CHAPTER FOUR

ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN ZANZIBAR: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANON

4.1. The Negotiation of Islamic Education

Changes in education and changes in concepts of knowledge reflect struggles among competing social groups within a given society (Eickelman 1985: 6). This remark seems to be true not only of the development of Islamic education, but also of the world of academe in general, and the study of the history of Islamic education in particular. This chapter will therefore start with a presentation of some major characteristics of Islamic education from a conceptual perspective, and will then proceed to major trends of Islamic education in history, taking India and Egypt as examples. India and Egypt have been chosen since initiatives of reform in these countries had model character for many Muslim societies from the 18th century onward, and have consequently influenced the course of Islamic education in East Africa in more or less direct ways. The social background to reforms in Islamic education in East Africa will be shown in a next step, before examining the structure and nature of Islamic education in Zanzibar. The two final sections will focus on the transformation of the canon of Islamic learning in Zanzibar in the early 20th and early 21st centuries.

Islamic education has been the focus of a multitude of studies, and most scholars in the field would agree that there was, in the sphere of ‘Islamic education studies’, a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ George Makdisi’s first major article in 1961 on Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh Century Baghdad and the entry madrassa in the Encyclopaedia of Islam by himself and Pedersen. Makdisi’s presentation of the development of Islamic education was expounded in a major volume in 1981, which included a critique of earlier work on Islamic education. At the same time, studies of Islamic education ‘beyond Makdisi’, such as Tibawi (1962), Nakosteen (1964), Eickelman (1985), Berkey (1992), Messick (1993), Chamberlain (1994), Grandin/Gaborieau (1997), or, more recently, Fortna (2000), Robinson (2001),
Zaman (2002), Hartung/Reifeld (2006) and Hefner/Zaman (2007) have pointed out some pitfalls of the Makdisian presentation and have added to established wisdom, not only regarding the history and development of Islamic education and the spectrum of disciplines in Islamic education, but also with respect to different expressions of education in the Islamic world. Tibawi (1962) and others have criticized Makdisi, for instance, for being too formal when describing ‘medieval’ Islamic schools (madāris) as ‘Islamic universities’ (of the European ‘medieval’ type) with an organized and differentiated student body, a specialized syllabus, a professorate, an institutional educational goal and the certification of both teachers and students. They hold against him that personalized relations continued well beyond ‘medieval’ times, that the new madāris were not that formalized and coexisted with individual and mosque learning. Also there was not a fixed curriculum of ‘beginning, intermediate and advanced studies’, even though there was a certain formalization of education and the emergence of a canon of texts that were supposed to be read (Chamberlain 1994: 69/70). In fact, it took several centuries, until such formalized structures evolved. Until then, the personalized study of texts (not disciplines) under the guidance of scholars (not necessarily in schools) remained paramount: to study, one went to scholars, not to schools (Berkey 1992: 23). Consequently, the ījāza (‘authorization’ to teach a specific text) of a student mentioned his teacher and not a school as the source of learning: ‘an education was judged not on loci but on personae’ (Berkey 1992: 23). Students studied in ḥalaqāt (circles), not in classrooms and the ḥalqa of a shaykh might be a place in a madrasa, but also in a mosque or his private house. Also, a student got an ījāza from his teacher for a text or the part of the text he had mastered, and consequently not for a ‘discipline’ (Chamberlain 1994: 88). Only when schools, often supported by charitable foundations (awqāf), became meeting places for several well known scholars, were schools mentioned in the biographies of scholars (Chamberlain 1994: 75).

When talking about ‘education’ in general, it has to be equally stressed that the expression tarbiya which has come to be used today for ‘education’, seems to be rather new in historical terms. Before the end of the 19th century, tarbiya was understood rather broadly as ‘nurturing’, a generic term for all kind of ‘breeding’ (of plants or animals) and ‘nursing’ (Heranziehen, Aufzucht). Rifā’a al-Ṣāḥibāwī’s famous report of his journey to France and his stay in Paris in 1834,