CHAPTER FIVE

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION
IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD I: SCHOOLS

5.1. Introduction: The Pillars of the Colonial Education System

In colonial times, education in Zanzibar was essentially based on four institutional pillars of education and corresponding types of school: government schools, mission schools, ‘Indian’ schools and Qur’anic schools. While government schools were largely thought of as caring for the children of the ‘Arab’ elite, and Indian schools catered for the needs of the Indian population, mission schools and Qur’anic schools were theoretically open to all population groups. Yet, while government schools, mission schools and Indian schools were regarded as part of the colonial education system, and figured in annual reports, the vast majority of schools, namely the Qur’anic schools, were recorded in colonial statistics only from the early 1940s. Until this period of time, official statistics convey the image of an educational system that was based on government, mission and Indian schools only, while Qur’anic school education was ignored and not regarded as proper education. Only in the late 1930s did this perception gradually change, and only the 1960 annual report accepted that ‘the beginning of education...lay in the establishment of Kuran schools, and today these are scattered in their hundreds in every village and hamlet throughout the islands, forming the foundation of the education of the majority of the people’ (ZNA BA 5/34).

In the late 19th century and the early colonial years, formal education was confined to institutions of Islamic learning, a first ‘Indian’ school and the efforts of some mission schools. British educational policies went through three distinct periods of development up to 1963, the year of Zanzibar’s independence:

a. The period from 1905-1920, which was marked by the efforts of two colonial officers, namely, the Director of Education (DoE) Rivers-Smith (B232) and Resident Pearce, who tried to develop the first outlines of an education policy. Attitudes with respect
to Islamic education were characteristically negative and may be summarized in the words of Rivers-Smith, who, in one of his annual reports, described Qur’anic school education as ‘deadening to potential intellect, wasted years in a child’s life...We should bring these children under proper control’ (ZNA AB 1/224).

b. The period from 1921-1939, which was marked by the efforts of DoE Hendry (B209), who tried to expand the impact of the government schools by integrating some aspects of Islamic education. Due to the resistance of the established religious scholars who were not prepared to accept British ideas on Islamic education, these plans largely failed.

c. In the period from 1940-1963, the British administration finally accepted incorporation of the ‘Alawí scholarly establishment into colonial policies, and also accepted the ideas of the ‘Alawí scholars regarding religious education. As a result, the Qur’anic schools were integrated into the colonial education system. The alliance of colonial policies and Islamic scholars stimulated a process of modernization, formalization and institutionalization of Islamic education and Qur’anic schools in particular. A consequence of this development was the establishment, in 1952, of the first modern Islamic institute, the Muslim Academy.

British colonial rule produced a great number of files on many aspects of British rule and colonial development, as well as on colonial education (see ZNA AB 1/78, 224, 451; AD 3/8; BA 3-5, 14-30, 34; PRO CO 688/5, 9, 13, 14, 20; and PRO CO 822/1606). These files represent a construction of colonial reality. The British as well as other colonial powers had a specific and selective perception of colonial realities. This perception of colonial life can be found in the colonial files and has to be read accordingly. At the same time, colonial administrators were forced to produce a specific interpretation of the colonial situation in order to mobilize support for the funding of what were sometimes very costly colonial development projects, in the face of resistance from notoriously stingy colonial administration headquarters in Bombay and London. In a number of cases, colonial development projects did not find unanimous support within the colonial hierarchy in Zanzibar. Competing perceptions of colonial reality, as well as constructions of colonial realities, can be identified in the files. Colonial files also reflect the processes of negotiation that took place within the colonial administration before results were