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‘The Ink of Excellence’: Print and the Islamic Written Tradition of East Africa

Abstract: This article examines the social and intellectual ramifications of print as both an innovative new medium and an extension of the manuscript tradition, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1950s. Taking a broad trans-regional framework that highlights the emerging connectivity between the Islamic centers of learning and print production in Egypt, on the one hand, and Muslims in East and Northeast Africa, on the other hand, it examines how print created new sets of discursive webs and relationships that entangled Muslims across various physical and conceptual spaces. Furthermore, this piece surveys the elements of the manuscript tradition that find their way onto the printed page exploring how such elements persist from one media to the next and the transformations they undergo in the process.

1 Introduction

One evening in 1917, ‘just at the moment between waking and sleep’, the Somali religious scholar Qassim al-Barawi1 was visited by his deceased mentor, Shaykh Uways b. Muhammad. They spoke of this and that, when al-Barawi offered up a curious bit of information. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘Shaykh Yusuf b. Isma‘il al-Nabhani has just written a book, Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ (‘A collection of the miracles of the saints’). Unimpressed, Uways replied, ‘my miracles exceed anything in that book. You need to compile my hagiography, asking all of your brethren [to contribute] before you do so.’2

1 While many of the names included in this article are clearly Arabic, many of the individuals themselves were of Somali or Swahili origin. As such, the spellings of these names often differ from standardized Arabic in local post-colonial orthographies (both Arabic and Latin). As a result, rather than either shoe-horn non-standard names into Arabic formats or introduce a confusing mish-mash of transliteration symbols, personal names have largely been presented in plain text. Arabic terms, book titles and concepts, however have been transliterated in accord with the LOC standard.

2 Translation and emphasis mine. The text is cited from a photocopy of the original manuscript in my possession. The location of the original manuscript is unknown. Qassim al-Barawi, Majmūʿa karāmāt, manuscript dated to 1953, pp. 1–2:
A number of insights emerge from this exchange. First, appearing as a manuscript around 1920, al-Barawi’s *Majmūʿa karāmāt* ['A Collection of Miracles'], an assemblage of Uways’ miracles, is one of the earliest known written hagiographies in East Africa—appearing to have been a largely oral tradition up to this point—and seems, at least in part, inspired by Yusuf Isma’il al-Nabhani (d. 1932) a well-connected Palestinian ‘ālim and retired Ottoman Qadi with strong connections to the elite publishing circles of Cairo. Indeed, it seems to have sparked a small industry in written hagiographical production, with collections emerging from this point forward devoted to multiple local holy men. But what is truly striking is, not only did many of these—including the aforementioned *Majmūʿa karāmāt*—eventually make their way from manuscript into print, but they were produced by the same Egyptian publisher as al-Nabhani’s work, Mustafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī.

Scholars of Islam have regularly used early printed works to explore the religious, social, and political lives of Muslims in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Until now, however, little attempt has been made to understand its significance on a more systemic level. In particular, how did the emergence of affordable printed works contribute to the creation of new discursive relationships while enriching or disrupting older connections? By the same token, what was the relationship between this new media and the manuscript tradition? How did the much deeper Islamic handwritten tradition shape emergent print and vice versa? What are the social, material and spiritual factors that drove such interactions?

Approaching print as both an innovative new medium and an extension of the written manuscript tradition, this article examines the social and intellectual ramifications of the former’s development. In order to illustrate the extent of the transformations that occur, I have chosen to utilise a broad transregional framework that highlights the emerging connectivity between the Islamic centers of learning and print production in the eastern Mediterranean (especially Egypt) and Muslims in East and Northeast Africa from the second half of the nineteenth century to the 1950s. Doing so enables us to examine how print created new sets of discursive webs and relationships that entangled Muslims across various physical and conceptual spaces.

3 Abu Bakr b. Sumayt’s slim volume of saintly stories related to Alawi b. Muhammad b. Sahl is, of course, older. However, its subject was a non-local *Wali* from India. See Ibn Sumayt 1886.
At the same time, this study examines print as an extension of the manuscript tradition rather than a break from it. In addition to uncovering networks of discourse, this piece surveys the elements of the manuscript tradition that find their way onto the printed page. This includes conceptual aspects such as the genres of works and their content, as well as material characteristics including the layout and organization of printed books in relation to their manuscript counterparts. But it also involves interrogating various discursive elements regarding proper formulation of texts (e.g. invocations, benedictions and endorsements etc.), claims to authority and guarantees of authenticity. All these components are essential for the authorized transmission of knowledge in the Islamic discursive tradition dating to the earliest period of the faith and all can be found when moving from manuscript into print. The ultimate objective is to understand how such elements persist from one media to the next and the transformations they undergo in the process.

This essay draws primarily on an examination of printed books from the collection of Maalim Idris b. Muhammad, located in Zanzibar. Currently the object of a digitization grant from the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP 1114), the Maalim Idris Collection (MIC) consists of more than 300 manuscripts and printed books dating from before 1950. While the manuscripts were generally produced in East Africa, the printed works have more varied origins, ranging from early lithographs produced by the famed Nawal Kishore press of India, to typeset works from Singapore, Mecca and even Dutch Indonesia. However, the overwhelming majority were produced by an Egyptian publishing houses located in Cairo: Maktabat ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-awlādūh. Assembled over the course of fifty years, largely from mosque collections and scholarly libraries, the MIC presents a snapshot of the scholarly curriculum and reading habits of Muslim religious intellectuals in an important Indian Ocean intellectual center. Equally important, the collection offers insight into the impact of print on the global umma and its emergence as a medium of Islamic discourse.

2 The age of steam and print

The technological advances of the second half of the nineteenth century – what Jim Gelvin and Nile Green have referred to as ‘the age of steam and print’ – were, of course, transformative for the personal and spiritual lives of many Muslims.6

Advances in steamship technology from the 1850s, along with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, rapidly increased the mobility of Muslims across the various European oceanic empires. The number of Muslims traveling on the Hajj during the second half of the century, for instance, increased exponentially with more believers taking part in the pilgrimage to Mecca than at any other time in the history of the faith.7 The development of regularized steamship routes also led to the development of new networks of commerce, labor, and religious scholarship.

Print in various Islamicate languages (most notably Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish) likewise exploded across the Muslim world from the 1850s onward aided by the corresponding development of regularized steamship routes across the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. Print was, in many ways, the great democratizer of Muslim public and religious discourse and its study is a well-established and growing field. Seminal articles such as Francis Robinson’s ‘Technology and Religious Change’ and Juan Cole’s ‘Printing and Urban Islam in the Mediterranean’, along with monographs like Ulrike Stark’s Empire of Books, Nile Green’s Bombay Islam and Ami Ayalon’s The Arabic Print Revolution have created a nuanced picture of a vibrant publishing industry that ranged across the Muslim world from Egypt to India since the second half of the nineteenth century.8 The focus of most of this work has been the world of the publishing house and the efforts of pioneering entrepreneurs to develop a printing industry that served political as well as religious ends. Undoubtedly important, the approach taken by scholars of Islamic print up to now has paid less attention to its social and cultural contexts or the manuscript tradition from which it emerged.

Advances in print technology, particularly the invention of the lithographic steam press and later linotype in the early twentieth century, revolutionized the accessibility of knowledge among Muslims.9 A great deal of research, over the last decade and a half, has focused on the proliferation of Islamic texts that accompanied the development of cheap lithographic printing as well as advances in moveable type.10 Ami Ayalon, in particular, has greatly enriched our understanding of mass Arabic printing especially in the important centers of Cairo and Beirut through the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of his work, and that of others, has tended to focus on what we might refer to as the most elite circles of the publishing world, that backed and promoted by intellectuals and business

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7 Tagliacozzo 2014; Low 2008.
8 Robinson 1993; Cole 2002; Stark 2008; Ayalon 2016; Kaptein 2014.
10 Kathryn Schwartz has recently noted the preference among Egyptian printers for moveable type over lithography. See Schwartz 2015.
men associated with the nahḍa or ‘awakening’ movement or adherents of scripturalist reform – in either the Arabic speaking lands of the Middle East or Persianate South Asia.¹¹

The progress of mechanical print certainly enabled the mass publication of the great classics of Islamic learning in fields such as law, theology and mysticism, previously available only in manuscript form, and thus accessible to only a limited audience. But the rise of cheap, rapid printing in its various forms (e.g. lithographic, moveable type, and later, linotype and off-set printing) also led to the proliferation of enumerable voices that were for the first time able to simultaneously participate in larger, global currents of Muslim discourse while also giving expression to local views and concerns.

### 3 Print’s progress

The print revolution, as it has been called, produced countless texts by authors reflecting their parochial interests, but also demonstrating their engagement and understanding of issues of concern to the larger, global community of Muslims. Commonly referred to as chapbooks, such works included hagiographies (the tales of saints), legal primers, essays, sermons and collections of poetry among many other genres. Generally printed in limited numbers, with cheap bindings and on poor quality paper, such works fall into the category of what Ami Ayalon has termed ‘pious print’.¹² They were, by and large, not intended for sale. Instead, they were meant to be distributed to particular constituencies for various devotional, ideological or ritual purposes, usually for free or at a nominal cost.

It is important to point out that the trajectories of print were not unidirectional. Nor was it the monopoly of elite intellectuals or scripturalist reformers. By the early twentieth century, for instance, African Muslims were avid consumers of print, but they were also emerging as producers. By the early 1900s, religious texts printed in Cairo and Bombay were readily available in the coastal towns of East Africa, as were reformist newspapers such as Rashid Rida’s al-Manār.¹³

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¹¹ See for example, Cole 2002; Green 2011, and Robinson 1993.

¹² Ayalon 2016, 87–96.

¹³ Literally ‘The Lighthouse’. Al-Manār was founded in 1898 by Rashid Rida as an outlet devoted to the promotion of scripturalist reform. One of numerous Islamically oriented newspapers published in this era, al-Manār is notable both for its longevity (remaining in publication until 1940) and its nearly global reach. Jomier 2012.
By the second decade of the century, Muslim scholars in the region were also producing a small but steady stream of religious texts and periodicals of their own. These ranged from local newspapers to dense theological works as well as popular – and easy to read – collections of poetry and hagiographies aimed at extolling the virtues of the ʿawliya. Such works were concerned with matters ranging from language politics and local practice to broader reformist issues such as the application of shariʿa (sharia) and kafāʿa (the Islamic legal notion that a woman may only marry one who is of the same – or superior – social, genealogical or moral rank) as well as the metaphysical and the shape of the cosmos.14

From one perspective, as I have detailed elsewhere, such works represent engagement with the intellectual, especially, reformist trends of the period on the part of those we might describe as regional scholars.15 As such, these materials demonstrate a dynamic, multidirectional flow of knowledge and the emergence of a more horizontally integrated and intellectually engaged global community of Muslims.16 Thus, not only are the ideas of what we have come to regard as the foremost voices of reformist thought – such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida – disseminated to a large audience; but we begin to see local scholars actively engaging with those ideas, seeking to become part of a broad globalizing discourse.

However, we need to bear in mind that these newly emergent discourses were not driven by a few stray copies of al-Manār or other like-minded publications. Instead, they were made possible through sustained interactions brought about by new networks of transportation and print.

By 1900, regular steamer connections developed a transportation web that helped expand the circulation of East African laborers and merchants between the ports of the western Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Regional ports such as Berbera and Mogadishu in Somalia, Mombasa and Zanzibar in British East Africa were linked to a wider world via larger imperial hubs such as Aden in southern Arabia, Durban in South Africa and Suez in Egypt. Many of these routes were not new. Movement along them, however, was now faster, more regular and less expensive than ever before, allowing increasing numbers of Muslims – mostly men – to transcend what we might view as their traditional geographic networks.

15 Reese 2015.
16 For instance, in addition to being commented upon in international centers of learning such as Cairo and Beirut, al-Qutbi’s work was read and positively remarked upon by more regional figures, most notably Muhammad Ali Luqman and al-Qadi Da’ud al-Battah, two important reformist figures in British Aden, both of whom, upon reviewing the collection for colonial censors, remarked on its positive moral message. See Reese 2015.
A number of historians of South and Southeast Asia have, in recent years, written about the transformative effect of imperial transportation on the Muslim intellectual networks of India and island Southeast Asia.\(^{17}\) Such links, however, were no less important for Muslims scholars in East Africa. There are numerous, well-known examples of ʿulamāʾ who found their way to the cities of the Mediterranean from the late nineteenth century. The famed Comorian scholar Sayyid Ahmad b. Sumayt Ba Alawi seems to have initiated this shift when he journeyed to Istanbul in the mid-1880s; while the Zanzibari ʿālim, Muhammad Barwani published an extensive account of his travels in Egypt and the Levant just before the outbreak of World War I.\(^{18}\) It needs to be noted that such movements were in fact an expansion of older networks of movement.

Traditionally, the ʿulamāʾ of East Africa and the Horn of Africa had looked to the holy places of the Hijaz (Mecca and Medina) and the learned centers of the Hadramaut (such as Tarim) for spiritual instruction. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, they were beginning to discover first-hand the erudition of al-Azhar in Cairo. Somali students were reportedly attending the university in significant numbers as early as 1905 and by 1914 a full page announcement appeared in a special issue of the Zanzibar Gazette encouraging Swahili students to study there.\(^{19}\) By 1912 not only was the notable Somali Qadiri shaykh Abdullahi al-Qutbi there in self-imposed exile, but there was at least one Somali ʿālim to be found among its professorate.\(^{20}\) This nexus is important because it was from the printing houses of Cairo that we see the development of East Africa’s print tradition.

4  Al-Ḥalabī and the ‘Boutique’ print industry

Cheap print led to the rapid development of a lively print culture in urban Egypt from the second half of the nineteenth century. But the real explosion in widespread print did not occur until the early twentieth century and seems linked to the introduction of the linotype press and other kinds of ‘hot type’. By 1900, Cairo was regarded as a capital of Arabic printing and book production.

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17 Green 2011; Laffan 2014.
18 More about this below.
19 Colonial Office Record 535/3 Correspondence 1905, Somaliland, British National Archives; Sadgrove 2008, 170.
20 See also Reese 2008.
Literally dozens of small ‘boutique’ firms, mainly in Cairo and Alexandria, produced an eclectic array of books, pamphlets, and newspapers for the consumption of a growing reading public.\textsuperscript{21} Concentrated in the area of ‘old’ Cairo around the Khan al-Khalili and al-Azhar, a few of these, such as the \textit{Maktabat al-Salafiyya} established in 1909, tended to serve particular ideological agendas, in their case, scripturalist reform.\textsuperscript{22} Most, however, were modest establishments that subsisted largely by printing what they judged the public wished to read and producing works on commission or for a flat fee. These might include scholarly commentaries, collections of sermons, mystical poetry or hagiographies of local saints among many other texts. Among the scholars of East Africa and the Indian Ocean the twin firms of Mustafa and ‘Isa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī were increasingly popular venues for the publication of their work.

The Halabi\textsuperscript{23} family constituted one of the most prominent presences in the Cairo publishing world, whose involvement in print production dates to the earliest days of private printing in Egypt. As a firm whose client base spanned the Indian Ocean littoral – especially East Africa – their history is worth relating in some detail.

The family’s Cairo patriarch was Shaykh Bakri al-Ḥalabī (1824–1894) who traveled from his home in Aleppo to study \textit{fiqh} at al-Azhar. During the course of his studies, however, he turned to the new world of private printing as a way to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{24} The print industry in Egypt dated to 1820 when Mehmed Ali Pasha, Governor and effective ruler of Egypt, established a government press at Bulaq.\textsuperscript{25} Although concerned primarily with printing works for the state, from 1839 the Bulaq press undertook commissions for the printing of books and pamphlets for private parties referred to as \textit{multazims} or ‘contractors’.\textsuperscript{26} Bakri al-Ḥalabī appears to have gotten his start in publishing in this manner around 1856 when he, along with his nephew Ahmad, funded the private publication of a work by Muhammad Damanhuri, one of the former’s al-Azhar professors.\textsuperscript{27} This first foray into print turned into a lucrative side line for a time as he ‘earn[ed] his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Reese 2008.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Though its owners only began to publish their own books around 1919, see Lauzière 2010, 379.
\item \textsuperscript{23} In keeping with the conventions noted earlier when Halabi is being used as the family name it does not include transliteration.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Al-Azhari 2019, vol. 3, 166–167.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ayalon 2016, 22, although as Ayalon notes the first books did not appear until 1822.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Schwartz 2015, 199–200.
\item \textsuperscript{27} The work was \textit{Ḥāshiya laṣṭ al-jawāhir al-saniyya ʿalā al-Risāla al-Samarqandiyya} and published under the imprint Dar al-Tiba’a or House of Print. Schwartz 2015, 205 n. ar-132.
\end{itemize}
living from the printing of books’. As the demands of printing grew, Bakri arranged to bring three nephews (Mustafa, Issa as well as the aforementioned Ahmad) from the village of al-Bab near Aleppo to support his efforts. Bakri soon left the publishing concern to return to teaching, ultimately taking up a number of religious posts in the Nile Delta under the Khedival government.

It was the three brothers who formalized the firm around 1859 with the establishment of al-Matba‘a al-Maymaniyya. All three spent some time engaged in the study of the Islamic sciences in addition to their publication business. Ahmad, however, soon left the family business to study full time at al-Azhar where he would ultimately take up a permanent teaching post. As such, it would be Mustafa and Issa who oversaw the press’s growth. However, their connections to al-Azhar that would play a considerable role in their fortunes.

The al-Babi al-Halabi family firm and its various iterations and imprints – hereafter referred to simply as al-Halabi – would become one of Cairo’s most prominent publishers. Al-Halabi was a commercial publisher that printed works brought to it by private individuals as well as occasionally issuing print runs of classic works such as al-Ghazali’s *Ihya Ulūm al-Dīn*, for the general market. However, the business was not driven solely by a capitalist entrepreneurial spirit. Instead, as partly illustrated by their long-lasting connection to al-Azhar, they were a family dedicated to Islamic learning and the perpetuation of the Arabo-Islamic written tradition. Furthermore, these same factors appeared to play a role in their emergence as the most important publisher of Arabic print across the western Indian Ocean.

By the 1920s, it was a press with a growing reputation for publishing a wide variety of works. Our knowledge of the al-Halabi catalog for the first half of the twentieth century is fragmentary at best. However, the firm appears as the publisher of choice for religious scholars from East Africa and the Horn of Africa, Southern Arabia and across the Indian Ocean as far as Southeast Asia. Appearing under their imprimatur we find Shadhili and Qadiri hagiographies, theological primers, commentaries on grammar, *fiqh*, and Hadith all by local authors. In addition, they also frequently produced bespoke editions of classical texts by prominent figures such as al-Ghazali or Zayni al-Dahlan for particular markets.

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30 Al-Dasuqi 2015. Thanks to Alessandro Gori for providing access to this reference.
31 Al-Azhari vol. 3, 166–167 and 232–233. We will hear more from Shaykh Ahmad below.
32 British Library, India Office Record, R/20/A/3031 Govt of Bombay Notification, 30 August 1921. Laffan 2014; Bang 2011, 103–104.
paid for via the patronage of local benefactors. The number and variety of al-Halabi editions afford us the opportunity to examine the various ramifications of print. On the one hand, certain texts offer insight into the new and expanded networks that developed among Muslim scholars that were a direct result of the age of steam and print. On the other, the volume and regularized structure of al-Halabi books allow us to observe the many elements of the manuscript tradition that are carried over and modified in the era of print. Developments, we should note, that were not mutually exclusive.

To illustrate the latter, let us turn to a number of works written by East African ʿulamā and published by al-Halabi in the period before the Second World War. The first, Abdullahi al-Qutbi’s al-Majmūʿa al-mubāraka, was a tawhīd or theological text published in 1919 (and then reprinted in 1959). Second, are two books by Ahmad b. Sumayt: Tuḥfat al-labīb sharḥ ʿalā lāmiyyat al-ḥābīb published in 1913 and possibly Ibn Sumayt’s earliest work with al-Halabi; and al-Ibtihāj fī bayān istilah al-minhāj written shortly before his death in 1925 (and apparently still somewhat incomplete) and published by his son Umar, with significant additions, via al-Halabi in 1935.

5 The growing reputation of Abdullahi al-Qutbi

Al-Qutbi’s Majmūʿa is variously regarded as a screed against supposed heterodox beliefs of Sayyid Abdullah Hasan and his Sufi Order, the Salihīyya; a didactic primer for correct behavior and belief aimed at a lightly Islamized and largely nomadic population; or an anti-scripturalist polemic. It can, in fact, be read as all three. As part of an ongoing dispute between the Salihīyya and al-Qutbi’s own Qadiriyya Order, elements of the collection attack the former as dangerous extremists who were no better than other heretics like the Kharijis, the Muʿtazilis and, worst of all, the Wahhabis. As such, he also regarded the Salihīyya as ‘innovators’ who denied the efficacy of the saints, particularly Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and Abu Bakr al-Aydarus. The former being the eponymous founder of al-Qutbi’s own Sufi ṭarīqa, the Qadiriyya, while the latter was the patron saint of the city of Aden and an important regional holy figure.34 The overwhelming bulk of

33 Al-Qutbi 1919, 61–62.
34 Indeed, these elements of the text were the source of tension and even street level violence when al-Qutbi took up temporary residence in the British port of Aden during the spring and summer of 1921 on his way from Cairo to Somalia. Stones were regularly thrown at the mosque where Shaykh Abdullahi preached and there were a number of violent scuffles between Salihī
the collection, however, is concerned with spiritual guidance and what one should believe rather than what one should not. If the writings of al-Qutbi and other oral accounts are to be believed, Muslim orthopraxy was hardly widespread in the Somali hinterlands of the nineteenth century. According to a number of sources, including al-Qutbi himself, un-Islamic practices such as alcohol consumption, mixed dancing and the blending of camels’ blood with milk as a dietary staple were rampant while regular prayer and fasting during Ramadan were hardly observed with any kind of rigor. As such, much of the collection is in fact, a primer on proper religious belief and behavior aimed at improving the faith of the average Muslim.

I have discussed this aspect of al-Qutbi’s work in detail elsewhere. Here we focus on Shaykh Abdullahi’s choice of publisher, and how, rather than happen-chance, it reflects what appears to be the increasingly entangled scholarly world of East African ʿulamā that transcended their traditional intellectual networks.

The Majmūʿa was a series of four pamphlets written largely at al-Azhar during al-Qutbi’s period of self-imposed exile in Egypt between 1915 and 1919. Published by al-Halabi in an initial print-run of approximately 300 copies, the collection was an example of what Ayalon has termed ‘pious print’, works that were printed not for sale but for distribution to the faithful as sources of guidance and spiritual inspiration. Al-Qutbi returned to northern Somalia with virtually all of these via Aden in the spring of 1921. Two hundred were seized and destroyed by British authorities because of their anti-Salihiyya rhetoric. But the remaining...
100 or so, were distributed by the shaykh to Qadiri teachers in the Somali interior free of charge.  

The Collection was a book produced for a very small target audience and never intended for a broad reading public or meant to achieve wider popularity. However, appended to the end of the work were two endorsements (Arabic, tagridh) that praise the work’s erudition. The first was by a Somali ʿālim, Umar Ahmad ‘al-Somali’, a scholar resident at al-Azhar. Shaykh Umar praised al-Qutbi as one of those who suppresses ‘emerging bidʿa’ and ‘answers and negates the party of wicked religious error’, i.e. the Salihiyya. It should come as little surprise that a fellow countryman would endorse Shaykh Abdullahi’s efforts and praise him as a champion of the ‘well-trodden path’ of the Prophet and his followers. But is also demonstrates that not only were Somali scholars represented on the highest rungs of scholarship, but that concerns regarding largely regional issues – such as the Salihiyya insurgency led by Sayyid Abdullah Hasan from 1899 until his death in 1920 – were now known in the lesson circles of Cairo.

Of even greater interest is the second endorsement that reads in part: ‘I have read this book which is one of the best religious works written in our age [...] It will be of great benefit to Muslims, bringing them guidance sufficient to counter the mischief of the envious and the innovators’. These were, in fact, the words of Shaykh Yusuf Isma‘il Nabhani. The shaykh was a retired Qadi from Ottoman Palestine who was a vociferous opponent of scripturalist reformers, particularly Rashid Rida. More pertinent, for our purposes, not only was he a product of al-Azhar, he was also a former student of Ahmad al-Bābī al-Ḥalabi, the brother who eschewed publishing for a life of scholarship. The shaykh also had a long list of works published by al-Halabi.

Nabhani’s ‘blurb’ is much shorter than Shaykh Umar’s, and it is likely that he and al-Qutbi were not personally acquainted. Instead, it seems that the much better-known ʿālim was prevailed upon by his Cairo publisher to provide a plug for a less well-known regional author. This, however, did not stop him from being appropriately effusive as we saw above. Indeed, Nabhani concluded that for his efforts, al-Qutbi would certainly ‘earn the love of the Prophet’.

40 Reese 2008.
41 Al-Qutbi 1919, 194: رد والانكار، البذعة الفاشية.
42 Al-Qutbi 1919, 194: فقد أطلعت على هذا الكتاب فوجدته من أحسن الكتب الدينية التي ألف في هذا الزمان [...] أن ينفع به المسلمين ويهدى به الخائفين ويكفهم شر الحساس والمبتدعين.
45 Al-Qutbi 1919, 194.
Al-Qutbi’s association with al-Ḥalabī brought him into contact with a larger world of reformists but it also meant that the publisher and Levantine scholar became better known in East Africa as a result. Not long after the publication of al-Qutbi’s Majmūʿa, a fellow Somali and Qadiri, Qassim al-Barawi began to regularly reference Nabhani in his own works. At the same time, al-Ḥalabī increasingly became the region’s publisher of choice.

As we have already seen, al-Barawi credited Shaykh Nabhani as the muse for his own hagiographical collection which dates to around 1920 in manuscript form (though not printed apparently until the 1950s). In the mid-1920s he published a collection of mystical poems, al-Majmūʿa al-qasāʿīd, with al-Halabi. Not only did al-Barawi avail himself of what seems to be a Somali-Qadiri connection with al-Halabi, he noted in the book’s introduction that one inspiration for the collection was his hearing tell of ‘al-mujadid fi zamanīnā’ (المجدّد في زمننا, ‘the renewer of our age’) named Yusuf bin Ismaʿil Nabhani who would remedy the troubles of the age. Indeed, al-Barawi drew extensively from Nabhani’s Wasāʾil al-wuṣūl (‘The Means of Attainment’) as support for the permissibility of Prophetic intercession.46 What is particularly interesting here, is that al-Barawi never traveled to Egypt and his knowledge of both Nabhani and al-Ḥalabī came only second hand. Yet, this contemporary fellow traveler along the path of the saints became an important spiritual touchstone.

Such endorsements and references clearly suggest that what we are witnessing with print is the emergence of a much larger discursive stage; one that believers – who circulated in previously much more regionally circumscribed networks – now found themselves able to join with greater ease. What is particularly important is that such engagement did not require personal interaction. The age of steam certainly created new mobilities that introduced East African religious scholars to the intellectual networks of the Mediterranean for the first time in significant numbers. But, the dissemination of print was also responsible for the creation of new virtual relationships where scholars need not travel far from home to engage with, and be influenced by the ideas of ‘fellow travelers’. It was a world where, in addition to being able to cite the traditional canon, scholars could engage and find common cause with distant contemporaries much more readily. To accomplish this, however, an association with a well-established Egyptian publisher could facilitate entry to new and correspondingly larger intellectual networks.

A great deal of al-Halabi’s catalog appears to be anti-scripturalist in nature. However, by itself, their penchant for publishing such texts certainly does not

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imply an ideological bent on their part. Nor is there any suggestion that like-minded authors necessarily encouraged one another to publish there for any reason other than they were a reliable operation that turned out a reasonable product at an affordable price. But what made al-Halabi so attractive to authors and patrons? The answer may lay, at least in part, in their conscious fidelity to the Arabic written tradition.

6 What does a book look like?

Print was certainly revolutionary. But it is important to remember that it emerged from an already extensive tradition of the written word. As such, ideas about the shape, purpose and value of printed Islamic books were all fashioned by this larger tradition. Even a cursory examination of the works printed by al-Halabi reveals a connectivity to the manuscript tradition not just in form, but with regard to the social, cultural, and spiritual function of writing within a Muslim context.

The written tradition in Islam, in the shape of manuscript production, dates to the earliest centuries of the faith, ultimately emerging as the dominant paradigm for the transmission of knowledge. With the evolution of the religious sciences (ʿulūm al-dīn) beginning in the seventh century, we witness the development of specific genres of texts that took on particular hallmarks. The question and answer format of classical fiqh texts, the marginalia commentary used to annotate classical theological works and augmented five hemistich poems of takhmis collections are all standard forms that date to the height of Islamic learning in the medieval centuries of Islam. In addition, various conventions developed that served to legitimate and authorize texts as correct, authentic knowledge. The concept of the ijāza, or literally a ‘license to transmit’, is well known, but this was hardly the only safeguard put in place to ensure that not only were those who transmitted texts qualified to do so, but that the knowledge contained therein was ‘correct’ and rightly guided. Dictation, formal recitations, drafts and ‘clean’ copies that were checked and checked again, notifications of which were carefully placed in the final manuscript.47

The material relationship between manuscript and print is considerable. With the appearance of the latter – far from being abandoned – many conventions of the manuscript tradition found their way into the new medium, although often undergoing certain transformations along the way. Lithography or ‘stone

47 See Pedersen 1984; Messick 1993; Déroche 2006.
printing’, for instance seems to have remained popular – especially in South Asia – through the nineteenth century at least in part because it enabled the creation of printed texts that looked like manuscripts. Indeed, as Francis Robinson points out, moveable type did not make inroads into the Indian market until the first decades of the twentieth century and has never completely supplanted lithography.48

However, even after the popularization of various forms of moveable type, authors and printers continued to incorporate elements of format associated with the manuscript tradition. Thus, we continue to find works of commentary (legal, Quranic etc.) with the maṭn, or original text at the center of the page ringed by commentaries placed in the margin. Multiple works are regularly produced within a single volume; while information regarding date of publication, publisher and other information pertaining to a work’s production were generally found on the last page in prose form mimicking the display of similar information in the manuscript tradition.

A typical example of these characteristics is Ahmad b. Sumayt’s posthumously published book al-Ibtihāj. The book’s front piece contains the title of Ibn Sumayt’s commentary and the author’s name, but also a great deal else. As is de rigueur in the manuscript tradition, the author is not simply named, but praised: ‘the learned, perfect Imam, highborn of nobility, Ahmad b. Abi Bakr b. Sumayt al-Alawi al-Hadrami, God’s beneficence be upon him, Amin’. In addition, like in many manuscripts, the work was not published on its own. Instead, it was coupled with a short biographical dictionary of jurists, titled Fawā’id naﬁsa, mentioned in the main text as well as an entry for Ibn Sumayt, penned by Sayyid Ahmad’s son, Umar. Finally, the reader is informed that the work was made possible through the patronage of Shaykh Ahmad Ba Shaykh al-Qahtani.

To anyone familiar with early twentieth-century Islamic print these features will hardly seem surprising, nor will the invocations praising God, His Prophet and the latter’s family that always preface the main text (which only begins with ‘wa-ba’d’ or ‘and so...’). So regular are these, that we might think of them as almost subconscious elements of structure, so deeply embedded in the written tradition that they simply flow from one medium to the other with hardly any notice or comment.

Two other notable features of the manuscript tradition made their way into print. First to establish the authority of a text the idea of al-taṣḥīḥ began as an outgrowth of earlier methods aimed at certifying the authority of a text. Second, was the frequent inclusion of taqrīdh or ‘blurbs’ that extol the virtues of a work

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whose use can be traced to at least the fourteenth century. Both practices ultimately relate to ideas of authority, rigor, doctrinal propriety and ‘correct’ knowledge. While these practices came from the earlier written tradition, each experienced its own transformations in their transition to print.

7 Processes of correction

Unsurprisingly, one of the most pressing concerns among publishers and authors was fidelity. Printers and consumers were concerned with accurate copies of classical texts that were faithful to the originals. At the same time, they were similarly anxious with regard to new works with regard to the correctness of their Arabic prose as well as worries related to the potential scope for the introduction of doctrinal error that print seemed to offer. In the age of handwriting, these dangers were mitigated via a number of labor-intensive processes. As Pedersen notes, in the classical tradition, before a text gained authority it had to:

[...] first be read in public by the author himself, then it is read publicly three more times in different versions by a copyist in the presence of the author. In the meantime, the changes and addenda are produced by being dictated to a famulus, who then reads the dictated version back to the author. The work only attains authority by being read aloud to the author in the presence of the public, and the author gives his authorization to this version.49

Modern publishers and their customers were no less concerned with works produced by the new medium of print. Thus, a number of safeguards emerged aimed at guaranteeing the accuracy of a work’s contents. In some cases, authors and publishers seem to have replicate the manuscript system. A book by the Meccan scholar Abu Bakr b. Muhammad Shatta, Iʿānat al-ṭālibīn, for instance was ‘printed from a copy written by the hand of the author and read in the Mosque of the Haram, next to the noble Kaʿaba’.50

50 Abu Bakr b. Muhammad Shatta, Iʿānat al-ṭālibīn.

Published in Cairo by the firm of Mustafa’s sibling, ʿIsa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, unfortunately it does not include a publication date. However, the colophons indicate that the manuscript was completed between 1880 and 1884 in four parts. Given this, as well as the lack of features that become hallmarks of all later al-Halabi publications – most notably reference to a process of ‘emendation’ or correction – it appears to be a fairly early printing.
Ultimately, the needs of mass production appear to have warranted a more streamlined approach to authentication. Thus, most publishers – from Singapore to Cairo – began introducing practices aimed at securing the fidelity of their products. The most common was the concept of *al-taṣḥīḥ* or ‘correction’, a regimen aimed in part at proofreading, but more significantly served as a guarantee that the teachings of a given text met the standards of permissible knowledge and correct belief.

The extent and seriousness with which ‘correction’ was undertaken seems to have varied with the press. Some, such as the Mahmudiyya Commercial Press in Cairo, simply stated on the title page that a text was ‘corrected’ with no further explanation. Others went to much greater lengths to reassure readers of the quality of their purchase. In a 1928 lithograph edition of al-Jazuli’s *Dalā’il al-khayrāt* (‘The Guides to Benefits’) from Bombay, the editor notes that ‘a weighty first-rate textual correction has been carried out of a copy whose writing appeared on loose pages.’ The printing, he goes on, was conducted with ‘proper tools’ with the support of the press’s two ‘esteemed proprietors.’

Al-Halabi took the issue of correction no less seriously. Reproductions of classical works and the writings of contemporary authors were subject to a process of critical revision. In the case of classical texts this was in order to insure fidelity with the original. With regard to recent works, the goal was to assure doctrinal reliability. Utilizing their connections to al-Azhar, both branches of al-Halabi established a ‘committee for correction,’ overseen by experts from the university. The seriousness with which the press approached this element of the publishing process is revealed by the fact those they employed were not simple proofreaders. Instead, the head of the committee was usually an esteemed ʿālim from al-Azhar with his own scholarly reputation.

Among the most prominent of these was Shaykh Muhammad al-Zahri b. Mustafa al-Ghumrawi. Presiding over al-Halabi’s ‘committee of correction’ from the late nineteenth century until at least the mid-1920s, al-Ghumrawi had a reputation as one of Cairo’s great editors who oversaw the production of numerous classics but also many works by his al-Azhar colleagues and mentors. Shaykh Muhammad’s editorial weight, however, also seems to have emanated

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51 The copy from which this lithograph was created was, in fact, from a printed edition originally produced in Islamabad. Al-Jazuli 1928, 135.
52 Al-Jazuli 1928, 135.
53 Usually located on one of the last pages of text before the index, every al-Halabi publication has a declaration of the work’s reliability signed by the ‘Head of the Committee on Emendation’. This practice is a regular feature of al-Halabi books from at least 1900, but may date earlier.
from his own scholarly *bona fides*. A scholar of Shafi’i jurisprudence, he was also a respected author in his own right compiling commentaries on various classical *fiqh* texts.\(^{54}\) Known as a ‘detailed and elegant editor’\(^{55}\) his attestation at the end of the work stating that it had been ‘corrected’ with his knowledge carried significant weight to those with knowledge of Cairo’s intellectual scene.

Even at a press like al-Halabi where *al-taṣḥīḥ* was viewed as a critical element of publication process, statements guaranteeing the reliability of a text could vary widely. A good example of this are two works by the noted Comorian-Zanzibari scholar Ahmad b. Sumayt, *al-Ibtihāj*, a brief commentary – only about seventeen pages – on the famous juridical primer, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn* by Nawawi ends with the following simple statement:

*Bihamdillah* the almighty, so ends the printing of the book *al-Ibtihāj* […] written by the learned, Ahmad b. Abi Bakr b. Sumayt al-Alawi al-Hadrami, *corrected with my knowledge*\(^{56}\).

Beneath, it is signed by Ahmad Saad Ali ‘One of the ‘ulamā’ of al-Azhari and president of the committee of emendation [of al-Ḥalabi]’. In addition, there also appear the names of Muhammad Amin ‘Amran ‘Superintendent of the Press’, and Rustam Mustafa al-Halabi ‘Director of the Press’\(^{57}\).

Not all such attestations to the rigor of a work, however, were so concise. In an earlier work by Ibn Sumayt, *Tuḥfat al-labīb sharḥ ‘ālā Lāmiyyat al-Ḥabīb*, an account of the origins, spread and traditions of the Alawi Sufi order published with al-Halabi in 1913 the statement of the *muṣaḥīḥ*, Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghumrawi is far more involved:

And here ends, with the praise of the almighty, the printed book *Tuḥfat al-labīb ‘alā lāmiyyat al-ḥabīb*, by al-ustādh al-fādil [...] a pioneer in the field of *adab* [...] *al-sayyid* Ahmad bin Abi Bakr b. Sumayt al-Alawi al-Hadrami [...] This book is one of the greatest deeds of the age, it is a precious pearl of this time.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{54}\) Al-Azhari 2019, vol. 3, 204–205.


\(^{56}\) Ibn Sumayt 1935, 46 (emphasis added, author’s translation):

\(^{57}\) Ibn Sumayt 1935, front piece:

\(^{58}\) This is one of a number of known al-Halabi imprints, Ibn Sumayt 1913, 179:

\(^{56}\) Ibn Sumayt 1935, 46 (emphasis added, author’s translation):

بِحَمْدِ اللَّهِ تَمَّ طُبُّ “الابتِهاجَ فِي بِيَانِ اسْتِطَلاَحِ المَنْهَاجِ” تَأَلِيفُ الْعَلَامَةِ أَحْمَدُ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْعَزِيزِ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْحَمْدِ. بِمُصْحَاحٍ بِعُمْرِفَيْنِ. 

أَحْدُ عَلَمَاءِ الأَزْهَرِ رَشِيدٌ وَرَئيِّسُ لِجَلَّةِ التَّصَحِّحِ. 

فَقَدْ تَمِّ بِحَمْدِهِ مُتَاخِمَتُ كِتَابُ تَحْقِيقِ النَّبِيبِ عَلَى لِائِمَةِ الْحَبِّ لِلْحَضْرَةِ الأَسْتَادَةِ الْفَاضِلَةِ […] وَحَازُتُ قُصُباتِ السَّبِيقِ فِي مَضْمُومِ الْأَلْبَابِ تَأَلِيفُ الْعَلَامَةِ أَحْمَدُ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْعَزِيزِ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْحَمْدِ. […] وَكِتَابُهُ هَذَا مِنْ مَحَارِسِ الزَّمانِ بَنِ الْدُّرَّ الْفَرِيْدَةِ فِي جِيِّدٍ هذَا الأَوْلَانِ.
Ghumrawi goes on to list the book’s contents including a synopsis of the ṭarīqa ‘alawīyya and their history as well as an abridgement of certain sections of al-Ghazali’s Iḥyā ‘ulūm al-dīn related to the reconciliation of Sufism and morality, noting that:

The seeds of [this] are contained in the writings of al-Azhar and the abode of Hadramaut, home [lit. headquarters] of the Sada, thus enhancing the work’s piety and magnify its benefit[s].59

As such, Ghumrawi’s statement does more than simply attest to the work’s propriety with regard to language and doctrine. Instead, he engages in the active praise and promotion of both the work and its author. His statement thus blurs the line between these statements of authority and another feature of the manuscript tradition, taqrīdh, literally ‘praise’.

8 Praise!

The tradition could make itself felt in other ways, as in the case of the authorization of texts, we find further evidence of an evolving tradition. Earlier, I noted the increasing use of textual endorsements in the shape of statements provided by prominent members of the ‘ulamā that served to lend texts authority. The use of this literary device, known as taqrīdh (literally ‘praise’) dates at least to the thirteenth century and probably earlier.60

Franz Rosenthal has defined taqrīdh as ‘comparatively brief statement[s] of praise solicited for the promotion of a newly published work and, incidentally, its author’.61 While admitting the term is not a perfect fit, he noted the term ‘blurb’ is probably the most accurate English translation. Furthermore, such statements appear largely contemporaneous with the emergence of a text and, he notes, were rarely – if ever – spontaneous. Instead, the majority of pre-modern blurbs seem to have been solicited by the author from ‘obliging friends of recognized stature’, in deliberate effort to promote the book. Indeed, we witness the continuation of this practice in many books produced by al-Ḥalabī.

Many of the endorsements contained in al-Ḥalabī books follow the model laid out by Rosenthal. All are relatively succinct, running from just a few lines to

60 Rosenthal 1981.
approximately a page worth of text. Each praise’s both the content of the book and the author in varying degrees of effusive language. As we have already seen, Abdullahi al-Qutbi’s work *al-Majmū’a al-mubāraka* was praised as a book that would benefit ‘all believers’ while he was personally lauded as one who worked tirelessly to quell ‘emerging bid’a’ and ‘answer and negate’ those who promote ‘wicked religious error’.62

The words used to endorse Ibn Sumayt’s *Tuḥfat al-labīb* are even more effusive. Shayikh Muhsin b. Nasir Shaykh Ruwaq al-Yamani al Azhari praised the book as one that ‘dismisses feeble ideas’ and constitutes ‘a garden among the gardens of paradise in which the calm spirit may take refuge as the radiant flickering beams in its brilliance [...]’. Furthermore:

> It is the reviver of hearts, the nourishment of the knowing, inciting the heedless about the knowledge of the unseen and the curriculum of the worshippers in the brilliance of the *madḥāhib* and the ladder of the followers to the brilliant gifts and the enlightenment of the pious on the brilliance of the paths [...]63

Even more notable is the praise heaped upon the author by the Azhari scholar, Ahmad Husayni al-Shafa’i al-Masri al-Qahiri who wrote:

> I was asked by the highly learned, overflowing sea, who few others equal [...] the noble sayyid al-Alawi by nisba, al-Sayyid Ahmad b. Abi Bakr, may God preserve him [to write a few words]. Muslims are advantaged by the truth of his knowledge and have the good fortune to become acquainted with his writing in the eloquence and understanding that springs from the book *Tuḥfat al-labīb* [...] it is a sea of understanding, light of perception, a guide for consultation, and a fountain of provisions.64

Like the endorsements found in al-Qutbi’s book, these illustrate continuity with the manuscript tradition. Aimed primarily at extolling the author’s erudition, they also demonstrate the vast extent of Ibn Sumayt’s reputation that stretched not only to Yemen – as one would expect, given his Alawi heritage – but also to the esteemed lecture halls of al-Azhar where a noted professor would describe him as an ‘overflowing sea, who few others equal’. These were, however, not the

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62 Al-Qutbi 1919, 194.
63 Ibn Sumayt 1913, 177–178:
> فهي احياء القلوب وقوت العارف وتنبؤ الغفلين عن علام الغيوب ومنهج العابدين إلى المذاهب ومعراج السالكين إلى أسمى المهوبات وتبصرة الناسكين إلى وضح الطرق.
64 Ibn Sumayt 1913, 178–179:
> يا طلب مني العلوم الكبير والبحر الزاخر من ليس له نظير [...] السيد الشريف العلوي نسبا السيد أحمد بن أبي بكر بن سبط العلوي لقبآ أدام الله نفع المسلمين بحقيقة علومه ووقيهم لأدراره تصنفه في مطافقه ومفعومه أن أطلع على كتابه تحققة اللبيب [...] وبحر غرانو ونور أيضا وهداءة مسترشد وسبيل منزود.
only types of endorsements found in Arabic books of this period. A small number of works among those surveyed include praise and exhortation for texts in the shape of poetic verse.

The historical use of praise poetry to endorse Islamic scholarly texts is unclear at best. There exists some tradition of *sabab al-ta’lif* (reason for composition) poems that praise an author’s sources or teachers. Kathryn Schwartz has referenced the use of rather unsophisticated rhyming *saj* verse to extol the virtues of certain technical works emerging from the Bulaq press in the early nineteenth century. However, there is scant evidence for the use of verse composed by others to honor an author’s work in religious texts. With that said, the Maalim Idris collection holds at least three separate texts that end with *taqrīdh* in verse rather than prose. Two of these – as we will see below – are modern works, but one is an edition of the well-known fourteenth-century *fiqh* text, *Reliance of the Traveler* (*ʿUmdat al-sālik wa-ʿuddat al-nāsik*) by Shihab al-din Abu al-ʿAbbas Ahmad ibn al-Naqib al-Misri (1302–1367 CE).

Published in 1935, this al-Halabi edition included five lines of verse praising the work and its author which reads in part:

O Seeker of knowledge, consume its attainment  
To harvest its manifold fruits [from the branches] of *fiqh*  
With the *Reliance* of Ibn Naqib you are elevated  
You are enriched by its exceptional, clear *fiqh*  
Other works can hardly be counted  
While this [work] is the sustenance which will increase your faith  
So, incline to it – may you be guided – if you are devoted to  
Understanding religion, and ask your master’s forgiveness  
If you were to purchase this book for its weight  
In gold, the seller would be cheated.

It is unclear by whom these lines were composed or when it became associated with the text – there is a 1982 Qatari imprint that includes these, but only notes

65 Schwartz 2015, 182.  
that this represents what ‘those among the best and most generous say about it’.\footnote{68 Al-Misri, ‘Um
dat al-sâlik (1982 edition published in Doha), 3.}
However, the verses associated with two, more contemporary, works possess clearer provenance and are thus somewhat more useful.

The first, \textit{al-Durrur al-bahiya} is another \textit{fiqh} text written by the Meccan ‘\textit{ālim}, Sayyid Abu Bakr b. Muhammad Shatta (1811–1892/1893) discussed above. The scion of an old scholarly family, Sayyid Abu Bakr (often referred to as al-Bakri) had the good fortune to be the protégé of Sayyid Ahmad Zayni Dahlan, probably the most prominent Mufti of Mecca in the nineteenth century.\footnote{69 See Bang 2014.} However, he was also a noted author and teacher in his own right, especially revered among scholars from East Africa and Southeast Asia.\footnote{70 Curiously, \textit{al-Durrur} is not his most famous work. Instead, the \textit{I‘ānat al-ṭālibīn}, mentioned earlier, is both better known and more widely published. The former, however, seems to have held a special place in the hearts of Muslims around the Indian Ocean. A brief, didactic \textit{fiqh} text, this edition was published by a small firm in Cairo, the Maḥmūdiyya Commercial Press for a firm of Bohra Ismaili booksellers, Mulla Karim Jee Mulla Mohamed Bhai & Sons, specifically for sale in Zanzibar. While the penultimate page ends with a fairly typical statement regarding the fact this is an ‘inspected’ copy, the last page contains something very different: two poems in praise of Sayyid Abu Bakr. The first, by far the more interesting, begins by declaiming, ‘the treatise \textit{al-Durrur al-bahiya}, is rightly guided; it gathers excellently in it, the noble elements’. And later declares that ‘our Shaykh is the ink of excellence, Sayyid al-Bakri, master of excellence’.\footnote{71 Shatta 1940, 40.} Of further note, the poem is attributed to Shaykh Abdullah al-Azhari al-Falambani, a student of the Sayyid, resident in Cairo but – at least according to his \textit{nisba} – originally from Palambang, Indonesia.

The other work surveyed, \textit{Rihlat Abī Harith}, differs from all of the above texts in two important respects. First, it is not strictly religious in nature, but a travel account, written by Muhammad b. Ali al-Barwani, an Omani ‘\textit{ālim} and a member of the Sultan’s court in Zanzibar. Second, it was printed in Zanzibar (on the Sultan’s Press) and not Egypt.\footnote{72 Al-Barwani 1915.} Al-Barwani’s \textit{rihla} is an account of his travels from East Africa to the Mediterranean on the eve of World War I. Providing a riveting account of modern steamers, Cairo streetcars and Beirut hotels, it

\begin{quote}

\textit{(رسالة (الدvrر الbهيّة) يهتدي * جمع وطاب بها فواد نبيل أعني به حبر الأفضل * شيخنا * السيد البكر ذا التفضيل

\textit{Al-Barwani 1915.}}

\end{quote}
became an enormously popular work that highlights the marvels of the modern world and the ways in which these led to a new connectivity for the *umma*.\(^73\) I have discussed this work in greater detail elsewhere.\(^74\) Here we are concerned with the end the book’s final pages, which like the ones above concludes with poems of praise for Shaykh al-Barwani’s accomplishment; in this case written by two of the most important scholarly luminaries of twentieth century Zanzibar, Ahmad b. Sumayt and Burhan al-M’kelle.

Ibn Sumayt praises the achievements of his colleague, declaring:

Great honor is the trip of the master of secrets
Lifting the boundary to its highest estimation
His language to me is a wonder (lit. ‘determined’)
It is a book commendable of praise\(^75\)

While M’kelle, in a much lengthier tribute writes rather more mundanely:

He found the people of his destination pleasant
Similarly, the food he saw was wonderous\(^76\)

Within the confines of such a limited survey, it’s difficult to speak definitively about the significance of these poetic tributes. However, the data is suggestive. The presence of this verse in *The Reliance of the Traveler* suggests that praise for works in poetic form was a part of the Islamic written tradition, if a minor one. But a sample of one is far too small to argue as such with certainty. Perhaps more likely, this may be a tradition primarily borne of – or at least preserved by – the intellectual networks of the Indian Ocean from East Africa to Southeast Asia. We can speak with a bit more confidence regarding what we learn from the other more targeted editions aimed at more specific audiences. These, I would argue, have a great deal to tell us about the shifting intensification of various intellectual networks in the age of print.

\(^73\) Al-Barwani, in fact, tells his reader about unexpectedly running into a cousin in his Beirut hotel.
\(^74\) See Reese 2004.
\(^75\) Al-Barwani 1915, 60:

سر مجلد أمير مولي سرئي* رفع الطرف للعمال المعي
بلغته المني عزيمة نفس* دابها آكاسب الثناء الوقى

76 Al-Barwani 1915, 64:

وجت بمورد للناس عذب* يمثل طعم شهد في بديع.
9 Conclusion: What do we make of print?

The rise of cheap print, as numerous scholars have shown, constituted a media revolution within the community of believers, providing an opportunity for the emergence of numerous, diverse voices. In particular, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of print culture. This included not simply the ‘classics’ of Islamic learning, but new works by regional authors seeking to enlighten their communities while simultaneously engaging larger audiences on a transregional stage.

The combination of ‘steam and print’ created new networks and shifted old ones. The opening of the Suez Canal – and consequent steamer routes – served to bring increasing numbers of East African scholars into the orbit of Egypt and the Mediterranean. But this was not a simple matter of so-called ‘center-periphery’ interactions. Certainly, the draw of al-Azhar provided an opportunity for Mediterranean based scholars to exert new influence in East Africa attested by Nabhani’s rising star among Somali Sufis. But the relationship with Egypt also created relationships that were not based on the intellectual and spiritual primacy of Egypt, ‘Mother of the World’ (Umm al-Dunya). As we also find a legal text written by a Meccan scholar, endorsed by an Indonesian printed for the East African market. Print, in this case, makes apparent the relationships and interactions that could emerge via the new mobilities created by steam.

But even as print was a new technology, it represented a continuation of the past rather than a break from it. As I have noted throughout this article, elements of the manuscript tradition remained not only implicitly present but were, in fact, consciously maintained. In particular, notions of authority that had their origins in the ‘classical’ past continued to be employed by authors and publishers albeit somewhat reimagined. At the same time, it seems certain regional traditions (e.g. the use of poetic praise) began to find their way in to a wider arena. It is too soon to determine what, if any, impact this had on intellectual circles beyond the recognition that others from disparate parts of the umma valued the same literary conventions. However, at the very least it provides testament to the existence of an increasingly horizontally integrated community whose commonalities were being steadily drawn into sharper relief through the printed word.

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