Tanzanian Salafī Shaykh Abu'l-Fadl Kassim Mafuta Kassim, who wrote a substantial – 175 page – rebuff entitled *Hoja zenye nguvu katika kuthibitisha kuonekana Allah Sub'haana wata'aalaa kwa macho huko akhera. Majibu na Maelezo* ('Strong Arguments to Prove the Visibility of God with Eyes in the Hereafter: Answers and Explanations'). Together with another 300-page book in which he attacks Shī'ī views on the Qur'an, these two titles mark a new stage in Salafī Swahili publications. Earlier key figures like Barahiyan from Tanga (Tanzania), Nassor Bachu from Zanzibar and Ahmad Msallam from Kenya mainly spread their ideas in oral form via mosque lectures.⁵⁷ Shaykh Kassim is a student from the Dār al-Ḥadīth school in Dammaj (Yemen) run by the controversial Yahya Hajuri.⁵⁸ After studying there for almost a year in 1998 he went to the Islamic university in Medina for four years before returning to Tanzania where he is now involved in *da'wa* and

teaching at the Ibn Taymiyya Centre near Tanga. In July/August 2008, he received a delegation of missionaries from the Dār al-Ḥadīth group that was visiting Tanzania and acted as a translator at their meetings. In the same year, they published a report on the state of (Salafī) Islam in that country.⁵⁹

The most important verses in the Qur'an that are quoted regarding discussions about the *Ru'ya* (the vision of God) are Q. 75:22–3, Q. 83:23, Q. 10:26 and Q. 50:35.⁶⁰ A few examples will suffice here to illustrate the different understandings. Salafī authors writing in Swahili usually translate Q. 75:22 as follows:

Nyuso Fulani siku hiyo ni zenye kunawiri [shine; sometimes kumeremeta: sparkle]; ni zenye kumuangalia (watch, look at, observe) Mola wake.

Some faces, that Day, will beam (in brightness and beauty); looking towards their Lord (Yusuf Ali)

They use this verse as proof that believers will see their Creator in the Hereafter. Not all Muslims feel the same, however. Is it possible to see God or can we only see physical things? Most Muslims, including Ibādī Muslims as well as some Shī'ī factions, believe the latter. Unsurprisingly, a Shī'ī translation like Mayunga's *Qur'an inayobainisha* translates this verse as 'Zikingoja malipo kwa Mola wao', i.e. *waiting for [the reward of] their Lord*.⁶¹ Q. 10:26 is also interpreted by Salafī *tafsīr* as evidence in this case, with the explanation between brackets showing that the reward comes from seeing God:

Kwa wale waliofanya ihsaan watapata (jazaa ya ihsaan: nayo ni) al-Husnaa (Pepo) na zaidi (ya hapo ni kupata aadhima ya kumuona Allaah) (al-hidaaya).

To those who do right is a goodly (reward): Yea, more (than in measure) (translation Yusuf Ali)

Comparing these translations with others, the recent emphasis on orthodoxy becomes clear. Al-Farsy avoids any allusion to such problematic issues in his commentary. Barwani briefly mentions the two opinions in a footnote at Q. 75:22–3, whereas more recent *tafsīr* (the Shī'ī Mayunga and the Ibādī al-Kindy) stress that their opinion represents orthodoxy.⁶²

Content

Juma Mazrui responded to Kassim Mafuta's book in July 2010 with a 500 page online publication consisting of fourteen chapters entitled *Fimbo ya Musa inayameza wanayoyazusha* ('The Rod of Musa that Swallows What They Have Fabricated').⁶³ In it, he also announces that three more parts of the same book are to follow in due course.

Mazrui begins by accusing Mafuta and 'his shaykhs' of following early heresies supported by incorrect *aḥādīth* and corrupted meanings of Qur'anic verses that are based on Jewish and Christian beliefs. He goes on to defend the scholarly and religious authority of Ibādī writers like Sa'īd b. Mabrūk b. Ḥammūd Qannūbī and attacks Salafī authors such as al-Albānī and Ibn Taymiyya. Their religious authority is further undermined by an extensive overview of Wahhābī beliefs, especially on the topic of *tajsīm* (the doctrine that God really has a body) and *tashbīh* ('anthropomorphism'). Juma Mazrui extensively quotes the Qur'an, *ḥadīth* and dictionaries to prove his point that allegorical interpretation must be applied because the holiness of God prevents Him from being in any sense similar to any aspect of His creatures. The philosophy of *bilā kayf* – the expression of the Salafīs to indicate that although the descriptions should be taken literally, we do not know exactly how –⁶⁴ is refuted by the author. Juma Mazrui claims that God speaks to us in a kind of Arabic that we understand either in a literal sense or in a metaphorical sense. God does not make linguistic jokes by talking for example about something that has wings and flies when He does not mean a bird. He provides the reader with an extensive lecture on different forms of comparison in Arabic and Swahili. Chapters 6 and 7 (pp. 177–302) are important and reveal Mazrui's ideas about the correct translation of the Qur'an. He proves that the Qur'an, *ḥadīth* and other Arabic texts are full of metaphors (*majāzī*) that require allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*). Ambiguous verses require the translator to make a decision about whether the real meaning is intended or a metaphorical one. The context (*mtiriko/muktadha*) is essential. Interpreting and translating the Qur'an into another language is not rejecting God's (Arabic) words, rather it is in order to find out what He is aiming at in His utterances and this is transmitted in the target language (p. 214). The hypothesis that the Qur'an is a semantic unity (a translation of one verse cannot contradict the meaning of another), logical reasoning⁶⁵ and an excellent knowledge of Arabic and linguistics in general (*naḥw*, *ṣarf*, *balāgha*) are essential. Mazrui explicitly mentions the importance of non-Qur'anic Arabic as a source and includes a list of Swahili proverbs and important dictionaries. He poses the definitions and technicalities of allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) against the Salafī rejection of this translation (*taḥrīf*, i.e. corruption) when it comes to God's essence.

Chapters eight to fourteen are meant to show that Salafī literalist interpretation is only propagated by a minority within Islam. The doctrine of *takfīr* (declaring other Muslims as infidels) goes against the teachings of the Qur'an and Muḥammad's exemplary practice (Sunnah). The Ḥanbalī and Wahhābī methodologies abound with internal inconsistencies and their theological champions, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim, are opposed by at least 80 authoritative Islamic scholars (who are named one by one). Mazrui is especially interested in Wahhābī-Ibādī relations and defends his own denomination against accusations of being similar to sectarian groups like the Khawārij and Mu'tazila.

Discussion

With the arrival of two major players (Salafīs and Ibādīs) in the field of Swahili Qur'an translations and polemics, there has inevitably been a shift in form and content. A major shift from the local market (*soko*) to the global internet (*mtandao*) is illustrated by the publication of this third *Fimbo ya Musa*. There is a huge difference between the first two (Badawiy's typescript and Nurudin Hussein's fourteen-page printed leaflet) compared to the 500 plus pages (in part one alone!) that were uploaded by Juma Mazrui and the almost 200 pages of his opponent, Mafuta, that can be accessed online. Although both books are available online, they still take the form of a printed book (with no hyperlinks, for example).

The content of the discussion has also changed. Once again, the supremacy of orthodoxy as the most critical feature for judging Swahili Qur'an translations has come to the fore and resembles the criticism put forward in the middle of the twentieth century concerning the Aḥmadiyya translation. The revived global discussions on God's names and attributes are now being translated into Swahili. The skills required of a good translator are different for the Salafīs and their opponents although both claim that knowledge of Arabic is a necessary condition for a good translation. The Salafīs refer to the age of the Salaf when Arabic was 'uncorrupted' and the 'true meaning' could be checked with the first *mufasssīr* ('commentator') of the Qur'an, Muḥammad and the following generations. Juma Mazrui places emphasis on the Arabic language and logical reasoning based on linguistic disciplines that are not necessarily limited to the Qur'an. In both books, there is no trace of any perceived problems with the Swahili but rather the discussion centres around the point that it is impossible to render the true meaning of the Qur'an in any non-Arabic language.

Badawiy spoke for the Riyadha and Nurudin al-Ghassany was closely connected to the Shadhilī Ṣūfī brotherhood he represented, but neither Mazrui's *Fimbo* nor Mafuta's responses are authorised by any religious institution. Arguments are judged on their religious and logical merits, and only in rare instances are references found to local networks or schools. Mafuta blames Mazrui that he 'follows' the Ibādī shaykhs Qannubi and al Khalili. And Mazrui accuses Mafuta of practising *taqlīd* with 'his imāms' Ibn Taymiyya and al-Albānī. There are very few references in either text to local scholars but at one point Juma makes the connection to prove what the real *sunna* entails: 'I wish that sheikh Umar bin Sumait, sheikh Sulaiman al-Alawi, sheikh Abdullah Salih al-Farisi and those like them were still alive that you, sheikh Kasim bin Mafuta, might sit with them just one day that you might see how the sunna is actually practiced' (p. 195).⁶⁶

One wonders who actually reads these complicated treatises on theological issues. Reactions on the internet suggest that respondents appreciated the book but have

only read a few pages. Both authors assume a highly literate and theologically educated readership. Mazrui, in his introduction, argues that misguided beliefs lead to aberration in political, social and economic fields but it is not clear just how this applies to the doctrines analysed in his book. The authors in this debate are a fine example of the new Muslim public as described by Eickelman and Anderson 'who link vernacular expression, modern education, and Islamic themes',⁶⁷ but it remains unclear whether their arguments have an impact beyond a small circle of highly learned scholars.

5. Changing Topics, Authorities and Audiences of Swahili Qur'an Polemics

These preliminary remarks show how the study of reception, criticism and actual use, although in its infancy, can be a fruitful way of enhancing our understanding of the role the Qur'an is playing in contemporary societies. Early opposition to Swahili translations of the Qur'an and other Islamic books quickly gave way to a massive flood of pamphlets, tracts and other print material that reveal a bewildering plethora of different interpretations of a single text. Local authorities have eroded and people are now able to compare different translations on the internet and in print. Any criticism of these translations has moved from an impermissibility of translation to the position stating that a particular interpretation threatens the unity of the community and corrupts correct beliefs. However, the real impact of Swahili religious texts and *tafāsīr* is hard to prove except in the field of interfaith relations.

The polemics discussed here reflect the importance that all parties continue to ascribe to a knowledge of Arabic. 'There is no arbiter except for the Qur'an written in Arabic and its *tafāsīr* ... because the Qur'an is revealed in the Arabic language' states one translator in his introduction to the Qur'an.⁶⁸ But how the message of the Qur'an is transmitted to a Swahili-speaking public has changed over the last few decades. Whereas some East-African Muslim scholars chose to publish only in Arabic in the past (for example, Hassan bin Ameir Shirazi), others have started to use both Swahili and Arabic (al-Farsy, Ahmad Ahmad Badawiy and Nurudin Hussein Shādhilī). Moreover, the number of contemporary writers who are publishing only in Swahili has increased dramatically (for example, Saidi Musa, Kassim Mafuta and Juma Mazrui). Changes in script show a similar trend away from Arabic in favour of the Roman alphabet. Muslims in particular have mourned the loss of the Arabic script as a medium but their voices have generally been ignored.⁶⁹ The minutes of the Tanganyika Muslims Students Federation meeting held on 4 September 1950 mention one of their resolutions as being that 'in the interest of Islamic Culture, Arabic script in the Swahili language be encouraged as far as possible'.⁷⁰ The Colonial Administration's reaction was negative: the Director of Education thought 'this would be a retrograde step' and gave the example of Turkish students who had also abolished

the use of Arabic script in favour of 'modern' Latin letters, thus facilitating their participation in advanced Western societies.

The three 'rods' discussed here show how such discussions have changed. Both Mwenye Baba and Nurudin Shadhili lamented the loss of the Arabic language and script in the transmission of religious knowledge. They first claimed that '*harufu za kilatina hazitekelezi*' ('Latin letters do not meet [their goal]') (p. 49) and would confuse the reader who could never know if the pronunciation of the transcription was as in Arabic. Swahili's limitations, when it comes to conveying Islamic knowledge, are at the heart of this argument.⁷¹ Shaykh Nurudin's arguments move more toward the idea that without the proper guidance of capable teachers, Swahili translations can never be sufficient. Neither author would regret it if all written translations of Islamic core texts were abolished. More recent discussions, fuelled by Salafī ideas of God's attributes, show that it is not the translation as such that is the problem but rather the content and beliefs derived from them. A good command of Arabic remains the norm for Muslims wherever they may be in the world and, paradoxically, Swahili literature can help explain Arabic linguistic nuances. In the foreword to Mafuta's book, al-Ghafri writes:⁷²

This book of brother Mafuta has collected many profitable issues concerning the study of *ḥadīth* and the study of the language of the Arabs, profits that cannot be found in many books already published in Swahili.

At a time when many students are returning from abroad proficient in Arabic and schooled in Salafī theology, Mazrui emphasises contextual elements and respects established scholarship as equally important skills for Qur'an translators.

Over the last four decades, ideas of authoritative knowledge have changed less than the system of knowledge production and distribution itself. Badawiy and Nurudin Ghassany strongly believe in a scholarly network where knowledge is disseminated by trustworthy persons who know each other. Differences within and between the schools of law are inherent but should be resolved by discussion among scholars. Badawiy's book would not have been published if al-Farsy had agreed to answer the letters by the Riyadh School. Even at the end of his critical review, Mwenye Baba expresses his hope of meeting al-Farsy in person (*twamtaka tuonana nae*) to hammer out the issues raised. Juma Mazrui refers to a public invitation by the Ibādī scholar al-Khalili to Ibn Baz to discuss the *Ru'ya*. Due to his refusal to accept this oral debate among peers, he felt forced to write a book and expose the controversy to the wider public. Al-Farsy referenced, in his *tafsīr*, a chain of teachers through whom he had received his knowledge. More recent works show how authors justify their positions by referring to books they had read in the past (without, in some cases, having access

to them at this moment!) or speeches they had heard or read about in the media though in most instances they did not know the author personally. The fact that recent Salafi translations are published without identifying the translator is telling in this respect. Divine and absolute truth is apparently seen as anonymous. In the polemics, a continuum can be seen between the accusations of blind following (*taqlīd*) and unfounded speculation (*ra'y bi-nafsi*). The further a translation is removed from an existing tradition or scholarly consensus, the greater the risk of it being seen as personal, groundless or unscholarly.

The Mafuta–Mazrui discussion is a good example of the newly emerging public sphere described by Eickelman and Anderson.⁷³ The change in media suggests a change in audience as well. In some of the Swahili books there is second-hand evidence of a readership. Someone wrote to al-Farsy ‘since we got this book [i.e. the Swahili Qur'an translation] no day passed without reading the Holy Qur'an. And our eyes were opened as well as our ears and even more our hearts.’⁷⁴ But despite greater education and a wider potential audience, it is probably too early to speak of a ‘Swahili Islam’ triggered by a flood of internet and print publications. Often the polemics reflect more the anxiety of authors about the Muslim community being fractured by the ‘aberrant’ interpretations presented in these publications than a real effect on the public. At one point, Shaykh Nurudin remarked to Saidi Musa that ‘these little leaflets of yours are not influential at all’. Of course Musa retorts by asking him why he bothers to refute these unimportant books.

It is unclear what the exact role of translated Swahili Qur'ans is in the Islamic religious knowledge classes in public schools. For example the official O-level syllabus and the textbooks only prescribe the identification of a couple of different *tafsīr* methodologies.⁷⁵ But outside the *madrasa* and the classroom there is one field where there is evidence that the different Swahili Qur'ans and (translated) religious texts are actually read and this is in Muslim-Christian dialogues. What Joshua Craze suggests and John Chesworth clearly shows is that the publication of Swahili religious pamphlets containing (translated) scriptures is an important phenomenon in pluralistic societies where there is a need to explain one's own religion. When reading blogs of Swahili-speaking Christians and watching videos of open-air meetings (*mihadhara*) it can be seen how Swahili-speaking Christians actually use the translations available to construct their own polemics.⁷⁶ Discussions in the 1970s and 1980s about the dangers of translated religious works were to protect an ‘ignorant’ public who, not knowing Arabic, might easily be confused by incorrect Swahili translations. Four decades later, it has become clear that, to use the metaphor of Moses' rod, the contest between the Prophet and the magicians is not yet over. Each new Swahili Qur'an translation has thrown new light on the complexities of the ‘clear signs’ revealed in Arabic.

NOTES

I thank John Chesworth, Roman Loimeier and Benjamin Soares for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1 Ali Mayunga, *Kitabu Kinachobainisha*; Said Moosa Mohamed al-Kindy, *Asili ya Uongofu*; Hassan Ali Mwalupa, *Tafsir al-Kashif*; Abdulrahman Muhammad Abubakar *Qur'ani Tukufu*; Said Bawazir et al., *Tafsir Ibn Kathir (Mukhtasari)*; Alhidaaya, *Tarjuma ya Qur-aan*.

2 In cooperation with Leiden University Library and following the suggestion of Professor Léon Buskens and Professor Jan-Just Witkam, I have been collecting Swahili books and pamphlets since 2000. The collection currently stands at 1,700 books and more than 1,200 newspapers. I do not pretend that this is a comprehensive selection but twelve years of collecting and reading such material has helped to contextualise the claims made in this paper.

3 These three books are just the tip of the iceberg and this paper makes little mention of the many works published during and since the first Aḥmadiyya translation appeared. The three books discussed here are not the only ones entitled *Fimbo ya Musa*, see for example, Abdin N. Chande, *Islam, Ulamaa and Community Development in Tanzania: A Case Study of Religious Currents in East Africa* (San Francisco: Austin & Winfield, 1998), p. 119.

4 O'Fahey also mentions this paradox in the context of Islamic education: 'The substance of learning is Arabic but the medium is Swahili' (Rex Sean O'Fahey, 'Islam, Language and Ethnicity in Eastern Africa: Some Literary Considerations' (Toronto: Unpublished Harriet Tubman Seminar paper, 2000), p. 16).

5 Justo Lacunza Balda, 'An Investigation into Some Concepts and Ideas Found in Swahili Islamic Writings' (Unpublished PhD thesis, London, 1989); 'The Role of Kiswahili in East African Islam' in Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Hurst, 1993), pp. 226–38; 'Translations of the Qur'an into Swahili, and Contemporary Islamic Revival in East Africa' in David Westerlund and Eva Evers-Rosander (eds), *African Islam and Islam in Africa* (London: Hurst, 1997) pp. 95–126.

6 Ernst Dammann, 'Ein Schafititischer Traktat in Suaheli', *Der Islam* 26 (1936), pp. 189–91.

7 Roman Loimeier, 'Translating the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa: Dynamics and Disputes', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35:4 (2005).

8 Anne K. Bang, 'Authority and Piety, Writing and Print: A Preliminary Study of the Circulation of Islamic Texts in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Zanzibar', *Africa* 81:1 (2011), pp. 89–107; Michael Lambek, 'Certain Knowledge, Contestable Authority: Power and Practice on the Islamic Periphery', *American Ethnologist* 17:1 (1990), pp. 23–40.

9 Usually al-Amin bin Aly al Mazrui is credited for being the one who initiated the use of Swahili as a medium for Islamic publications and education, see for example Abdallah Salih Farsy, *The Shafi'i Ulama of East Africa, c. 1830–1970: A Hagiographic Account*, tr. Randall Pouwels (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989), p. 222. But given the close relationship between Ali b. Hemed and al-Amin b. Ali and the fact that they started publishing at the same time, they should probably share this status. See Ghalib Yusuf Tamim, *Maisha ya Sheikh Al-Amin Bin Ali Mazrui (1891–1947)* (Nairobi: Signal Press, 2006).

10 One excellent example is al-Buhriy's defence of the *akika* ritual performed as a funeral practice for children instead of the reformist emphasis on the orthodox interpretation that prescribes the rite to be performed when the child is still alive. Al-Buhriy's few references on this topic in one of his Swahili books are still important citations in more recent polemics. The authoritative knowledge in this dispute is clearly based on Arabic sources, but the Swahili translations and commentaries make this knowledge available and relevant to a non-Arabic speaking audience.

- 11 Louis Brenner and Murray Last, 'The Role of Language in West African Islam', *Africa* 55:4 (1985) p. 442.
- 12 Lamin Sanneh, 'Translatability in Islam and in Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach' in Thomas D. Blakeley et al. (eds), *Religion in Africa* (London: James Currey, 1994), pp. 22–45.
- 13 Chanfi Ahmed, *Les conversions à l'islam fondamentaliste en Afrique au sud du Sahara: Le cas de la Tanzanie et du Kenya* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 341–4.
- 14 Kai Kresse, 'Swahili Enlightenment?: East African Reformist Discourse at the Turning Point: The Example of Sheikh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33:3 (2003) pp. 279–309; Loimeier, 'Translating the Qur'an', pp. 403–23.
- 15 The often quoted remarks '*si lazima lugha ya Kiarabu*' ('Arabic is not necessary') and '*Uislamu hautaki Istiimari (Ukoloni) wa dini*' ('Islam does not want colonialism in religion'; translation by Joshua Craze) come from Abdulla Saleh Farsy, *Tunda la Quran* (Dar es Salaam: Lillaahi Islamic Publications Centre 1982 [1976]) pp. 4–5, but they are usually taken from Lacunza Balda, *Investigation*, p. 217. In the original the two citations are not connected. Both refer primarily to personal prayers and the possibility of gaining access to God without a *shekhe* or *sharifu*. It certainly does not mean that Arabic is not necessary as the language of prayer as al-Farsy explicitly states in the same sentence (*maadam si ndani ya Sala*). Nor does he downplay the value of Arabic for religious scholars because al-Farsy not only mentions his own education in Arabic linguistic subjects (Dibaji, p. 1) but the book itself is a short extract from an Arabic original! Some of his Arabic poems have been reprinted but in general al-Farsy's Arabic production receives far less attention than his Swahili books do.
- 16 Joshua Craze, *Truth of Words: A Report on the Islamic Publishing Industry in Dar es Salaam* (unpublished, 2007). Joshua Craze, *Islamic Modernism: The Case of Qutb in Dar es Salaam* (Unpublished MA thesis, ASCA, University of Amsterdam, 2008).
- 17 A modern *madrasa* in Tanzania is a religious school usually connected to a mosque, offering a twelve grade course or part of it. For an excellent overview of disciplines taught in *madāris* in Zanzibar (but very similar in many respects to the Tanzania mainland) see Loimeier, *Between Social Skills*, ch. 4, pp. 149–213.
- 18 Chesworth, *The Use of Scripture in Swahili Tracts by Muslims and Christians in East Africa* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Birmingham, 2007); Ahmed, *Les conversions*.
- 19 Loimeier, 'Translating the Qur'an', p. 413.
- 20 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Paper Series, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (Washington: Georgetown University, 1986).
- 21 I use the Arabic words *tafsīr* (pl. *tafāsīr*) to indicate all Qur'an translations and commentaries, and I do not make a distinction between the more literal translations (Swahili: *tarjama*) and the more exegetical ones (Swahili: *tafsiri*).
- 22 Cf. O'Fahey, 'Islam, Language and Ethnicity'.
- 23 Lambek, 'Certain Knowledge', p. 24.
- 24 In my opinion, it is this intended discriminatory nature of the works rather than the reference to miracles as Ahmed claims (Ahmed, *Les conversions*, p. 343).
- 25 According to Kresse, he was born in 1939 – *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 93; and Chanfi Ahmed, *Les conversions*, p. 95 – and claims to have a *madrasa* in Mamburi where he occasionally publishes booklets in Arabic. One of these Arabic titles he quotes as *Tawḍīḥ al-ishkāl 'amm fī hidāya al-atfāl*. I found two other titles in Malindi: a volume containing the famous poem *Kishamia* with a short biography of the writer Mwenye Mansab (1828–1922) written in Swahili in Arabic script and the more substantial

al-nuṣūṣ al-ṣariḥa fī al-ʿaqīda al-ṣaḥiḥa ('Pure Texts on the Correct Creed, S.I.') (Kenya: Markaz al-Naḡaḥ al-Islāmī, 1998).

26 On the Bilal Muslim Mission that was founded in Dar es Salaam in 1964, see Ahmed, *Les conversions*, pp. 285–97.

27 See Kresse, *Philosophising*, p. 258, n. 37 on this controversy.

28 See for similar Christian ideas, Chesworth, *The Use of Scripture*, pp. 126 ff.

29 The quotation is from the Ṣūfī handbook entitled 'Book of Assistance' (*Risālat al-muʿawwana*) written by ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿAlawī al-Ḥaddād and available in East Africa in Arabic, English and Swahili editions. This point of critique should be related to al-Farsy's reformist ideas concerning unacceptable innovations in religion formulated in his book *Bidʿa* in which he has a chapter on 'favourite' suras. Further research on the development of al-Farsy's ideas of reform is needed. Cf. Loimeier, 'Translating the Qur'an', p. 422, n. 34.

30 The problem of different editions becomes even more pressing in online versions. Often I could not find the original text that had led to the critique. In some print copies, it is clear that the process of revision continues even after publication. Sometimes a bookseller may go as far as making amendments at the moment the book is being sold. In a print-on-demand world, there are unlimited numbers of editions with print runs usually being less than five!

31 I am not certain if the authors are the same but this is suggested by the name (Ahmad b. Ahmad Badawiy b. Salih b. Alawy al-ʿAlawiy Jamal al-Layl, (Lamu) and the kind of topics treated (all Ṣūfī-related, such as the waking vision of the Prophet, his intercession and the recitation of *dhikr*).

32 It remains unclear how many people actually read Badawiy's polemical, multi-copied typescript.

33 See Chanfi Ahmed, 'Networks of the Shadhiliyya Yashrutiya Sufi Order in East Africa' in Roman Loimeier and Rüdiger Seesemann (eds), *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th Century East Africa* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006) pp. 317–42; and Ahmed, *Les Conversions*, pp. 64–8, According to his autobiographical note in ʿAbd al Qādir fī idāḥ al-taṣawwuf, he was born in 1343/1925.

34 In current Islamic discourse, Nurudin Hussein is mentioned as one of Nyerere's Muslim victims (cf. Khalifa Khamis Mohammed, *Kupiga Marufuku Uislamu*) (Dar es Salaam: Sherman Publishers, 2010).

35 According to his life history that was written down for me in January 2000. Lacunza Balda, 'The Role of Kiswahili' p. 231 and others claim he was born in 1944.

36 He could reproduce 138 titles for me in 2000. At the back of his book, '*Makatazo ya bidaa*' (1981), he mentioned 153.

37 For more information on these textbooks and the educational environment they are used in, see Roman Loimeier, *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills: The Politics of Islamic Education in 20th Century Zanzibar* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), especially ch. 4.

38 Unknown to this author. The book *Saumu na shuruti zake* or *Saumu na maelezo* was probably meant.

39 Supererogatory prayer popular in Tanzania (cf. Jama Shaaban, *Sunnat tasbīḥ na sūrat fātiḥa katika kutatua matatizo*).

40 He is clearly referring to the books *Utukufu wa sala* pp. 30–2 and *Vyakula alivyokula Mtume na faida nyenginezo*.

41 *Imani ya waislamu*, p. 12.

42 One of these fractures concerned the day when people should start and stop fasting. In a seminar on the moon sighting issue in 1991, Shaykh Nurudin claimed that against the Salafis

who emphasised Qur'anic and *ḥadīth* texts as ultimate authorities, the other accepted heuristic tools for deciding a case like *ijmā'* ('consensus' in the Muslim community) and *qiyās* ('analogical reasoning') should not be overlooked.

43 Michael Feener, *Muslim Legal Thought in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 49.

44 Among the many materials published about this *bid'a* polemic in East Africa, one could start with the work of Kai Kresse, 'Debating *maulidi*: Ambiguities and Transformations of Muslim Identity along the Kenyan Swahili Coast' in Roman Loimeier and Rüdiger Seesemann (eds), *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th Century East Africa* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), pp. 209–28.

45 See his poem/prayer '*Kwa siri ya Qur'an*' ('By the Secrets of the Qur'an') which he wrote while in prison.

46 Nurudn al-Ghassany opens his book *Ufafanuzi* with letters he received from confused Muslims asking if the author of the *bid'a* books was the same as the famous *kadhi* al-Farsy.

47 The very productive Mombasa translator Muhammad Abdullah Riday writes a warning in the Swahili translation of Ahmad von Denffer's book *A Day with the Prophet* which was published in 1983: 'anyone who does not understand something should ask a scholar (*mwana chuwoni*) or write to us. No one should attempt to translate [these *ḥadīth*] according to his own opinion.'

48 Saidi Musa, *Majadiliano juu ya maulidi* (Dar es Salaam: Lillaahi Publications Centre, 2007 [1985]), pp. 46–7.

49 '*Ni wazi kwamba yeye katika tafsiri hio hakukusudia kutia maelezo ya undani juu ya elimu ya tafsiri ...*' ('It is clear that he in his *tafsir* did not intend to provide very detailed explanations based on exegesis as a discipline') (Juma Mazrui in his edition of Farsy's *Maisha ya Nabii*). Al-Kindy complains that, as with the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, al-Farsy's explanations are too brief, and that this is potentially dangerous for readers without sufficient skills (Introduction in his *Asili ya uongofu*, Part 1.)

50 Ahmad Muhammad al-Khatib in his foreword to Mayunga's *Qur'an inayobainisha*.

51 The example is from Q. 72:18 where al-Farsy's translation opens the door to the wrong practice of *tawaṣṣul*, according to Abdul-Aziz Said Mohamed Nahdi, *Bid'a na madhara yake kwa muislam; ahly sunnah wal-jama'a* (n.p.: n.p., 2010).

52 Introduction to *Tarjuma al-Qur-aan*, also quoted as '*Tarjama Ya Maana Ya AL-QUR-AAN AL-'ADHWIYM (al-Hidaayah)*'. The final part of this translation was published on December 13, 2012. Another anonymous Salafiyya Qur'an *tafsir* in Swahili (*Tafsiri ya sehemu ya kumi ya mwisho ya Qur'ani tukufu Ikituatiwa na sheria muhimu kwa muislamu*) contains 100 pages of translation of the Qur'an and 120 pages with practical comments on correct beliefs and practices.

53 Introduction to *Tarjuma al-Qur'ān*.

54 Loimeier, *Translating the Qur'an*, pp. 416–17.

55 Most of the other Swahili *tafāsir*, such as Barwani, Mayunga, al-Farsy, Muḥammad Ayyub use Mwenyezi tafāsir Cf. Lacunza Balda, *Investigation*, ch. 3. Similar reasons for preserving God's holiness and for not associating Him with anything human leads the Tarjuma translator to render the above-mentioned verse, Q. 7:54, as literally as possible '*... kisha istawaa (Amelingamana sawa) kwenye 'Arshi*'. Neither the word for 'settling' (*istawaa*) nor that for 'throne' (*arsh*) is translated; they are initially given an interpretation between parenthesis (*amelingamana sawa*: 'He is in a state of harmony'). The earliest reference to the reality of God sitting on His throne in a Swahili translation I have found is in Ibn Taymiyya's '*Aqida yā Wasiṭ*' (Mombasa: Adam Traders, 1969), p. 41.

56 This book was refuted by Ali b. Muhammad al-Faqihi in his book *al-Radd al-qawīm al-bāligh ‘alā kitāb al-khalīlī al-musamma bi’l-Ḥaqq al-dāmigh: fī inkārihi ru’yat al-mu’minīn rabbahum yawma al-qiyāma wa-da’wāhu khalq al-Qur’ān wa-qawluhu bi-takhlīd al-‘uṣāh min al-Muslimīn fī’l-nār* (2001). Juma Mazrui often refers to al-Faqihi.

57 But Barahiyani wrote a book on women in Islam (75 pp.), Bachu an important contribution to the moonsighting controversy (165 pp.) and Msallam a few polemical works and translations. Compared to the number of tapes, videos and DVDs, this is quite insignificant. The number of Swahili translations of Salafī authors like al-Albānī, Ibn Bāz, Muḥammad Jamil Zino and Ṣāliḥ Fawzan are naturally much higher.

58 I bought his Arabic book *al-Mabādī’ al-muḥḍa fī’l-fiqh wa’l- tawḥīd wa’l-‘aqīda* but could not get the Swahili translation by Abu Rabi Jimal al-Muhri.

59 Husayn Ibn Mahmud, *Arba‘ūn yawman fī Tanzania* (San‘a: Maktab al-Ḥukmī, 2008). It is interesting that the Salafī group was not allowed to preach in the Ansar Sunna mosque by Salim Barahiyani who accused them of representing a ‘new Salafīyya’. Kassim Mafuta is one of Barahiyani’s most active opponents. After Barahiyani claimed that calling oneself a Salafī is not allowed (against the opinion of the Saudi Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān, b. 1933), all his videos were removed from the qsea.net site. This illustrates how the Salafī movement in East Africa is internally fractured.

60 Ibn Taymiyya, ‘*Aqīda*, Q. 75:22–3, *Some faces, that day, will beam [in brightness and beauty]; Looking towards their Lord; (translation by Yusuf Ali); Q. 83:23, On thrones [of dignity] will they command a sight [of all things]; Q. 50: 35, There will be for them therein all that they wish, and more besides in Our Presence; Q. 10:26, To those who do right is a goodly [reward] – Yea, more [than in measure]!*

61 But see the Shī‘a *Tarjuma Tafsīr al-Kāshif* which translates ‘*zinam tazama* (‘look at’) *Mola wako*’ but explains elsewhere (Q. 2:55) in more detail that his position is also that God cannot be seen in the Hereafter.

62 Usually at Q. 6:103, one of the popular verses used to defend the non-visibility point of view: *No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.*

63 A reference to Q. 20:69, ... *quickly will it swallow up that which they have faked.*

64 See Craze, *Islamic Modernism*, pp. 51–6, and references there.

65 But not logic (*manṭiq*) as a separate discipline. Mazrui rebukes Mafuta for using Greek philosophy to support his arguments.

66 In a similar way, Abdillahi Nassir, the Shī‘ī politician and scholar, referred to the reformist Sunnī scholar Farsy to develop his defence against the external Wahhābī threat (Kai Kresse, ‘The Uses of History: Rhetorics of Muslim Unity and Difference on the Kenyan Swahili Coast’ in Ed Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007), pp. 248ff. Both al-Mazrui as an Ibādī Muslim and Nassir as a Shī‘ī evoke highly authoritative East African Sunnī scholars to strengthen their arguments.

67 Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, ‘Redefining Muslim Publics’ in D.F. Eickelman and J.W. Anderson (eds), *New Media in the Muslim World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 11.

68 Nassor b. Humaid b. Fudhail al-Ghazy, *Nuru ya Uislamu: Qur’an na tafsiri juzuu ya Amma* (n.p.: n.d., 2000).

69 See Loimeier, *Between Social Skills*, pp. 289–92, for the effect of these changes on Islamic education.

70 TNA File 41286/3.

71 As in Ali b. Hemed al-Buhriy's book *Mafundisho ya dini* according to Damman, 'Schafitischer Traktat', p. 189.

72 Mafuta, *Hoja*, p. 12.

73 Eickelman and Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics'. The proverbial 'engineer' replaced by an employee at a medical consultancy firm.

74 Al-Farsy, *Tunda*, p. 2; In Abedi, *Uongofu*, pp. 101–7, letters are found containing praise of the new Aḥmadiyya translation.

75 'Elimu ya dini ya kiislamu', *Shule za sekondari* 4 (Dar es Salaam: Islamic Education Panel), pp. 306–10.

76 See Daniel Mwankemwa, *Je Waislamu ni watoto wa Ishmael*, www.findtruefaith.blogspot.com in which he quotes the commentaries of al-Kindy and Mayunga; Khalid Mtwangi, *Wakristo watafute ukweli kutoka kwa masheikh* (an-Nuur 1017/ June 2012) quotes from three different Swahili *tafāsīr* (al-Farsy, Barwani and the Shī'ī Mayunga) to support his critique of a Christian book.