CHAPTER THREE

SAINTS, SCHOLARS AND THE ACQUISITION OF DISCURSIVE AUTHORITY

“In [times past] the people of Mogadishu wrote genealogies that diverged from their true ones. As the Prophet, praise be upon him, said ‘He who recites a genealogy other than his own is cursed!’”¹ Such are the concluding thoughts of Mu’allaM Makram b. ‘Umar, copyist, and probably editor, of a late nineteenth-century manuscript detailing the contributions of his clan, the Banū Qaḥṭān, to Mogadishu society from the time of the city’s founding. The Ibn ‘Umar manuscripts, as we saw in the last chapter, provide evidence of a religious paradigmatic view of the past in which faith and the religious leadership played a role in resolving social crises.

These texts, along with several contemporary genealogies, also detail the clan’s status as a founding lineage of the town and their claims to local religious authority. In the first, they were rewarded with the position of qādī as a result of their role in brokering the smooth ascension to power of the Muzzafar sultans in the thirteenth century. In the second, their position was reaffirmed by an episode in the early eighteenth century when a scion of the lineage—Faqīh AbūJa—saved the city from an English invasion fleet through his piety and miraculous powers. So, while the texts tell us something about how Benaadiris viewed their past, they also provide insight into how particular groups or individuals saw their own place in society and might make use of religion to solidify their own social position.

Mu’allaM Makram’s texts, which can be dated only to the 1880s, are the earliest known written accounts of his clan’s traditions. As such, they likely tell us far more about the role members of the ‘ulama’ sought to carve out for themselves in nineteenth and early twentieth century society than any realities of the thirteenth or eighteenth. The appearance of these manuscripts coincided with the various crises faced by Muslim East African society during the late 1800s. The larger focus

of this work, of course, is the role of local religious leaders, such as the Banū Ḍabān, as what we could refer to as “brokers of social discourse” and their ability to mediate these communal crises. However, one question that is frequently ignored in the literature is exactly how does an individual, or group, lay claim to such authority? What are the tools typically used by religious practitioners (or their followers) to publicly assert their right to provide social guidance? How does an individual successfully assert discursive authority?

The Banū Ḍabān represented a hereditary ‘ulamā’ who, in their view, had guided society through periods of crisis in the past. Their right to continue to do so, the manuscripts argue, was based on their status as a founding lineage of the town, claims to a noble ‘Arab’ ancestry and historical precedent. They were not, however, the only members of the learned classes seeking to legitimize their voices. Among the most prominent members of the ‘ulamā’ in East Africa during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were those associated with the newly emergent Sufi orders, whose appearance coincided with the onset of the social and economic disruptions of the late nineteenth century. We shall return to the events of this period in Chapter 4. Here we want to consider the question of discursive authority and the ways in which spiritual leaders sought to legitimize their influence during these times of crisis.

Not surprisingly, we see the leaders of these new organizations laying claim to authoritative social discourse and the right to provide moral guidance to their fellow Muslims. This included not only eponymous leaders such as Uways and Zayla'ī but countless poets, preachers, hagiographers and theologians such as Abdullāh al-Quṭbī and Qassim al-Barawī, who inhabited a more or less second tier of leadership responsible for spreading the order’s teachings to a mass audience. In some instances, these leaders could assert prestigious family backgrounds similar to those of the Banū Ḍabān. In most cases, however, they could not.

No religious leader could afford to completely ignore the place of descent in establishing one’s discursive credibility. As a result, lineage—variously defined—played at least some role in the discursive authority of every individual’s claims to religious authority. The leading figures of the Ḥurūq, and their supporters, however, relied largely on other tools

---

2 This topic will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 4.