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# Islam and Chiefship in Northern Mozambique

LIAZZAT J. K. BONATE

Links between Islam and the chiefly clans in Mozambique have existed since the eighth century, when Islam made inroads into the northern Mozambican coast and became associated with the Shirazi ruling elites. When the region became entangled in the international slave trade during the nineteenth century, the Shirazi clans secured alliances with the most powerful mainland chiefs through conquest and kinship relations in order to secure access to mainland slaves. This process was accompanied by a massive expansion of Islam into the hinterland. The alliances between the Shirazi at the coast and the mainland chiefdoms resulted in a network of paramount chiefs and subordinate Muslim slave raiders. This network also served as a marker distinguishing between themselves (the *Maca*: Muslims and “civilized”) and those to be enslaved (the *Makua* and *Lomwe*: derogatory terms denoting savagery, i.e., “non-Muslims” and “uncivilized”).

Some scholars have suggested that kinship ideology in general, and matriliney in particular, came under a great deal of pressure from the expansion of Islam.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the chiefly network remained matrilineal. Considering that the network was grounded on the Swahili

(Shirazi) regional Islamic tradition, the perseverance of matriliney appears to be a paradox. It can be explained, however, by the fact that Islam was the domain of chiefs, whose legitimacy and authority was embedded in matrilineal ideology of kinship and territorial/land relations of the region.<sup>2</sup>

## Encounters with Sufism

When two new Sufi Orders, the Shadhuliyya Yashrutiyya in 1897 and the Qadiriyya in 1905, arrived at Mozambique Island, the rest of northern Mozambique was still politically unstable, with Muslim chiefs spearheading a generalized resistance against the Portuguese. Crushed at the outset, this resistance went on sporadically until the 1930s.

On launching the Shadhuliyya Yashrutiyya at Mozambique Island, Shaykh Muhammad Ma'arouf bin Shaykh (1853–1905) of the Comoro Islands, gave the first *ijazas* (authorization) of the *khalifa* to two local Muslim chiefs.<sup>3</sup> However, when he left Mozambique, a conflict over the leadership of the

orders ensued between the chiefs and a recent Comorian immigrant. The fact that this Comorian did not establish kinship relationships with Muslim chiefly lineages undermined his religious claims in the eyes of local Muslims.

The Qadiriyya reportedly was brought to Mozambique Island in 1905 by Shaykh 'Issa bin Ahmad al-Ngaziji (also known as al-Msujini) al-Barawi, a disciple of shaykh 'Umar Uways al-Barawi (1847–1909). He travelled to the mainland of Mozambique Island, Cabaceira Pequena, recruiting adepts from among a mixed-race Indian-African group of Muslims, who were descendants of the Gujarati Sunni Indian immigrants and local African women. Despite intermarriage, the Indo-African group remained under Portuguese rule, which kept them separated from the rest of the population.

**Muslim leadership of Northern Mozambique historically has incorporated Islamic authority and chiefship at once. Throughout the colonial period, Muslim chiefs defended their version of Islam against non-local conceptions of Islam, such as Sufism and Wahhabism. After independence the links between chiefship and Islam in northern Mozambique became less visible. This resulted primarily from the policies of the post-colonial government, which saw African chiefship and Islam as two separate spheres. Islam was viewed as an “organized faith” similar to Christianity, while chiefship was understood to represent African “traditional authority.”**

The position of Indo-Africans in relation to Africans had been safeguarded by the presence of the Portuguese administration at Mozambique Island, but when the administration moved to the southern settlement of Lourenço Marques (currently, Maputo) in 1896, the group was left without colonial backing. They had to arrange for their economic survival and compete for Islamic authority with the Africans. They controlled the Qadiriyya until 1929, when local chiefly clans, in particular, Sayyid Ba Hasan (also known as Abahassan), a descendant of the local Shirazi rulers, stepped in to take over

the order. He was the son of a Hadrami *sharif* and a relative of numerous important Swahili and Muslim chiefs of northern Mozambique.

The violent transition of the Qadiri leadership from the Afro-Indians to the chiefly clans set in motion the competition between the two groups, which continued up to the end of the colonial era, and impacted the split of the orders into eight *туруq*. Until his death in 1963, Ba Hasan used his family ties, his chiefly status, and Islamic learning to expand the orders throughout Mozambican territory. As a rule, northern Mozambican Muslim chiefs became the leaders of the orders or they appointed their kin for this position.

The integration of chiefs into the colonial system of *indigenato* and the modernization processes which took place between the 1930s and 1970s did not halt the expansion of Islam nor impinge on matriliney prevailing in northern Mozambique. Individual files of the chiefs of the three northern Mozambican Districts collected by the Portuguese between 1954 and 1974 indicate that the majority of the chiefs were Muslims, and had mostly inherited their positions and title from their maternal side, as a rule from a maternal uncle.<sup>4</sup>

## Encounters with the Wahhabis

Muslim chiefly clans of northern Mozambique provided massive support to the liberation movements in the early 1960s, in part because of the harsh anti-Muslim policies of Portugal and in part because the Mozambique liberation movements were under the patronage of TANU (Tanganyika African national Union) that had a wide Muslim support, especially from Sufi shaykhs such as Muhammad Ramiya. Between 1965 and 1967, the Portuguese purged chiefs participating in the liberation movements, many of whom were arrested, murdered, and replaced by non-kin. Simultaneously, the colonial administration undertook a meticulous study of Islam and “traditional authorities.” Because Portugal was concerned with the independence movements and identified Muslim chiefs and Sufi Orders as representing a religious leadership for the majority of northern Mozambican Muslim territories, it displayed a public support to them rather than to the Wahhabi group that began emerging in the 1960s. Two Afro-Indians, returning after studying in Saudi Arabia, founded a mostly urban-based Wahhabi group centred at the Anuaril Islamo mosque in Lourenço Marques. The conflict between them and the northern Mozambican tariqa-based and chiefly Muslim leadership soon escalated into direct confrontations, with the Portuguese intervening in favour of the Sufis.

## Muslim leadership and independence (1975–1983)

The socio-political standing of the northern Mozambican Muslim leadership was shaken to the core after independence. In 1977, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) adopted Marxism and “scientific socialism,” and sought to eliminate a wide variety of so-

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cial practices and beliefs which they deemed “obscurantist,” “backward” and thus contrary to the modernist norms of revolutionary “scientific” socialism.<sup>5</sup> These practices included the initiation rites, traditional healing, as well as ceremonies of ancestral supplication, all of which crucial for the legitimacy and authority of chiefship.

Religion was identified as another “obscurantist element,” and the post-independence Mozambique government banned religious teachings from schools, nationalized religious institutions, and harassed and persecuted religious leaders. With this, Muslim chiefs of northern Mozambique lost yet another one of the pillars of their power, that of Islam.

To make matters worse for the northern Mozambican Muslims, a 1976 government decree outlawed associations, including religious ones. To counter this move the Wahhabi group, led by Abubacar Ismael “Mangira” met on December 23, 1978 in the Anuaril Isslamo mosque in Maputo in order to delineate new strategies, especially because Anuaril Isslamo was an association too. They concluded that an organ representing all Muslims nationwide must be created in the face of the new circumstances. In doing so, the Wahhabis took advantage of the government’s ban on associations to establish their position as the legitimate body of Islamic authority and to eliminate their historical rivals once and for all. The nucleus of the would-be national Muslim organization was set up there and then, and it was presented as such to the government when in 1981 the Frelimo decided to reconsider its positions toward Islam and create a national Muslim organization.

A nation-wide Islamic organization, called the Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique (Islamic Council of Mozambique), was established in a meeting between the government and a group of Maputo imams in January 1981, who went on to elect Abubacar Ismael “Mangira” as its co-coordinator and later on its first national Secretary of the Islamic Council.<sup>6</sup> As the northern Mozambican Muslims were not consulted on the creation of the Council, let alone invited to take part in it, its creation signalled a definitive victory of the southern Afro-Indian Wahhabis in their long-term historic struggle over Islamic authority against the northern Mozambican tariqa-based Muslim leadership.

Northern Mozambican Muslim leadership’s disenchantment with the post-independence state became aggravated when Frelimo became associated with southern Wahhabis. The Frelimo’s favourable stance toward Wahhabis seems to have stemmed from the government’s perception that Islam and “traditional authorities” were unrelated; from allegations that “traditional authorities” had collaborated with colonialism and were, therefore, less nationalistic; and from the “modernist” outlook of the Wahhabis, who were well versed in Arabic and armed with university degrees and first-hand experience of Middle Eastern Islamic culture.

Accordingly, in 1983, Maputo Muslims who disagreed with Wahhabis created their own national organization, called the Congresso Islâmico de Moçambique (Islamic Congress of Mozambique), to which most of the pre-colonial associations and confraternities, including Sufi Orders, became affiliated. The Council attempted to de-legitimize the Congress in the eyes of the Frelimo government by denouncing confraternities and associations as incompatible with the spirit of Islam, and linking them to the colonial power and “traditional authority” as opposed to a “true” and “legitimate” Islamic authority of the ulama with “adequate” religious training.<sup>7</sup> This did not result in the elimination of the Congress as the Council expected. From that time on, the two organizations have continuously competed with each other for the Frelimo party and government patronage, as well as for the funding of international Islamic NGOs.

However, the Northern Mozambican Muslim leadership, perceived as both “un-modern” and either completely African “traditionalist” or following an Islam which had “syncretized” with these “traditions,” were not able to play any significant roles in the official Islamic public sphere or be considered as unequivocally and legitimately “Islamic.”

## Muslim leadership and liberalization (1983–2006)

Rather than relying on the culturally loaded notions of a “chief” of régulo, the Frelimo government has preferred to use the term “traditional authorities” to indicate a group comprised of chiefs and their en-



PHOTO BY LIAZZAT J. K. BONATE, 1999

tourage of subordinate chiefs and healers. Realizing the social importance of this group, Frelimo gradually reinstated “traditional authority.” In 1989, the ban on traditional healing was lifted. After the signing of the peace accord in 1992, which ended the civil war with Renamo, the Frelimo recognized that “traditional authority” could powerfully influence voter behaviour in the first democratic election of 1994. From 1991 to 1997, the government, through the Ministry of State Administration, undertook research on “traditional authorities.” In 1996 a change in the Constitution placed local authorities under the administrative protection of the state. The 1997 Land Law attributed legal rights within the State Law to “traditional authority” by recognizing the right of “local communities” to use land and benefit by occupation, in accordance with “customary norms and practices.” And finally, a government decree fully reinstated the “traditional authority” in Mozambique.

While with these legal reforms the Muslim leadership in northern Mozambique seems to have recovered the “traditional” side of their authority and power, they have not been able to recapture their claim on Islam yet. They are still largely associated with chiefship and African culture rather than Islam. Because of this they are barely able to access benefits or gain socio-political influence through Islamic platforms or organizations. This situation has been the source of their continual frustration and resistance to the alleged racial and cultural discrimination perpetrated by Frelimo allied with southern Wahhabis, Afro-Indians, and Indians.

Many northern Muslim leaders have preferred to perform their religious leadership through traditional patrimonial relationships thus perpetuating the links between Islam and chiefship. These links, historically and culturally grounded in local tradition, still enjoy legitimacy and positive response in rural or peri-urban areas of northern Mozambique.

## Muslim healer’s banner, Mozambique Island

### Notes

1. For example, J. F. A. Mwiliza, *History of Commodity Production in Makuani 1600–1900: Mercantilist Accumulation to Imperialist Domination* (Dar Es Salaam University Press, 1991).
2. For more details, see Bonate, “Matriliny, Islam and Gender,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 2, no. 36 (2006): 139–166.
3. A. P. de Carvalho, “Notas para a história das confrarias Islâmicas na Ilha de Moçambique,” *Arquivo* (Maputo: Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique), no. 4, (March 1988): 59–66, p. 61.
4. Ficheiro dos Regulados, 1954–1974, Cx: 899, 901, 902, in Fundo de Governo-Geral, Mozambique Historical Archives.
5. H. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xvi, 151–152.
6. Eric Morier-Genoud, “L’Islam au Mozambique après l’indépendance. Histoire d’une montée en puissance,” *L’Afrique Politique*, 2002: 132–33.
7. Letter from Abubacar Mangira to the Prosecutor of the Republic of Mozambique, 31 May 1986. Archives of the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Justice of Mozambique, Maputo.

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