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# Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy's Mrima Swahili Translation of the Qur'an and its Place in Islamic Scholarship in East Africa

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# SHAYKH ALI HEMED AL-BUHRIY'S MRIMA SWAHILI TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS PLACE IN ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN EAST AFRICA

Abdin Chande\*

**Abstract:** Dutch scholar Ridder Samsom has noted that few of the writings of religious scholars among the Swahili speaking peoples of coastal East Africa have survived destruction caused by natural and human factors. Other factors that have complicated matters include the political developments and uncertainties of the colonial period (late 19<sup>th</sup> century to roughly 1960) that led to the abandonment of the use of the Arabic script, not to mention ongoing weak conservation practices. Nevertheless, the recent identification of a Swahili manuscript of the Qur'ān in Arabic script by Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy (1889-1957), undoubtedly the foremost Islamic religious scholar of mainland Tanzania during the colonial period, represents an important contribution to the still-growing Islamic scholarship in East Africa. The manuscript (in Mrima, the Swahili dialect spoken on the northern coast of mainland Tanzania) ranks alongside Swahili translations of the Qur'ān by other leading Islamic scholars of East Africa such as Shaykh al-Amin Mazrui of Mombasa, a colleague and personal friend of the Shaykh. It was handwritten by Shaykh al-Buhriy in the 1950s during the terminal phase of the colonial era. The Shaykh had served as the *qadhi* (Muslim judge) of Tanga (1921-1935), although his position approximated that of the chief *qadhi* of Tanganyika, a post that, unlike the case of Kenya, had never been created.

**Keywords:** *Swahili, tafsir, Mrima, qadhi, Tanga, scholars*

## INTRODUCTION

Writing this paper was prompted by the discovery of a hitherto unknown Swahili translation of the Qur'ān by a well-known Islamic scholar, Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy (1889-1957), whose family has a reputation in the local Tangan and the national Tanzanian Muslim communities. Dutch scholar Ridder Samsom (a specialist in Swahili manuscript

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\* Abdin Chande is an Associate Professor of History at Adelphi University, Garden City, NY, USA. I was fortunate to receive a sample of this important translation from a member of this scholarly family (Zuheri Ali b. Hemed) who, until his death in 2015, was preparing the manuscript in Roman script for publication. My intention is to examine this translation in relation to a few others like it that were produced within the colonial and post-colonial East African setting. This will provide the backdrop against which I will present some snapshots of its contents, the methodology employed and the purpose it is supposed to serve. Ultimately, this discussion will be situated within the larger context of changing social and political realities that impinge on Muslim life, the development of exegetical tradition and Islamic scholarship in East Africa with which coastal Swahili families of Arab descent are associated.

culture) first made me aware of this translation by the Tangan scholar. This is despite the fact that a few decades earlier I had met and interviewed members of the Buhriy family in Tanga and Dar es Salaam as part of my research on Islam in Tanga (local context) and Tanzania (national context). Samsom was kind enough to convince the late Zuheri Hemed, who had been transcribing the manuscript belonging to his father, to provide me access to a sample of this collection (consisting of the first six chapters of the Qur'ān) for my study.

The study is divided into two parts: the first part presents the scholarly background of the Buhriy family of Tanga by way of highlighting the contributions of Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy in the development of the Islamic scholarly tradition in coastal East Africa. It includes an examination of the role Swahili families of Arab origins/ancestry have played (especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century onset of Omani-Busaid rule based in Zanzibar) in deepening and promoting higher Islamic religious learning in the region. In other words, the Omani presence encouraged religious scholars from southern Yemen and Oman as well as the Indian ocean island of the Comoros and Benadir/southern Somali coast (towns such as Barawa) to relocate to coastal towns thereby stimulating and entrenching the written orthodox tradition.

The second part of the paper focuses on the role and place of Swahili translations and commentaries of the Qur'ān in East Africa in the dissemination of knowledge about Islam among the masses. This includes discussing the motivations behind the local Muslim scholars' preference for regional or coastal dialects of Swahili over the standard Swahili (created during the colonial period) as most suitable for the Qur'ānic translation. This provides context within which to examine Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy's translation of the Qur'ān as well as his outlook and approach to the text. More specifically, the last section of the paper presents a summary and analysis of the first two chapters of the Qur'ān along with a discussion of the components that this commentary shares with others.

The purpose in all this is to understand the importance of the Qur'ān in the life of East African Muslims in general and Swahili Muslims in particular as it plays a role in worship and local Muslim scholarship; informs Muslim practices and what they believe and consider to be sacred; structures they learn in Muslim madrasa (schools) and mosque-based Qur'ānic study circles in this part of the world; and, through its aural dimension, provides access to the Qur'ānic message through sound (hence its performance in different contexts). This will provide some idea as to why Swahili translations of the Qur'ān, which began modestly during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had by the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century right up to beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century become a main feature of Islam East Africa. What factors drove this need to translate the Qur'ān in the Swahili language during the colonial and post-colonial eras?

To understand this Qur'ānic manuscript within its proper social and Islamic scholarly contexts, a short sketch of its author is necessary to shed some light on his scholarly background and the function and purpose for which his translation was supposed to serve. The manuscript (in its original handwritten Arabic script form) consists of 402 pages of a

foolscap linen-bound ledger.<sup>1</sup> The sample in my possession, the first chapter and parts of the second chapter of the Qur'ān, represents the efforts of the late Shaykh's son, Zuheri Ali Hemed, who had been in the process of preparing the manuscript in Roman script for publication. It is part of a larger collection in the possession of Zuheri who had found it outside in the courtyard of a house in Dar es Salaam, among books and papers previously in the custody of his elder brother, Shaykh Muhammad Ali Hemed (1927-1995).<sup>2</sup> While the manuscript was not seriously damaged by rain, the whole episode of recovering it sadly illustrates the fact the writings of religious scholars from the Swahili world have not often survived the destruction caused by natural and human factors.<sup>3</sup>

## THE LEGACY OF THE BUHRIY FAMILY: ISLAM AND ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN TANGA

Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy was born in Mtangata (Tanga) in the period of German colonial rule of Tanzania. His first teacher and mentor was his father, Shaykh Hemed b. Abdalla al-Buhriy (1840-1928), from whom he received his earliest Islamic education before continuing his studies with other leading scholars of Tanga, including renowned scholar of Islamic law Shaykh Omar Stambuli,<sup>4</sup> former *qadhi* (Muslim judge) of Tanga and former student of Shaykh Ali Abdalla Naf'i al-Mazrui (d. 1894) of Mombasa.<sup>5</sup> He was also educated by Shaykh Khamis b. Salim and Abdus Sadiq Bawazir.<sup>6</sup> Later he travelled to Zanzibar to study under Sayyid Ahmad Sumayt,<sup>7</sup> the venerated scholar and *qadhi* of Zanzibar (Zanzibar was arguably the leading centre of Islamic learning in East Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). More specifically, Sayyid Sumayt's reputation extended beyond East Africa to the Arab world (he had travelled and studied in that part of

<sup>1</sup> Ridder Samsom, "Why Write in the Abandoned Arabo-Swahili Script?," Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, November 2013, [http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/mom/2013\\_11\\_mom\\_e.html](http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/mom/2013_11_mom_e.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ridder Samsom, "The Dissolved Collection of Sheikh Aliy Hemed Abdalla al-Buhriy (1889-1957)," *Islamic Africa* 6 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ann Biersteker and Mark Plane, "Swahili Manuscripts and the Study of Swahili Literature," *Research in Africa Literatures* 20, no. 3 (1989); "The Manuscripts of the Riyadh Mosque of Lamu, Kenya (EAP466), Endangered Archives Programme, <https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP466>. accessed October 23, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Abdin Chande, "Islam, Islamic Leadership and Community Development in Tanga, Tanzania" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1991). See also the Buhriy family website at <http://alibinhemed.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Ghalib Yusuf Tamim Baalawy, "Sh. Ali bin Abdalla bin Nafi Mazrui: the Pioneering Role Model of the Islamic East African Reformers" (paper presented at the University of Cape Town's Religious Leadership in East Africa: Christian Evangelism and Islamic Reform workshop, Limuru, Cape Town, July 2-6, 2013), accessed October 23, 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/5286798/Sh\\_Ali\\_bin\\_Abdalla\\_bin\\_Nafi\\_Mazrui\\_The\\_Pioneering\\_Role\\_Model\\_of\\_the\\_East\\_Africa\\_Muslim](https://www.academia.edu/5286798/Sh_Ali_bin_Abdalla_bin_Nafi_Mazrui_The_Pioneering_Role_Model_of_the_East_Africa_Muslim).

<sup>6</sup> Samsom, "The Dissolved Collection," 206.

<sup>7</sup> Abdallah Salih al-Farsy, *Baadhi ya Wanavyuoni wa Kishafi wa Mashariki ya Afrika* [Some East African Shafi'i Scholars] (Mombasa: Adam Publishers, 1972) discusses the leading Islamic scholars of East Africa from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, among whom the top two were Sayyid Ahmad Sumayt and Abdalla Bakathir (both of Hadhrami/South Yemeni origins). Both lived in Zanzibar, which was a major centre of Islamic learning in East Africa for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1964, the Zanzibar revolution and resulting overthrow of Arab rule led to scholars (especially those of Arab ancestry) leaving the island or fleeing to Oman.

the world, including spending some time in Istanbul where he is said to have met the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid).<sup>8</sup>

Given his extensive religious training, Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy began to train his own students and went on to become among the leading scholars of Islamic law in East Africa.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Schacht, who met him in 1953, described him as the most learned Shafi'i scholar he had ever met.<sup>10</sup> He lived during the heyday of another scholarly giant of Islam in East Africa, Shaykh al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui (the father of the late Prof. Ali Mazrui),<sup>11</sup> whose family had ruled Mombasa and its dependencies for over a century until 1837. The two men were of Omani ancestry and both (because of their legal Islamic training) had served as *qadhis* during the British colonial period. They were close friends who lived just a few hours' drive from each other in coastal Swahili towns that were known (especially Mombasa, a major powerhouse of Islamic learning in East Africa) for their Islamic scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Mombasa, being a much larger cosmopolitan town than Tanga, was more receptive to modernist Islam<sup>13</sup> of which Shaykh Mazrui became the leading figure during his time. The Buhriy family has its origins in Pemba island from where Shaykh Buhriy's grandfather had migrated to Mtangata on the mainland coast of Tanga in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and eventually some members of the family ended up in Tanga town. They embraced a more traditional Islam that included a fascination with the occult sciences, for which Pemba was known.

For purposes of comparison, the Buhriy family of Tanga is the equivalent in some ways to the Mazrui family of Mombasa as its members have been leading poets and Islamic legal scholars in Tanga for almost two centuries.<sup>14</sup> The family attained fame as poets (including the Shaykh's father, Hemed b. Abdallah al-Buhriy) as poetry was cultivated by all the cultured, educated Swahili.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Hemed b. Abdalla al-Buhriy had a national reputation as a poet and healer and as the foremost astrologer on the Mrima. He composed the famous *utendi*/poem "The Epic on the War of the Germans to seize the Mrima Coast," depicting the struggle or resistance by local people against German attempts to take over the Tanganyikan

<sup>8</sup> Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860-1925* (London: Routledge Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> The shaykh's writings include: *A Handbook of the Mohamedan Law of Inheritance* (Nairobi: n.p., 1923); *Taarifu juu ya Tafsiri ya Wakadiani* [Information on the Qadian Translation] (Mombasa: Adam Traders, 1954); and contributions to "Habari za Mrima" in *Mambo Leo*, 1934-36.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Schacht, "Notes on Islam in East Africa," *Studia Islamica* 23 (1965), 109.

<sup>11</sup> Ghalib Yusuf Tamim, "Prof Ali A. Mazrui: The Re-incarnation of Sh. Ali b. Abdalla Naf'i" (paper presented at the seminar in honour of Prof Ali A. Mazrui, Mombasa, Kenya, December 15, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Prof. Al-Amin Mazrui, who teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey, US, spent part of his youth living in Tanga with a member of the Buhriy family.

<sup>13</sup> Randall Pouwels, "Sh. al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui and Islamic Modernism in East Africa, 1875-1947," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13 (1981). The ideas of Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh filtered through to East Africa via Zanzibar and eventually reached Mombasa.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui, *The History of the Mazrui Dynasty of Mombasa* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> J. W. T. Allen, "The Collection of Swahili Literature and its Relation to Oral Tradition and History," *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 53 (1959).

coast in 1888-89.<sup>16</sup> His son, Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy, a *qadhi* and legal scholar who gave fatwa (religious rulings), developed very close ties with his contemporary, Shaykh al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui (1891-1947) of Mombasa, who also issued fatwas and served as the chief *qadhi* of Kenya.

## SWAHILIS OF ARAB DESCENT AND THEIR ROLE IN ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN EAST AFRICA

Although many of the earliest Omani Arabs who came to East Africa were Ibadhis, a good many of their offspring, including the Mazruis and Buhriys (having lost the sense of religious differentiation), are today Sunnis. This is because all Arabs of the coast are part of the larger Swahili community which is mainly Sunni. Therefore, unlike the South Asians, with their distinct ethnic identities, the local Omanis speak Kiswahili as their first language and have close religious, cultural and other ties to the Swahilis. A very good example of an Omani family that has been completely assimilated or integrated into the local Swahili identity is the well-known Buhriy family of poets and religious scholars.<sup>17</sup> It is an influential family of Sunni scholars that has exercised leadership and whose fame extends to the national Muslim community of Tanzania.

The genesis of this scholarly life of the Swahili coastal community, represented by such eminent families, goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when several important developments took place. The presence of Omanis in coastal East Africa in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century during the heyday of their Zanzibari commercial empire had far-reaching consequences for the intellectual life of the Muslim communities of the region. Clearly, Omani Arabs contributed to literacy and the growth of higher Islamic education for which the coastal region became well-known for in East Africa.<sup>18</sup> By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century books became more readily available and clearly the presence of the Busaid (which encouraged religious scholars from Hadhramawt/Yemen and Oman, the Comoros and the Benadir or southern Somali coast to relocate to coastal towns) stimulated and deepened the written orthodox tradition. The intensive interaction between Omani Ibadhis and the local African Sunnis (including Hadhramis) resulted in Omanis not only losing Arabic as their first language (they became Swahili speakers) but also several leading Ibadhi families such as Busaid, Mazrui, Hinawy (which includes the Buhriy of Tanga) and Barwani ended up following Shafi' rites.<sup>19</sup>

Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy attained such a reputation that most of the major Islamic scholars of Tanga and its hinterland during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been trained as scholars either by him or his former students. The Shaykh's son, Shaykh

<sup>16</sup> Hemedi bin Abdallah Buhriy, *Utenzi wa Vita vya Wadachi Kutamalaki Mrima, 1307 A.H.* [The German Conquest of the Swahili Coast, 1891 CE], 3rd ed., trans. J. W. T. Allen (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> See the Buhriy family photos at <http://alibinhemed.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> Randall Pouwels, "Islam and Islamic Leadership in the Coastal Communities of Eastern Africa, 1700-1914" (PhD diss., University of California, 1979), 437-441. See also Chande, "Islam, Islamic Leadership and Community Development," chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> Pouwels, "Islam and Islamic Leadership," 392.

Muhammad Ali al-Buhriy, was an Islamic legal scholar who also pursued a university degree at Dar es Salaam University. Shaykh Muhammad al-Buhriy (served in the Attorney General's office, as an authority on the Swahili language, as a member of the East African Swahili Committee and later became the Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Tanzanian Muslims/BAKWATA) and his cousin, Shaykh Hemed b. Juma al-Buhriy (became the Grand Shaykh of BAKWATA) due to the great fame the family enjoys locally and nationally, played a role in the affairs of the Tanzanian Muslim community.

Clearly, Shaykh Ali al-Buhriy's contributions to Islam in Tanzania included the training of students from the Tanga region and beyond who came to study with him and later went back to their villages or towns to teach Islam; offering religious rulings on questions that were addressed to him for his opinions; giving sermons, *darasas* (teaching in the mosque) and leading the Muslim congregational prayers and so on. He also saw it as part of his responsibility as a scholar to educate Muslims on matters relating to their religion. This led him to write several books (some of which were published),<sup>20</sup> including his unpublished Swahili translation of the Qur'ān in Mrima Swahili. This translation of the Qur'ān was used by Qur'ānic teachers as far away as Dar es Salaam and probably beyond. It is not clear though to what extent it disseminated in Tanzania. In any case, one Dar es Salaam-based teacher mentions that he prefers this Mrima version of the Qur'ānic commentary as it is more accessible to his students from mainland Tanzania than the literary mother tongue Swahili varieties of the type produced by the Zanzibari scholars, Shaykh al-Farsy and Shaykh al-Barwani.<sup>21</sup>

## SWAHILI TRANSLATIONS OF THE QUR'ĀN

Although important advances have been made since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the production and dissemination of Swahili translation and interpretation of the Qur'ān; nonetheless, more work needs to be done in the study and analyses of these works and others that have not yet been published. By the 1990s, translations of the Qur'ān existed in Mombasan<sup>22</sup> and Zanzibari<sup>23</sup> Swahili and Buhriy's Mrima translation (once it is fully transcribed from Arabic into Roman script and eventually published) will be an important addition. It will be the first translation of the Qur'ān undertaken by a scholar based in mainland Tanzania during the late colonial period.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, Shaykh al-Buhriy's

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 9 above.

<sup>21</sup> Samsom, "The Dissolved Collection," 207.

<sup>22</sup> Shaykh al-Amin bin Ali al-Mazrui of Mombasa began work on the translation of the Qur'ān in Kiswahili during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A printed translation of the 30<sup>th</sup> portion of the Qur'ān was ready by the 1930s.

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy, *Qurani Takatifu* [Holy Qur'ān] (Nairobi: The Islamic Foundation, 1969); Ali Muhsin Al-Barwani, *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab Katika Tafsiri ya Qur'ani Tukufu* [A Translation into Swahili of al-Muntakhab being an Interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān] (Abu Dhabi: Zayed Bin Sultan al-Nahayan Foundation, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Newer Swahili translations of the Qur'ān have been appearing during the last several decades, including the Shi'i-inspired *Tafsir al-Kashif* by Sheikh Hassan Ali Mwalupa (Dar es Salaam: Al-Itrah Foundation, 2003). More accurately, he translated from Arabic the *Tafsir al-Kashif* of Allama Mohamed Jawad Mughniyya (d. 1979) into Kiswahili. Mwalupa (d. 2021) is a Tangan who received his earliest education

work will be a unique and invaluable source that represents by far the most important work by the author. More works such as these are still in manuscript form and hopefully once published will enrich the literary tradition in the coastal region and help to put to rest the perception that Swahili scholars relied entirely on the oral method to pass on information to students. That there exists a textual tradition should come as no surprise as Islam with its focus on the Qur'ān in its oral/auditory and written forms, encourages Muslims to read, ponder and write/copy passages of the Qur'ān for ritual, teaching and other purposes. Moreover, we know that some leading scholars in East Africa wrote in Arabic<sup>25</sup> (material that was meant for teaching purposes) for their prospective students as well as perhaps for other scholars.<sup>26</sup>

Based on available copies of his writings, Shaykh al-Amin bin Ali al-Mazrui of Mombasa was probably the first Muslim scholar to attempt a printed translation of the 30<sup>th</sup> portion of the Qur'ān in the 1930s. His superb translation was in Mvita/Mombasan Swahili and soon became part of a full-blown project (the first two chapters were published in Lahore) to translate the entire Qur'ān. Unfortunately, several factors, including the uncertainties of World War II and his untimely death in 1947, interrupted these efforts. Shaykh al-Amin's uncompleted Qur'ān translation work was taken up by his son-in-law and former chief *qadhi* of Kenya, Shaykh Muhammad Kassim al-Mazrui (d. 1982) and by Shaykh Kassim's son (Shaykh Hamad al-Mazrui, who also in recent decades has served as the chief *qadhi* of Kenya) but as far as I know remains unfinished.<sup>27</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Kassim believed the Mvita dialect of Swahili (asserting it has greater phonological proximity to Arabic) was the most suitable of all the Swahili dialects for Qur'ānic translation.<sup>28</sup> This is a clear rejection of

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from the well-known Madrasatu Shamsiyya in Tanga where he is said to have mastered the Arabic language at an early age. He later joined the Shi'i Bilal Muslim Mission in Mombasa, Kenya, for further studies.

Another Shi'i translation is Ali b. Juma Mayunga's *Tarjuma ya Qur'an Tukufu* [Interpretation of the Glorious Qur'ān], which was published in Qum, Iran, in 2003. Other scholars that have produced Swahili versions of some chapters of the Qur'ān include: Said Musa Mohamed al-Kindi and Asili ya Uwongofu (he lives in Muscat), whose intention apparently is to produce a new commentary of the entire Qur'ān. See uwongofu, "Sheikh Said Moosa Mohammed Alkindy-1," YouTube video, 18:09, posted March 21, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev\\_0sVxdgXg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev_0sVxdgXg). Another scholar, Machano Makame Machano of Zanzibar, has also produced a translation of the second chapter of the Qur'ān.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Hassan bin Ameir Shirazi published only in Arabic whereas Shaykh Saleh al-Farsy, Ahmad Badawiy and others wrote in Swahili and Arabic. For disseminating information on Islam for educational purposes and reaching a Swahili reading audience, Shaykh al-Amin al-Mazrui and his colleague in Tanga, Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy, were probably the earliest scholars to write or publish in Swahili. See some of al-Buhriy's publications mentioned in footnote 9 above.

<sup>26</sup> As reported by Ghalib Tamimi, a 19<sup>th</sup> century handwritten family copy of the *Tafsir Jalalayn* was passed from one generation of Mazrui scholars to the next, starting with Shaykh Ali Abdalla Nafi al-Mazrui (d. 1894), then Sh Suleiman Ali al-Mazrui, followed by Sh al-Amin al-Mazrui (d. 1947) until reaching Sh. Muhammad Kassim al-Mazrui (d. 1982). Each of the four scholars scribbled their own notes in the margins of this family copy (presumably in Swahili or most likely in Swahili and Arabic). See Baalawy, "Sh. Ali bin Abdalla bin Nafi Mazrui."

<sup>27</sup> Al-Amin al-Mazrui, *Cultural Politics of Translation: East Africa in a Global Context* (NY, London: Routledge, 2016), 27. Al-Amin al-Mazrui's brother, Shaykh Hammad al-Mazrui, as well as their father, Shaykh Muhammad Kassim al-Mazrui, attempted to complete a translation of the Qur'ān begun by the late Shaykh al-Amin al-Mazrui (d. 1947).

<sup>28</sup> Al-Amin al-Mazrui is a professor of sociolinguistics, literature and cultural studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey, US. I received from him a copy of one of the translated portions of the Qur'ān in Kimvita



the standard Swahili that was created during the colonial period by European Christian missionaries based on spoken, not written or literary forms of the language.

With respect to Zanzibar, its foremost scholar of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Shaykh Abdallah Saleh al-Farsy (d. 1982), Sh. Al-Amin Mazrui's student, produced a complete translation of the Qur'ān in Zanzibari Swahili by the late 1960s. It was written in response to the sectarian translation in 1953 by Shaikh Mubarak A. Ahmadi, the Indian member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in East Africa who was a non-native speaker of Swahili. Interestingly, the Ahmadiyya standard Swahili translation had been written as a polemical retort to another earlier standard Swahili translation of the Qur'ān by yet another non-native Swahili speaker, Godfrey Dale (1861-1941). Dale was an Anglican priest whose 1923 translation of the Qur'ān was written for Christian missionary propaganda purposes to combat the spread of Islam. In any case, al-Farsy's translation appeared in parts from 1950 until 1969, when the entire translation was completed. In 1995 Ali Muhsin Al-Barwani, another Zanzibari and former minister in the pre-revolutionary Zanzibari government, produced a two-volume work titled *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab Katika Tafsiri ya Qur'ani Tukufu* (a translation into Swahili of al-Muntakhab being an interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān) also in non-standard Swahili.

## TRANSLATIONS OF THE QUR'ĀN IN LITERARY VS STANDARD SWAHILI

It is interesting to note that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sunni Muslim scholars undertook their translations of the Qur'ān in Swahili with such urgency (despite the earlier Muslim belief of the untranslatability of the Qur'ān) at the same time that they chose to do so in literary rather than the standard form of the language. One obvious explanation for this is that in East Africa the translation efforts were clearly seen as a tool in the polemical struggles that Muslims were waging against the smaller sectarian Ahmadiyya movement (with origins in the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent) on one hand and the well-funded anti-Islam Christian missionaries who had close ties to the colonial governments on the other.<sup>29</sup> As for the Ahmadiyya, it does not seem to be coincidence that Shaykh al-Farsy's and al-Buhriy's translations began around the same decade perhaps partly as a reaction to the initiative of the Ahmadiyya movement and its efforts to expound and diffuse its views.<sup>30</sup> This was also the period of a quite well-

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Kiswahili by members of his family. Given his academic training and membership in the Mazrui scholarly family, his book on the cultural politics of translation provides an in-depth investigation of the cultural factors that influence translation in the East African region.

<sup>29</sup> The many instances of tensions between colonial administrators and Christian missionaries resulted mainly from conflicts of objectives; for instance, in the area of education. The colonial governments, in Tanzania, to give just one example, wanted missionaries to broaden their educational curriculum to include teaching subjects that had nothing to do with the Bible and would prepare Africans for employment in the lower ranks/levels of administration. In areas where there were no conflict of objective/mission, missionaries and colonial administrators maintained a close working relationship, as already mentioned, to de-Islamise Swahili and exercise linguistic control of Swahili in the process of creating a standard version of the language. In the area of language, Joseph Errington's *Linguistics in a Colonial World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) deals with this interplay between colonialism and the missionary enterprise. See al-Mazrui, *Cultural Politics of Translation*. Also, personal communications with him via email.

<sup>30</sup> al-Buhriy, *Taarifu juu ya Tafsiri ya Wakadiani*.

sustained anti-Ahmadi/Qadiani campaign by the Jamaat-e Islami organisation in Pakistan, which supported Shaykh al-Farsy's efforts to translate the Qur'ān in Swahili.

Efforts to promote the use of literary forms or dialects of Swahili in the production of Qur'ān-related works are partly related to the fact that coastal Muslim scholars see themselves as the custodians of the cultural/religious and literary heritage of the educated people within their societies. This explains why scholars such as Shaykh Kassim Mazrui have made a case for the Qur'ān to be translated in Mvita/Mombasan dialect of Swahili instead of adopting (as the Europeans did) the standardised language, i.e. the spoken language of Zanzibar town.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, for those (although their numbers are dwindling) who make a case as well for a return to the old Swahili script (i.e. Swahili-Arabic alphabet) and not just old Swahili literary language they view both as an integral part of coastal Swahili culture going as far back as the 11<sup>th</sup> century (examples of the old Swahili script have been found on coins and tombstones).<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, specimens of this old script were used in commercial documents, correspondence, genealogies of elite families, chronicles of towns and literary works. Most of these documents were destroyed during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese invasion of coastal East Africa accompanied by the systematic burning and looting of Mozambique, Kilwa, Mombasa, Barawa and other coastal towns that were ravaged by the Portuguese.<sup>33</sup> One consequence of the Swahili loss of their Indian ocean commerce, it is pointed out, was that the Swahili literary heritage survived mostly in the oral form whereas only a limited number of Swahili manuscripts, including a manuscript dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup> and 14 letters from 18<sup>th</sup> century Goa in India and the long poems/*tendi* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) have survived.<sup>35</sup> By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans have their first encounters with the chronicles of Swahili city states. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until around the period of World War II, the process began by which the old Swahili-Arabic script and old Swahili literary language were replaced by the Roman script (introduced by European Christian missionaries and colonial administrators) along with the "standard" Swahili used in modern Swahili literature.

For their part, Christian missionaries had their reasons for preferring or favouring the Roman script.<sup>36</sup> For one thing, it would facilitate the study of European languages and the

<sup>31</sup> For a sustained critique of standard Swahili, see Abdallah Khalid, *The Liberation of Swahili from European Appropriation* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1977). The British High Commission set up the East African Literature Bureau in 1947 to publish books for the general public in this standard Swahili (East African vernacular language) and English.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Zhukov, "Old Swahili-Arabic Script and the Development of Swahili Literary Language," *Sudanic Africa* 15 (2004).

<sup>33</sup> Yahya Ali Omar and P. J. L. Frankl, "An Historical Review of the Arabic Rendering of Swahili Together with Proposals for the Development of a Swahili Writing System in Arabic Script (Based on the Swahili of Mombasa)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>34</sup> Omar and Frankl, "An Historical Review," 55-71.

<sup>35</sup> Yahya Ali Omar and P. J. L. Frankl, "A 12/18th Century Swahili Letter from Kilwa Kisiwani (Being a Study of one Folio from the Goa Archives)," *Afrika und Übersee* 77 (1994): 263-272. See also Swahili Letters from Goa (380699) on the SOAS University of London's website <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/LSMD000381/00001/2x>.

<sup>36</sup> This was never the issue and, as Prof al-Amin Mazrui – a linguist and a Mombasan born native Swahili speaker – pointed out to me, technically, any script can be modified to make it compatible with the phonological system of virtually any language. Hence, the Arabic script has been so modified to write unrelated languages from different parts of the world, with immensely varying phonological systems. That

Christian Bible that came with them; for another, the Arabic script was considered by Christian missionaries such as Johann Ludwig Krapf (d. 1881) as aiding Islamic proselytisation of local ethnic groups. This led him to publish in standard Swahili using Romanised script.<sup>37</sup> Colonial administrators had similar concerns. For instance, in German East Africa (mainland Tanzania) colonial policy attempted to suppress the use of Swahili in Arabic script to arrest the spread of Islam in the country.<sup>38</sup> In effect, the Germans forbade official use of this script in 1902 while the British marginalised it by 1920 after taking over the territory from the Germans. By 1940, Swahili in Arabic script had lost out as it received no official support. Therefore, it is quite odd that it was in this very Swahili Arabic script that Shaykh Ali Hemed al-Buhriy chose to write his translation in the 1950s.<sup>39</sup>

One major outcome of the establishment and eventual entrenchment of European colonial rule in East Africa was that it led to the birth of a new colonially educated class distinct from the religious group that had been bypassed by the new socio-economic, political and educational changes in the region. In light of such changed circumstances Muslim religious scholars felt called upon to preserve the Islamic legacy by taking upon themselves the task of translating the religious texts, including the Qur'ān, thereby meeting the needs of people. To facilitate this process, scholars such as Shaykh al-Amin al-Mazrui, Shaykh Abdallah al-Farsy and later Shaykh al-Barwani started to prepare understandable translation and interpretation of the Qur'ān in non-standard Swahili. Shaykh al-Buhriy was the exception to the rule (at least as far as we know) as he had deliberately chosen to write his translation in the Arabic script.

Why was there a need for Qur'ānic translations combined with interpretations in vernacular languages such as Swahili, the major language of East and Central Africa and later even in regional languages such as Luganda<sup>40</sup> spoken in the southern half of Uganda? There is clearly widespread demand for translations of the Qur'ān among a generation of Muslims who are obliged to turn to translations to deepen their understanding of their faith. This is also the era in which Muslims, especially those living in the major urban centres, increasingly have access to not only printed material but also to pamphlets, audio and visual cassettes and even YouTube videos assuming they have access to the internet. The contemporary semantic fields of English (apart from English translations of the Qur'ān being in a style of language that the average Swahili-speaking reader may not be able to easily access or fully understand), in contrast to Swahili with its sizeable number of assimilated Arabic loan-words,

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aside, the main drivers for colonial language policy aimed at replacing the Arabic script with the Roman script are those we have already mentioned. See footnote 29 above. Interestingly, it has been stated by some scholars that “there can be absolutely no correct speaking of the Swahili language as spoken by the Swahili people, and no scholarly writing of the language, unless a sensible distinction in the sounds” is factored in the script (this is not the case with either the Roman or Arabic script). See Omar and Frankl, “An Historical Review of the Arabic Rendering of Swahili,” 61.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>39</sup> Samsom, “Why Write in the Abandoned Arabo-Swahili Script?”

<sup>40</sup> Shaykh Abdal-Razak Matovu (mufti of Uganda) wrote a translation of the meaning of the Qur'ān in Luganda. It is a translation with explanatory notes published in 1983 by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Kuwait. It is one-third the length of the Qur'ān and covers the first 11 chapters.

phrases and expressions, do not correspond so well to symbolic and wider semantic fields of Qur'ānic Arabic. In other words, the Qur'ānic language being rooted in a different semantic universe of allusions, parallels, ellipsis, etc., translators are often obliged to reinvent a “new” alternative vocabulary/language and forms of expression that can best convey the spiritual realities outside the confines of their languages. This approach may not be as necessary in languages as different as Berber dialects, Swahili (its local/literary coastal dialects), Somali and others that reveal the influence of Islam at the explicit and suggestive levels. Moreover, Qur'ānic translations such as those by Shaykh Hemed al-Buhriy are designed to reach an audience (consisting of students and presumably even the average mosque-goer) who may not or cannot undertake years of apprenticeship in the original Arabic.

One aspect of the Qur'ān that all translations must come to terms with is a concerted attempt to capture the Qur'ānic Arabic cadences/unique symphony; that is, its music, sound and rhythm that facilitate its memorisation by Arab and non-Arabic speakers. Listening to its verses being chanted can awaken deep spiritual emotions, especially in this era of readily available cassettes, CDs and internet sites combining recitations of the famous Qur'ānic reciters and imams of the holiest centres of Islam with screens of the Arabic text and translations in different languages spoken by Muslims. The gifted poetic translators may succeed even in partially capturing something of the musical rhythms of the Qur'ān and some of the intended meaning. This must be combined with a vast complex of Islamic learning that encompasses the occasions of revelation (*asbab nuzul*), exegesis (*tafsir*), Prophetic sayings (*ḥadīth*), stories of prophets (*qisas al-anbiya*), rhetoric (*balagha*) and legal matters (*fiqh*), all of which provide the matrix for the scholarly interpretation and comprehension.

It is important to mention in this context that there is confusion that may occur when the Swahili word “*tafsir*” (which is of Arabic origin) is used: it means “translation” as well as occasionally (depending on the context) it has the original Arabic meaning of “exegesis.” For this reason, Shaykh al-Barwani prefers the Arabic word “*tarjama*” or “translation” over the Swahili word “*tafsiri*,” which has ambiguous meaning and for Swahili speakers most often than not simply means translation. Therefore, Shaykh al-Buhriy’s work is strictly more of a translation and interpretation than it is a work presented in an extended *tafsir* style of Tabari, Razi or even the Jalalayn.

## SHAYKH ALI HEMED AL-BUHRIY’S TRANSLATION OF THE QUR’ĀN

Clearly, the exegetical tradition of the Qur'ān in Swahili came of age between the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century when complete and partial translations of chapters have appeared.<sup>41</sup> Non-Arabic translations have proliferated in other parts of Africa thus ending the hesitance on the part of scholars to produce written vernacular translations of the Qur'ān. In East Africa, Shaykh Ali al-Buhriy’s work can be

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<sup>41</sup> Gerard C. van de Bruinhorst, “The Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur’an Translations: The Three ‘Rods of Moses,’” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2013).

seen as part of these efforts to promote understanding of the Qur'ān in the local Mrima dialect of Swahili.

As for the Shaykh's Qur'ān translation, it is titled "al-Murshid al-Karim ila Tafsir al-Qur'an al-adhim" (the Noble Guide to the Interpretation of the Glorious Qur'ān). It is 402 pages long in 201 folios written on both sides in Qur'ānic Arabic and Arabo-Swahili script.<sup>42</sup> It is written in the Shaykh's beautiful hand with original Arabic written in red ink followed by the translation in dark blue ink.<sup>43</sup> In the introduction (*tangulizi*), the Shaykh mentions he has written this exegetical work, being a translation of the Qur'ān from Arabic into Swahili of the Mrima, hoping his efforts will be accepted by God and the book will be of benefit to Muslims. This suggests the work developed within the culture of *madrasa* education or scholarly training in which a student learnt, for instance, the exegesis of the Qur'ān from their teacher before they become qualified to teach their own crop of students in this field. This explains why it is a running translation written in the style of a teaching translation. It does not break with traditional translation by espousing/reflecting modernist, Salafi, Sufi or other positions/influences. Moreover, it does not engage in any polemics (at least those sections I have read). Also, unlike the case of the Mazrui family whose members have kept up the effort to complete the translation of the Qur'ān in Mvita Swahili, Shaykh al-Buhriy's family have not done so. This is despite the Shaykh's son, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Buhriy, and his nephew, Shaykh Hemed b. Juma, studying Qur'ānic exegesis with him and both were competent Qur'ānic exegetes/commentators. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the Shaykh's Qur'ānic manuscript has not been published and exists only as a handwritten copy produced in the 1950s with no follow-up attempts by members of his family to continue with the translation work beyond where he had stopped.

Without doubt, Shaykh al-Buhriy's translation is written in very elegant, polished Swahili of an educated person of this part of the world. Yet, despite its literary features, it is in a language that makes it comprehensible to his immediate coastal as well as Tanzanian hinterland audiences. One of its notable features (though this is not unique to it) is that it makes no references to any works of tafsir/exegesis, including the well-known 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* that is taught in East Africa's coastal *madrasas*.<sup>44</sup> Nor does it mention with which scholars the author had studied *tafsir*, something, for instance, Shaykh al-Farsy had to do to establish his credentials and justify why a translation in Swahili was necessary.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Samsom has published a sample of this tafsir in its original Arabic-Swahili script.

<sup>43</sup> His son, Zuheri Ali Hemed al-Buhriy (d. 2015), who found it before it began to fall apart, started to transliterate the Arabo-Swahili text into Roman script as early as July 2008. Samsom, "The Dissolved Collection," 201-208.

<sup>44</sup> *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (co-authored by the two Jalal ad-Din who lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century) is noted for its brevity and conciseness. For that reason, it is without doubt the most popular tafsir in West and East Africa. See Andrea Bigaglia, "Two Published Hausa Translations of the Qur'an and their Doctrinal Background," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35 (2005).

<sup>45</sup> Possibly this is due to the objections of some of the conservative Muslim scholars associated with the Riyadh Mosque of Lamu, who consider the Qur'ān to be untranslatable. A running debate has been occurring since the 1950s/1960s that pits Mombasa-based Muslim reformers (former students of Shaykh al-Amin al-Mazrui), notably Shaykh al-Farsy, and others who support his reformist ideas against religious

Moreover, this translation (unlike al-Farsy's) was not written as a response to or rebuttal of other preceding translations before it although the Shaykh wrote a separate book refuting the claims of the Ahmadis as the title of his book indicates.<sup>46</sup>

More importantly, Shaykh al-Buhriy's translation is linked to his career as an oral exegete and this is reflected in the brevity of his translation in which much of the detail is left out. Moreover, there is semantic value inherent in the formal features including the style of writing/calligraphy. The work reveals the widespread practice of translating the Qur'ān orally in which the scholar reads a few passages of the Qur'ān and offers a running translation and explanation. The student who is present at these informal study sessions may choose to scribble a few notes on his notepad as he listens to the scriptural exegesis. This is part of the process of religious learning through successive stages to acquire the necessary skills for translating and interpreting the Qur'ān. The student is then able, by virtue of having received a sanctioned role through an informal *ijaza*/certification from his teachers, to teach other students and convey to them by means of translating the meaning of the sacred word from the original Arabic into the local language. The translation aims only at capturing some part of the meaning and interpretation of the original polyvalent verses of the scripture that are expressed in the highly Arabic elliptical language.

This translation indicates without a doubt the interaction between the oral and written modes of communication using religious categories that have been assimilated into the local language. This is what has made Swahili a vehicle for sacred discourse, allowing it to express themes related to God's power, majesty, mercy and so on. This is, accordingly, the major theme of the opening chapter of the Qur'ān (*surat al-Fatiha*) that focusses on Allah's glory, majesty, mercy and justice that are easily captured in the Swahili translation as words al-Rahman (*mwenye/mwingi wa rehema*) and al-Rahim (*mwenye kurehemu*) are used in Swahili. Other Arabic words that have become Swahilised include *ni'ma* (bounty), *nafs* (self/soul), *mawla* (lord), *mawti* (death) and so on. This is a successful translation as it captures the meaning then expresses it in the equivalent Swahili language with attempts to convey some aspects of the nuanced meanings of the original language.

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conservatives such as Ahmad Ahmad Badawy and the other Sharifs (those who claim descent from the family of the Prophet) who are based in Lamu.

<sup>46</sup> See footnote 31 above.

Figure 1: Qur'an verses followed by the shaykh's translation in Swahili-Arabic script

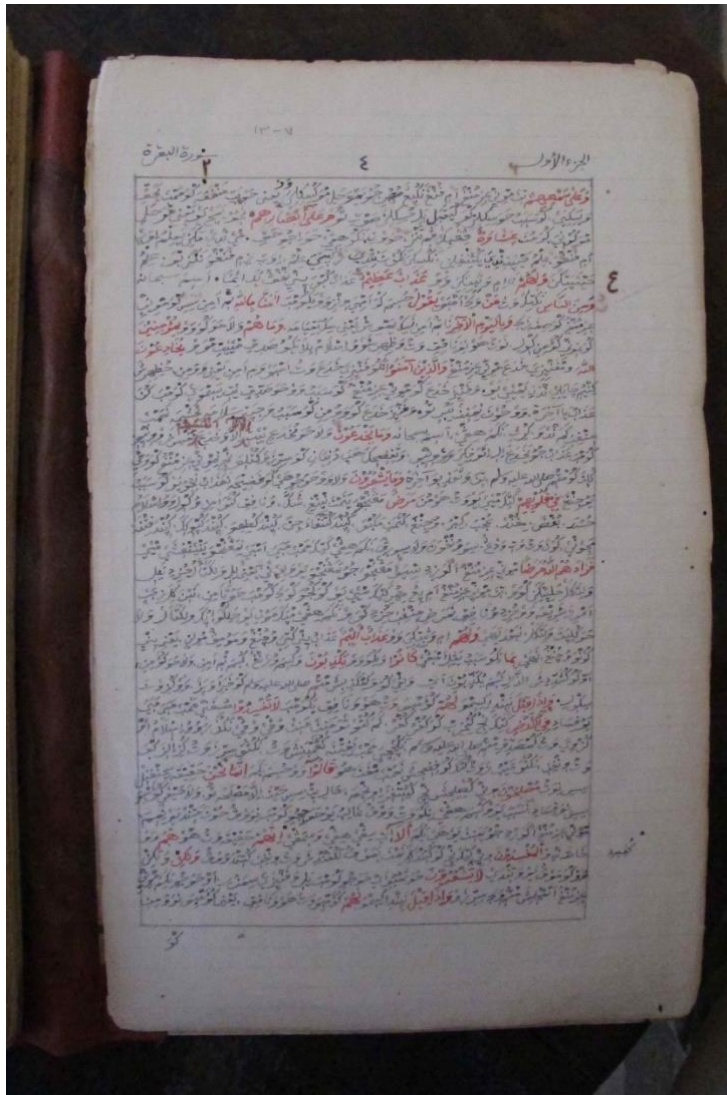


Figure 2: One of the rare pictures of the Shaykh in front of the second house on 13th Street, Tanga



## THE SHAYKH'S TRANSLATION OF THE CHAPTERS AL-FATIHA AND AL-BAQARA

The starting point of this Qur'ānic work is appropriately with the first chapter (al-Fatiha). This is owing to its status as the mother of the book containing seven verses that sum up the message of the Qur'ān. It is considered a prayer and invocation of God's majesty. In his translation (a brief running commentary that combines translation with interpretation or explanation with no footnotes) the Shaykh mentions this chapter was revealed twice: first, in Makka before the *hijra*/migration when the five prayers were mandated for Muslims; and in Madina after Hijra when the qibla/direction of prayer was changed. He considers the formulaic expression "In the name of God" that appears at the beginning of the chapter to be an attribute emphasising the fact that God has no beginning. For the Muslim reader, scholar or not, the quest for understanding the Qur'ān begins with the invocation of this *basmala* and the first chapter of the Qur'ān that opens the door through which Divine mercy flows. Accordingly, it is believed the Qur'ān will open in accordance with your understanding and the state of your spiritual development.<sup>47</sup>

As part of the *basmala*, he also translates al-Rahman as meaning "God who is merciful in this world and the hereafter" and al-Rahim as "God who is merciful in the hereafter." This means that God is al-Rahman in the world (a bestower of the gratuitous gift of mercy to all irrespective of who they are) at the same time as He is also al-Rahim (bestower of Divine mercy through righteous action) in the afterlife. Furthermore, he elaborates on the attribute of al-Rahman as referring to the abundant mercy of God as it is generally manifested in creation, faith (*iman*), health, intelligence, hearing, sight, provision as all coming from God who cares for all his creation while al-Rahim is related more specifically to God's bounty/favours including beauty, excellence in speech, increase in knowledge, faith, wealth, intelligence and so on.

By way of comparison, Shaykh al-Farsy translates al-Rahman (referring to God) as one who grants or is a dispenser of abundant bounties (*neema kubwa kubwa*) and al-Rahim as one who grants/dispenses with minor bounties (*neema ndogo ndogo*). By contrast, his fellow Zanzibari, Shaykh Ali Muhsin al-Barwani (like Shaykh Al-Amin Mazrui before him), translates the Arabic words al-Rahman and al-Rahim (in the form in which they have been assimilated into Swahili) as "*mwingi wa rehema, mwenye kurehemu*."<sup>48</sup> This translates roughly as "one who is abundant in *rahma*/mercy and one who is a dispenser or dispenses with *rahma*/mercy." It is sometimes difficult to grasp the subtle difference between *Rahman* and *Rahim* even by some of Arabic speakers unless they are scholars or well-versed in the intricacies of the Arabic language. Those who read English translations of the Qur'ān also face this problem of differentiating between al-Rahman (often translated as "most gracious/compassionate") and al-Rahim (often translated as "most merciful") that are expressive of

<sup>47</sup> Ali bin Hemed al-Buhriy, *al-Murshid al-Karim ila Tafsir al-Qur'an al-adhim* [The Noble Guide to the Interpretation of the Glorious Qur'ān] (unpublished), 1-4.

<sup>48</sup> See the first chapter of Shaykh al-Barwani's *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab Katika Tafsiri ya Qur'ani Tukufu*.



God's attributes of mercy.<sup>49</sup> In explaining the doctrine of mercy, early exegetes note a distinction between the two Divine names of mercy in the *basmala*: al-Rahman as more general/absolute, entailing a greater and far more inclusive compassion encompassing believers and non-believers alike than al-Rahim, which is taken to refer to God acting compassionately with respect to His devotees. Therefore, the most common formulation is to gloss that (for al-Rahman) God is the source of mercy for the whole of His creation and (al-Rahim) the giver of mercy to only his believing servants/devotees. In other words, the interpretation of the Fatiha makes the significance of mercy more explicit: God is presented as the source of mercy (universal application) and giver of mercy (particular application). This is what the different translations of the Qur'ān, including Shaykh al-Buhriy's, Shaykh al-Farsy and Shaykh al-Barwani's, attempt to express in different ways.<sup>50</sup>

After the standard consideration of the importance of Fatiha and its excellences, including elaborating on the doctrine of mercy or the two Divine names that are mentioned in the *basmala* and repeated in the third verse, the Shaykh explains the rest of the chapter. His translation can be summarised as: *al-hamdulillah*, which is in the form of praise, affirms or declares that all noble attributes of perfection are His and applicable to Him alone and no one else. He is the Lord (*Rabb*) or Creator of all that has been brought into existence (in the universe) or is other than Him (*al-'Alamin*). He is the Lord of the Day of Judgement (*Maliki yaumi-ddin*) or the day when all dominion will be His. To Him alone we render worship and to Him alone we seek assistance in our affairs of this world and the Hereafter (*'iyyaka na'budu wa iyyaka nasta'inu*). Guide us (*ihdina*) to follow the straight path/*siraat* (i.e. Islam) that you have accepted (chosen for us), the path of those whom you have blessed/favoured by giving them success through obedience, not the path of those who either have incurred your anger (through their disobedience/shortcomings) or are lost. He goes on to identify those who have earned God's anger as Jews (presumably for breaking the covenant) and those who are lost as Christians (again, presumably for transforming a human being even though a prophet into a god and making him the object of worship). He bases this interpretation on a Prophetic tradition that he alludes to but does not identify or cite. As further evidence, he also cites a Qur'ānic passage (5:33) without providing a Swahili translation: "They have erred before this and they have caused many to err and they have erred from the right way." This is, of course, one possible interpretation of those who have incurred anger or are lost by making a specific reference to particular groups whereas other scholars consider these words to be of more general/universal meaning and would include, for instance, in the case of Ibn Kathir, anyone who follows falsehood (*batil*).

In any case, the fact that minimal explanations and general references to Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition) are made in the Buhriy "*tafsir*" indicates this translation was meant first and foremost to be used by teachers (already familiar with the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*) as an aid for teaching the Qur'ān. This is further evidence that Swahili scholars valued the

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an* (Lahore: Khalil al-Rawaf, 1946), 14; M. Muhsin Khan and M.T. al-Hilali, *The Noble Qur'an* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2016), 11.

<sup>50</sup> See their translations of the chapter al-Fatiha: al-Farsy, *Qurani Takatifu*; al-Barwani, *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab*.

role of texts in the transmission of Islamic knowledge. This *tafsir* does not delve into exegetical scholarly debates as that was not its intended purpose.

However, there are no major divergences in terms of the way the three coastal Sunni scholars, Shaykh al-Buhriy, Shaykh al-Farsy and Shaykh al-Barwani, have translated the seven verses of the first chapter of the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, what we have already noted is that Shaykh al-Buhriy's translation differs from the other two in that verses are translated and interpreted and even explained within the text. Shaykh al-Barwani's verse by verse translation (available online) of the Qur'ānic text (in impeccable elegant Swahili) is accompanied on average by two to three or more sentence-explanatory footnotes in addition to providing a few introductory remarks at the beginning of every chapter. Without such explanatory notes/footnotes it would be very difficult for the average Muslim reader to understand certain verses for which the Qur'ān (due to its elliptical language) provides no context. Among the three translations, Shaykh al-Farsy's translation is relatively more comprehensive with extensive footnotes, including, for instance, footnote 7 (with reference to the phrase in verse 7: "the path of those whom you have blessed or bestowed favour") that is almost a page long and devoted to refuting the Qadiani claim that God's favour mentioned here includes the sending of prophets after Muhammad. Beyond his anti-Qadiani polemics, which are sprinkled all over his footnote explanations throughout his entire translation and occupy a lot of space, Shaykh al-Farsy demonstrates on occasions a concern for Arabic language or linguistic usage and explaining the origins of words whereas Shaykh al-Buhriy is more concerned with providing religious guidance and occasionally making or providing inter-textual connections than he is with explaining Qur'ānic meaning in detail. In other words, Shaykh al-Buhriy offers his explanations in snapshots rather than as part of a larger, comprehensive, multi-faceted translation that delves into the different aspects of this science of exegesis.<sup>51</sup>

Shaykh al-Buhriy's translation of chapter two of the Qur'ān (*surat al-Baqara/the Cow*), which is also the longest chapter consisting of 286 verses, follows closely the traditional view that holds the meaning and purpose of the abbreviated letters found at the beginning of several Qur'ānic chapters are known only to God. He prefers to leave such mysterious letters, for instance, ALM at the beginning of this chapter untranslated as earlier Islamic scholars had done by not attempting to offer personal opinions as some later scholars did. Moreover, what he seeks to do, instead, is identify those character archetypes referred to in this chapter and elaborate on their functions.

In contrast, Shaykh al-Farsy has an extensive almost two page-long footnote in which he identifies all the chapters in the Qur'ān that begin with variations of these abbreviated or mysterious letters. He then points out the purpose of the Qur'ānic inclusion of these mysterious letters such as ALM in this chapter is to demonstrate to disbelievers that the Qur'ānic scripture is composed of these letters of the Arabic alphabet beginning with Alif, Ba

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<sup>51</sup> See the explanatory notes to the first chapter in al-Farsy, *Qurani Takatifu* and al-Barwani, *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab*.

until Ya.<sup>52</sup> So, if the disbelievers think Muhammad just made up this Qur'ān (and did not receive it as revelation) then they should do the same by using these same letters of the Arabic alphabet to compose a book like the Qur'ān if they are able to do so. He explains this is one of the reasons why these letters are mentioned in the Qur'ān. Shaykh al-Barwani offers a similar explanation.<sup>53</sup>

A summary of Shaykh al-Buhriy's running translation, interpretation and commentary all in one of the earliest sections of this chapter will now be presented to illustrate his approach to the Qur'ān. He mentions this chapter draws attention to the Divine status of the Qur'ān as a revealed book that Muhammad had been commanded to read and convey its message to others. This makes it a book of guidance for those who are God-conscious, believe in the unseen (including such unexperienced realities as resurrection, Paradise, Hell, day of judgement, etc.) and follow what God commands (by establishing the five daily prayers and spending of their wealth to assist others) and avoid what He forbids. Accordingly, those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who are being guided by their Lord and it is they who will be successful in the Hereafter. As for those who disbelieve, such as Abu Jahl and others like him, they will not believe whether the Prophet warns them or not as God has sealed their hearts, hearing and sight so nothing gets through to them. The last category is people who seek to deceive God by pretending to be believers (thereby attempting to gain respect and other advantages) when they are, in fact, hypocrites and mischief-makers. In their hearts is a disease of hypocrisy for they promote discord among people while they pretend to be peacemakers in the hope of gaining some advantage. He considers these three character archetypes of believer, disbeliever and hypocrite as revealing the existence of these three types of human beings. Nevertheless, human beings are not condemned to remain in any of the latter two categories as they can change if they are willing to make an effort and at the same time seek God's guidance.<sup>54</sup>

Clearly, Shaykh al-Buhriy's approach is guided by certain themes or teachings that he wants to bring out by focussing on certain overarching concepts or categories (in this case character archetypes) as indicating the desirable or undesirable traits. Details are less important as these will be provided within the context of the Qur'ānic *darasas* (teaching sessions) by the Qur'ānic teacher. As such, if one is new to the Qur'ān, Shaykh al-Barwani's translation supplies explanatory notes as does Shaykh al-Farsy's though the latter's anti-Ahmadiyya polemics (that take up a lot of space) can be a bit distracting.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

What this brief article on Shaykh Ali al-Buhriy's Qur'ānic translation and interpretation reveals is the striking brevity and elegance of the language (Mrima Swahili) that the Shaykh has deployed instead of the standard Swahili. Second, the Shaykh has gone a step further than

<sup>52</sup> al-Farsy, *Qurani Takatifu*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> See the explanatory notes to the second chapter of the Qur'ān in al-Farsy, *Qurani Takatifu* and al-Barwani, *Tarjama Ya al-Muntakhab*.

<sup>54</sup> al-Buhriy, *al-Murshid al-Karim ila Tafsir al-Qur'an al-adhim*, 1-7.

other coastal Muslim scholars in championing the use of a coastal Swahili (Mrima) dialect in his translation of the Qur'ān and his choice of using Swahili in Arabic script. In other words, although this script has almost virtually disappeared, Shaykh al-Buhriy has exercised his right to affirm local Swahili agency by writing on scripture without resorting to the use of the standard Swahili and Latin script that missionaries and the European colonial administrators promoted to distance Swahili from the existing coastal literary forms of the language. For the Shaykh, the coastal dialects and an adapted Arabic script (Swahili “*Ajami*”) are viable mediums for expressing deep-felt Muslim understanding of their faith and their scripture and their literary traditions, which are best preserved in the coastal dialects. These Swahili translations in coastal dialects are already proving to be some of the “glories of the printed word in Swahili” as Frankl describes Shaykh al-Barwani’s work.<sup>55</sup> It is ironic to note that the Shaykh’s son (Zuheri, before his death in 2015) was in the process of preparing this Qur’ān manuscript in Roman script for publication, which would make it readily accessible to a wider readership. Does this mean that this translation of the Qur’ān will continue to be inaccessible in the form in which it is in (Swahili *Ajami* script) and will remain in the private possession of the Shaykh’s family or will it one day see the light of day? Hopefully, it will be published so it can be circulated beyond the circle of scholars of *tafsir* for whom it is an aid to teaching Qur’ānic interpretation and commentary.

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<sup>55</sup> See P. J. L. Frankl, “Tarjama ya al-Muntakhab Katika Tafsiri ya Qur’ani Tukufu by Ali Muhsin al-Barwani,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 192.

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