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Shifting the meaning: Swahili discourses of Islamic reform and everyday life in postcolonial Mombasa

Among Muslims in Mombasa at the Kenyan coast, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, there is an ongoing competition to determine the locally dominant understanding of Islam and spell out its normative implications. This discursive struggle is translocal from the outset. It is linked to, and draws from, external sources and resources for ideological guidance and material support. These dynamics are reflected in local Islamic publications of religious leaflets, pamphlets, and poetry, written in Kiswahili. They are part of a regionally distinct discursive tradition of Islam, and reflect an internal pluralism of positions within the Muslim community. Such debates are also apparent elsewhere in everyday life, whether in Islamic speeches, lectures, or radio programmes, but also in informal discussions among friends and neighbours. All these negotiate the question of good Muslim practice. Often, these discussions raise or negotiate points of reformist ideologies that seek to root out supposedly unjustifiable innovations (*bid'a*) within the practices of the community.

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This project investigates further the internal dynamics of local Islamic discourses of reform, and their relations to wider Islamic networks and debates within the global Muslim community. It seeks to pursue and document how individuals – both local Islamic intellectuals and ordinary Muslims – ultimately facilitate the processes of translocal adaptation and implementation of Islamic doctrines and ideologies (from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, or elsewhere) into everyday life at the Kenyan coast. Through their practice, local actors reshape and transform these discourses. This applies to reform-minded activists and intellectuals as well as to their opponents and critics. In order to make Islamic ideologies from outside sensible and practicable within the Swahili context – or to show that they are neither sensible nor practical – people adapt, and thus ‘localise’ and integrate the meaning of external discourses in ways that make these ideologies compatible within the specific cultural and socio-historical framework of this region. In this sense we can speak of translocal shifts of meaning in the formulation, dissemination, and institutionalisation of Islamic discourse.

Conducting anthropological research involving participant observation, interviews, archives, and the contextual study of speeches and texts, this project investigates the above dynamics further. It seeks to present particular case studies, focusing on individual Muslims as well as topical debates. Postcolonial Kenya, with its ongoing historical tensions between coastal Muslims and upcountry Christians, provides the particular social and historical setting of this investigation, thus postcolonial conditions shape the framework within which social interactions take place. Here, research is conducted with this in mind.



Mandhry mosque, Mombasa



Sheikh Abdallah S. Farsy (1912-1982), Mombasa



Zefe (festive procession), Maulidi celebrations 2006, Mombasa



Poster of Radio Rahma in front of market, Mombasa