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Authority with Textual Materials – Power of the Written Qur'an

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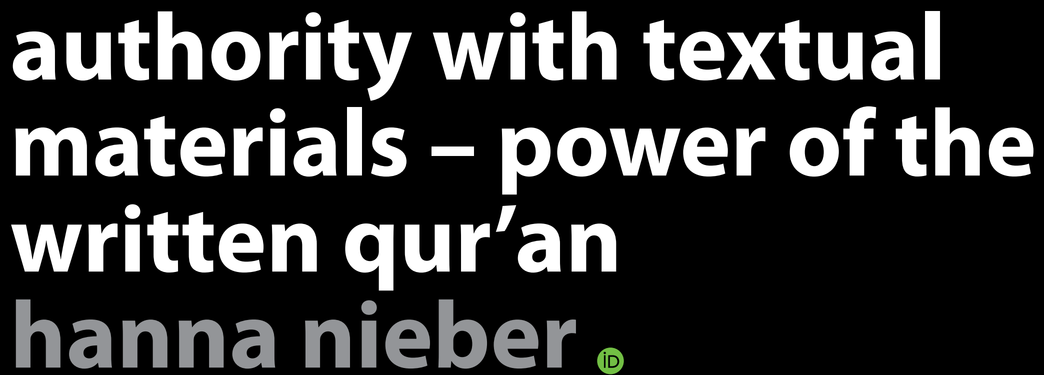

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ABSTRACT

The article studies the performance of Islamic authority through texts. It combines this with a close investigation of the textuality of these texts—that is, their letterforms as well as shapes of words and sentences—and their material affordances. Given that Muslims understand the Qur'an to be powerful, this article argues that it is the concrete possibilities that textuality provides which feed into Islamic authority. This article takes an ethnographic encounter in Zanzibar Town in which I was repeatedly prompted to visually follow the textual aids of my interlocutor, Hakimu Saleh, in order to gain access to that which is "hidden between the words" as starting point. I investigate how Hakimu Saleh used these occasions to perform his authority as a knowledgeable Islamic healer through "material citations." I then explore the singularity of the Qur'an to examine the textuality of *kombe*, a practice in which the Qur'an is used as a decidedly textual artifact to be washed off for patients to ingest. In doing so, I show how practices tapping into the power of the materially textual Qur'an feed into other practices with material text, including those that support the performance of authority in an Islamic context.

Keywords: text, authority, Islam, Qur'an, materiality, Zanzibar Town

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Introduction

The text you are reading here manifests as black inked shapes that mark a difference from the white background of the paper (or the screen that displays the pdf). Readers, including academics, usually don't engage with that which is in front of them, but seek meaning from that which these inked shapes are expected to contain by means of their formation as letters, words, sentences, paragraphs. These inked formations are powerful: they allow messages to be stored and to travel as they constitute materializations of something other than material.

This particular text is about the performance of authority through material texts in a context that is influenced by Islam and it is about the healing power of the written Qur'an. More concretely, it is about practices in which an Islamic healer in Zanzibar Town assembles, pages through, and points at printed, copied, and annotated texts—practices that I term "material citations." And it is about a practice in which the Qur'an is used as medicine, which in Swahili is called *kombe*. Building on a multidisciplinary approach, the article combines an ethnographic take on performances of Islamic authority through texts with religiously situated understandings of textual and more specifically Qur'anic power. I employ the notion of "materiality of textuality" to focus on how the text itself—the letterforms, shapes of words and sentences that in this case make up the Qur'an—has a materiality in its own right and has certain material affordances. Analysis of these affordances helps us understand practices with texts in religious contexts and goes beyond invoking texts as material artefacts with iconic qualities (Watts 2015). In a material religion framework, there is an attempt to distinguish research on religion that emphasizes an otherwise dominant engagement with the semantic content of scriptural sources from those that focus on the myriad ways in which religion is lived in places, in and with bodies, and with things (Meyer et al. 2011). This article contributes to the still relatively scarce body of literature that employs a material religion approach to direct this lens back onto texts in religiously connoted settings (see Hazard 2021). This implies a shift from the "textual materiality" to "material textuality." While scholars of Islam (Graham 1987; Lambek 1990; Messick 1996; Rosenthal 1970) have focused on the production of scriptural authority through practice and performance, they have not yet explicitly focused on how those practices stabilize authority for the text itself. By building on ethnographic research in Zanzibar Town from 2013 to 2015, this article argues that understandings of textuality, derived from the Qur'an which is deemed powerful, feed into practices of authority with text within a specific Islamic learning context.[1]

Hakimu Saleh is a self-taught, middle-aged Islamic healer who lives in Zanzibar Town. With its long history of Islam (Pouwels 1987; Loimeier 2007, 2012, 2013; Topan 2009; Saleh 2009), Zanzibar is home to a Muslim majority population with

ties across the Indian Ocean (Bissell 2019; Sheriff 2010) and as such differentiates itself from the Tanzanian mainland (Nieber 2019; Kaiser 1999; Killian 2008; Sheriff 2006). A semi-autonomous part of Tanzania, Zanzibar politically marks its difference by referring to Islam. Hakimu Saleh positions himself as decidedly Zanzibari, understanding Islam both as moral disposition and political stance which colors his provision of "Islamic" medicine. In our weekly meetings, he explained, lectured, and taught me in Swahili and with an occasional sentence in broken English about Islamic medicine and everything that is related to it. This almost always entailed him picking up a book and reading from it. Whenever he did this, I was to read along. Although he knows most Qur'anic verses by heart, this guided reading entailed the presence of an Arabic *msahafu*, a Swahili translation, or an English annotated translation.[2] It also entailed various other texts in Swahili, English, and Arabic. Moving his finger along the lines of text, he made sure I knew where on the page he was, even if he was aware of the fact that I could barely follow the Arabic script. The importance of reading along, I learned from Hakimu Saleh, is closely connected to a frequent repetition of verification and, at the same time, to an openness to gaining new understanding. If God wishes, he can make you understand the deeper meaning "hidden between the words," as he put it.

Hakimu Saleh extended practices of facilitating inspiration through reading the Qur'an to various other texts. His performance as teacher who shows his references and builds a solid foundation for his lessons merged with his creation of opportunities for me to be inspired through the textual material that he presented. In our sessions, the social performance of authority through texts met an understanding of texts as potentially inhering God's power.

It is imperative to note the entanglement of oral and written practices with textual materials in Islamic societies (Graham 1987; Messick 1996; Rosenthal 1970; Schoeler 2009; Zadeh 2009; Ware 2014; Osborne 2021). The written book in heaven (Qur'an 13:39), the oral revelation through the arch-angel Gabriel to Muhammad (Qur'an 2:97), the processes of writing, collecting, and codifying the oral revelations into a singular Qur'an (Zadeh 2008b), the practices of memorizing and reciting (Ware 2014), the distinction between qur'ān and kitāb (Neuwirth 2011), all these angles from which to approach the subject of orality and literacy in Islam point to the importance of the links between them.[3] Acknowledging these entanglements, I nevertheless stick to a narrow understanding of textuality as the formation of notational shapes against a background.

A written, physical codex of the Qur'an is designated as *msahafu* in Swahili (Arabic: *muṣḥaf*) and as such it is a written artifact to which qualities of textuality apply. However, it is unlike any other text since for Muslims it manifests God's words and thus it is acknowledged to be the source of ultimate

authority. Questions of authority in Islam are often addressed by tracing whose interpretations were (and are) recognized in which period and to which effects and how knowledge about these interpretations was authoritatively transmitted.[4] Devin DeWeese expands on this by showing how religious authority in Islam is not simply conveyed by the Qur'an's content, but that it is inherent to the "tension between understandings of its historical context and assumptions of its timelessness and essentiality" (DeWeese 2010, 35). The Qur'an, he says, "is at once the historically contextualized final revelation and a revelatory prototype outside history" (DeWeese 2010, 35). As manifestation of God's word—inside and outside of history—the *msahafu* acts as a source of authority and is embedded in the "circularity of […] written texts and the knowers of written text [that] legitimize each other" (DeWeese 2010, 32). It is this interpretive circuit that provides the framework for teasing out the relations between material and text, practice and artifact, performance of authority and the power of texts such as the Qur'an that stand at the heart of this article.

Arguing for a relation of performances with material texts and specific understandings of how textuality works, I first draw on the example of Hakimu Saleh's teaching sessions to examine how he performed authority through texts and introduce the concept of "material citations." I then explore ways to describe the Qur'an's singularity and finally move to *kombe*, a medical practice that explicitly shows how the Qur'an's material textuality is enacted as the carrier of power. In the conclusion, I return to the question of how the ascribed power of the textual Qur'an relates to the performance of authority through texts.

Performing Authority through Textual Practices

Hakimu Saleh's insistence on my visual contact with the text made me curious about the presence of other written materials that accumulated in the room during almost every session that we had. Often, when I visited him, the floor was initially empty. Over the course of my visit, he would start explaining one thing to me, look for a certain book in the room next door, bring it to me, show me the relevant passage and move along with the argument. By the time I left, the room was often strewn with several books. The visible reliance on and reference to printed text that needs to be made present in the room—which I frame as "material citation"—was important for his way of presenting an argument. This is a citational practice that builds a foundation for his lesson and it requires the referenced books to be present, to be pointed at and visually accessible.

Although this presence of material texts was tailored to the encounter with me and resonated with me as a researcher coming from a European university producing text about him, I was not the only one to whom this "material citation" was presented. Neighbors who briefly came inside to greet Hakimu Saleh, patients who sought his help, as well as curious people

who peeked in through the mesh-wired windows while passing by were all able to take note of his engagement with textual material. For Hakimu Saleh, the presentation of material text that I was to visually follow when he read out loud—including both the Qur'an and other texts, often bound as books, that he successively brought into the room—was an important part of his performance as an Islamic healer. Our teaching sessions with the "material citations" amplified this performance. Hakimu Saleh's performance of authority through the display of knowledgeability in Islamic matters is appreciated by his patients. But he continuously needs to fashion himself as knowledgeable and work towards a social position of authority through such performances. Like elsewhere (see Krämer and Schmidtke 2006; Robinson 2009; Bano 2018; Hamdeh 2021; Mohiuddin 2022), Islamic authority in Zanzibar Town is contested (see Turner 2009; Wortmann 2022). To what extent it rests with the *ulama*, the local learned elite, and to what extent it is popularized, pluralized, and Arabized is negotiated in everyday practices such as Hakimu Saleh's references to material texts.[5] Next to ascertaining his own authority as Islamic healer, his presentation and active employment of material texts through performance helped make these texts meaningful.

The authority granted to textual materials became particularly noteworthy in one of our meetings. A week after we had spoken about a particular topic, he greeted me at our weekly session with a smile and stated: *Angalia, mara hii nimefanya utafiti wangu.* "Look, this time I have done my research." He then presented a compilation of photocopied, marked and annotated passages of text which took up, verified, and added to the explanations he had provided the week before. Apparently, he did not think the elaborate answers he had given a week earlier were sufficient. The compilation was copied out of books and booklets, written in Swahili. I was struck by the fact that Hakimu Saleh deemed it necessary to present to me printed material, justifications and verifications of what we had talked about and what I had recorded before. I had made it known to him that I place much emphasis on the traceability of information by, for example, noting down book titles he mentioned or asking him for the numerical references of the Qur'anic verses from which he recited. His explanations about the previous week's topic were sufficient for my inquiry at that moment. Hakimu Saleh, however, situated his explanations within a broader framework, similar to the chain of transmission through which knowledge is authorized in Islamic education (Arabic: *silsila*, see Graham 1993; Heck 2008). As such, this production of the compilation could also be referred to as an aesthetics of authority (Schmidt 2021) and shows how he enacted his authority in light of a very particular audience (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006): me. He positioned himself as somebody who is aware of the relevant publications and attributed significance to printed text by

offering me this compilation; he underlined his explanations of the previous week with the authority of more textual material.

This compilation was also a way for Hakimu Saleh to produce writing in his own way, to give a particular kind of materiality to his teachings, that is deemed authoritative in both Islam (Schimmel 1994, 151; Heck 2008, 324), which he explicitly takes as his frame of reference, and academia (see Mortensen and Kirsch 1993; Tang 2009; see also Schüttpelz 2009) where I was understood to be coming from. The production of the compilation took his material citational practice to another level. Hakimu Saleh produced a compilation of mostly Islamic material text by himself and invited me to use it in my own practices of citation. Implicitly, he inserted himself as authoritative actor in the academic realm and challenged me to take the Islamic texts that he assembled seriously as academic literature.[6]

That texts—and particularly religious texts—must not solely be regarded for their semantic content has long been noted in anthropological literature and philological studies. Writing against an exclusively textual interpretation of Islam, for example, Michael Lambek states that

> [t]exts by themselves are silent; they become socially relevant through their enunciation, through citation, through acts of reading, reference, and interpretation. Therefore, we need to examine how texts are used and by whom, when recourse is made to textual authority, and what kinds of entailments such actions bring. (1990, 23)

Lambek posits that texts require enactment in order to not be silent; without enactment, texts are not relevant or meaningful. Hakimu Saleh's practices with material text, his "material citations" and his presentation of a compilation are instances of making texts relevant and which, following Lambek's call, we need to examine.

Similarly, in her broader concern for an anthropology of text, Karin Barber pays attention to institutionalized structures that enable and disable certain textual practices:

> [I]t is not the textual forms alone that are important in the process of entextualisation. Equally important are the formal and institutional arrangements set up by the owners, producers or users of these texts. Texts are not memes that in and of themselves survive or fail to do so. They survive because of the efforts that human beings go to, to mark them out, bind them up and project them across time and space. (2007, 28)

Similar to Lambek, Barber points out that texts rely on practices and human engagement with them. Furthermore, she draws attention to the structures in which these practices are situated, namely the 'formal and institutional arrangements' within which certain practices are valued and which position

texts as relevant and meaningful (Barber 2007, 28). When Hakimu Saleh photocopied, annotated, and compiled chosen text passages into a booklet, he did not only perform printed and copied text as an authoritative source of verification of an earlier explanation. He also drew attention to the institutional structures in which both he and I are embedded. Both my university background, and his expectations about what that means, and Islamic scholarship that he engages with entail historically developed arrangements in which texts are treated as privileged sources of authority, and which informs the authority of those who enact those texts.

Anne Bang (2011) shows how the ties between textual materials and performance of authority have developed historically in Zanzibar. She traces how textual justifications (in Arabic) became increasingly important in religious debates from the 1850s onwards and how authority was increasingly negotiated through increasing access to books and rising Arabic literacy rates. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Bang, restricted access to texts and restricted literacy education "allowed for […] social regulation—including the regulation of access to authority" (Bang 2011, 105). Swahili has since gained prominence as a language in which religious debate is carried out. It is studded with Arabic terms and turns of phrase, and access to texts in Swahili have become much easier (Bang 2011). Nevertheless, these debates and concomitant negotiations of authority have not faltered and remain tied to textual practices as the case of Hakimu Saleh's "material citations" shows. These textual practices are performed with various texts, but those involving a codex of the Qur'an (Swahili: *msahafu*) were and are of particular importance.

The power granted to a *msahafu*, according to William Graham, is different but not disconnected from other scripture. Working comparatively, he is interested in tracing how scripture has been set apart as religiously valued.

> [F]rom the historian's perspective, the sacrality or holiness of a book is not an a priori attribute of a text but one that is realized historically in the life of communities who respond to it as something sacred or holy. A text becomes "scripture" in active, subjective relationship to persons, and as part of a cumulative communal tradition. (Graham 1987, 5)

Lambek, Barber, Bang, and Graham all stress the social situatedness of texts. The relevance, role, and meanings of such texts are the outcome of social practices. This has been an incredibly useful intervention that has expanded our understanding of textual authority beyond older philological studies that focused almost exclusively on the semantic content of texts such as the Qur'an. Inspired by this work, I want to relate such performances of text and authority through text to the materiality of textuality. That is, I want to relate practices such as Hakimu

Saleh's "material citations" to understandings of textuality that are shaped by practices with the Qur'an as text and its material affordances. For this, I take inspiration from technology studies and designate "affordance" as the capacity of particular material configurations to facilitate the conditions for specific practices.

Hakimu Saleh's practices with text, his active enrollment of physically bound books, that enabled him to leaf through the pages and that contain words that he can read out and point to, as well as his preferential treatment of the *msahafu*, all these practices contribute to the performance of his authority and reify a valued status of material texts. Taking seriously Hakimu Saleh's expectation for me to gain a deeper understanding and to access meaning that is "hidden between the words" by gazing at the text, I wonder about the affordances of these texts. What is it about the materiality of textuality that facilitates certain practices, and how does an understanding of texts as having the power to convey hidden meanings become engrained in practices with these texts? In an attempt to engage more comprehensively with textual practices of Islamic authority, I now turn to the singularity of a *msahafu* and then, relying on my ethnographic fieldwork, shift the emphasis from textual materiality to focus on material textuality.

Singularity of the Qur'an

Hakimu Saleh refused to specify which school of Islamic jurisprudence he adhered to as the message of Islam's unity was more important to him than internal divisions. He did however, frequent Shafi'i mosques, which are the most common in Zanzibar Town. Yet the publications that he used for his "material citations" often had a Sufi leaning, especially those that included astrological knowledge and knowledge on how to calculate auspicious times for preparing and dispensing medicine. His teachings about the Qur'an also resonate strongly with scholarship on Sufism.[7] It is for these reasons that I take recourse to literature on Sufism in order to briefly delineate the singularity of the Qur'an. Annemarie Schimmel, within the framework of her study on Sufism, poignantly distinguishes the uniqueness of the Qur'an, saying:

> The centre of Islam is the Koran. Its sound, as has been said, defines the space in which the Muslim lives, and its written copies are highly venerated. In no other religion has the book/Book acquired a greater importance than in Islam. (Schimmel 1994, 150–51)

Numerous theological debates have taken place to describe and mark the Qur'an's singularity (see Hawting 1978; Zadeh 2008a). However, in the context of my ethnographic research in Zanzibar Town, I have not come across these debates.[8] For my interlocutors, the Qur'an is the Qur'an. No other words can describe what the essence of the Qur'an is/comprises/entails/does. Attitudes towards and practices with the Qur'an are

describable, its text is analyzable as "text," and its history is traceable, they often explained to me. However, none of these approaches is sufficient for my interlocutors (see also Zadeh 2008a, 63). Acknowledging my limitations in understanding the Qur'an in my interlocutors' terms, I am left to accept a gap between how I could describe the Qur'an in this academic format and how they describe its "mysterious" power.[9] William Chittick in his book on the Sufi path to knowledge circumscribes what may be meant by the indescribable:

> The revealed Book is the actual, true, authentic embodiment of God's Speech. Its every letter is full of significance, since the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning. It is true that the same thing can be said about the cosmos, but the written Book has the advantage of having been given a linguistic form that necessarily corresponds with Absolute Truth, which is God. (1989, 15–16)

This linguistic form, corresponding to "Absolute Truth," is folded into the cosmos as a material artifact. Though indescribable, a *msahafu* (a materially written manifestation of the Qur'an) is part of the cosmos. It gives material presence to "God's Speech" in the human realm. Hakimu Saleh's frequent allusions to what he terms "mysterious" characteristics and his explanations of its inexplicability perform the Qur'an as scripture and mark its iconicity.[10]

In the preceding paragraphs, I have already engaged with the textual artifact of the Qur'an in a way that comes close to understanding how my interlocutors appreciate it. With recourse to the vocabulary introduced by James Watts (2015), I have started to delve into the "iconic" aspect of a *msahafu*, its "mysterious" power.[11] In addition to semantic and performative aspects, Watts urges scholars to take the iconicity of scripture into account which, he claims, has thus far been understudied.[12] Following this call, Natalia Suit (2015) notes a lack of engagement with *maṣāḥif* (Arabic plural for *muṣḥaf*) in ethnographies and within the study of religion. She draws attention to negotiations around the Qur'an's material existence and engages with "ways in which the Qur'an's authority is mediated by its physical container—the *muṣḥaf*" (2015, 205).[13] I acknowledge the scholarship about the iconicity of the Qur'an as important. Yet they often leave the book closed and focus on its veneration as a material object. Instead, I am interested in opening it and engaging with the textuality of this material.

Hakimu Saleh insisted on my visual contact with the *msahafu*. He advocated that the Qur'an carried a potentiality of power on its own. To him, the *msahafu* is not just a physical container for the Qur'an. Instead it manifests the Qur'an and its power, its "charisma" (Zadeh 2021), the "distributed agency" of God's Qur'anic word (Flueckiger 2021 with reference to Bennett 2010). Urging me to look at the text that he read, Hakimu Saleh

facilitates the written Qur'an's potentiality to act on me so that I may see that which is "hidden between the words", as he put it. "Hidden between the words" is a very visual image that links up with the importance of having the *msahafu* in front of you. If you have the written text with lines and words and spaces between the words, it is conceivable to fill these spaces, to find meaning "between the words" of a material *msahafu*, not least because the Arabic script itself is understood to exert power (Moustafa and Sperl 2014, 21). The material textuality of a *msahafu*, I discern, is central to understanding how authority in Islam relates to textual practices.[14]

Of course, a *msahafu* is unlike other texts. According to Muslims, a *msahafu* has power in itself by way of being God's word in textual form; its material existence as a book allows humans to establish multi-sensual contact with God's powerful words and its textuality is one way to potentially facilitate access to God's power. Textuality, here, is the gateway for God's word to reach earth. Thus, I claim, in addition to a fruitful examination of the materiality of texts and ways of performing authority through and of them, it is also necessary to examine the textuality of these material texts. I thus now turn to a practice where the healing power of the Qur'an, materialized as written artifact, is tapped into.

Textuality and the Written Qur'an's Healing Power

To produce an Islamic medicine called *kombe*, Qur'anic verses are written with saffron ink on a plain plate or on plain paper (Nieber 2017, 2020; see also Purpura 1997). Geometrically balanced against the background, these Qur'anic verses, which sometimes are adorned with praise particles or protective symbols such as the Solomonic Seal, manifest through the ink in the very specific shape of the chosen Arabic-scripted verses. Carefully pouring water over the ink, the verses (and their supplements) are liquefied. This pinkish colored water is collected and, containing the verses, it is poured into a bottle and given to patients to be drunk as medicine.[15] In Zanzibar, this liquid is called *kombe*.[16] While there is a similar practice in which Qur'anic verses are recited over water that then equally contains the verses and is drunk as medicine, I focus here on *kombe la kuandika* ("written *kombe*"). These practices of writing, liquefying, and drinking Qur'anic verses that give way to the Qur'anic textuality in various material forms, invite numerous questions concerning the relation of the Qur'an and the material world from within which and with which it interacts (see also Ware 2014). Here I draw on some of them and inspect the affordances of *kombe* as material object, as material text, as text, and finally as textual artifact to scrutinize what *kombe* reveals about the Qur'an's materiality of textuality.

As a *material object* that contains the Qur'an, *kombe* directs attention to how the Qur'an is turned into medicine and thus made to exert power over affliction. Using the Qur'an as

medicine gives valence to the celebration of the Qur'an's singularity, its attribution of power, and practices of veneration.

As *material text*, *kombe* enables investigation of how the performance of writing the Qur'an, geometrically balancing the script (and supplements) on the writing surface, is entangled with the performance of expertise. That is, medical practitioners and/or Islamic teachers perform their role by writing *kombe* and thereby solidify their authority vis-a-vis the patients. Washing off the written traces could be read as an interesting commentary on resistance to the link between writing and power. I do however, believe that there is more at stake here. The writing of *kombe* multiplies Qur'anic verses and "[i]n the Qur'ān, God speaks with his own voice, not through inspired human writers" (Graham 1987, 87). Thus, copying from a *msahafu* constitutes a text that in itself is powerful rather than according power to the person who has performed the shaping of the ink traces.[17] Even if practitioners are mostly chosen to take on the role of writing, manuals that are sold on the streets, explaining which combination of verses and praise particles to use for which afflictions, provide a way to bypass a visit to a practitioner. In this way non-professionals are empowered to choose and copy Qur'anic verses for their *kombe*. Thus, rather than foreground the writers and portraying writing as an instrument of power that then becomes part of social economies (Goody 1986), the public proliferation of *kombe* recipes draws attention to the power of the text itself. Put differently, writing is a constitutive part of the process of preparing *kombe la kuandika*, but the healing power derives from the (written) Qur'an. Thus, while the process and the product are entangled in the performance of the writer's authority, following *kombe*'s liquefaction the written product becomes disentangled from the process of its emergence. Then, by being drunk by a patient, it becomes newly entangled with a consuming body.

> Ricoeur has argued that texts […] are material realities in their 'being-thereness.' While this is a useful insight, the fact that texts are objectified activity should not lead us to forget their processual character. And while it is legitimate and fruitful to explore how texts 'say something about something,' we should be careful not to reduce their materiality to signification. Texts are always the result of (and we always meet them through) practices of production and consumption. (Vásquez 2011, 255)

Indeed, the production and consumption (literally) of texts are important, as Vásquez argues. In the case of *kombe la kuandika*, writing as well as drinking are constitutive practices. Yet, while essentially agreeing with Vásquez, but arguing the other way around, I posit that in investigating the materiality of texts, the texts' "being-thereness" must not be forgotten. *Kombe la kuandika* is written, and the power lies in the product. The authority of writing and the power of the product are entangled,

but in the further processing, this entanglement turns into differentiation. That is to say, while writing is a constitutive part of the process of forming *kombe*, in the liquefaction the verses become detached from the shapes that constitute the writing—indeed, with *kombe*, liquefaction is a crucial affordance of written Qur'anic text. In its liquefaction, the written product is not disturbed; it remains the textual product that in this case of the Qur'an has inherent healing power. However, it is not constituted by the process of writing anymore. The authority of writing and the power of the product become disentangled. Liquefaction renders the written verses whole: it eclipses the teleological narrative of their becoming and merges its meaning with materiality. The performance of *kombe*'s textuality stops with the liquefaction. After liquefaction, neither the production nor the objectified activity of *kombe*'s textuality is performable anymore. *Kombe*, however, retains the power to perform healing after liquefaction.

As *text*, *kombe* invites scrutiny of the content of the verses in relation to the affliction against which it is ingested. Abdullahi El-Tom's article (1985) on this liquid amongst the Berti provides helpful insights as to these relations. He describes how the purpose (an affliction) for writing a Qur'anic verse is often mentioned in the verse itself. I have observed similar instances in Zanzibar Town. Patients who feel disturbed by their dreams, for example, are given verses from Sūrat Yusuf (12), in which Yusuf interprets dreams. In this case, the semantic content of the verse—the dream—is directly targeted at afflicting dreams. El-Tom shows how, at times, these connections only become discernible after placing the affliction in broad frames and privileging a certain exegetical reading of the verses. Through analogy, the affliction and the content of the verses (are made to) relate in these cases, thus establishing a relation of the written Qur'an to and within the world by way of the Qur'an's textual pragmatics.

Though liquefied and thus disentangled from the writer, *kombe* remains a textual artifact, the pragmatics of which is relevant and the performance of which sheds light on the dynamics between process, product, and consumption and their relations to the written Qur'an's healing power. However, as *textual artifact*, of which the visual legibility is deliberately foreclosed, it affords to be "read" beyond visually scanning for legible arrays of letter shapes. I contend that as textual artifact, in which the carefully shaped ink meets water and becomes liquefied (not liquidated!), *kombe* incites engagement with the textuality of material text.

The text of *kombe* relies on saffron ink taking a very particular shape manifesting text. In addition to the verses, supplementary numbers, names, or symbols to protect the verses are also written with the same ink. These supplements not only have meaning in what they illustrate and portray, but the exact shape of the ink manifesting the verses and their supplements as well

as the elements' exact position in relation to each other and on the paper/plate also contribute to the material and spiritual protection of the verses. Through the theme of protection, I elucidate the materiality of textuality and its affordances in a two-fold way.

Firstly, these supplements often encircle the verses and, as Hakimu Saleh explained to me, protect them from the edge of the paper/plate. The supplements ward off outside influences from beyond the paper/plate. Here, the materiality of what is written—the shape of the ink that forms the verses—needs to be protected by ink in certain shapes stationed around the verses' edges. Writing creates a surface and defines its two-dimensional plane (Ingold 2010b, 23). It exists on the surface it creates, but the so-created surface extends beyond the size of the writing. The protection must guard the inner verses against threats coming from all directions within the dimensional plane of the surface. Textuality yields a two-dimensionality, which, I argue, must be taken into consideration when investigating the materiality of texts. Hakimu Saleh, once he has written the verses and the supplements on paper, uses scissors to excise the edges of the paper that are left empty. He thereby centers the verses on the paper and geometrically balances the position of the ink in relation to the size of the paper. The added value that comes with visual symmetric balance relates to shape of the material ink rather than what this shape stands for.

Secondly, the supplements "close" the Qur'anic text. Wolfgang Iser (1972, 283) describes how "reading" fills the gap that any text leaves between words and sentences; he explores how "reading" is interpretation and thus "closes" the text of a particular actualization, a particular moment of reading. Following a similar logic, Brinkley Messick (1996, 2018; see also Ahmed 2016, chapter 5) scrutinizes *fiqh*-texts, texts of Islamic jurisprudence that are placed around the Qur'anic text. The *fiqh*-texts authoritatively give direction to the reading of the Qur'an, and they "endeavored to further define the already definitive" (1996, 17) whereby the already definitive is the Qur'an. The supplements to the Qur'anic verses in *kombe* similarly close the written verses. The supplements protect them from outside influences and substantiate the healing context. The supplements thus also function to preclude other ways to "read" the verses. There is a special danger associated with mischievous jinn who might influence the patients' perception of the material writing and thus of the potential "reading." Furthermore, the supplements intensify the verses' healing properties for which they were written. Textuality's properties of assembling letters and words with spaces between them that can be crafted to form a geometrically balanced two-dimensional product are important here to understand practices of protecting material texts.

But it is not only the protective supplements that can be understood by taking the materiality of textuality seriously. Textuality also provides a way to understand the liquefaction of

kombe. In the examination of how the protective supplements are written around the verses, Tim Ingold's considerations of how writing creates a surface are conducive in revealing how the supplements shield the inner verses from outer danger (coming from the edge of the paper/plate) within the two-dimensional plane. In the liquefaction of *kombe*, this two-dimensionality turns into three dimensions. On multiple occasions throughout his work, Ingold distinguishes between traces and threads (see amongst others 2007, chapter 2, 2010b, 20; see here 2010a, S130):

> [T]races are formed on surfaces; threads are strung through the air. [… T]hese two manifestations of a line are readily interconvertible. In the formation of surfaces, threads are converted into traces; in their dissolution, traces are converted into threads.

In his work, he refers to knotting, weaving, embroidery, and writing to give examples of the former (how threads turn into traces) and for the latter, he turns to cases in which mazes, loops, and designs (tattoos) are indicative of how people's life paths (as threads) unfold. When *kombe* is washed off, the traces that had formed the letters on the plate/paper are also converted and, once drunk, affect the patient's life path (become part of the "thread" of a person's life). However, also recitation, amulets, or other enactments of the Qur'an may affect a patient's life path: the liquefaction of *kombe* prompts engagement with a more literal "dissolution" of the surface in which ink traces are transformed. I argue that the written traces' transformation from two to three dimensionality renders their textuality tacit.[18] The verses are not converted into something else; they do not cease to be the verses. Instead, they are transformed: their textuality is kept intact (it is still *kombe la kuandika*) in a different (three-dimensional) form. The text's characteristics—the letters, words, punctuation, their protective supplements, and the spaces that ink had left untouched—are maintained throughout the process of liquefaction. However, the writing has become tacit (the "traces" are now potential "threads"): the verses' textuality has turned materially implicit to potentially "unfold" within a patient's body to finally affect that patient's life path.

Liquefying the written Qur'anic verses renders their textuality tacit, forecloses cognitive engagement with the verses' contents, and enables a corporeal encounter whereby a bodily "reading" facilitates the verses to be targeted at an affliction. In this healing practice, Qur'anic verses do not heal without being ingested. Only once a body "closes" the text for its affliction does healing take place. Disconnected from the writer, materially absorbed into a human body, the Qur'anic text has power over afflictions.

Kombe makes the very textuality of the Qur'an's materiality explicit. This includes the way the ink is formed to create shapes against a background manifesting Qur'anic verses with

protective supplements, thereby constituting a two-dimensional plane that is transformed into a three-dimensional liquid and thus facilitating an embodied closure to target the verses at an affliction. With *kombe*, the healing power of the Qur'an is activated by fusing the Qur'an's text with a human body. *Kombe* provides a very concrete example of this fusion and shows the material affordances of textuality. This takes us some way in understanding Hakimu Saleh's "material citations" and his insistence on my visual encounter with the texts he used for teaching. More than the semantic content of the texts and more than his performance of being knowledgeable, Hakimu Saleh was interested in facilitating a way for God to reach me as his student through the material textuality of the texts he provided. To him, the potential of the two-dimensional layout of the texts had more to offer; there was potentially something "hidden between the words" for me to attain by visually following his reading. Indeed, the "material citations" offer opportunities for that which is potentially "hidden between the words" to aid his teaching and my understanding and thereby his performance of Islamic expertise. To me, this indicates how crucial it is to explore the materiality of textuality that affords human encounters with text and thus to textual practices including those through which Muslims perform authority. The interpretation of texts has played and continues to play an important role in disseminating authority in Islam. However, practices of foreclosing or delaying visual "readings" of religious texts (see also Kokoschka 2019) point to more complex constellations of people (and their bodies), texts, and power potentials.

Conclusion

"Authority with Textual Materials – Power of the Written Qur'an": the title bears a dash. The dash is a typographic symbol, drawing a straight line from one group of words to another. This dash distances and connects. It creates a binary, marking the authority with textual materials as distinct from the power of the written Qur'an, and simultaneously alludes to a relationality between these two poles. The dash visualizes what this article does: connecting and distinguishing the written Qur'an's power and textual practices that yield authority.

Acknowledging the Qur'an's privileged role as source of power and authority in Islam, DeWeese cautions that "authority cannot be understood wholly on the basis of its sources" (DeWeese 2010, 33). This is an invitation to explore the "methods" of how authority is recognized and transmitted (DeWeese 2010). Or, as I refer to here, how authority is performed with textual materials, through "material citations." While this is far from being sufficiently explored, it is not the only response to DeWeese's call to go beyond a "simple literalism of textual interpretation" and to investigate how "religious authority [is] conveyed without words, in non-discursive venues" (DeWeese 2010). Rather than solely stepping back and regarding texts as

material objects that inform practices of authority, I propose to stay close and engage with the very textuality of these texts, the meaningful shapes that are set apart from a background and their multi-dimensionality. I suggest with this article that taking seriously the textuality of material texts helps to understand practices with texts, particularly when questions of textual power/authority are at play, such as is the case with Hakimu Saleh's "material citations."

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notes and references

[1] Kjersti Larsen (2019) shows how in Zanzibar, the Qur'an's power can be materialized in different ways, such as speaking its words or uttering Qur'anic praise particles, but also through *kombe*. While I focus on the Qur'an's materialization as text, I second her observation that Qur'anic materializations are not confined to ritual contexts, but merge these contexts with everyday life, especially with regard to medicine.

[2] The Swahili version is published by Darussalam: *Tafsiri ya maana ya Qur-ani Tukufu Kwa Lugha Ya Kiswahili*. The English version is translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali. On Swahili translations of the Qur'an, see Lacunza-Balda (1997) Topan (2019), and Zadeh (2021).

[3] The Sufi approach to textual materials, including to Sufi writing, is shaped by ambiguities. Zachary Wright describes it as the "paradox of Sufi writing," that is "putting the ineffable experience of God into words," and moreover, that "[w]hatever the blessing or lofty purpose of a Sufi text, the reader [...] should not forget the suspicion with which Sufis have generally 'treated writing'" (Wright 2010, 109, 123).

[4] See for example Francis Robinson's article (2009) in which he traces how the interpretative authority of the *ulama* has been changing for the past 200 years.

[5] Hakimu Saleh's reliance on material texts that are usually printed and not hand-written, is in itself an interesting development within the history of Islamic practices of authority. See Robinson (1993) and Messick (2018).

[6] I have not been able to do justice to this exchange and am still searching for a good way to navigate, in writing, the multiple implicit agendas that framed the encounters between Hakimu and myself.

[7] Hakimu Saleh did not, however, belong to any Sufi brotherhood (*tariqa*)

as far as I know (see Fujii 2010 on *tariqa*s in Zanzibar).

[8] I have, however, come across teachings on how to treat the Quran and questions about purity (see also Katz 2002).

[9] I take the word "mysterious" from Hakimu Saleh who, in English, employed it in this context. See also Graham and Gilsenan who both note the inability of academic texts to capture this "miraculous source of the umma" (Gilsenan 1982, 16), its "religious meaning that may exist apart from rational, discursive meaning - and, indeed, apart from mystical or esoteric meaning as well" (Graham 1987, 112; Watts 2015). Furthermore, see Larsen (2019) who frames the authority of those knowledgeable in Islamic literature to their ability to tap into "hidden dimensions and mysticism."

[10] For a historical study of this solidification see Zadeh (2009, 466).

[11] In fact, Watts speaks of three "dimensions" of scripture. However, I replace Watts' term "dimension" with "aspect" since I will engage with "dimensions" in a different way below.

[12] A few studies have already shown the merits of such an approach. See for example Thomas Kirsch (2011) for textual practices in a Zionist Church in southern Zambia. For a non-religious example see Matthew Hull (2012), who, similarly to Kirsch, shows how texts become meaningful not solely as constituting communication, but also as objects of palpable management of material text as that which is entangled with practices of authority.

[13] This is of particular importance considering the commodification of printed copies. Suit states that "[f]rom an aesthetic perspective, a mass reproduced *muṣḥaf* loses the aura of authenticity rooted in scholarship, calligraphy, and hand-production. But removing the same *muṣḥaf* from these aesthetic concerns enhances the Qur'an's authority with individual readers through multiplication" (Suit 2015, 198). With reference to Hakimu Saleh's practices with such a printed *msahafu*, I find it rather remarkable how much this debate about the shift from handwriting to print is absent in contemporary practices in Zanzibar.

[14] This line of thought could be developed further, including the entanglements with academia: As reader of this text, you are interested in the contents, ready to underline, highlight or place big question marks and critique in the margins. As reader of this text, you also consume the layout, typography, the whiteness of the paper or the brightness of your screen. You take into consideration how you received this text in the first place and which other texts it comes connected to. Focusing on the semantics, you do not only perform this text as part of a gigantic academic corpus of texts, but are affected by its iconicity.

[15] Note how with *kombe*, the "oral" ingestion of the "textual" Qur'an provides a different understanding of the relation between "texts" and "orality."

[16] Although I focus on my fieldwork in Zanzibar, this liquid is prepared in many other regions. The name and the details of its preparation and use might differ, but writing and liquefying Qur'anic verses for ingestion appears to be as widespread as Islam. See for example Lambek (1993, 142), O'Connor (2004, 176), Flueckiger (2006), Lemons (2010), de Stoop (2011, 47, 60), or Tocco (2014, 131–132).

[17] In Hakimu Saleh's case, however, he uses various other textual practices to "materially cite" and solidify his situated authority as Islamic healer in his neighborhood.

[18] Similarly, in her research about Islamic calligraphy, Alina Kokoschka engages with the "close connection in Islam between script and material objects, or things" (2019, 257). She is interested in how the line of Arabic script both forms and disguises legible words and how the delay in readability carries meaning beyond that which the words carry semantically.

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