Northern Mozambique Ajami correspondence and its role in the establishment of Portuguese colonial administration

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This study is part of Masters Dissertation in Historical Studies performed at the University of Cape Town under the supervision of Professor Shamil Jeppie. The study is based on archival and fieldwork research and provides an historical analysis of the northern Mozambique ajami manuscripts held in the Mozambican Historical Archives (AHM). The main focus is on the role played by ajami literacy in the creation of a local Muslim intellectual class that played a significant role in the establishment of a Portuguese pre-colonial administration in northern Mozambique. The history of Islam in northern Mozambique is viewed as a constant struggle against the Portuguese establishment in the region. Through an examination of ajami correspondence held in the AHM and focusing on two of the main northern Mozambique Swahili centers of the nineteenth century (Quissanga and Sancul), this paper offers a more nuanced interpretation of the relations between the Portuguese and the Swahili Muslim rulers of the region. On the one hand, it views Quissanga-Ibo Island relations based on systematic and relatively loyal collaboration expressed in more than two hundred letters found in the collection of AHM. On the other hand, it presents Sancul-Mozambique Island relations based on ambiguous collaboration and constant betrayals, expressed in forty letters of the collection.

The AHM ajami manuscripts collection numbers a total of 665 letters which were first revealed in the context of the pilot study of Northern Mozambique Arabic Manuscripts, held in the Mozambique Historical Archives, under the leadership of Professors Liazzat Bonate and Joel Tembe. The present study worked with the whole collection (excluding the 60 letters which were translated through the pilot study). However, only 266 letters, considered more relevant for the analysis and argument of the paper have been taken into consideration and nine of them were closely examined and cited as the main sources for the construction of local history and as documentary witness of the historical facts under discussion.

The use of ajami literacy in northern Mozambique is analysed in the context of global and regional phenomena. In this sense, it is viewed as in the context of a longue durée process which integrated the region into the western Indian Ocean’s cultural, political and economic dynamics. It is argued that the spread of ajami literacy in the region was framed in the context of regional Islamic education and an intellectual network. Both were also part of the process of expansion of Islam in East Africa.

Quissanga (in Cabo Delgado) and Sancul (in Nampula) represent the two main regional settlements from which most of the manuscripts originated. The ruling elites of both regions represent suitable examples of the integration of northern Mozambique into the Swahili political, economic and intellectual networks. They also offer examples of two different dynamics of the process of integration of northern Mozambican rulers into the Portuguese pre-colonial administration.