

THE DISCOVERY OF AN UNKNOWN SWAHILI MANUSCRIPT IN ARABIC
SCRIPT ON ISLAMIC THEOLOGY IN MOZAMBIQUE.

BY JAN KNAPPERT

The presence of Islam in southern Africa begins just three hundred years ago. In Uganda, Islam arrived not more than c. 150 years ago. On the coast of Kenya and Tanzania however, and on the islands in the western Indian Ocean, Islam arrived 1300 years ago, though not in all those places at the same time.

Contact with Islamic countries began in the late seventh and early eighth centuries along the northern Kenya coast, by trade with southern Arabia and the Gulf countries. Gradually the Muslim visitors built dwellings on the coast and the islands, marrying the daughters of the local chiefs, thus say all the traditions. In the course of generations, a new people arose, called by the Arabs Sawāhili, from sawāhil 'shores, beaches'. They call themselves Wapwani 'People of the Coast' and also Waungwana 'Free Men', because they were, and are, Muslims, who considered themselves nobler than the heathens of the Interior. The Portuguese who arrived first in 1498, called them Moros, Moors, because that was the Portuguese name for all Islamicised Africans. The English captains who visited the East Coast from about 1800, called them Sowahilee, (or some such spelling) since that was what the Arabs called the Bantu speaking population of the Coast. Ever since they have been known as Swahili, though anthropologists are still unable to define the term exactly.

Responding to pressure from the north where the Somali were occupying the northern Swahili Coast from Mogadishu southwards, the Swahili Muslims moved south along the coast and settled in small communities along what became the Mozambique Coast. There, as elsewhere, they set up city states, ruled either by councils of elders, (like Mombasa) or by petty sultans, like Pate, Kilwa and the Tungi sultanate on the Mozambique Coast.

When the Portuguese occupied the East African Coast, they endeavoured to eradicate all vestiges of Islam, rebuilding the towns like typical Portuguese colonial cities. The towns north of the Ruvuma river (the frontier between Mozambique and Tanzania) were later re-islamicised, but in the towns of Mozambique the traces of its Islamic history were hidden.

After the end of the colonial period, and especially now that the influence of Communism is waning, there is a new political force stepping into the vacuum left by the departing western and northern powers : Islam. Radio Cairo is transmitting broadcasts in good Swahili to East Africa. Egypt and Pakistan are sponsoring Islamic teachers and preachers to East Africa to spread the learning of Islam. The Saudi government is building mosques and madarasas (Islamic schools) in many towns in East Africa, especially Tanzania and Uganda. Even the Turks are publishing textbooks on Islamic law and duty in Swahili .

Africans are feeling abandoned to their poverty by the ex-colonial nations, as well as by the Communists, but especially many African Christians are feeling left without a guide. So, Islam is gaining prestige simply by being there and by being seen in the form of teachers and mosques. No wonder that many Africans who may have supported other ideologies for a time, are beginning to remember that their forebears were once Muslims. The new president of Tanzania is a Muslim and so are several of his ministers. In Uganda, the rule of Idi Amin, in spite of its ignominious end, has left a sharp increase in the number of Muslims in and around Kampala as well as in the north (West Nile).

Many Mozambicans too, are remembering that they have a partly Islamic history. Now that all nations need a history, it is discovered that this history is Islamic, shared with many other nations along the coasts of the western Indian Ocean and beyond.

It is in this political context that the discovery of an important Swahili manuscript in Arabic script is of more than literary and cultural interest. It demonstrates that the people of Mozambique are re-orientating themselves, finding their bearings in a politico-cultural world that has changed its ideological direction three times this century already.

Islam promises to be stable in the sense that it has never changed since its foundation. It has known sharp setbacks during its history as a result of wars with the West Europeans and against the Communists as well, in countries like Eritrea and Afghanistan. However, today, the West- and East Europeans are too absorbed by their own problems to pay attention to Africa, whereas the Islamic nations seem to grow stronger and more attentive to the needs of their brothers in Islam. Their lore teaches them to help fellow Muslims at any expense, and this doctrine has never changed. It follows that a document on Islamic theology remains valid in spite of age.

The document in question is a copybook such as were sold in all shops owned by 'British Indians' anywhere in Africa. It is filled with writing in Arabic script. There are some prayers in Arabic, but most of the copybook is taken by three long poems in Swahili in Arabic script, all three religious Islamic in content. There is one poem on the long legend of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, a very popular theme in Islamic literature. Very similar manuscripts with the same contents are currently being edited by Professor N.Q.King of California and myself. The second poem contains an unknown legend of the Prophet Muhammad and the Woman in the Mosque at Medina. The third poem is by far the most important. It is the Utenzi wa Musa, the Epic of the Prophet Moses to whom God spoke. This writer spent many years searching for it, not suspecting that it would come to light in Mozambique.

Its title was well known among Swahili scholars in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, where this writer was working 20-30 years ago. I had also suspected that there was a 'hidden' but living Islamic culture in Mozambique, which survived the long Portuguese period. It is a miracle that any manuscripts have survived the long time of warfare between 1964-1975 in northern Mozambique. This too, causes me to suspect that there was a great deal of Islamic cultural activity going on in northern Mozambique, even on the coast, where Portuguese cultural influence was strongest.

The fact that African Muslims write down their theological works in verse is very common and makes good sense. The young boys who have to learn the subject, will memorise the entire text. Obviously poetry is easier to keep in mind than prose, so that numerous works in Swahili and other African languages of the Islamic tradition are composed as poetry, dealing with ritual, prayers, fasting, marriage and all the duties of daily life.

The Epic of the Conversation between God and Moses is an authoritative work on theology, represented as a dialogue in which Moses is permitted to ask God some, but not all, questions which God then answers. This representation of the dialogue as coming directly from God and His prophet lends the greatest possible authority to this work. It is one of the explanations for the question why this work is so widespread that it is found in Mozambique, a thousand miles from Kenya, its presumed country of origin, since the great majority of Swahili poetry is Kenyan.

This discovery of long Swahili texts far away from their city of origin (probably Mombasa, judging by the dialect of the poems) demonstrates also the vast extension of Swahili Islamic literary culture as a united cultural habitat for one of the oldest cultures of Africa. It reaches from southern Somalia to Mozambique, and across Africa to central Zaire, where likewise Swahili manuscripts have been found.

The political consequences of this vast extent of a coherent Islamic culture are obvious : in course of time, given freedom, these scattered Islamic communities, which are in contact with each other, will grow together into one densifying network of Islamic villages and mitaa (town neighbourhoods) across eastern Africa. The process of Islamisation never stops, and although it may be arrested temporarily by adversity, such as happened during the colonial period, as soon as the opposing forces are removed, or become slack, Islamic culture will revive and resume its expansion and intensification. This process can at present be observed in the Sudan, where the last vestiges of Christianity are being eradicated, and in Eritrea, where at last the ruling governments of Christians and their successors, the Communists, have been ousted to make room for the native forces of Islam. Chad, although its Muslim population is given as only just over half (52 %) , behaves like an Islamic state in political life, since both parties contending for political power .are Islamic.

In South Africa too, the power of Islam is growing, for more than one reason. Firstly, the Muslims decided to participate in the new power structure offered to them by the government, in contrast to the Hindus who abstained. As a result, the Muslims have occupied a number of high positions in the new structure, which has given them a very considerable political influence.

In Zimbabwe too, Muslim influence is on the increase. There is now already some Islamic literature in the Shona language, small printed books on the life of Muhammad and the precepts of Islam.

In Malawi too, religious tracts and small booklets are printed and published describing the life of the Prophet and the precepts of Islam. Of the population of Mozambique and Malawi, 16 % are reported as belonging to the religion of Islam. The numbers are growing. And with the numbers, the political power will grow, continuously. Funds will come in abundance from the Middle East, to sponsor schools and welfare societies for Muslims, whose sons will receive scholarships to go and study in Riyadh and Tehran. They will be the new leaders.

