

Travelling Texts

Arabic Literate Learning in Coastal East Africa, c. 1860–1930

This book,
What is in it, is in it,
And whosoever does not know what is in it
May the dog pee on him¹



While the previous chapters have focused mainly on the spread of Sufi orders to different locations in the western Indian Ocean, this chapter addresses something more fleeting but also the most concrete aspect of reformist thought: its words. These are manifested in manuscripts and printed books. In other words, the object under study is the fabric underpinning the networks formed by travel, trade and teacher-scholar relationships; the printed books, manuscripts, large and small, texts and commentaries that were part of the making of Sufi reformism in the western Indian Ocean.

Surprisingly, this “parallel network” has often received less attention in studies of Islamic networks in nineteenth and twentieth century East Africa, in favour of the network formed by individual teachers and scholars.² Overall, travelling bodies or spirits have been stressed, not texts. This is all the more surprising, for the simple reason that to the historian, this is often the most tangible and accessible of all the networks of the past. Indeed, it is often all we have.

Today, what will be called here a “book network” can be traced in the form of manuscript collections and mosque libraries and the succession of manuscripts, text editions, reprints, commentaries and additional textual material. Furthermore, the words themselves – whether transmitted in manuscript or print form – are our most explicit and lasting testimonies of ideas, and they can be assumed to have had that function also in the past, albeit to the admittedly limited group of people that B.G. Martin called “the learned class”.

¹ Inscription in manuscript, Riyadhha Mosque, Lamu. EAP466_RM18.

² Notable exceptions when it comes to East Africa are the works by B.G. Martin, A. Ghazal, S. Reese, V. Hoffmann and R. Loimeier.

Textual Transmission and Religious Authority

As has been pointed out in earlier research, East Africa in the period c. 1860–1930 saw an increased orientation towards textuality. I have argued elsewhere that what took place was a “textualization of charisma”, as authority no longer rested solely in a person or group, but rather in a person’s (or group’s) ability to access texts.³ Islamic authority was, in other words, becoming “bookish”, contingent on access to written words, be they produced locally or elsewhere, in the present or in the past.

Here, the discussion will address text in the most concrete terms, as books and manuscripts. What books were being circulated, and who owned them? In many ways, these questions echo those of the German orientalist C.H. Becker, who in 1911 asked: “What books come into the hands of local *mwalimus* and so exercise a direct influence on the intellectual life of our colony? [Tanganyika]”⁴

A second question is how authority was gained and maintained through the presence of texts. Explanations will be sought in the teaching, ownership, exchange, circulation, copying, and commenting on manuscripts and printed books. In total, the analysis will move towards a fuller understanding of the textual basis for the spread of Sufism in nineteenth and early twentieth century East Africa.

This chapter will also address a third and related topic: the transition from manuscript to print in this period. As has been pointed out by, amongst others, R. Schulze, the transition from manuscript to print implied a changing role for the Islamic text in the public sphere. As the “printed sphere” emerged, a new social discourse was created “in which the new reading public came to distinguish between “tradition” (manuscripts without use in the market) and what was considered “modern” (printed books).”⁵ Here, Schulze’s observations will be addressed from the point of view of authority: As textual transmission moved into print, did the authority attached to a given text change? Did readership change? In other words: did print open for new interpretations or new interpreters? Or, to formulate the question slightly differently, and more in line with M. Lambek’s emphasis on meaning as constructed by

3 A.K. Bang, “Authority and Piety”.

4 C.H. Becker, “Materials for the understanding of Islam in German East Africa” Edited and translated by B.G. Martin, *Tanzania Notes and Records*, 68, 1968, 31–61.

5 R. Schulze, “The birth of tradition and modernity in eighteenth and nineteenth century Islamic culture – the case of printing” in J. Skovgaard-Pedersen (ed.), *Culture and History: The introduction of the printing press in the Middle East*, *Culture and History*, 16: 29–72, 29.