

## Swahili Qur'an Translations as a Window on Societal Developments in East Africa

Gerard C Van de Bruinhorst<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Afrika Studiecentrum, Library, Leiden, Netherlands

[g.c.van.de.bruinhorst@ascleiden.nl](mailto:g.c.van.de.bruinhorst@ascleiden.nl)

At this moment at least 8 different Swahili Qur'an translations and commentaries (*tafsirs*) are in print in East Africa. Five of them have been published in the last decade. An even larger number of translations of one or more Qur'an chapters have been produced and are still in circulation. Although some of these *tafsirs* are direct translations from other languages (mainly Arabic) a significant number of them are original works written by African scholars.

This paper describes the major developments in the field of Swahili *tafsir* publishing, mainly focusing on the production after the year 2000. It argues that the study of African language Qur'an commentaries can enormously contribute to our understanding of the social context of production: biographical information of the authors, social networks they participate in and theological genealogies they try to connect to or to move away from. They also give us valuable insights in the societies in which they are read and quoted. A close reading of Swahili Qur'an translations reveals important shifts in East African Muslim societies. Islamic book production is no longer being monopolized by native Swahili speakers or eminent scholarly family networks. Better access to publishing facilities and to sources have facilitated the democratization of religious discourse. At the same time the financing and publishing of Swahili commentaries often betrays outside influences from places like Oman or Iran.

In this presentation different functions of these commentaries are distinguished. The *tafsir* as a missionary means and a polemical tool is clearly present since the first Swahili Qur'an translation was published in 1923 by a Christian missionary. Qur'an translations are used as educational vehicles to preserve and teach particular language skills like the writing of Swahili in Arabic script. Publishing parts of the Qur'an with or without Swahili translation is used to transmit spiritual benefits for deceased family members. And finally *tafsirs* are used to express political opinions not very different from those found in letters to an editor or political pamphlets. The easy access and multiple uses of these very rich sources promise to be fruitful for future social and linguistic research in East Africa.