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The use of the Arabic script in northern Mozambique

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Northern Mozambican Muslim population has been using the Arabic script for writing in KiSwahili and local African languages for centuries. Even today, many people continue using this script in private correspondence. Despite the abundance of the documents in this script that are housed at the Mozambique Historical Archives as well as in private hands, these documents have never been addressed or researched either from linguistic, historical, cultural or religious vantage points. For the last seven years, the Archives have been trying to draw attention of the scholars and obtain funds for the preservation and research of the documents. In this article two short letters from the collection of the Mozambique Historical Archives are transcribed and translated with the help of a local shaykh who was educated within the regional historical Islamic literacy tradition. Then, the content and the protagonists of the letters were identified and analyzed with the reference to the historical context and the events of the time. Besides serving as the evidence for historical occurrences, the letters also provide a general public with a unique opportunity of “hearing the voices” of the authors and in their own words (in first person). **Key words:** Mozambique, Islam, KiSwahili, Arabic.

Introduction

The northern Mozambican Muslim population has used the Arabic script for communication purposes among the coastal communities where KiSwahili remained dominant amidst some of the significant local variants such as Ekoti (the language of the Angoche’s Koti people [see Schadeberg & Mucanheia 2000]), Esangaji (the language of the Sangage people [see Lyndon 2007; Schadeberg 1997]), or KiMwani (see Rzewuski 1979; Schadeberg & Mous 1994: 239–244; Petzell 2002: 88–110). At the same time, this script was used for writing in local African languages of the mainland, such as Macua, Yao and others. A considerable number of people in contemporary northern Mozambique do not write nor read the official language of the country, namely Portuguese; but they continue using the Arabic script in private correspondence. In fact, writing a letter to parents in this script along with recitation of the Qur’an remains one of the traditional ways of showing that a student of a Qur’anic school has concluded his/her studies. While many northern Mozambicans, who have kinship and religious ties with Tanzania, understand KiSwahili and tune

into the regional KiSwahili radio station, the language is no longer as commonly used for writing as it was the case when it was a regional lingua franca of East Africa and northern Mozambique in the nineteenth century.

A substantial number of documents in the Arabic script from northern Mozambique are housed in the national archives and in many private hands; both sets of collections have remained largely unexplored, however. As far as it could be ascertained from preliminary fieldwork research, the private documents contain mostly information on genealogies and family histories, and are thus suitable to shed light on transformations of the local and regional power alliances and the emergence of notable lineages and chiefdoms through migration and conquest. Moreover, the documents also disclose important aspects of the local culture such as the intellectual and literary traditions of the region and in particular the Islamic ones. In addition to the more traditional aspects of the religious literature, private collections include the *qasa'id* (praise poetry), fables and tales inspired by Islam and local African historical traditions, Sufi literature, and the literature on healing, divination, dream-reading and amulet writing.

The collection of documents in the Arabic script is kept at the Mozambique Historical Archives in Maputo and they contain mainly the nineteenth century correspondence between local African rulers and the Portuguese military commanders in the regions of the contemporary coastal Cabo Delgado and Nampula provinces. Although of an official nature, these documents illustrate legal, religious, cultural and economic aspects of the local societies of the time, as well as show the interconnectedness of the coastal Mozambique to the world of the Swahili in East Africa and other centres of Islam along Indian Ocean shores.

In this article two short letters from this collection are examined. Both of them date from the 1890s, and are written by the African rulers of the regions of Angoche (local name *Nguja*) and Sangage to the Portuguese military commanders (Port., *Capitão-Mór*). The documents are in KiSwahili and not in any of the local languages. The letters were translated by shaykh Abu Dale, a KiMwani-speaker from coastal Cabo Delgado, who learned KiSwahili through the use of the Arabic script in the town of Lindi, Tanganyika, while studying with a Qadiri shaykh Abdallah Abdurrahman (a disciple of shaykh 'Umar al-Qullatayn of Zanzibar) between 1959 and 1962. According to shaykh Abu Dale, the letters reveal that, although those who wrote them could speak and understand KiSwahili, it was not their native tongue; the fact which was reflected in some of the spelling and grammatical mistakes.

A letter from Farallahi

The first letter is from Omar bin Nacogo Farallahi (Farelay in Portuguese sources), who was a nephew of the legendary Musa Quanto (d. 1879) and a brother of the

Angoche Sultan Ibrahim (who reigned in 1889–1920). Unfortunately, no records pertaining to Farallahi’s birth and death dates are available (see Lupi 1907, Coutinho 1935, Bonate 2003, 2006). The letter dates 3 June 1894 and is addressed to the Portuguese military commander at Parapato (the mainland of Angoche, where a small Portuguese garrison was stationed). It was written amidst a generalized upheaval of the European military conquests of the “effective occupation” following the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and the Treaty between Portugal and Britain (1891) which set to delineate the borders between the two colonies. At the time, while the Sultan continued to guard Angoche’s maritime interests from his seat on Catamoyo Island, Farallahi had opted to settle on the mainland where he became the chief of the Mluli region.

Farallahi, like other African chiefs of his time, was involved in the international slave trade, but was, however, irritated by the Portuguese presence, mainly because they constantly interrupted his shipments of slaves along the coast; as a consequence, he attacked the Parapato in 1890 (Lupi 1907: 212–213). Fortunately, the approaching vessel named Tamega saved the day for the Portuguese. Following Farallahi’s flight, various lesser chiefs came to submit to the Portuguese, and in the face of this massive exodus of the from the rank and file of his supporters, Farallahi decided to submit to the Portuguese too out of strategic interests to buy himself some time. Thus, he signed a treaty with the Portuguese, who left him alone after thereafter. During the following year, Farallahi visited the chiefs of the region, including those who officially submitted to the Portuguese and as a result of his negotiations he gained the upper hand in the regions again.

The letter below is written during this intermediary period before the final conquest of Angoche by the Portuguese in 1910. In it, Farallahi demands the Portuguese commander to come to him, and force the traders, who established their shops without his permission, to pay him tributes of one hundred reais. Shaykh Abu Dale and Liazzat Bonate rendered its transcription and translation, as follows:

Introductory line	<i>Hafivati lahi ta'allah</i>	May the Almighty Allah protect him
1 st line	<i>ilah janabi al-'aziz al-akram rahman li mufadhali ali mughadham</i>	this letter is to the noble one, the great, respected, pious, knowledgeable and superi-
or		
2 nd line	<i>indana guvernadur di Nguji salaamuhu alla'huta'allah</i>	greetings from our side to the governor of Nguja, God is with us

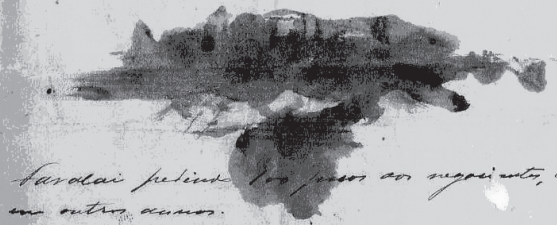
3 rd line	<i>aida na kwarifuni habari ienu emini wa swiliya jazakallah</i>	then, I am explaining to you, and warning that I have already received what you sent to me, Allah will pay you back well
4 th line	<i>mimi nakwarifu mimi niko tarafa ya Rimimi sita sindani</i>	I am informing you that I am in the place of Rimini
5 th line	<i>na Rimimi nataka ada yangu nataka matajiri wa nipe reali mia</i>	I will not fight Rimini, I want [to receive] my tribute, [and] I want the traders to pay me 100 reais
6 th line	<i>zangu nimizoweia makajana wa linipa makahu sukuona</i>	which are mine, I am used to it [because] last year they had paid, and this year have not yet [paid]
7 th line	<i>wa na kuja kutia duka bila muriango</i>	these traders came here to establish their shops without my permission
8 th line	<i>naji capitamoro nionane</i>	the <i>capitão-mór</i> must come to talk to me
The lines at the bottom of the page – written up-side down	<i>mimi niko tarafa yari wa kitabaha wa Mombefa Bunu Muhoko</i>	I am staying in the place <i>Yari wa Kitabana</i> of Mombefa Bunu Muhoko

During 1902, Farallahi camped 2km away outside Parapato, and announced to the Portuguese that he was coming to “lie down in his own bed” (Amorim 1910: 21). Then together with various chiefs of neighbouring regions, he descended on Parapato and burned and pillaged the station-village. The desperate inhabitants were saved by a French vessel that later reported the occurrence to the European media mocking the myth of the Portuguese dominion in Mozambique. And in 1903, the new captain of Angoche, José Augusto Cunha occupied and devastated the mainland of Angoche and proceeded to Catamoyo Island from which Sultan Ibrahim escaped (Amorim 1911: 23). Cunha destroyed the houses and the mosques of the Sultan as well as that of his *wazir*, the *Etite-mwene*, and desecrated local cemeteries. Thereafter, he proclaimed the deposition of the Sultan. In retaliation, the Sultan, Farallahi, and their allies started harassing the Portuguese and raiding the lands of the chiefs who collaborated with them. The Portuguese military commanders were subjected to the payment of tributes and all the caravans coming from the interior to the Portuguese posts were attacked and plundered. The *sepoys* that served as couriers between different Portuguese posts were burned alive; the telegraphic cords of these posts were cut down. And their boats and vessels including the fishermen were assaulted at sea and the Portuguese traders were robbed.

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Escrito 3-6-74

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By 1906, Pedro Massano de Amorim, Ernesto Vilhena, and other Portuguese officials conceived of a project that would lead to the total and effective occupation of the region (Amorim 1911: 195–216). After four years in preparation and study, Angoche was conquered in 1910. Whilst some of the paramount chiefs were killed in the battle, the most important ones were imprisoned; and they, along with Farallahi and Sultan Ibrahim, were eventually deported to Guinea.

A letter from Mussa *bunu* Ibrahimu, the *waziri* of Sangage

The second letter, dated May 7, 1895, is from Mussa *bunu* Ibrahimu to the Portuguese military commander at Sangage. No information is available on Mussa *bunu* Ibrahimu, except that he was the *waziri* (Sw., from Ar., *wazir*), or the principal adviser of the *Shehe* of the Sangage region by the name of Bwana Amadi. Similar to other Swahili regions, most of the African Muslim rulers of northern Mozambique had traditionally held the title of the *Shehe*, except for Angoche and Tungui that had *Sultans*. The Portuguese usually called the regions ruled by a *shehe* as *xeicado* (Port., *shaykhdom*). Sangage was one of these *xeicados*, which according to oral tradition, was founded by the people of the Mozambique Island after Portuguese occupation of the island-town in the sixteenth century. These people first migrated to nearby Sancul and subsequently – in the eighteenth century – moved to Sangage, the region that was under the control of the Sultanate of Angoche (Amorim 1911: 11–12, 35–39, 53–54; Lupi 1907: 165–71; Coutinho 1935: 10; Hafkin 1973: 9–10, 240). However, during the height of the international slave trade, Bwana Amadi began trading and shipping off slaves from his own ports without the consent of the Angoche Sultan. Kidnapping and piracy in this region became commonplace and the *shehe*, who was the owner of innumerable slave trading vessels, had welcomed many such vessels to his ports, including those of the Portuguese *negreiros* from Mozambique Island, where the slave trade was legally abolished (Amorim 1911: 23). Bwana Amadi and Sangage not only disregarded the supremacy of Angoche, but also became its major rival in the slave trade. For that reason, Mussa Quanto and his heir, Sultan Usseni Ibrahimu attacked Sangage several times, and besieged it in 1885. The Portuguese offered assistance to Bwana Amadi which he accepted. Consequently, he signed a treaty that permitted the Portuguese to establish a fiscal point and military garrison in Sangage in order to curtail the slave trade. Though the *shehe*, who now became a *regedor* (Port., a small king) under the Portuguese, had promised the Portuguese to stop trading in human merchandise and denounce any such activities in the regions under his control, Mwana Amadi was indeed regarded as one of the biggest clandestine slave traders until his death in 1902. The Portuguese continuously suspected and reprimanded him for this.

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Lentura

A tradução do intérprete é:
É do Nasim, de Langage, e diz que é men-
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تعالی

Hautur, 1111

الی الید العزیز الالکرم عندنا سیور کهدنت ملتار سیور کدر کدی هدی کاتم

أما بعد نلعنا یف یلمب ہم شمان نلی کو جا کتک کتف بحف جانکلم
و مبعل یحفت کو جا کتتر ام سیور بر جد ذر د شفاج شمان
نلی کتشی کتتر ام الکتی کو شیح امیب مجکار کتتکی یبانه ماخ
حفاي کناه کتکت کدا کذا ار عفرن کتشی نلی انای مطان و کتتک
یبان نعو ن کم مینر کهان سدموع الکتب فیض باغ هم یحصاح بعد
الکتی یلم انای مت قدر یحکا ملقون نلی بی الکتب کا جل یرت
ش یی یهان کو غلی ربه نلی کتتک نجان خبار یکو بر جد ذر
کاتر پار نکو نعو و عتشن خبار حیر سینی سکو کتتای حال
یا کر نجان یغفرن سینی یجو کو قوی نغو قوی ظهل ناو سیور
کهدنت اسعقاي حای نو قتی و و نلی لا نکتی مکتوی یاکر نای
سینی حجو دی جبار ر حق شفاج ایضا سینی ر یف
ش بر جد ذر سیور و الا امان نو اس و سلام و ش بر موسی

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ابراهیم بیبر
شرف شفاج

Mussa *bunu* Ibrahimu's letter is written as a response to the accusation by one of the neighbouring Sangage African chiefs, the Majifa-*munu*, the chief of the Mpmamella, who denounced the *Shehe* Bwana Amadi as an active slave trader whose "work was to buy people". The *waziri*, however, points out that Majifa-*munu* misunderstood the circumstances surrounding the *Shehe* acquiring a woman to work at his house. Majifa-*munu* thought that the woman was a slave, but according to the *waziri*, she was not, and also, she was declined because there was already a male worker at home. The *waziri*'s point was that neither he nor the *Shehe* were involved in the slave trade. He emphasizes that the *shehe* had "always worked for the Portuguese government", and that the Majifa-*munu* was lying and slandering the *shehe*'s and his *waziri*'s good names. Herewith follows a copy of the letter's contents:

1 st line	<i>ila liaddi al-'aziz al-akram indana siniur kumadanti militari siniur karduzu kadi hadakallah</i>	the letter comes from me to the respected, the great <i>senhor</i> military commander <i>senhor</i> Cardoso, May Allah protect you
2 nd line	<i>ama da'aduhu nakuarifu yakwamba mimi zamani niliukujakutuka kwangu bamuja nahakimu</i>	I am informing you about the time when I came to my house with the judge
3 rd line	<i>wa mbamila majifumunu kuja kumtazama siniur rigidur di sangage zamani</i>	and a Mpmamella Majifa- <i>munu</i> [went] to visit <i>senhor regedor</i> of Sangage at that time
4 th line	<i>niliu kuisha kumtazana akanabia kwa sheiha aminipa mjakazi kunitumikia niubanu muanju</i>	after he finished his visit, he said that <i>shehe</i> [of Sangage] gave me a slave woman to work in my house
5 th line	<i>hafa'i kamana kunakitu kadha wa kadha za kufirnu kasha tina anaiu mutuana ukutumika</i>	this slave woman does not fit because she has a lot of things from the [Portuguese] government; on the other hand, there is a male slave that is serving
6 th line	<i>nhumban. Namuuna kama mizi kamasikusumuja alikuiba fedaiagu mimi nikamusamehe bas</i>	inside [my] house. He sees like a thief because one day he stole my money, but later I forgave him. Then
7 th line	<i>akanabia ya kama unaiu mutu qadiri iakuka muladuni nipe yeye akanipa kaojili iazitu</i>	he said to me: there is person who stays at the door [the guard], give me this man [sic], he gave me a man
8 th line	<i>zilizu niumbani. Kwangaluia dipo nilipo kunda kwangu nikapata habariyakwa rigiduru</i>	to look after my things inside the house, so to be a person who controls things. Afterwards, when I came back home, I found out about this news saying what <i>regedor</i> is saying

9 th line	<i>kaziani nikumununwa watu hasha habari hizu sissi sikumununai hali-</i>	this news saying that the work of the <i>regedor</i> was to buy people, the news that we had never seen here
10 th line	<i>-iaki [haliaki] nikazi iaguvernu sissi najwa ku haiu niufitina duahili nau siniur</i>	he is always busy with the work of the [Portuguese] government; we know that this news is a lie. You Mister
11 th line	<i>kumadanti usiangamali haiu niufitina wa uanwinziue la nakampa makusa ya kini haiu</i>	commander have nothing to do with these words of lies of his comrade, you did not err, no
12 th line	<i>sissi hatiu'u diu habari zahuqu shangazi aidoa nasissi siniur nifu-</i>	we here do not know of anything about this news that is being given by (<i>senhor</i>)
13 th line	<i>-za [nifuza] rigidur siuniwa illa amani nawatu wa salaamu waziri Mussa bunu Ibrahimu barazani Sanagagi</i>	here <i>senhor regedor</i> we do not see anything bad, only [good and] peace of all people, <i>waziri</i> Mussa bunu Ibrahimu, in the house of Sangage
The line at the right margin of the page	<i>7 di mai 1845</i>	this letter is of May 7, 1895/1314 of <i>Hijra</i> [i.e. Islamic calendar counted from the flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medinah]

Conclusion

In this article an attempt was made to investigate and explore the contents of two short letters that reflected upon specific socio-historical events and developments. The letters revealed that the Arabic script was not just employed to locally spoken African languages in Mozambique but it was also used to communicate with European Portuguese rulers at that time; this seems to have been the nature of many of the extant documents that have, of late, been located in the northern part of Mozambique. The use of Arabic script among the northern Mozambican Muslims constitutes a local tradition of *longue durée*, which still persists to this very day.

Despite the abundance of the documents in this script, they have never been seriously addressed or researched either from linguistic, historical, cultural or religious vantage points. While some of these historical documents are in KiSwahili, many of them were written in some of the local spoken African languages. Since they have not been given the necessary attention, this researcher is of the opinion that a multilingual team of specialists, who has mastered Arabic as well as some or all of the local languages, will render Mozambique a great service if they are carefully scrutinized and studied. They will most definitely fill some of the historical gaps that still persevere in Mozambique's rich past.

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