CONVERGENCES AND CONTRASTS IN MUSLIMS’ RESPONSES
AIDS AND THE POWER OF GOD: NARRATIVES OF DECLINE AND COPING STRATEGIES IN ZANZIBAR

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Discourses on AIDS in Zanzibar are embedded in a cultural logic associated with Islam and shaped by the island’s long problematic relationship with the mainland. Muslim values and norms are the dominant framework for discussing the spread and the impact of the epidemic in Zanzibar. I shall analyse how people struggle to translate such discourses into local practice in an effort to make sense of and contain the epidemic, and how AIDS has been used by religious groups in a political discourse opposing government policies that are perceived as having tolerated moral decay and compromised Muslim values and practices in Zanzibar over the past decades.

AIDS is not just a biomedical problem; in Zanzibar, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the biomedical aspects are often outweighed in importance by the epidemic’s social and moral implications. Discussion of the disease here takes place with reference to the profound changes—political, economic, and social—that have occurred in Zanzibar over the past decades.2

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2 The data presented in this paper is derived from my doctoral research, carried out in Zanzibar over a period of fifteen months in 2004/5. My PhD thesis provides an in-depth study of the way AIDS is made sense of and managed in Zanzibar, with a particular focus on the lives of HIV-positive people before and after antiretroviral treatment. During fieldwork I was interacting with a wide range of different people, participating in a network of trading families mostly of Hadhrami and Omani origin who in economic terms form part of Zanzibar’s small middle-class. At the same time, I worked closely with HIV-positive people, many of whom were members of the Zanzibar Association for People Living with HIV/AIDS (ZAPHA+), the only organisation on the islands exclusively run by, and for, HIV-positive people. The majority of ZAPHA+ members belonged to the poorest sectors of society, were lacking secondary education, and many were young women, often divorced, separated, or widowed.