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### One Text, Many Forms – A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts

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First page of an Arabic *Qas ʿida Hamziyya* manuscript, copied by Abī Bakr bin Sulṭān Aḥmad in 1311 AH/1894 CE, with annotations in Swahili and Arabic. Private collection of Sayyid Ahmad Badawy al-Hussainy (1932-2012) and Bi Tume Shee, Mombasa.

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Fig. 1: Maalim Moliti preparing for a madrasa class by writing down translations of Arabic formulas in Swahili and, partly, Emakhuwa; Mozambique Island, Mozambique.

## Editorial

# One Text, Many Forms: A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts

Ridder H. Samsom and Clarissa Vierke | Hamburg and Bayreuth, Germany

The papers in this issue of *manuscript cultures* explore the variability of Swahili manuscripts in terms of their graphical representation and material design and address the question of how manuscripts differ in form across time, regions and text traditions. The articles also discuss the reasons for variability and the interdependence of manuscripts and practices: to what extent can variations in manuscripts' representation be attributed to differences in the practice and purpose for which they were used? How have writing practices changed over time? These papers are the result of a workshop with the title 'One Text, Many Forms: A Comparative View of the Variability of Swahili Manuscripts' that was held at the Sonderforschungsbereich 950 'Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa' and within the scope of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg on 21 and 22 April 2017.

Regarding manuscript cultures found in Africa, the coast of the western Indian Ocean, which is often referred to as 'the Swahili coast', is commonly mentioned as an area with a long-standing tradition of writing linked to its Muslim tradition of learning. With the arrival of Islam, literacy in Arabic and the Arabic script reached the East African coast before the end of the first millennium. The oldest preserved writings can be found on coins from the coastal sultanates and in stone inscriptions dating back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The art of writing had reached a high standard by the seventeenth century, as shown by artwork and inscriptions in stone, ivory and metal<sup>2</sup> – an aspect further explored by Ann Biersteker in her contribution to this volume. However, it is mostly in the eighteenth century that we can find substantial proof of Swahili texts being written in Arabic script, namely on paper.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from letters (see the paper by Chapane Mutiua) and contracts, poetry is the genre that accounts for the largest body of ancient texts in Swahili written in Arabic script, and it is these pieces of writing that have also attracted considerable interest among scholars since the end of the nineteenth century. Approximately eighty text editions based on Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script have been published by around thirty academics and experts in the Swahili language.<sup>4</sup> These publications of Swahili manuscripts are mainly in the form of critical text editions which emphasise the content of a particular text and analyse it historically, linguistically or as literature. Despite the sizeable corpus and these critical text editions of various literary achievements such as the laudatory poem *Hamziyya*, *Chuo cha Herkal*, an epic poem about battles in the early history of Islam, or *Al-Inkishafi*, a philosophical poem on the brevity of life, as well as the poems of *Fumo Liyongo*, the earliest East African hero and *Mwana Kuponu*, a guideline for marriage life, or polemical, satirical and dialogue verses of *Muyaka* in the tradition of the *mashairi* genre, there are no established conventions of codicological research yet from which any clear generalisations about all genres of Swahili manuscript culture can be made.

To date, only a small number of scholars have asked questions about the manuscripts themselves such as who wrote them, when and what for, and how and why they were written; William Hichens, John W. T. Allen and Mohammed H. Abdulaziz are among the few who have attempted to describe the material characteristics of the manuscripts they have been dealing with.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the short articles by

<sup>1</sup> Hichens 1939, 119.

<sup>2</sup> Hichens 1939, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Whiteley 1969, 38; Miehe 1990, 202.

<sup>4</sup> Steere 1876, Taylor 1891, Stigand 1915, Büttner 1892, Neuhaus 1896, Velten 1901, Werner 1917, Meinhof 1925, Hichens 1939, Sacleux 1939, Dammann 1940, Allen 1945, Hinawy 1950, Harries 1950, Lambert 1952, Whiteley 1957, Knappert 1958, 1979, Harries 1962, Alpers 1967, Allen 1971, Abdulaziz 1979, Mgeni bin Faqih 1979, Biersteker and Shariff 1995, Mulokozi and Sengo 1995, Liyongo Working Group 2004, Mutiso 2005, Saavedra 2007, Miehe and Vierke 2010, Vierke 2011, Raia 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Hichens 1939; Allen 1971; Abdulaziz 1979.



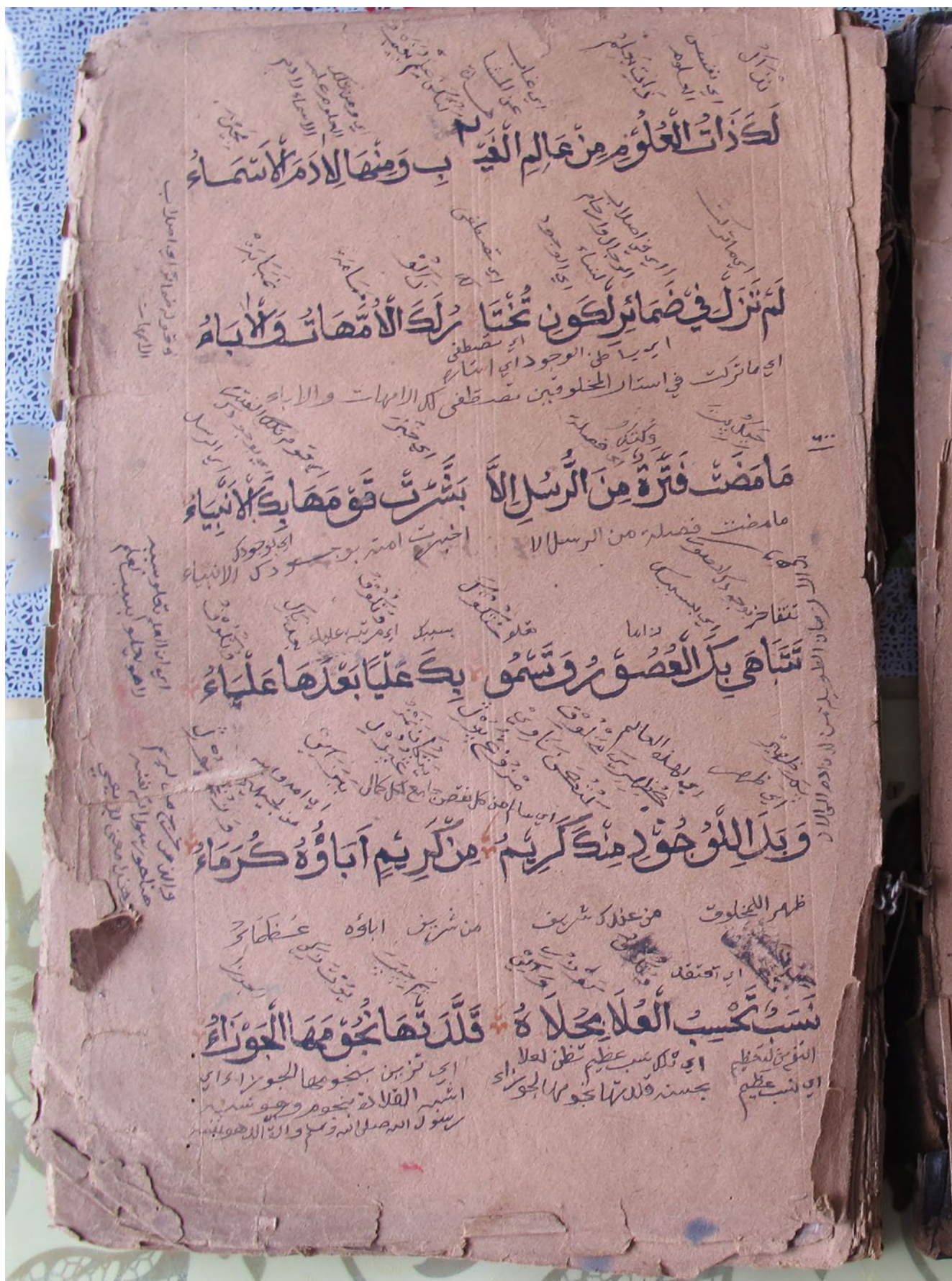
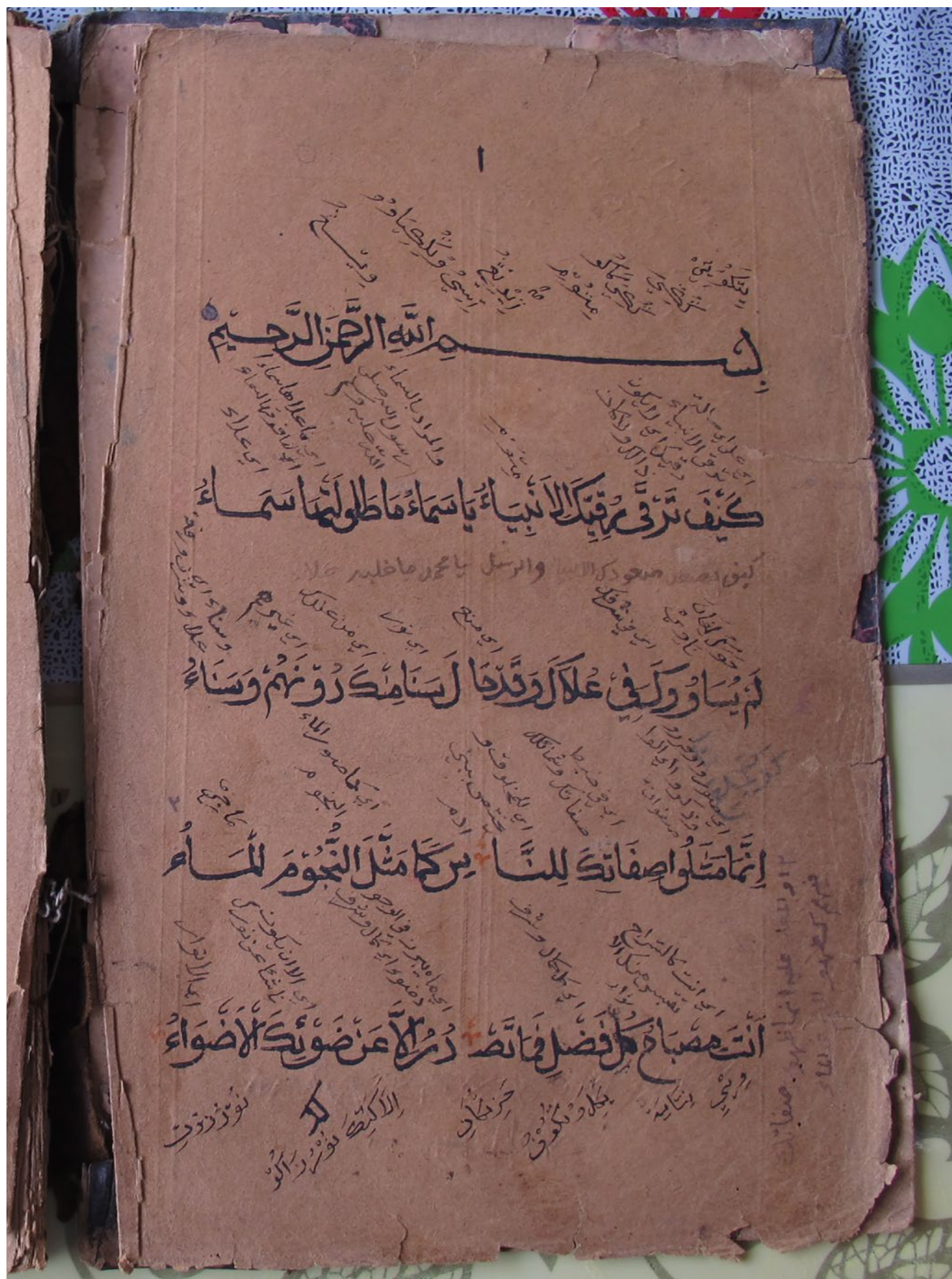


Fig. 2: First opening of Arabic *Qasida Hamziyya* manuscript of 66 pages, copied by Abi Bakr bin Sulṭān Aḥmad in 1311 AH/1894 CE, with annotations in Swahili





and Arabic. Private collection of Sayyid Ahmad Badawy al-Hussainy (1932-2012) and Bi Tume Shee, Mombasa.



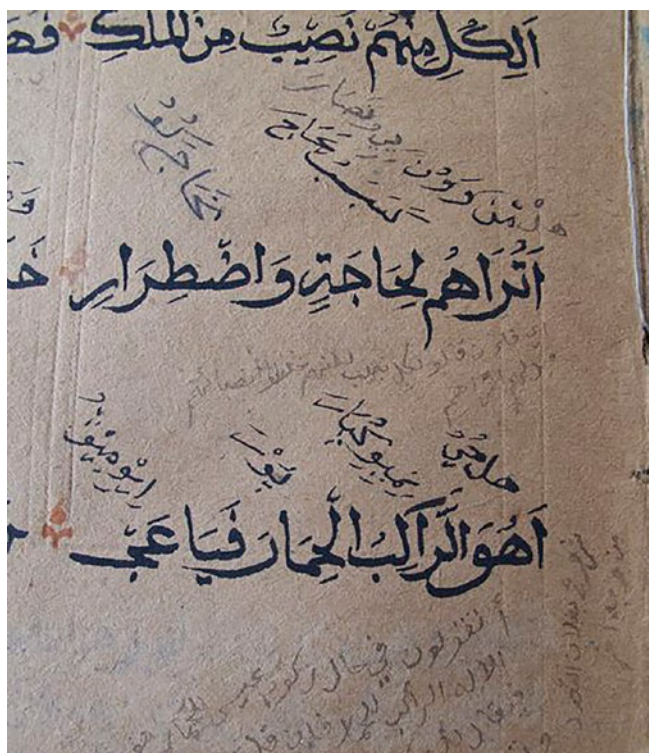


Fig. 3: *Qaṣīda Hamziyya*, detail showing pencil annotations, Mombasa. Private collection Sayyid Ahmad Badawy al-Hussainy and Bi Tuma Shee.

Simon Digby and James de Vere Allen, we hardly have any information at our disposal about the production of Swahili manuscripts before the printing era started in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The contributions to this issue written by Ahmed Parkar, Annachiara Raia and Clarissa Vierke seek to dig deeper into history before practices of printing and reading fostered by Western school education introduced in colonial times left their imprint on Swahili manuscript culture and on other co-existing textual practices. However, as the paper that Chapane Mutiua has authored concerning letter-writing and correspondence during the era of Portuguese colonialism underlines, the ‘modern’ colonial state and its practices of reading and writing did not just make the local manuscript culture vanish, but it actually fostered the continued usage of Swahili in Arabic script.

So far, the interface between Swahili manuscript culture and oral poetic traditions and performance practices has hardly been considered, even though they co-existed in the past and still do to this day. This is surprising since in a society such as the Swahili-speaking one where literacy was and still is restricted to a certain extent and orality is emphasised, Swahili manuscripts cannot be

considered as being independent from oral performance and composition. Thus, one of the main concerns that some of the contributions deal with, like the articles by Annachiara Raia and Clarissa Vierke, is the relationship between manuscripts and oral practices, which is the root cause of much of the variability that exists.

The earliest Swahili manuscripts known so far emerged from a practice of translation involving Arabic texts that are generally regarded as canonical in Swahili Islamic culture. In the predominantly oral culture of the Swahili coast, where knowledge was transmitted by word of mouth (and still is to a large extent), translation, rendition and adaptation from Arabic texts can be considered the main incentive for Swahili literacy and Swahili manuscript culture. Consequently, early translations from Arabic into Swahili, which were not commissioned by Europeans, cover a particularly interesting period and text corpus. These texts include corpuses of narrative poetry like the *Chuo cha Herkal* or the *Qissat al-Yusuf* (dealt with in Annachiara Raia’s contribution) and the hymnal *Tabaraka*, the *Hamziyya* (which Ahmed Parkar discusses in his paper) and the *Maulidi Barzanji*, the poem narrating the Prophet’s birth. These are just a few examples of texts written again and again by scribes who rendered them in different ways and styles in manuscripts. As Ahmed Parkar has shown, for instance, apart from idiosyncrasies in the usage of Arabic script, much of the variability one can find is due to the differing arrangement of lines, variable marking of pauses and the insertion of glosses and interlinear translations. Although these manuscripts and their variations provide unique access to an epoch when manuscripts started to be used systematically to transmit knowledge in Swahili and when forms of written representation of oral narrations were only just starting to emerge, they have hardly been studied yet. The manuscripts may also help us to reconstruct a history of Swahili manuscript production and reception. One pertinent question here is how Swahili scribes adapted Arabic manuscript conventions. In the case of bilingual manuscripts, how are the two languages arranged or referred to? How is Swahili oral practice ‘translated’ into a manuscript page? How have Quranic recitations and commentaries been adapted in various contexts of ‘vernacularisation’, for instance? And how do translation and commentary practices in either written or oral form mediate between the text, the performer and the audience?

<sup>6</sup> Simon Digby 1975; Allen 1981.



Following the comparative perspective suggested, the presentations and articles chosen for this issue cover a large geographical and historical spectrum of Swahili manuscript culture. They include evidence of early Swahili literacy in stone and wood, three different bilingual testimonies in Swahili and Arabic of the canonical Arabic *qaṣīda* by al-Būṣīrī, the *Hamziyya*, which speak of early translation practices and oral performances, nineteenth-century letter-writing in northern Mozambique and its hinterland during Portuguese colonialism, and the transmission, collecting, copying, transliterating and translating of textual practices concerning the popular *Utendi wa Yusuf*, the story of the Prophet Yusuf, and, finally, the essential question about the meaning of the concept of the written text in relation to its performance or vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

In her article, Ann Biersteker (emerita Michigan State University) considers whether ancient carvings and inscriptions might contribute to our understanding of ‘the variability in design, layout and phrasing’ found in later Swahili manuscripts. Epitaphs on tombs seem to provide evidence of early and continuous writing in code-mixed Arabic and Swahili and in Swahili along the East African coast. The evidence they provide is limited, though, as it primarily consists of Swahili honorific titles and proper names that are also Swahili words.

Chapane Mutiua (University of Hamburg, Germany and Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique) shows in his contribution that the process of diffusion of Ajami literacy through Islamic education and the use of Arabic script in Kiswahili link this literary tradition to the wider Swahili region. Its integration as part of the colonial system of communication and the use of elements of Portuguese and northern Mozambican languages as loanwords make it peculiar to northern Mozambique. Written correspondence also shows that although people in the region spoke different languages such as Kimwani, Ekoti, Enattembo, Emmakhuwa and Portuguese, Kiswahili was the dominant language for literary production and letter-writing.

Ahmed Parkar (Pwani University, Kilifi, Kenya) compares three manuscripts relating to the *Hamziyya* and explains that one major feature in them is their divergent textual layout. He also shows that a single text in Swahili society can be written in various ways in a given time and place. Two of the manuscripts under discussion show they were probably used as an aid for chanting and for private reading as well. This is because their textual layout contains the double column system and is narrowly spaced, which indicates that they were mainly used for preparing oral performances. One of the manuscripts was probably used for teaching and learning purposes.



Fig. 4: Mr. Sh Zuheri Ali Hemed (1944–2015) showing a manuscript of 400 pages with *tafsīr* in Swahili, composed and written by Sh Aliy Hemed Abdallah al-Buhriy (c.1870–1957). Private collection of the family of Sh Zuheri Ali Hemed.

<sup>7</sup> Variability in the way the Arabic script has been used for the Swahili language has been dealt with in two presentations (by Prof Mohammed Abdulaziz and Sh Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulkadir ‘Mau’) which are not contained in this volume, nor is the presentation by Eugeniusz Rzewuski on the recurrence and variability in ‘Shirazian’ sagas from northern Mozambique.

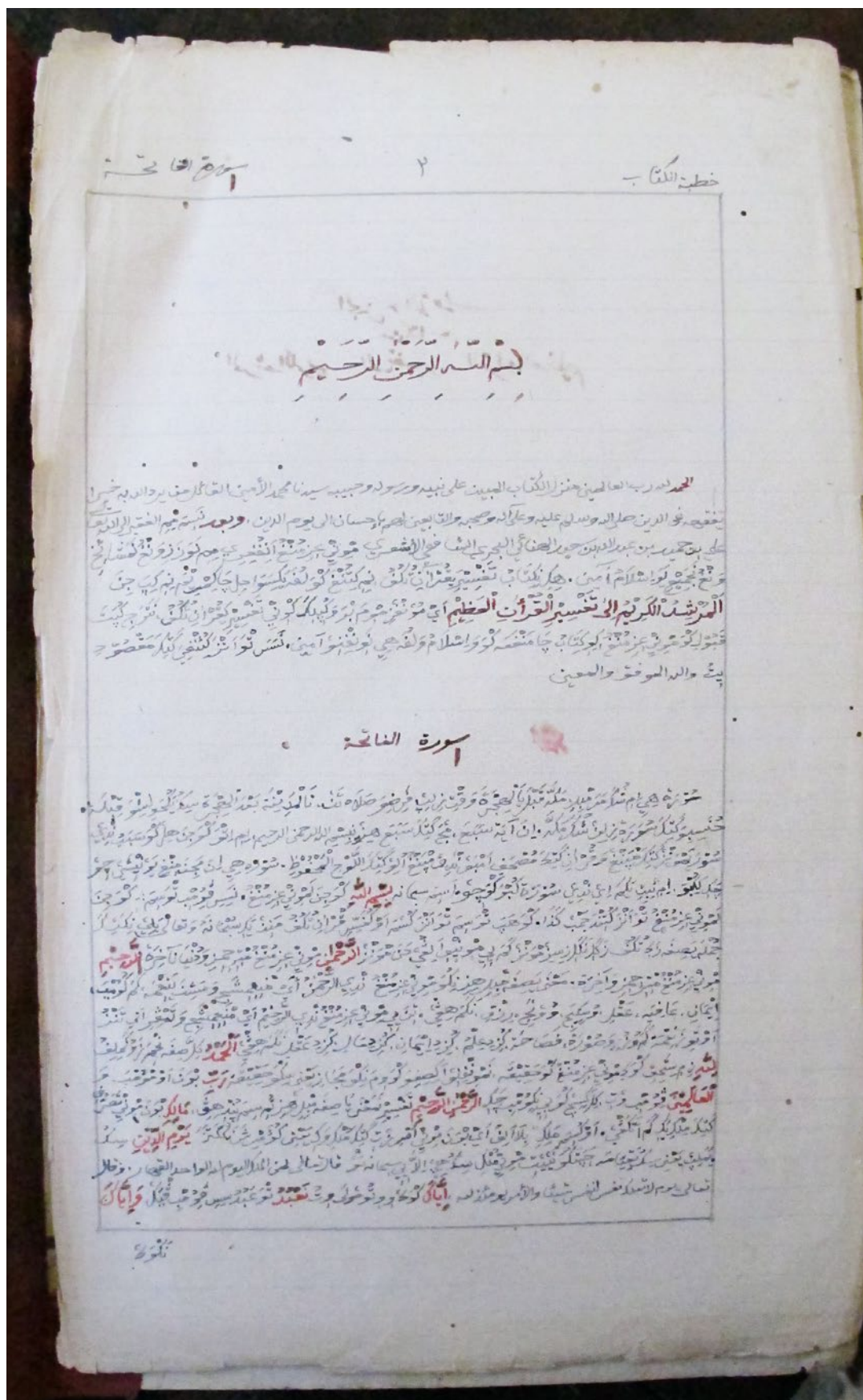


Fig. 5: *tafsir* manuscript in Swahili and the Qur'anic Arabic in red ink, composed and written by Sh Aliy Hemed Abdallah al-Buhriy (c.1870–1957), p. 1. Private collection of the family of Sh Zuheri Ali Hemed (1944–2015).



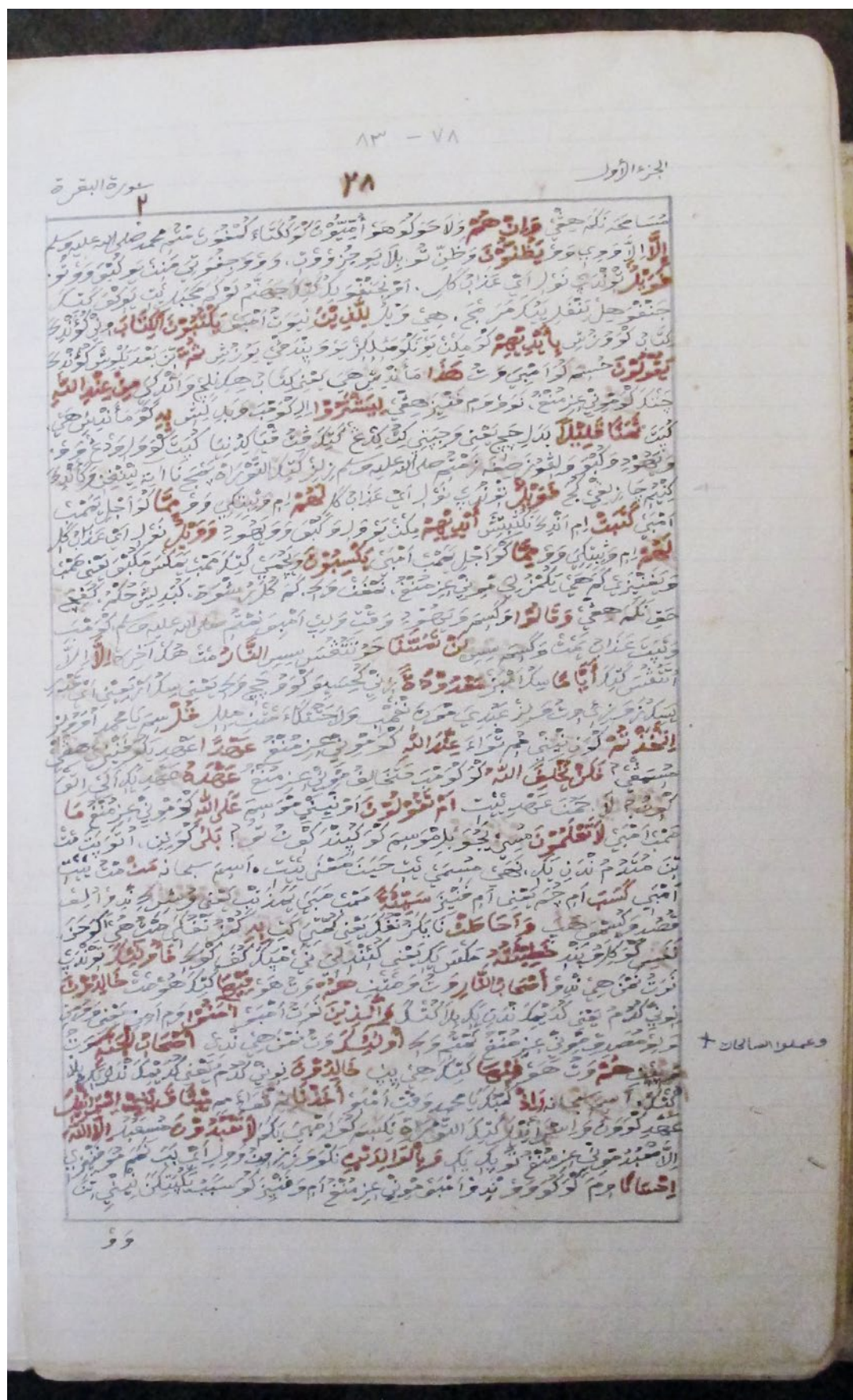


Fig. 6: *tafsir* manuscript in Swahili and the Qur'anic Arabic in red ink, composed and written by Sh Aliy Hemed Abdallah al-Buhriy (c.1870–1957), p. 28. Private collection of the family of Sh Zuheri Ali Hemed (1944–2015).

Annachiara Raia (University of Leiden, Netherlands) concludes that what has emerged from the overview of the different *Utendi wa Yusuf* manuscript groups is a mosaic-like scenario showing how much the texts have diverged, as they were handwritten and re-written over the centuries. Side by side with the figure of the poet/adaptor committed to producing a copy of the poem, she has also introduced the figure of the singer/adaptor committed to giving voice to a written text and editing it at his or her own discretion. Such a 're-performance' must also be seen as another *form* through which a story is re-formulated and transmitted.

Clarissa Vierke (University of Bayreuth, Germany) underlines in her paper that writing is not a straightforward process, but can serve different roles and functions. On the one hand, it can be strongly linked to the very idea of a poem such that prosodic features become visual features of the script. On the other hand, however, she uses examples from the genres of the ancient *utumbuizo* and competitive poetry in *shairi* form to show that writing can be so entangled with orality that the question of what a text is, where it starts and where it ends becomes difficult to answer. In the latter case, each version of the text is but a temporary constellation of its parts, which recur in a different arrangement in the next manuscript and performance. The *utenzi* genre with its strong emphasis on writing and fixity despite its own variability is the more peculiar case. It mimics the use, reading and writing of Arabic texts in the Swahili context more closely, probably also because it is clearly derived from a practice of adaptation or translation that emphasises the Arabic original.

The editors of this volume are of the opinion that each of the five papers published here contributes to the development of a full set of instruments for dealing with past literacy in Swahili on the one hand and Swahili's prominence in orality on the other. The papers demonstrate that codicological and manuscriptological methods of analysing Swahili manuscripts can be on a par with the arts of literary criticism, linguistics, history and other social sciences that are needed to answer the question of what role Swahili manuscripts in Arabic script once played – and still play today – in the transfer of knowledge in Swahili society.

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