

‘I Didn’t Want to Write This’: The Social Embeddedness of Translating Moonsighting Verses of the Qur’an into Swahili

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1. Introduction

The importance of the Qur’an in the life of Muslims can hardly be overestimated. Reading, memorising and reciting the Qur’an in Arabic is considered a praiseworthy and commendable exercise, widely practiced during the year and especially during Ramaḍān and holidays.¹ The modern perception of Islam as a ‘complete way of life’ implies that not only reading, but first and foremost the understanding and implementation of the Qur’an in all walks of life should be the aim of a pious Muslim.² Many commentators and translators emphasise that the Qur’an refers to itself as a ‘Manifest Book’ containing ‘Clear Signs’ and provides ‘Guidance for those who believe’ (Q. 2:2, Q. 10:6, Q. 20:72, Q. 3:138, etc.), therefore understanding its message is the most important goal these authors want to achieve with their laborious task.³ Knowledge of Arabic is recognised as indispensable for a real understanding of the Qur’an but Islamic authority guarding this knowledge and embedding it in all kinds of linguistic and exegetic disciplines has been eroded and pluralised in many different ways.⁴ Therefore most contemporary literate Muslims in East Africa perceive the dozen or so Swahili translations which are available as convenient and necessary tools with which to seek true knowledge, explain the divine message both to Muslims and non-Muslims, and further the cause of Islam in a non-Arabic speaking environment. Contemporary Swahili Qur’an translations illustrate the changes in the way Islamic authority is contested and constructed.

Academic work on Swahili Qur’an translations often focuses more on philosophical, theological and linguistic ideas found in the text rather than on the question how and why a translator chooses to translate a particular way he did.⁵ Even when the emphasis

is on the wider social, religious, and political contexts of a translation, researchers often pay specific attention to salient (theological) disputes on a macro level triggered by such a Qur'an translation.⁶ The micro and meso levels of translation founded in highly personal motivations and contingent biographical circumstances are more often than not left out in these works. In this paper I will look at this social context of translation activities and their relation to the final text. I will argue that this anthropological perspective will reveal in some cases a much more pragmatic, very personal motivation which can be just as important in the coming into being of the translation. Translators are in the first place Muslims who read the Qur'an and who have done so for the greatest part of their life. They really care about the genuine meaning and the intention of the text, an interest that goes far beyond a mere academic curiosity. The intimate link between social contexts, the individual questions a translator approaches the Qur'an with, and the translation itself is often obscured because the author has died. But when we do have access to the genesis of a translation this will advance our understanding of Qur'an reading and translating as social phenomenon.

In East Africa increased literacy and a rapidly changing media landscape provide more and more people with access to the Qur'anic text in a language they understand. In many cases these new readers are not able to assess the equivalence between source- and target-language. Especially in the field of interreligious disputes where Christians and Muslims are attacking each other's texts in translation, this has led to a whole new dynamic.⁷ Many Muslims who used to be restricted by their limited knowledge of Arabic are now able to turn to the Qur'an in their quest for answers to real-life problems. In recent years we have seen major political and social events in Tanzania – constitutional reform, a housing and population census, the implementation of kadhi courts, membership of the OIC⁸ – which have stimulated Muslims to look for proper Qur'anic guidelines. The Islamic activism movement *harakati ya kiislam*, which originated in the 1980s, has especially emphasised the applicability of the Qur'an in daily life. Expressions like 'to follow the Qur'an', to 'have the Qur'an translated into action', 'to give the Qur'an its due place in society' illustrate this discourse. But also beyond the circle of Islamic activists one can find the idea that the Qur'anic message must be functional. For example the *tafsīr* of the Lebanese Shī'ī scholar Mughniyya (1904–79) was selected by the publisher Mehboob Somji for translation into Swahili because of its relevance for the global Muslim community (*maslahi ya umma*) and its applicability to modern questions (*amejaribu sana kwenda na wakati*). Ordinary discussions on street corners and in mass media may contain references to Swahili translations of the Qur'an, implying that it carries a message or could be applied to solve a problem.⁹

This local discourse should not be reproduced uncritically as the best way to approach a text. More than two decades ago Jonathan Boyarin produced a pioneering volume to

'challenge the still-prevalent literary tendency to analyse reading in terms of disembodied decoding of inherent meanings'.¹⁰ Reading, translating, and commenting on the Qur'an is very much socially embedded and this awareness is critical to our understanding of its place in the modern period. Anthropologists of Islam have amply shown how meaning is attributed *to* a text rather than taken *from* a particular Scripture. 'Texts by themselves are silent: they become socially relevant through their enunciation, through citation, through acts of reading, reference and interpretation [...] we need to discover the local hermeneutics'.¹¹ But this should not lead to a neglect of the vast scholarship of Qur'anic exegesis as being irrelevant for modern Muslims. Many anthropologists of Islam tend to undervalue these exegetical traditions of Islam in the reading and translation process,¹² probably as a reaction to philologists and 'Orientalists' who sometimes tend to emphasise the autonomous power of the texts from which the meaning can be extracted without any form of mediation.

I will argue that reading and translating the Qur'anic text in Swahili is influenced both by linguistic/theological resources usually produced in other global settings and personal motives fuelled by very local, contingent events. Because of the changes in educational and media landscapes in East Africa over the last few decades, the (largely non-scholarly) audiences of vernacular translations have increased.¹³ The new readers of these translations are starting to read and interpret the (translated) text not just as a devotional practice but also in order to find answers to their particular questions. When they are not satisfied with what they find in existing commentaries, they may produce their own translations, less restricted (but not un-restricted) by rules and norms of established scholarship and current exegetical traditions. In this rapidly expanding public space Qur'anic commentary is no longer limited to the strictly defined genre of *tafsīr*.¹⁴ Analysis of these new, contemporary 'translations', understood here in the broadest sense of the word as any kind of interpretation or application of the Qur'an through textual form, is appropriate for discovering local reading hermeneutics. Whereas not all readers are translators, all translators are readers, albeit of a particular kind. To understand the choices they make, one should take into account both the authoritative exegetical disciplines and the social conditions in which they read and translate.

Mandaville's conceptual dimensions of pluralised authority are useful tools to understand how individual readers/translators understand the purpose of finding religious knowledge in the Qur'an ('functional pluralisation'), where they seek this knowledge and authority ('spatial pluralisation') and in which form this 'translation' is mediated ('media pluralisation').¹⁵ The first axis deals with the shift in perceptions of what a Muslim can and should do with religious knowledge; the second dimension Mandaville understands as the engagement of an increasing number of people with events, discourses, and personalities from elsewhere on the globe. Many of these

actors do not have a formal religious schooling. Obviously this widening of the public sphere leads to a shift in the mediatisation of religious knowledge as well. Whereas the print book still remains dominant as reference in discussions among the established religious scholars, increasingly the new audience finds other channels and forms of participation in these discourses. However, globalisation is not an autonomous actor, but rather a facilitator and catalyst of individual actors: ‘Globalization [...] makes it possible for an unprecedented range of social actors in diverse locations to have experience of, and become involved in, the pluralization of authority in the Muslim world.’¹⁶ It is some of these individual social actors, translating the Qur’an and shaping contemporary Islam in a global world, who will be highlighted here.

In this paper I will primarily deal with the Swahili translation of two Qur’anic verses referring to the beginning and end of lunar months in the ritual calendar, a ‘modern’, controversial and widespread subject of debate in the Islamic world;¹⁷ its relevance for ordinary people in the East African context will be described in Section 2. In Section 3, I will introduce Said Moosa Muhammad al-Kindy and his eighteen-volume Swahili commentary on the Qur’an entitled *Asili ya Uongofu*, completed in 2014. Section 4 analyses the range of translation options a reader faces when dealing with the two Qur’anic verses related to crescent sighting issues. Here, I will relate al-Kindy’s choices to the existing Swahili *tafāsīr*. Finally, in the fifth section, I will contrast these translation choices with two very different products, both published by authors from the same theological background and network as al-Kindy. In the first place I describe al-Kindy’s distributor and co-author Said Masoud, a bookshop owner in the Tanzanian town of Tanga as well as writer, journalist, and secondary school teacher. The second contrasting example is from al-Kindy’s former student Juma Rashid al-Mazrui, prolific writer and polemicist publishing widely on theological issues and apologetics.

2. Moon Sighting Debates: ‘Perspectives from the Path’

Since the middle of the twentieth century, local and national differences concerning the beginning and end of the lunar months have increasingly become a problem for large parts of the global Muslim community. The question of whether a crescent sighting in one particular place in the world is valid for determining the beginning of a new month thousands of kilometres away preoccupies individual believers as well as state institutions.¹⁸ Although the same problem presents itself in each lunar month, in practice it is only ever felt as problematic when it comes to ritual obligations like fasting in the month of Ramaḍān and performing rituals in connection to the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in the month of Dhū’l-Ḥijja which culminates in the Sacrificial Feast (‘Īd al-Aḍḥā) on the tenth of this month. In this paper, I will only consider problems that concern the Ramaḍān fasting.¹⁹

There are two major positions with regard to the dating of Ramaḍān: on the one hand, *ittiḥād al maṭāli*^c ('the unity of the horizons'), meaning that a sighting in one place in the world is valid everywhere else; and on the other hand, *ikhṭilāf al-maṭāli*^c ('the difference of the horizons'), meaning that every place should rely on a local crescent sighting. The validity of one sighting in the world corroborated by one or two witnesses as sufficient proof for the fasting month to start and end is the opinion of most Salafi-oriented groups. A second group allows for a more limited area (*taḥḍīd*) of sighting and usually waits for a valid sighting in their own country or in the region of East Africa. The last position can be further divided among different groups who claim that one nation should fast and feast together, or one particular latitude or an area bounded by a certain geographical definition like eight degrees in all directions of the sighting.²⁰

The number of textual sources to mine for evidence supporting any one of these positions is limited. The necessity of sighting the crescent moon with the naked eye, as opposed to relying on calculations, can be attributed to a *ḥadīth*:

Start fasting on seeing [the crescent of Ramaḍān], and give up fasting on seeing [the crescent of Shawwāl], and if the sky is overcast [and you cannot see it], complete the number [of thirty days] of Sha^cbān.

Qur'anic evidence is even scarcer and is limited to two parts of the Qur'an dealing with the regulations of fasting. Q. 2:189 contains the phrase *they ask you about the crescents (ahilla)*²¹, and Q. 2:185 says *and those who witness (shahida) the month (al-shahra) should fast*. Swahili Qur'an translators of the latter verse are faced with the complicating fact that the words for moon and month are homonyms in their language: both are called *mwezi*. This allows the interpretation of *shahr* as 'moon': 'he among you who observes/sees the *mwezi* ('moon'/'month'), he should fast'. Especially in popular discourses on the internet we often find the words '*shahida* [...] *al-shahra*' quoted and translated as 'seeing the moon'. One example is a statement of 'ZenjiBoy' advocating a local moonsighting position, independent from Saudi Arabia:²²

When you see the moon, fast. So if they see the moon in Libya and Turkey before the Saudis do, then let them fast.

However, opponents knowing a little bit of Arabic are quick to explain the fact that the Arabic word *al-shahra* cannot be translated by the Swahili word *mwezi* in the sense of 'moon'. Thus, in the case of the Zanzibar discussion, one week later a certain Muhammad replied to ZenjiBoy explaining the differences between 'moon', 'month', and 'crescent' in Arabic, English, and Swahili. His final (translated) comment I quote in full:²³

If you want to bring forth a Qur'an verse as proof I ask you to be sure about what you are saying, in order not to deceive other people. I friendly ask you to consult the Swahili Qur'an translation of Shaykh

Abdallah Saleh al-Farsy [and] you will see the meaning of this verse
AND GOD KNOWS BEST.

This ‘perspective from the path’²⁴ illustrates a couple of important points raised by Peter Mandaville concerning the pluralisation of authority.²⁵ It shows how religious knowledge has become just one component among a wider range of authorities like astronomy and politics. Unlike debates on philosophical questions such as, for example, the visibility of God in the hereafter,²⁶ moonsighting discussions are not limited to the circles of ivory tower academics. Facebook, internet fora, pamphlets, newspapers, television, and other media confirm the lived reality of these questions. The Arabic Qur’an and Prophetic *ḥadīth* remain the ultimate authorities in these discussions but they coexist with other forms of knowledge which are increasingly accessible through Swahili translations.

The proliferation of these translations and the pluralising of Islamic authorities provide a challenge for the Islamic activist discourse in which the Qur’an is presented as the answer to all social and political problems. Readers searching for practical solutions turn to the (translated) Qur’an but fail to find ready-made answers for practical problems. The secretary of the Tanzania Hay’at al-Ulamaa, Abdullah Ahmad Bawazir, warns these readers that the Qur’an is a ‘Guide, not a Constitution’.²⁷ According to some these different translations and commentaries of the Qur’an threaten Islamic unity and peace and are blamed on groups outside the country.²⁸ In the moonsighting debates the most important foreign group is defined as ‘Wahhabi’ or ‘Saudi’. Whereas the uniformity and clarity of the (Arabic) Qur’an is still upheld in discussions, the plethora of different translations and commentaries leave many people confused about the real meaning.

The enhanced accessibility of many Qur’an translations and interpretations in Swahili also makes clear that making an appeal to personal authority alone no longer suffices. ‘Muhammad’ quoted above supports his argument with a reference to the Zanzibari Arab, former chief kadhi of Kenya, and Qur’an translator al-Farsy, rather than to textual or linguistic evidence. The problem a reader of his internet post will have with following up on his advice is that neither the Qur’an nor Farsy’s translation/*tafsīr* of the Qur’anic text are very helpful in giving answers to moonsighting questions. As we will see below, al-Farsy presents a careful mainstream translation of Q. 2:185: *he who is present in town during this month (of Ramadan), he should fast*, without taking position in the local/international sighting discussion. The footnote related to this verse does not mention any of the grammatical, theological or socio-political issues related to his choice of translation. Ironically, while al-Farsy himself wanted to provide the reader with direct access to the content of the Qur’an without any human intermediary, he now is quoted as an authority.²⁹

Thus, the rich polyvalence or, from another perspective, lack of clarity of the Qur'anic text is brought to the surface by the many different contemporary vernacular interpretations. At the same time, we are witnessing the erosion of the authority that had been attributed to the educated elite in the past. Together with the almost complete absence of any theoretical reflexion on hermeneutical traditions and exegetical methodologies these phenomena raise the question how reading and translating the Qur'an in Swahili is perceived as helpful in dealing with a pragmatic problem like the beginning and end of the lunar month. To what extent do current translators reproduce exegetical traditions, and to what degree do they feel free to leave these well-trodden paths? And what is the influence of their personal experience and life histories in the translation choices they make? Before further pursuing these questions, I will briefly introduce the most extensive lay commentary of the Qur'an available in Swahili and then analyse the way in which it tackles the moonsighting issue.

3. Said Moosa al-Kindy and his *Tafsīr Asili ya Uongofu*

Said Moosa Mohamed al-Kindy published his eighteen-volume Swahili Qur'an translation and commentary *Asili ya Uongofu katika uhakika wa mteremsho na ubainisho wa tafsiri* ('The Source of Guidance in the Original Revelation and as Clarified in Translation') in the years between 1992 and 2014. Al-Kindy was born in 1943 in Dar es Salaam, colonial Tanganyika, as one of fourteen children.³⁰ His father was an Arab businessman who also authored many – unpublished – religious books. Unfortunately all of his father's works, as well as his library, were lost when a cargo vessel from Tanzania to Oman sank. Said went to the Aga Khan school in Dar es Salaam and completed primary school up till class 10. After the bloody revolution in Zanzibar when many Tanzanians of Arab descent were killed, his father and his family left for Oman in 1964. After a short while looking for a job the young Said went to Saudi Arabia where he studied in several Ibādī mosque-schools in Riyadh and Medina from 1964 to 1968. Then he went to Abu Dhabi where he was employed as an airport clerk for two years. In 1970, Qābūs b. Sa'īd Āl Sa'īd ousted his father, Sa'īd b. Taymūr, who later died in exile in London, and in July of that year Said Moosa returned to Oman. There he continued his religious education and started to preach in mosques and for radio and television stations. Most of the time these sermons and speeches were recorded but sometimes he performed live. Radio Iqra in Nairobi asked – and received – his permission to broadcast his *Asili ya Uongofu*, but he did not hear back from them until September 2013. Said Moosa perceives himself primarily as a *dā'ī*, a preaching missionary inviting people to the truth of Islam. Until the early 1980s he lived in Nizwa, then later on moved to Muscat. He regularly – usually once a year during the hot season in Oman – visits Tanzania for one or two months and uses the opportunity to preach in Tanzanian mosques such as Mwanza and Kahama.

In 1982 al-Kindy started writing books and pamphlets and in 1991 he commenced his *tafsīr* work. All his publications are primarily self-financed – he sold his house and land for this purpose – but he sometimes finds sponsors for individual volumes of his Qur’an translation. In 2011, Said Moosa stopped all activities except for his Qur’an translation due to increasing health problems. During the last few years he has worked daily on his *tafsīr*, which he writes by hand and assembles in ledgers.

His network is clearly linked to his new patria Oman and is Ibādī-oriented: his books contain prayers for Sultan Qābūs b. Sa‘īd Āl Sa‘īd, the current ruler of Oman. All of his published works have been sent for approval to the Grand Mufti of Oman, the Zanzibar-born Aḥmad b. Ḥāmid al-Khalīlī, whom he knows personally as he states in his book *Hoja na Dalili*. All of his books carry a registration number from the Ministry of Information and some contain reproduced letters of approbation. Another major Omani author he regularly thanks in his acknowledgements is Sa‘īd b. ‘Abd Allāh Sayf al-Ḥātimī, who has authored more than 34 works in Arabic, Swahili, and English.³¹

On several occasions, al-Kindy has emphasised that he is not a learned theologian or academic.³²

I am not a scholar, I cannot even come close to the rank of scholars (*Wataalamu*) neither can I mention my name in the list of scholars. But it suits me to thank the Almighty God, my Lord who has given me this illumination (*ilhamu*) [...], for the grace He has given me to enable me to do the things I do that please Him.

Asili ya Uongofu contains over 8,000 pages, is printed on paper and not available on-line. Al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* resembles very much the genre of popularising commentaries as described by Pink.³³ The language is simple, the nuances of grammar and *fiqh* are limited to a minimum, the emphasis is on sound *ḥadīth*, a preference is shown for majority and mainstream *tafsīr* and most minority interpretations are omitted or easily discarded.³⁴ It is a narrative, verse-by-verse *tafsīr*, intended for a broad audience. Aimed at making a direct impression on the readers, al-Kindy makes use of all kind of material including full colour pictures and newspaper articles. He sometimes inserts thematic excursions on topics related to the particular chapter or verse – for example, on the holiness of *laylat al-qadr* or the conditions of fasting.

It is the meaning and the spiritual effect of the Qur’an in the lives of the reader that matters first and foremost to al-Kindy, and not the historical or contextual difficulties of the text. The style of *Asili ya Uongofu* clearly identifies the author as a preacher and *dā‘ī*, persuading his readers and audience to return from their evil ways, to repent and recognise the truth of their Creator. He derives his motivation for writing this *tafsīr*

from Q. 3:104, *Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity.*³⁵ His mild and pleasing tone resonates with the Qur'anic verse which he takes as his guidance for his commentary, Q. 20:44, *But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah)*, on which he comments: 'The Qur'an is our guidance and the ultimate Conciliator of our conflicts'.³⁶

Although al-Kindy's *tafsīr* is identifiable as a product of the Ibādī school of law, this identity marker cannot be applied too narrowly. References to grammar, linguistics, or *fiqh* to defend particular theological points of view are quite rare. Al-Kindy almost never mentions any alternative translation, and whenever *ikhtilāf* (differing legal opinions) are mentioned they are usually labelled as a minor difference (*hitilafu kidogo*) or commented on with expressions like 'these things are not important' (*hayo mambo si muhimu*).³⁷ Distinctive Ibādī theological issues such as the belief in the createdness of the Qur'an³⁸ or the possibility of seeing God in the hereafter³⁹ are hardly identifiable in al-Kindy's *tafsīr*. The only distinctive Ibādī dogma that he does mention time and again is the eternal hellfire for grave sinners.⁴⁰

External sources like the Sunna, the Bible, scientific insights, political events, and personal experience are occasionally inserted into the text, but are secondary to Qur'anic references. The self-referential meaning of the Qur'an is al-Kindy's main concern. For example, in his commentary on Q. 9:16 he states:⁴¹

We have explained this verse by just referring to other Qur'anic texts without giving our own explanation to the reader [...] the Qur'an itself is the best exegete. If someone knows the Qur'an well, he no longer needs a teacher to explain him the meaning of the Qur'an. [...] but this is not achieved very easily. One has to get used to reading the Qur'an time and again, and whenever someone reads it he has to use his intellect and think hard and continuously do research to find out clarification of the words of Almighty God, and so you will reach the ultimate truth of the Qur'an.

4. Translation Choices in Two Crescent Sighting Verses

4a) Q. 2:185, *fa-man shahida minkumu'l-shahra fa'l-yaṣumhu*

The most common Qur'anic verse used in crescent sighting discourses is the middle part of Q. 2:185: *fa-man shahida minkumu'l-shahra fa'l-yaṣumhu*:

So every one of you who is present (shahida) [at his home] during that month (al-shahra) should spend it in fasting, but if any one is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period [should be made up] by days later.

In table 1 I give a list of existing Swahili translations of this passage.⁴² Footnotes and explanations contained in the translations, if any, are summarised in English in the rightmost column.

<i>Mufassir</i>	Swahili	English working translation	Summarised commentary by <i>mufassir</i>
Godfrey Dale, 1923	<i>Na mtu miongoni mweni aliyehudhuria mwezi huo na afunge;</i>	And everyone among you who is present in this month should fast.	—
Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui, 1940 ⁴³	<i>Basi mwenye kuwamo katika mwezi huu naaufunge;</i>	Therefore he who is present during this month, let him fast therein	The intention of ‘he who is present’ is he who is not travelling.
Mubarak Ahmad Ahmadi, 1953	<i>Basi miongoni mweni atakayeona mwezi, afunge saumu</i>	Therefore he among you who sees the moon, that he fast	—
Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy, 1969	<i>Atakayekuwa katika mji katika huu mwezi (wa Ramadhani) afunge</i>	He who will be in town in this month (of Ramaḍān), he should fast	—
Ali Muhsin al-Barwani, 1995 ⁴⁴	<i>Basi ataye kuwa mjini katika mwezi huu naaufunge</i>	Therefore he who will be in town in this month, he should fast	He who reaches (<i>mwenye kuuwahi</i>) this month in good health (<i>mzima</i>), not ill, and is in town, not travelling, he should fast.
Mughniyya/Mwalupa, 2003–2009 ⁴⁵	<i>Basi atayekuwa mjini katika mwezi huu naaufunge</i>	Therefore he who will be in town in this month, he should fast	He who is in town as opposed to travelling. <i>Shahida</i> means ‘being in town’.
Ali Juma Mayunga, 2003, 2008	<i>mwenye kuwamo katika mwezi huu naaufunge</i>	He who is present in this month, he should fast therein	The Shi‘i commentator Mayunga explains that a sighting in one city should result in the fasting of people from another town because of the

Table 1: Swahili Translations of Q. 2:185 in Chronological Order of Publication.

<i>Mufasssir</i>	Swahili	English working translation	Summarised commentary by <i>mufasssir</i>
			modern means of communication. Just in the case when a sighting occurs in a country very far away, each community should depend on its own latitude (<i>mat-lai yake</i>). Mayunga bases this opinion on the late Shī'ī spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Imam Al-Khū'ī (1899–1992) and his <i>mas'ala</i> 1044. Except for two general <i>ḥadīths</i> illustrating the necessity of sighting with the naked eye and the command of fasting and feasting together with other Muslims, he only refers to al-Khū'ī's book <i>Risāla ḥawl mas'alat ru'yat al-hilāl</i> .
Abdulrahman M. Abubakar, 2009	<i>Basi yeyote ataka<u>eona</u> mwezi miongoni mwenu na <u>aufunge</u></i>	Therefore he among you who sees the moon, that he fast therein	—
Al-hidaaya Tarjuma ya Qur-aan ⁴⁶	<i>Basi atakay<u>eshuhudia</u> miongoni mwenu mwezi na <u>afunge</u></i>	Therefore he who witnesses among you the moon/month, that he fast.	—
Al-hidaaya word for word translation ⁴⁷	<i>Basi atakay<u>eshuhudia</u> – miongoni mwenu – mwezi – basi <u>aufunge</u></i>	Therefore he who witnesses – among you – moon/ month – that he fast therein	—

Table 1: *Continued*

The Swahili translations show differences in (1) the translation of the verb *shahida*, (2) the choice for the rendering of the polyvalent Swahili word *mwezi* moon/month as equivalent of the Arabic *shahr*, and finally (3) the reading of the suffix in *fa’l-yaṣumhu* (third person masculine personal pronoun, referring to *shahr*).

The first two difficulties, the translation of *shahida* and *al-shahr*, are related and will be treated together. The Arabic word *shahida* basically has the following three meanings: ‘to see/witness’, ‘to certify/confirm’ and ‘to be present’. The first two require a direct object (*mafʿūl bihi*) which can be *al-shahr*, ‘the month’ (although seeing/witnessing/confirming the month is not a very common expression). Most Swahili translations choose the option ‘being present’, in Swahili usually rendered by the verb *kuwa*, ‘to be’, or in the case of the Christian translation by Dale by an Arabic loanword: *hudhuria*, ‘being present’.⁴⁸ The interpretation as ‘being present’ is based on the assumption that the first part of Q. 2:185 (*fa-man ... fa’l-yaṣumhu*) should be seen as opposed to the second part of the sentence (*wa-man kāna marīḍan aw ʿala safarin faʿiddatun min ayyāmin ukhar*), a construction called in Arabic *muqābala*. In the English translation by Yusuf ʿAlī, this opposition between ‘being present’ in the first part and ‘ill, or on a journey’ in the second part is further emphasised by the word ‘but’. Thus, the verb *shahida* could be translated as referring to anyone who ‘is present’ during the month; consequently, the second problem, the translation of *al-shahr*, can only be solved by reading it as an adverb of time (*ẓarf zamān*). This results in the interpretation that a particular person in town or at home during the month of Ramaḍān should fast as opposed to someone who is travelling: the latter one should make up for the lost days later. However, the opposition (*fa-man ... wa-man*) is somewhat flawed by the inclusion of *marīḍan* (‘being ill’) which does not have a counterpart in the first part of the sentence. From this perspective some translators choose to qualify *shahida* further by an expression of ‘being healthy’ implying it to be the opposition of ‘being ill’. This exegetical tradition is followed by the Ansaar Sunna discussants in a debate between Şūfīs and ‘Wahhābīs’ in Dar es Salaam in 1997:⁴⁹

Atakaye ushuhudia mwezi wa ramadhani (kwa maana ya atakayeudiriki, yaani atakayekutwa na Mwezi wa Ramadhani) akiwa hai na afya njema.

He who witnesses/is present in the month/moon of Ramaḍān (meaning he who will reach it, that is he who is overtaken by the month of Ramaḍān), alive and in good health.

We can observe that only one original Swahili *mufassir* (al-Farsy) as well as the Swahili versions of the *Muntakhab* (translated by Barwani) and the Lebanese *al-Tafsīr al-kāshif* (translated by Mwalupa) feel the need to emphasise this opposition to travelling by including the word ‘town’ (*mjilmjini*). This is a direct result of the fact that, even if we assume this verse is a *muqābala* construction, there is still something

elided (*maḥdhūf*). A second, and equally valid, option to complete this incomplete construction is to include a qualification of the month indicating its beginning, for example by inserting the word *hilāl* ('crescent'), and to translate *shahida* by a synonym of the verb 'to see'.⁵⁰ The meaning of this verse would thus be something along the lines of 'Everyone who sees/observes the *hilāl* of this month, let him fast'. The most famous representative of this interpretation is Ibn Kathīr.⁵¹ Because the Swahili translation of both moon and month is *mwezi*, the translations of Abubakar and Ahmad that use the verb *kuona* ('to see') as an equivalent of the Arabic *shahida* are slightly equivocal. A reader without knowledge of Arabic would assume that *shahr* means moon or *hilāl*. Finally, only the Salafī-oriented Al-hidaaya, represented by two translations, dodge the question whether this Qur'an verse means 'being present' during that month or 'seeing' the crescent and opt for a loanword instead of a translation: the Arabic *shahida* is rendered in Swahili as *kushuhudia* with a more or less equivalent semantic range ('to witness, attest, confirm, give evidence or proof'). Elsewhere on their site Al-hidaaya makes it very clear that it is in favour of an international moonsighting point of view, but this is not reflected in their translation of this verse. We find a similar literal translation used to defend a totally opposite opinion in the polemic books of Juma al-Mazrui (see below). Just like Al-hidaaya he uses the loanword *kushuhudia* to translate this verse into Swahili: *Atayeushuhudia mwezi miongoni mwenu, basi na-aufunge*.⁵²

Besides the words *shahida* and *shahr*, the suffix *-hu* in *fa'l-yaṣumhu* causes differences in some Swahili translations. No more than four translators out of eleven attempt to render the suffix, mostly by inserting an object infix (*-u-*) referring to *shahr* ('month') as in *aufunge* ('that he fast it/therein'). The Ahmadiyya translation provides the most dynamic interpretation and adds the word *saumu* ('fasting') because by choosing *kuona* ('to see') as a translation of *shahida*, the translator is forced to look for another object as an equivalent of the Arabic *-hu*. Abubakar faces the same problem when he selects 'sighting' as the best choice for *shahida*; but his translation of *fa'l-yaṣumhu* by *a-u-funge* (the relative infix *u* referring to *mwezi*: moon/month), seems a bit odd. In the first part the homonym *mwezi* should be read as referring to 'moon' rather than 'month': *Basi yeyote atakaeuona mwezi miongoni mwenu* (Therefore he among you who sees the moon). But in the second part Abubakar does not address the problem that *fa'l-yaṣumhu* no longer can be interpreted as 'let him fast it/therein', i.e. the *shahr* (month). He simply maintains the polyvalence of *mwezi*: in the first part as 'moon' and in the second part as 'month'. Most translators avoid these problems by not translating the suffix at all.

Unsurprisingly, each of the two groups – local moonsighters and international moonsighters – prefers a particular translation and interpretation, but most of them carefully acknowledge the semantic range of the Arabic language and strive to remain true to the Arabic source text. Local moonsighters often take *shahr* as an object and

translate *shahida* as ‘seeing’; the resulting ambiguity of *mwezi* (‘moon’/ ‘month’) is then solved by referring to the possibility to change cause and effect in Arabic rhetoric called *dhikr al-sabab bi-murādat al-musabbab* (‘mentioning the cause by its effect’).⁵³ Thus, the month (*shahr*) is the effect of the appearance of the moon (*hilāl*), which is understood by the reader without being explicitly mentioned in the text. Another argument used to support the claim that each region should wait for its own *hilāl* is found in the verb *fa’l-yaṣumhu* (*let him fast*). *Fa* is usually rendered in Swahili as *basi* (‘therefore’, ‘so’). A shaykh from Tanga explains:⁵⁴

My brothers! Among the ayas we do not have ‘weak’ or ‘*saḥīḥ*’ verses; you [need to] accept all these ayas. If this verse was *umumi* [meaning a verse containing a general rule for everyone] why then did the Almighty God not write *fa-ṣūmuḥu* (they, plural, i.e. all people, wherever they are, should fast) instead of *fa’l-yaṣumhu* (*let him, singular, fast therein*)?

International moonsighters oppose this reading and base their interpretation on the fact that this verse does not qualify the location of the start of the month or provide specific conditions limiting the applicability of the moonsighting to a particular area. The *ḥadīth* ‘*fa-ṣūmū li-ru’yatihi*’ (‘fast when you see it’) contains the plural *ṣūmū*, meaning that all people everywhere are addressed. Therefore, the appearance of the Ramaḍān moon, wherever that may be, immediately results in the start of fasting everywhere.

4b) Said Moosa al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* of Q. 2:185

Al-Kindy translates this verse in volume 1 of his *tafsīr* (finished January 1992): *Utakayemfikia mwezi (huu wa Ramadhani), naye yuko mjini basi afunge*, and explains:

Na ‘UTAKAYEMFIKIA MWEZI’⁵⁵ huu wa Ramadhani, yaani ukiandama mwezi ‘NAYE YUKO MJINI’ kwake au mji wengine, tarehe moja ya mwezi huo wa Ramadhani ‘BASI AFUNGE’ Asubuhi ya tarehe moja aamke naye amefunga baada ya kutia niya ya saumu tangu usiku ulioandamia mwezi.

He to whom the month/moon of Ramaḍān arrives, meaning when the (new) moon appears, and he is in his town or another town, the first date of this month of Ramaḍān, he should fast. In the morning of the first day he should get up and start fasting from the moment he wakes up after he has expressed his intention (*niya*) of fasting on the eve when the moon appeared.

Al-Kindy sticks to the ‘being present paradigm’⁵⁶ but clearly without specifically defending the global sighting position. In his explanation he carefully shuns the whole problem of what to do when a sighting is reported from a different area. He is the first

one who uses the verb 'to reach' (*fika*) as an interpretation of *shahida*. In his paraphrase, al-Kindy mentions a reference to the appearance of the *hilāl* (*ukiandama mwezi*). By explaining 'when the new moon appears and he/she is in town' he seems to support a local moonsighting position: only those who are in a town and who see the new moon there, they should fast. However the verb *fika* ('to arrive, reach') is – although rarely – chosen by the international moonsighters because it suggests that the month can also arrive in the form of a message or notification that the *hilāl* has been sighted somewhere in the world. For example, Shaykh Yusuf Hamza Yussuf from Zanzibar concludes his oral *tafsīr* of Q. 2:185 by saying:⁵⁷

Kwa hivyo ni wazi kabisa kwamba atakayekuwepo katika nchi, ukamfikia ule mwezi wa Ramadhani na aufunge.

So now it is completely clear that he who will be in the country/region, when that Ramaḍān moon/month will reach him, then let him fast therein.

4c) Q. 2:189, *wa-yas'alūnaka 'ani'l-ahilla*

The second verse often quoted in East African moonsighting debates is the first part of Q. 2:189 *wa-yas'alūnaka 'ani'l-ahilla*. The major problem here is the use of the plural *ahilla* (s. *hilāl*), a plural that only occurs once in the Qur'an. Yusuf 'Alī translates the complete verse as follows:

They ask thee concerning the New Moons (ahilla). Say: They are but signs to mark fixed periods of time (mawāqīt) in [the affairs of] men, and for Pilgrimage. It is no virtue if ye enter your houses from the back: It is virtue if ye fear Allah. Enter houses through the proper doors: And fear Allah. That ye may prosper.

In Table 2, I summarise some Swahili translations of the word *ahilla* in this verse:

<i>Mufassir</i>	Swahili	English working translation	Summarised commentary by <i>mufassir</i>
Godfrey Dale	<i>Watakauliza khabari za mageuzi ya mwezi</i>	News of the changes of the moon	—
Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui	<i>Wakuuliza wewe khabari ya miezi</i>	news of the moons/months	Phases of the moon. Muḥammad guides his people by revelation and therefore it is not his task to

Table 2: Swahili translations of *ahilla* in Q. 2:189 in chronological order of publication.

<i>Mufassir</i>	Swahili	English working translation	Summarised commentary by <i>mufassir</i>
			give any astronomic evidence.
Mubarak Ahmad Ahmadi	<i>Wanakuuliza juu ya miezi</i>	months	The Companions are aware of the benefits of Ramaḍān and would like to know those of other months.
Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy	<i>Wanakuuliza juu ya miezi</i>	moons/months	Different appearances of the moon (<i>sura ya mwezi</i>): sometimes small, sometimes large
Ali Muhsin al-Barwani	<i>Wanakuuliza khabarai [sic]⁵⁸ ya miezi</i>	news of the moons/months	Phases of the moon explained by astronomy
Mughniyya/ Mwalupa	<i>Wanakuuliza juu ya miezi</i>	moons/months	Makes a distinction between the scientific explanation of the different moonphases and their meaning as expressed in the Shari‘a. The second part of the verse <i>no virtue if ye enter your houses from the back</i> is equal to asking scientific questions on this issue. ⁵⁹
Ali Juma Mayunga	<i>Wanakuuliza juu ya miezi</i>	moons/months	—
Abdulrahman M. Abubakar	<i>Wanakuuliza juu ya miezi (vipi hujitokeza kidogo kisha ukajaa mbinguni kisha ukarudi hali yake ya udogo)</i>	moons	Between brackets: ‘how the moon appears small and then becomes full at the sky and then returns to its smallness’
Al-hidaaya Tarjuma ya Qur-aan	<i>Wanakuuliza kuhusu miezi (inapoandama)</i>	(crescent) moons	—
Al-hidaaya word for word	<i>Wanakuuliza – kuhusu – miezi (mipya)</i>	(new) moons/ months	—

Table 2. *Continued*

Almost all Swahili translations show a preference for the polyvocal and rather imprecise *miezi* ('moons', 'months'), without indicating that in Arabic only the new moons or the waxing crescent moons are intended.⁶⁰ Again the Salafī Al-hidaaya translations are the only ones which make clear that the crescent moons are intended in Arabic. In a similar pattern as in the translation of Q. 2:185 we see this tendency to stick very close to the Arabic original only with their opponent Juma al-Mazrui who translates in his polemical work on this issue (see below) *miezi miandamo* ('crescents of the new moons').⁶¹ Most other Swahili *mufassirūn* use footnotes to explain the plural *ahilla* by referring to the different consecutive lunar cycles, an interpretation that has a lot of famous advocates like the authors of the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. Thus, the 'crescents' refer to the *hilāl* of Rajab, Sha^ʿbān, Ramaḍān, Shawwāl, etc. A second interpretation of 'crescents' could be that they mean the different *hilāls* as they appear in one lunar cycle at different places. In that case the verse would mean that one day the Ramaḍān *hilāl* is visible in Indonesia and only one day later Tanzania will have its *hilāl*. Naturally this second interpretation is the one favoured by the advocates of the local moonsighting views.⁶²

The Kenyan Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui uses an explanatory footnote to explain the fact that the answer to the question raised in the verse (*they ask you about the crescents*) is rather odd from the perspective of a reader. If the question were answered scientifically, that would open the door for many more questions not related to the task of prophets, which is teaching people about the revelation (*wahy*). Explanations of issues which can be known by common wisdom (*ilmu*) should not be asked of prophets. To teach the companions these truths, God gives a general overview of the benefits derived from the lunar phases and warns them not to doubt the wisdom of the Creator by *entering their houses from the back*.⁶³ In the extensive polemics between the Ansaar Sunna and Juma al-Mazrui this particular mode of answering questions is explained by referring to Arabic rhetoric where this is called *uslūb al-ḥakīm*: giving an unexpected answer in order to reveal a deeper truth.⁶⁴

International moonsighters prefer to interpret the plural *ahilla* by referring to the different phases of the moon (Swahili: *hali*, *sura*, or *hatua*).⁶⁵ The most important piece of evidence for this translation comes from a single *sabab al-nuzūl* ('occasion of revelation') that is often quoted in the version of al-Kalbī presented by al-Wāḥidī.⁶⁶

This verse was revealed about Mu^ʿādh b. Jabal and Tha^ʿlaba b. ^ʿAnma, both of whom were of the *ansār*. These two men said: 'O Messenger of Allah! How is it that the moon first looks fine like a thread, then it grows until it becomes full and round, but then it starts to decrease and become fine again as it initially was. It never stays in one form?' And as a response, God revealed this verse.

All Swahili commentators who advocate a single moonsighting as being valid for the whole world explain the plural of *ahilla* as referring to each *hilāl* of every month through the year.⁶⁷ Thus, these *ahilla* indicate according to them the diachronic appearance of the new moons, as opposed to the synchronic ‘crescents’ the local moonsighters read in this verse.

Local moonsighters argue that a good translation should explain why the plural of *hilāl* is used and not the plural of other words for moon like *qamar*. They also refer to the fact that in the text the Ḥajj pilgrimage is mentioned. Besides, they reason, the different appearances of the single moon (new, waxing, full, waning) are not ‘signs to mark fixed periods of time’ (*mawāqīt*); only the single crescent of each new lunar cycle determines the start of every new month, including the month of Dhū’l-Ḥijja, in which the pilgrimage is performed.⁶⁸ So why would God mention the plural ‘crescents’ as a fixed period of time for the Ḥajj when it is only the single crescent of the Dhū’l-Ḥijja which determines it? With reference to the target audience of this verse, the local moonsighters emphasise that this is not restricted to the Companions who asked the question, in which case the verse would have had a limited, local meaning, with only the appearance of the moon in Mecca being significant; rather, the audience is clearly global, including all people: *mawāqīt li’l-nās*. The plural of *ahilla* corroborates the fact that even the unique event of the Ḥajj, which takes place at one location, has different times of celebrations all over the world.⁶⁹

4d) Said Moosa al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* of Q. 2:189

How does Said Moosa al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* fit into this discussion? In *Asili ya Uongofu*, Q. 2:189 is translated as *na wanakuuliza juu ya miezi (they ask you about the moons/months)*, which is identical to al-Farsy’s *tafsīr*. In al-Kindy’s commentary, which takes up about one page, he first presents a short paraphrase of the verse:⁷⁰

The Messenger was asked about how the moon when it first appears (*ukiandama mwanzo wa mwezi*) is small and then after [some] days it is half, then big and then it diminishes and returns to be half and small and then it is like a thread (*uzi*) – what is its wisdom?

Al-Kindy mentions that among those who asked this question was Mu‘ādh b. Jabal, an inhabitant of Yathrib who pledged allegiance to Muḥammad before the Hijra, and Tha‘laba b. Ghanam:⁷¹

They continued to ask the Messenger: why does the moon change? And why does not the sun change [its appearance]? And then this verse was revealed [*yas’alūnaka* etc.]. These (the fact that the moon is sometimes small and sometimes big) are signs to mark fixed periods of

time for the affairs of people. They refer to the affairs of this world [*dunia*] and also to those of the religion [*dini*]. To know: debts they owe one another, and their rents they pay for different things, and their calculations and to know their days and months and years and times. And that they know the waiting periods in the menstrual cycles of their wives [*eda ya hedhi*], and they know the days of their fasting, and they know the days of their Ḥajj and ... and ... The Messenger (S.A.W.) was asked about the reason why the moon changed time and again. And so he answered that if the moon were to remain the same as the sun, then the calculation of months would not be possible. The reason [for the changing phases] of the moon is '*takwim*': to know the calculation of times: days, weeks, months, years, and many things people give each other in their lives in this world like: payments for houses, fields, labour, or, or ... And many things like this. As for the religious issues, we have already mentioned them. Both these worldly and religious things are concerned with the calculations (based on) the changing lunar phases: sometimes small, sometimes big.

Al-Kindy concludes his *tafsīr* with the only *ḥadīth* which is also mentioned by Ibn Kathīr in this context:⁷²

ja'ala Allāh al-ahilla mawāqīt li'l-nās fa-ṣūmū li-ru'yatihi, wa-aḥīrū li-ru'yatihi, fa-inna ghamma 'alaykum fa-'uddū thalāthīn yawman.

God has made the crescents signs to mark fixed periods of time for mankind. Hence, fast on seeing it [the crescent for Ramaḍān] and break the fast on seeing it [the crescent for Shawwāl]. If it [the crescent] was obscure to you then count thirty days (i.e. mark that month as thirty days).

Al-Kindy's translation choices are remarkably similar to those he made in Q. 2:185. His interpretation is close to mainstream Sunnī translations like the Swahili *tafsīr* of al-Farsy and the *tafāsīr* by Ibn Kathīr and Jalalayn,⁷³ the two classical sources which were influential in both al-Farsy's and al-Kindy's work. Al-Kindy sticks to the *miezi* translation interpreted as 'phases of the moon' – the interpretation favoured by international moonsighters. But in his commentary he refuses to take a clear position on the controversy. By translating *ahilla* with *miezi*, he joins the majority of Swahili *mufassirūn* and reproduces the polyvalence of *miezi* ('moons', 'months') without making it clear for non-Arabic readers that it is the plural of *hilāl* ('crescents'). He is the only one who mentions the *sabab al-nuzūl* of this verse, but he again neglects to mention any other contextual relevant information about the reputations of transmitters or about the *isnād* of the *ḥadīth* from which we derive this information.⁷⁴

5. An Anthropological Approach to Qur’an Translation

5a) Said Moosa al-Kindy: A Preacher Guiding the Community

A purely textual and linguistic analysis of the *Asili ya Uongofu* translation fails to reveal its real significance. Reviewing Said Moosa al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* of Q. 2:185 and Q. 2:189, and not knowing anything about the Swahili-speaking Islamic world, we could see his translation and commentary as rather unremarkable, ordinary, and mainstream. However, it would be more reasonable to look at al-Kindy’s translation as the result of a deliberate and conscious effort to achieve his major objective: religious guidance for readers. In his attempt to persuade his target audience of the ultimate truth of the Qur’an and Islam he avoids all doctrinal differences. Writing in Swahili automatically involves the awareness that a large part of the potential readership consists of non-Muslims. Discussions of controversies (*ikhtilāf*) about minor doctrines (*maṭāwī*) and ritual details would not be helpful for convincing Christians to embrace Islam, nor would they provide Muslims with guidance on how to live a better life that is more in conformity with the Creator’s commandments, which is the fundamental aim of a *dā‘ī* like al-Kindy. When we look at his *tafsīr* as a whole and acknowledge the social embeddedness of Qur’an reading and subsequently translating, we obtain a picture that is different from what would result from understanding Qur’an reading as a ‘disembodied decoding of inherent meanings’.

In 2005, thirteen years after the completion of his commentary on the first sūras of the Qur’an, al-Kindy finished volume 9, containing the Meccan sūras *Yūnus* (Q. 10) and *Hūd* (Q. 11). In this period, the world, and East Africa, have considerably changed. Since the 1990s, liberalisation of the press has encouraged Muslims to publish a flood of print, audio, and video products in Swahili. Increased access to sources and communication technologies have allowed an increasing number of actors to participate in the construction and contestation of Islamic authorities. A substantial number of these authors have dealt with the moonsighting controversy, and two audio lectures by prominent Salafī preachers were picked up by al-Kindy; in his *tafsīr* on *Sūrat Yūnus*, commenting on Q. 10:6 (*Verily, in the alternation of the night and the day, and in all that God hath created, in the heavens and the earth, are signs for those who fear Him*), he allows himself a very emotional response. Over no less than fifteen pages, he vehemently reacts to the opinions of the ‘Wahhābī’ preachers Nassor Bachu from Zanzibar and Salim Barahyan from Tanga (Tanzania), both well known upholders of the global moonsighting position. In this diatribe al-Kindy’s own position becomes clearer⁷⁵ as he defends the local moonsighting standpoint and quotes the *ḥadīth* ‘Every country has its own crescent sighting, so fast when you see it and break your fast when you see it’.⁷⁶ However, most of the space devoted to this verse is not used to present linguistic and theological proof for his view, but rather to

lament the attacks on the Islamic community by 'Wahhābīs'. The first and only Qur'an verse he quotes is Q. 49:11:

O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: It may be that the [latter] are better than the [former]: Nor let some women laugh at others: It may be that the [latter] are better than the [former]: Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by [offensive] nicknames: Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, [to be used of one] after he has believed: And those who do not desist are [indeed] doing wrong.

He then narrates the story of a man called Mā'iz as part of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of Q. 49:12. After committing adultery and confessing his sin to Muḥammad, Mā'iz was stoned to death:⁷⁷

The Prophet heard two men saying to one another, 'Have you not seen the man who had God cover his secret, but his heart could not let him rest until he was stoned to death, just as the dog is stoned.' The Prophet continued on and when he passed by the corpse of a donkey, he asked: 'Where are so-and-so? Dismount and eat from this donkey.' They said, 'May God forgive you, O God's Messenger! Would anyone eat this meat?' The Prophet said: 'The backbiting you committed against your brother is worse as a meal than this meal ... Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, ye would abhor it ... But fear God. For God is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.'

Al-Kindy interprets the behaviour of Barahyan and Bachu in the moonsighting discussion as 'eating the flesh of their brothers'. In this context, he describes a personal, traumatic incidence in which he was removed from a Saudi mosque because he was an Ibādī and not a Wahhābī.⁷⁸ Al-Kindy continues his philippic in the same volume while commenting on Q. 11:118–19:

If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute. Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: and for this did He create them: and the Word of thy Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together.'

He spends almost 30 pages expounding his sadness about the way in which Barahyan and Bachu create friction and disputes in the community, and about their tendency to declare other Muslims unbelievers over minor differences. Producing different opinions (*ikhtilāf*) in the lesser important doctrinal and ritual fields of religion, he maintains, is merely the way God has created us and is even *rehema kwetu* ('a mercy for us').⁷⁹ But the moonsighting discussions are used by shaykhs 'who are bought

by the Wahnābīs from Saudia’ to create *fitna*, he claims; they are practicing *tafsīr bi-ghayr ‘ilm* (‘unscholarly/ignorant *tafsīr*’) or, according to another *ḥadīth*, *bi’l-ra’y* (‘based on their personal whims’), and therefore their place in the Fire has already been prepared.⁸⁰

This is an example of how the processes of *tafsīr* production and of translation in this particular popularised commentary of al-Kindy are embedded in and affected by events and persons other than the translator. ‘I did not want to mention these things, but they have forced me to, although I did not like it, when I listened to their tapes (and heard) how they insulted our Islamic scholars’ al-Kindy writes.⁸¹ In this context, he quotes Q. 2:159:

Those who conceal the clear [Signs] We have sent down, and the Guidance, after We have made it clear for the people in the Book – on them shall be God’s curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse ...

As a preacher it is clear that he continually has his target audience of the Swahili speaking community consisting of both Muslims and non-Muslims in mind. Therefore at this stage he contrasts the response of the Ansaar Sunna shaykhs with God’s message to that of the converts John/Abu Bakar Mwaipopo and Professor Josephat/Musa Ngogo.⁸² The latter have noticed the truth (*haki*) and do their utmost to spread the word, while the former continue to hide (*kuficha*) the truth and deceive people. It probably is this emphasis on the personal response of the reader to Gods call (*da‘wa*) which makes al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* a modern one.

5b) Masoud Mohamed Said: The Well-informed Citizen Seeking Pious Practice

We encounter a different approach to the moonsighting problem in the work of al-Kindy’s book distributor in Tanga: Masoud Mohamed Said. His first and only book *Kwa nini tuabudu* (‘Why Do We Worship?’) was proofread, corrected, and complemented by Said Moosa al-Kindy. In this publication Masoud covers a lot of ground: his topics include the holiness of God and the Qur’an, the reason for religious worship, the nature of Islam, and life after death. Most of his eighty-page book consists of an elaborate description of the relationship between science and the Qur’an (46 pages). The basic assumption, illustrated with many examples, is that findings of modern science can never contradict the Qur’an. Moreover, a close reading of the Qur’an will, according to Masoud, reveal that everything scientists discover already exists in the word of God. Nowadays it is common to find this kind of literature in Swahili; all such writings are more or less related to Maurice Bucaille’s *La Bible, le Coran et la science*, published in the 1970s. What is interesting in Masoud’s work, and critical to understanding his take on the moonsighting controversies, is his idea that God has given His creatures the potential to ‘discover’ (*gundua*) and ‘develop’ (*kukuza*) knowledge and wisdom about the world already in the Qur’an.⁸³

In 2008 Masoud launched the website www.islamicalendertides.com, soon followed by asiliyaoungofu.com. In his educational autobiography *Kusomea chini ya mti* ('Studying Under the Tree'), he described how, after he had finished his A-levels, he wanted to pursue a university degree in Islamic studies but was time and again refused. This traumatic experience of rejection made him search for a platform to share his ideas. In this personal account, he recalls how he always wanted to solve the moonsighting problem and thanks to developments in information technology now finally had a chance to do so. His site provides two highly interesting contributions to the moonsighting controversy. First, he reviews three moonsighting debates on this topic (held in Zanzibar in 1991, Pemba in 1995, and in Dar es Salaam in 1998), but in contrast to others, he does not merely summarise these seminars but, after obtaining videotapes of these events, meticulously transcribes all discussions and publishes them online. These discussions show the social actors and their interaction while performing their acts of Qur'an translation and *tafsīr*. The arguments are mostly similar to the ones described above, but thanks to Masoud's efforts we get an important glimpse of the social embeddedness of religious reading and the cross-fertilisation of local experiences with global knowledge. We learn who attended these government-sponsored meetings and who did not. As we can see on Masoud's website and forum, these debates are clearly a 'glocal' phenomenon. Whereas most of the arguments are derived from Islamic theological and linguistic sciences and appear to be the same wherever the debate takes place, the actors clearly have their own (local) agendas.

Secondly, because Masoud is disappointed with the scholarly approach to the moonsighting problem as illustrated by the verbatim reproduced discussions in the seminars, he uses his site not in order to produce an alternative reading of the authoritative texts, but to propose a different solution based on a different type of knowledge. Instead of remaining within the hermeneutic discipline of established *fiqh* and *tafsīr* scholarship, he moves towards another kind of episteme. He introduces his own website islamictides.com as follows:⁸⁴

This site as introduced in KUSOMEA CHINI YA MTI [i.e. his autobiographical notes on his experiences with the Tanzanian educational system, GCvdB] believes that knowledge and education comes in many ways, but the education systems of most countries recognise one way. So this is the right place where the unrecognised ones can freely express themselves and their ideas reach others.

His starting point is the expression in Q. 2:185, *shahida ... al-shahra* (witnessing ... the month). Instead of choosing between the 'being present' and 'seeing' camps, Masoud draws a connection to the spring tide, which is observable within twelve hours after the astronomical new moon in the equatorial region (at other latitudes the

spring tide is behind). These tides are an exact mirror of the moon phases, and therefore fully compatible with Q. 2:189 in which the crescents are described as *signs to mark fixed periods of time for people (mawāqīt li'l-nās)*. In Q. 10:5, Masoud continues to argue, God has made clear that the sun and moon orbits are among His signs for those who understand. He quotes:

It is He Who made the sun to be a shining glory and the moon to be a light [of beauty], and measured out stages for her; that ye might know the number of years and the count [of time]. Nowise did Allah create this but in truth and righteousness. [Thus] doth He explain His Signs in detail, for those who understand.

Those who understand, according to Masoud, are not the educated religious scholars, but ordinary Qur’an readers. Elsewhere Masoud explains how he as ‘a believer and a researcher’ merely mentions what is already in the Qur’an and, moreover, uses the intellect that God Almighty has provided him with.⁸⁵ The human ability to develop skills and knowledge is created by God and is the cornerstone of Masoud’s work.

Masoud started by buying a ‘Digital Qur’an’ that contains seven *ḥadīth* collections and numerous *tafāsīr*; he even bought a new computer to facilitate this. He collected books, lunar calendars, and videos of major moonsighting seminars as described above. He wrote to astronomers and ocean experts and collected the tidal tables of East African ports. And, finally, he did fieldwork by daily visiting the port of Tanga, where he lives, and Pemba, where he was born. Based on this research,⁸⁶ he annually publishes an Islamic lunar calendar with equivalent Gregorian dates. To find out the correct lunar dates, he starts with the exact prediction of the birth of the astronomical new moon to be found at the site www.moonsighting.com. Then Masoud looks for a spot on the equator either west or east of Tanzania where at the time of the new moon the call for the *maghrib* prayer will be heard (standardised as 18:30 local time). That place is the host town of that month and all places in the world follow the moon of that location. He proves at length that on the equator the spring tide (or its minor equivalent at the other side of the globe) can always be observed within twelve hours after the birth of the astronomical new moon. Thus, before the *fajr* prayer the next day, the whole world could observe the reality of the new moon. And according to Masoud, the *fajr* is the real start of the Islamic day, while the established scholarship takes sunset as the beginning of the day.⁸⁷

In contrast to the knowledge constructed in the moonsighting seminars, the knowledge of Masoud’s system is based on a dynamic interaction between (1) the Qur’an and East African scholarly *fiqh* discussions reflected in the verbatim reports of the moon seminars; (2) astronomical science based on high school textbooks and popular internet sources; and (3) personal experience, mainly his educational autobiography. He starts his essay with a reference to the women in his native village: ‘The Swahili

women of Pemba, when they go down to their farms in order to obtain water from near the sea and when they see the incoming tide reach a certain point, they understand this as a confirmation the new month has arrived.' Because a large part of the human population actually lives near the oceans, this system is very practical and does not need any other skills than those that already exist in all fishing communities. The sea is a very important part of Said Masoud's life. Born in a coastal village on Pemba Island, his whole life has been dominated by the oceans. Before tourism arrived at the archipelago, the most important parts of the island economy were small-scale subsistence and cash crop farming (mainly cloves) and fishing. After the 1980s, seaweed farming, which heavily depends on the intertidal zones, became a source of income for those parts of the population not able to participate in fishing: women, children, and the disabled. The tides at Pemba, as in other parts of the Zanzibar archipelago, are quite spectacular, not so much because of the differences in waterlevel, but because the tides come in very quickly due to the shallow waters. Masoud describes a terrifying personal memory from his youth of how almost an entire family was drowned by the fast-incoming tide.⁸⁸

Masoud is convinced that his system could solve all calendrical chaos and that it will be implemented when people start to read the Qur'an with care. In his first book, *Kwa nini tuabudu*, he gives ample consideration to the topic of science in the Qur'an and finally concludes with a quote from Q. 4:82, *Do they not consider the Qur'an [with care]? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy (hitilafu nyingi)*. His original take on the Qur'an is an excellent example of the shifts in the politics of religious knowledge witnessed by many scholars in the last decades. New forms of textuality (his website, personal narrative), discursive methods (a mix of Qur'anic references and modern popular science), and different forms of authoritative knowledge (Masoud emphasises that he is not a religious scholar, but a pious Muslim with a broad interest in science) all illustrate Mandaville's argument about the tendency towards decentralised Islamic authority.⁸⁹ The moonsighting discussions are no longer restricted to religious scholars or astronomers but knowledge of the new moon can now be confirmed by ordinary women fetching water near the coastline of their island.

5c) Juma al-Mazrui: The Theological Expert Defining the Truth

Compared to the preacher al-Kindy and the pious citizen Masoud, our last example is the most professional and the most detached. The works on moonsighting controversies published by the Ibāḍī shaykh Juma Mohammed al-Mazrui are probably the best example of what Loimeier calls a 'reassertion of the theological and intellectual dimension of religious debates'.⁹⁰ Al-Mazrui currently lives in Oman, but hails from Zanzibar, is a former student of Said Moosa al-Kindy, and a very prolific polemical writer who publishes in Swahili mainly on internet message boards.

He is part of the review committee that oversees the Swahili Qur’an *tafsīr* by Said Moosa al-Kindy. He has written apologetic books about the Islamic caliphate, the definition of the word *khawārij*, the correct body posture during the *ṣalāt*, and a work directed against the Shī‘a explaining the so-called *ḥadīth thaqalayn*, and the visibility of God in the afterlife.⁹¹ All of his publications have a clearly developed argument, are divided into chapters, and are heavily footnoted and finished with unambiguous summaries and deductive conclusions. Despite the fact that they are published as messages on internet fora they are continuing a long established print book tradition.

Mazrui’s first contribution to the moonsighting controversy was a response to the Zanzibar shaykh Nassor Bachu. This Ansaar Sunna preacher published a book entitled *Ufafanuzi wa mgogoro wa kuandama kwa mwezi* (‘Explanation on the Crisis of the New Moon’) in which he defended the international moonsighting position: one crescent-sighting report from a trustworthy source anywhere in the world is sufficient for Muslims everywhere. Persuaded by his ‘brothers from home’ Mazrui responded in 2006 with *Ushahidi uliowekwa wazi katika suala la miandamo ya mwezi* (‘Clear Evidence on the Problem of the Lunar Crescents’), in which he attacked Bachu’s point of view and assembled textual evidence for an outspoken local moonsighting stand. Bachu’s students at the Zanzibar committee of the Sunna Mosque reacted to Mazrui’s book in *Ukweli juu ya kuandama kwa mwezi* (‘The Truth about the Appearance of the Moon’) in June 2009. The same year Mazrui responded again with *Jawabu yetu kwa kitabu kiiwacho ‘Ukweli juu ya kuandama kwa mwezi’ cha kamati ya masjid sunna* (‘Our Response to the Book Called “The Truth About the Appearance of the Moon” by the Sunna Mosque Committee’).

The books provide a much more detailed *tafsīr* than al-Kindy’s Qur’an commentary and are more entrenched in the Ibāḍī theological tradition of discursive polemics.⁹² As is the case with al-Mazrui’s other works, the moonsighting treatises illustrate the importance of the interpretation of the Qur’an in supporting his claims and his emphasis on the need to possess the technical skills to interpret the words of God correctly within the context of other Qur’anic texts and sound Prophetic traditions. He stresses the overriding importance of the Arabic linguistic disciplines (*fani za lugha*), the comparison of translation with the basics of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and the scientific research of *ḥadīth* traditions. He clearly distinguishes between different forms of *tafsīr*: one verse explaining another one; using *ḥadīth* to explain the meaning of a verse; and searching for supporting evidence in the auxiliary disciplines.⁹³ His works demonstrate a sound belief in the powers of logical reasoning (*hoja za kiakili*).

In comparison to the works of al-Kindy and Masoud Mohamed Said, Juma al-Mazrui shows the most disembodied style of reading and decoding of inherent meanings found in a text. Sound religious knowledge is to be found in the texts, and not in any kind of theological tradition. He often attacks his opponents who quote ‘our scholars’

(*wanvyuoni wetu*) by calling their arguments 'mere opinions' (*fikra tu*) lacking any textual evidence (*madondoo sahihi*). Relying on the interpretation of the scholars without knowledge of the basic disciplines of *tafsīr* will never yield a trustworthy translation. In all of Mazrui's works the mistakes, errors, and unreliable stories of Islamic scholars serve as means to discredit his opponents' beliefs in their opinion. He reminds Bachu and his students that even their 'heroes' the Saudis changed their opinion from an international to a local moonsighting point of view.⁹⁴

6. Conclusion

The 1991 moonsighting seminar in Zanzibar was introduced with the words: *Tanzania ni sehemu ya dunia* ('Tanzania is part of the world'). This awareness of being part of a global whole has deeply influenced the Qur'an translation practices described above. The 'cross-fertilisation between local experiences and intellectual resources developed in other global settings'⁹⁵ has led to products as different as the popularised *tafsīr Asili ya Uongofu* by al-Kindy, the website and calendar of *islamicities.com* by Masoud Mohamed Said, and the online polemical books by Juma Mazrui. Reviewed together each of these different 'translations' illustrate Mandaville's conceptual axes of the functional, spatial, and media pluralisation of religious authority.

The three cases described above show a remarkably different attitude towards what a Muslim can and should do with religious knowledge. Al-Kindy in his *tafsīr* 'Source of Guidance' is concerned with the presentation of Islam as a harmonised, spiritually attractive religion of universal truth; therefore, he feels compelled to skip all sordid discussions and conflicting texts. Even a very close reading of his commentary on Q. 2:185 and Q. 2:189 will not reveal any particular viewpoint which might cause friction in the Muslim community. Masoud has the personal aim of identifying the single most correct religious practice and finding an answer on the existential question *kwa nini tuabudu?* ('why do we worship?'). Having read as many Qur'anic commentaries as he could find and having painstakingly researched and reproduced all moonsighting debates in East Africa, he finally turns toward a scientific solution. Still, his reading is firmly rooted in the belief that this scientific solution is part of *considering the Qur'an with care* (Q. 4:82). Al-Mazrui's writings are mostly concerned with identity politics: his search for the truth takes place within the established boundaries of Ibādī theological discourse. Both the topics of his books and his style reflect the perspective of the Islamic scholar. Religious knowledge is derived from the Qur'an by applying reading and translating skills to the text.

The spatial pluralisation of Islamic knowledge comes immediately to the fore when we look at the place from where the three authors write as well as where they seek their authority. Al-Mazrui and al-Kindy are both Omanis born in East Africa, where their Swahili-speaking target audience lives. Their approach, however, remains fairly

traditional: al-Kindy’s *tafsīr* limits itself mostly to Qur’an and *ḥadīth* sources and al-Mazrui continues a long tradition of polemical writing based on skills acquired in formal religious schooling. The shifts in religious knowledge production are much more visible in Masoud’s work which is at the same time more globalised and localised than the publications by his two colleagues. In his endeavour to solve the moonsighting problems Masoud has no spatial limitations: he writes to astronomers, he searches the internet, he visits harbours in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar. On the other hand his representation of the global *fiqh* discussions is presented in a very local format: verbatim reports of East African participants in East African seminars. His news and discussion forum reflects the same mix of very local and global issues ranging from damage caused by a fallen tree in Tanga, to news on telephone technology from India.

The pluralised mediatisation of Islamic knowledge is visible in the range of media used to bring across the translation of the Qur’an. The most traditional work is al-Kindy’s: his *tafsīr* is only published in print and he only occasionally inserts different media in his commentary (such as full colour pictures and newspaper clippings). Al-Mazrui’s books are mostly distributed through social media and public internet fora but apparently some of his titles are also printed. Masoud is probably the best example of recent shifts in this field: his website, interactive forum, calendar, and the verbatim reports of the moonsighting seminars reveal an astonishing mix of different genres and media. His transcription of the seminar discussions show the lively performance and oralisation of scriptural sources in a social context.

This social context of the translation practices discussed here proves to be critical in our understanding of the phenomenon. Just as important as these global changes which have facilitated and brought about the pluralisation of religious knowledge are the social actors and their very personal, localised experiences. In this paper I argue that if we perceive *tafsīr* as a result of socially embedded reading practices rather than a ‘disembodied decoding of inherent meanings’, we may explain why the Qur’an translations produced by these three Arab Ibādī Muslims born in Tanzania differ so noticeably, both in their approach and their outcome. Differences in character, contingent historical events, and biographical circumstances have motivated each author to highlight different kinds of authoritative knowledge in translating the Qur’an. Al-Kindy’s reading of the moon verses resembles an oral conversational class geared towards spiritual improvement of the listeners, persuading them to accept the Qur’anic truth. Undoubtedly the process of translation, for him, involves a lot of research, but eventually he only needs *ilhām* – spiritual enlightenment – in order to reproduce the meaning of God’s words. His translation of the two verses discussed here is intuitive rather than rigorously derived from hermeneutical methodologies and supported by linguistic or theological evidence. But the differences in the *tafsīr* in his

early work on Q 2:185–9 and his later *tafsīr* on Q. 10 show how a highly accidental event (listening to the tapes of Barahyan and Bachu) thoroughly influenced his work as a commentator.

In a similar way Masoud Said's translation not only brings into line two disciplines (established Islamic scholarship and astronomic science), but also demonstrates his recourse to personal experience as an authoritative source of knowledge. On his website and forum for 'the unrecognised ones' he directly links his sense of marginalisation (not having been admitted to university) with his effort to solve the moonsighting problem. This personal trauma and his experience of living near the ocean have influenced his unconventional translation of the verse *fa-man shahida minkumu'l-shahra*. 'Witnessing the month' is now possible for every Muslim by observing the God-given tidal fluctuations.

Even Juma al-Mazrui's approach, which is by far the most scripturalistic and disembodied of the three, illustrates the importance of the social context he lives in. His textual analysis is focused on decoding inherent messages, and the critical skills to find these message are to be found in the classical ancillary *tafsīr* disciplines. But the reason for his doing this is triggered by highly coincidental historical events: he read Nassor Bachu's book and wanted to respond some time in the future, but when friends from Zanzibar visited him in Oman they persuaded him to write his rebuttal immediately because the matter was so important for the islands.

As the three examples just described show, looking beyond the narrowly defined genres of *tafsīr* we will see a lot of highly motivated social actors engaged in Qur'an translation discourse in hybrid, multi-epistemic settings. In terms of the broader field of contemporary Islam, these translations of the Qur'an are not necessarily innovative or vehicles of liberal ideas, but given the globalised environment all of these intellectual products have the possibility to have an impact far beyond the immediate place of production.

NOTES

1 I am indebted to Nathaniel Mathews who read an early draft of this article and to the participants of the workshop 'Muslim Translations of the Qur'an in the Modern Nation State', University of Freiburg, 17–19 July 2014 convened by Johanna Pink.

2 Craze, *Islamic Modernism*; see also Abu Saumu, *Waislamu*, in which he describes several categories of readers: those who don't read the Qur'an at all, those who do not know what they read, those who know the message of the Qur'an but do not follow it and those who read, understand and live according to its message.

3 al-Huda, *Qur'an Inahifadhiwa, Inasomwa vizuri, Bado Utekelezaji* ('The Qur'an is Memorised, Beautifully Recited, but Still Not Implemented'), www.islamicides.com [accessed 9 October 2014]. See also the introduction of the Qur'an translation published by the Salafi website Al-hidaaya.com where the responsibility of the reader is described as '... first

reading the Qur’an, then comprehending, understanding and making it work (*kuifanya kazi*) because there is no one else [to do that] but the one to whom the Qur’an is being brought’ (www.Alhidaaya.com/sw/node/6085) [accessed 27 April 2012]. The translators of Ibn Kathīr’s *tafsīr* write that ‘the great aim of this *tafsīr* is to guide the Muslim in knowing and applying (*kuyafanyia kazi*) the words of God Almighty [...] exactly as they are meant by the Creator Himself’.

4 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’.

5 Yusuf, ‘An Analysis of Swahili Exegesis’, Lacunza Balda, *An Investigation*.

6 Loimeier ‘Translating the Qur’an in Sub-Saharan Africa’.

7 See Chesworth, *The Use of Scripture*, Chesworth, ‘Polemical Revival’.

8 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (formerly Organisation of the Islamic Conference).

9 Many newspaper articles in the Islamic Swahili press illustrate this spirit. See for example Ng’onda, ‘Tumeihama Qur’an!’, p. 13, in which the author urges not only to read, understand and love the Qur’an but ‘above all make it work accordingly’.

10 Boyarin, *The Ethnography*, p. 3.

11 Lambek, ‘Certain Knowledge, Contestable Authority’.

12 Lambek, whose work I value highly, hardly knew any Arabic when he wrote his study of Mayotte communities. This differs from, for example, an anthropological study of Christians reading the Bible in which the disciplines of theology, papyrology, Greek, and Hebrew feature prominently (Malley, *How the Bible Works*).

13 Loimeier, ‘Translating the Qur’an in Sub-Saharan Africa’.

14 See, for another example, Eickelman, ‘Qur’anic Commentary’

15 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’, p. 103.

16 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’, p. 113.

17 For a particularly fierce defense of one opinion in this debate, see a South African pamphlet written by the Mujlisul-Ulama, *A Discussion of the Rules of the Shariah*.

18 In this paper I am concerned with individual readers and translators, rather than with the role of the state. But see a few examples of the state’s involvement in this issue: Oman’s State Department for Astronomical Affairs (<http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/oman/new-unit-to-oversee-oman-moon-sighting-matters-1.1217184>) oversees moonsighting activities. In Zanzibar the state interfered in religious affairs and arrested people for praying on the ‘wrong’ day (cf. van de Bruinhorst, *Raise Your Voices and Kill Your Animals*, p. 241). In 2011 former Tanzanian president Hassan Mwinyi bought 400 copies of a moonsighting book in order to distribute them among imāms. In Malaysia celebrating the *‘īd* on another day than the state has announced is officially criminalised according to the Sharī‘a criminal procedure code enactment 1997.

19 Determining the correct date of *‘īd al-kabīr* poses different problems which I described elsewhere (Van de Bruinhorst, *Raise Your Voices and Kill Your Animals*, van de Bruinhorst, “‘Siku ya Arafa” and the “‘Idd el-Hajj”). Quite a few Muslims who prefer local moonsighting with respect to the beginning and end of Ramaḍān still follow the Ḥajj and especially the day of ‘Arafa (9 Dhū’l-Ḥijja) in Saudi Arabia as decisive for the *‘īd al-kabīr* elsewhere in the world. In Tanzania the national Muslim council Bakwata announces the official *‘īd* for both religious festivals based on local moonsighting, usually one day later than Saudi Arabia. In 2014, for example, Saudi Arabia celebrated the *‘īd al-kabīr* on 4th October while Bakwata announced 5th October as the national holiday for Tanzania. According to <http://moonsighting.com/1435zhj.html>, 66 countries ‘followed’ Saudi Arabia and declared October 4 as the right date

while 18 did so for October 5, and only four October 6. (See <http://www.alriyadh.com/979553> [accessed 13 January 2015]).

20 See, for some of the East African literature on this topic, van de Bruinhorst, *Raise Your Voices and Kill Your Animals*, pp. 221–52.

21 Most commentators take the verses 183–8 as a single exegetical unit. I am following a *tafsīr* tradition which includes verse 189 as being part of this same group of *āyāt al-aḥkām* dealing with fasting rules. A representative of this tradition was Shaykh Saleh who explained his views during the moonsighting conference on Pemba, 1995.

22 ‘Faman Shahida Minkumu Shahra Falyasumhu’. Mukiona nyinyi mwezi mufunge. sasa ikiwa Libya na turkey wameona mwezi kabla ya Saudi basi wafunge. At <http://zanzibarwebsite.com> [accessed 24 August 2009].

23 Hivyo basi unapotaka kutoa ushahidi wa aya nakuomba uwe na uhakika na kile unachosema, ili usije ukawapoteza watu wengine nakuomba kwa moyo mkunjufu rudi kwenye tafsiri ya kiswahili ya Qur-aan ya sheikh Abdallah Saleh Farsiy utaona maana yake nini aya hiyo WA LLAAHU A’LAM. At <http://zanzibarwebsite.com> [accessed August 24, 2009].

24 Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte*.

25 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’.

26 van de Bruinhorst, ‘Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur’an Translations’.

27 Bawazir, ‘Qur’an ni Mwongozo.’

28 Rajab, ‘Waislamu Tanzania’. Bachu quotes former Zanzibar president Salmin Amour in one of the moonsighting seminars: ‘In our countries there are splits resulting from different translations/interpretations (tafsiri)’ (Bachu, *Ufafanuzi*, p. 143).

29 Al-Farsy comments on Q. 53:28 (*But they have no knowledge therein. They follow nothing but conjecture; and conjecture avails nothing against Truth*) that real truth comes from the Qur’an and Sunna only and not from leaders and elders (*maraisi na Wazee*).

30 Information in this paragraph is based on an interview with al-Kindy, 13 September 2013, Dar es Salaam, and biographical comments in several volumes of his *tafsīr*.

31 Al Hatimy died in 2013 after 20 years of illness.

32 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 1, p 14. See also similar expressions in his commentaries on Q. 7:142 and Q. 10:26.

33 Pink, ‘Tradition, Authority and Innovation’, pp. 61–2.

34 See for example the exegesis of Q. 37:102–7 in which al-Kindy quickly denounces the many early commentators who interpret the near sacrifice of Abraham’s son as referring to Isaac instead of the later exegetical traditions who favour Ishmael as the intended victim.

35 All English translations of Qur’an verses come from the internet version of Yūsuf ‘Alī’s *The Meanings Of The Holy Qur’an* at <http://www.islam101.com/quran/yusufAli/> which differs slightly from the print editions.

36 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 1, p. 23.

37 As in al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 1, p. 237.

38 Ibādīs, just like Shī’īs, believe that the Qur’an is created and differs from the essential speech of God. As on all controversial issues al-Kindy is very careful to vent his opinion on this. For example in his commentary on Q. 4:82 he formulates a clear distinction between the Qur’an and (other?) creatures: *qurani hii imetoka kwa Mwenyezi Mungu na maneno yaliyomo ndani ya Qur’ani ni tafauti kabisa na maneno ya kiumbe* (‘The Qur’an comes from God and the words it contains are totally different from human words’). In several other places al-Kindy’s

commentary almost implies an affinity with mainstream Sunni/Ash‘arī theology and assumes that the Qur’an is uncreated, for example, *Mwenyezi Mungu mwenyewe aliyetuumba na ndiye aliyeteremsha Qurani* (‘God Himself has created us and He is the one who sent down the Qur’an’; vol. 1, p. 360). He does name the Qur’an as the ‘words of God’ (*maneno ya Mungu*) but refuses to declare if the Qur’an is identical with God’s essential speech or not. Instead of these theological nuances al-Kindy prefers to talk about the Qur’an as a *ponyo* (‘healing’), *nuru* (‘light’), *rafiki* (‘companion’), and *kinga* (‘protection’).

39 Whereas his student Juma al-Mazrui has already published more than 1,000 pages on this subject (cf. van de Bruinhorst, ‘Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur’an Translations’), al-Kindy recognises that there is here a great difference of opinion among the scholars (*pana khiitlafu kubwa sana tena sana baina ya wanavyuoni*), but instead of explaining the difference he just states that the evidence of God’s non-visibility in the afterlife is more trustworthy and reliable (Q. 10:26).

40 See for example his commentary on Q. 38:27, *they will remain forever in the Fire because of their Unbelief*.

41 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 181.

42 For some information on some of these translations see Lacunza Balda, *An Investigation*, Chesworth, *The Use of Scripture*, and Mazrui, *Swahili beyond the Boundaries*, pp. 83–122.

43 Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui (1891–1947) translated only part of the Qur’an himself during his life. When he died he had only produced the footnotes up to Q. 3:170. His disciple Kasim Mazrui completed suras 3 and 4. I used the 1980 reprint of the first volume (Mazrui, *Tafsiri ya Qur’ani Tukufu*).

44 Al-Barwani, *Tarjama ya ‘Al Muntakhab’*.

45 Mughniyya, *Tarjama ya Tafsir al-Kashif*.

46 Salafī translation published in parts and completed in 2012 (www.alhidaaya.com).

47 This *Tarjama ya Qur-aan Tukufu Neno Kwa Neno Kwa Lugha ya Kiswahili* is a word for word translation produced by Ummu Iyyaad-Talha Muhammad which appeared a short while on the website Alhidaaya.com in 2008–9.

48 English Qur’an translations reveal the same preference for explaining/translating *shahida* by a synonym of *ḥaḍara*: six out of ten use ‘being present’, two choose the option of ‘sighting the *hilāl*’, the final two choose to remain close to the Arabic but stick to a polyvalent meaning, ‘to witness the month’ and ‘behold the month’ (www.quranbrowser.com).

49 Jumuiya Zawiyatul Qadiriya Tanzania, *Mjadala*, p. 219. This paraphrase is probably inspired by the Muntakhab, who explain this sentence as *fa-man adrak hadha’l-shahr salīman ghayr marīd, muqayyiman ghayr musāfir fa-‘alayhi ṣawmihi*. See <http://elazhar.com/qurana/baqarah/185.asp> [accessed 16 July 2014]. Note the choice for the loanword *diriki* compared to the proper Swahili of Barwani *kuuwahi* (table 1).

50 Lech, *Das Ramadan Fasten*, p. 23. Few (Arabic) *mufasssūrūn* deny the acceptability of translating *ra’ā* (‘to see’) as equivalent to *shahida*. One of them, Muḥammad ‘Alī aṣ-Ṣābūnī (b. 1930), is often quoted in the polemical works of international moonsighters, for example in Kamati ya Taaluma Masjid Sunna Zanzibar, *Ukweli*, p. 58.

51 Ibn Kathīr inserts in his *tafsīr* the word *istihlāl*, which is translated in the Swahili version of Ibn Kathīr by the much more neutral *kuanza kwa mwezi* (‘the start of the month’) without any reference to the first appearance of the crescent (http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=253). This is probably due to the fact that the Tanzanian translators might have used the English version instead of the Arabic, as they did in their translation of Sayyid Quṭb’s *In the Shade of the Qur’an* (Craze, *Islamic Modernism*, p. 14). Cf. Mazrui, *Jawabu yetu*, p. 225–6, in which he suggests *dukhūl shahr* (‘entering’, ‘beginning

of the month') as a possible interpretation: *ataye shuhudia miongoni mwenu [uingiaji wa] mwezi*.

52 Al-Mazrui, *Ushahidi*, pp. 68–85.

53 Jumuiya, *Mjadala*, p. 223.

54 Sh. Ahmad Zubeir, *Kongamano la mwezi* 1998, transcript provided by Masoud Mohamed Said, *Kwa nini tuabudu?!*, p. 5.

55 Al-Kindy uses capital letters to indicate that these parts are direct translations from the Arabic.

56 In his earlier *ḥadīth* collection al-Kindy offers another translation of Q. 2:185 that is much closer and almost identical to the al-Farsy version: *Na ataekuwa katika mji katika huu (mwezi wa Ramadhani) basi afunge (he who will be in town in this [month of Ramaḍān], let him fast)* (al-Kindy, *Mkweli mwaminifu*, vol. 1, p. 111).

57 'Mjadala wa mwezi kengeja', p. 7.

58 Apparently a spelling error for *khabari* (as in the footnote of this verse). The error is reproduced everywhere since Barwani's *tarjama* of the *Muntakhab* is widely available on the internet.

59 In most polemical literature this *jāhili* practice of entering houses from the back is attributed to one's opponents. For example the Ahmadiyya who advocate the use of astronomical calculations say that the old-fashioned naked-eye sighters are like those who enter their house from the back (Editorial, *Mapenzi ya Mungu*, April 1988).

60 Among the ten English translations I checked, six translate *ahilla* with 'new moons'. Shakir has 'new moon' (singular) and the other three have 'phases of the moon'. One (Salafi) website mentions 'crescents' (<http://www.qss.org/articles/celebrations/10-2.html> [accessed 16 July 2014]).

61 Mazrui, *Jawabu yetu*, p. 102.

62 Clear explanation of the two options to be found in Mazrui, *Jawabu yetu*, p. 115, etc.

63 Among the non-original Swahili translations the Lebanese *Tafsir al-kashif* provides a similar explanation of the absence of any scientific explanation. The Egyptian *Muntakhab* translated by Barwani adds a textbox explaining different moon phases from an astronomical perspective.

64 Kamati, *Ukweli*, p. 23.

65 Kamati, *Ukweli*, pp. 21–31.

66 See <http://main.altafsir.com/AsbabAlnuzol.asp?SoraName=2&Ayah=189&search=yes&img=A>. Criticised as the least trustworthy class of *ḥadīth mawḍūʿ* ('forged, fabricated') by Mazrui, *Ushahidi*, pp. 65–7.

67 Moonsighting seminar Kongamano la mwezi EACROTANAL, 1991, transcript p. 44.

68 al-Mazrui, *Ushahidi*, p. 65.

69 Shaykh Ba Hassan, in moonsighting seminar 'Kongamano la mwezi EACROTANAL', 1991, transcript pp 38–9.

70 Al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 1, Q. 2:185.

71 Al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 1, Q. 2:185.

72 Translation from http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=237 [accessed 4 July 2014]. Note how the first part refers to Q. 2:189 (*ahilla* and *mawāqūt li'l-nās*) from the context of the Ḥajj whereas the second part of the *ḥadīth* refers to the month of fasting.

73 http://www.altafsir.com/Books/Al_Jalalain_Eng.pdf.

74 See al-Mazrui, *Ushahidi*, pp. 64–7.

75 al-Kindy is a local moonsighter when it comes to Ramaḍān but prefers one global ‘*ʿid al-kabīr*’ because ‘*ʿArafa is one*’ (interview, 13 September 2013). In this particular point he disagrees with the official view of the Grand Mufti of Oman, al-Khalīlī, who neither follows the Saudi Umm al-Qurā calendar for Ramaḍān nor for Dhū’l-Ḥijja.

76 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 35. As elsewhere, al-Kindy is rather uncritical towards the reliability of his sources. In fact his quote ‘*li-kulli baladin ru’yatuhu*’ is not part of the *ḥadīth* itself but added as a chapter title by the *ḥadīth* collector al Tirmidhī and reflects the opinion of contemporary scholars, not an authentic text (cf. van de Bruinhorst, *Raise your Voices*, p. 210). Disdainfully the international moonsighter Ahmad Majid Ali remarks: ‘The people of the other side cling to these two words [i.e. *ikhtilāf al-maṭāliʿ* and *li-kulli baladin ru’yatuhu*] GCvdB] but they are not in the Qur’an!’ (Kongomano la Mwezi, 1991, transcript p. 18).

77 Narrated by Ibn Kathīr, Q. 49:12.

78 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 46.

79 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 38, p. 116, p. 564.

80 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 584.

81 al-Kindy, *Asili*, vol. 9, p. 47.

82 Former bishop Mwaipopo founded the activist Qur’an reading council BALUKTA in 1987. In the Swahili media he serves as an iconic victim of Christian repression; see Wijisen and Mfumbusa, *Seeds of Conflict*, p. 58, and Chesworth, *The Use of Scripture*, pp. 183–6, p. 428–9 and the references there.

83 Said, *Kwa nini*, p. 50.

84 <http://islamicides.com/index.php/about-us>.

85 Masoud, *Kwa nini*, p. iv.

86 The two most important articles describing his quest for the truth are ‘Mawimbi kama kioo cha kuuangalia mwezi’ and ‘Kupwaa na kujaa kwa bahari’, which are found on his website.

87 Masoud meticulously searched for textual evidence for starting the day at sunset, which is the commonly held view in *fiqh*. However, he could not find convincing proof and therefore takes the day of ‘*ʿArafa* (9 Dhū’l-Ḥijja) as the model Islamic day; this is the only day in the Islamic calendar that starts at *fajr*.

88 Said, *Kupwaa na kujaa kwa bahari*, p. 4. For references to other sea-related fatalities, see p. 11. I once asked him after another ferry disaster if any of the victims were related to him and he answered: ‘Everyone in any village in Pemba has bodies in the Indian Ocean’.

89 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’, p. 103.

90 Loimeier, ‘Translating the Qur’an in Sub-Saharan Africa’, p. 417.

91 van de Bruinhorst, ‘Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur’an Translations’.

92 When al-Mazrui lists the different opinions of the schools of law, he often starts with Ibādī (*Ushahidi*, p. 28). In one of his books he presents a long biographical eulogy on Muftī Khalīlī.

93 Cf. Mazrui, *Ushahidi*, pp. 61–85.

94 Mazrui, *Jawabu yetu*, p. 6, p. 109; See for example the fatwās of Muḥammad b. al-ʿUthaymīn (1925–2001) explaining his local moonsighting perspective for both Ramaḍān and the Sacrificial Feast.

95 Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’, p. 110.

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