The Riyadha Mosque Manuscript Collection in Lamu, Kenya

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In Lamu, Islamic practice and intellectual traditions in the late nineteenth century have been profoundly marked by the Riyadha mosque, established near the end of the century by Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAlawī Jamal al-Layl, known in East Africa as Habib Saleh (1853–1936). He was a descendant of early migrants from Ḥaḍramawt, Yemen, who by the late 1880s had branched out to the urban centres of East Africa, including Zanzibar and the Comoro Islands. As part of the stratum known collectively as the ‘ʿAlawī sāda, the Jamal al-Layl family was also known to adhere to the brand of Sufism known as the ṭarīqa ʿAlawīyya.

Habib Saleh was born in Grande Comore, but settled permanently in Lamu some time in the late 1870s or early 1880s. His biography has been documented in earlier studies and will not be repeated here.1 However, one aspect that must be addressed is Habib Saleh’s close connection with intellectual developments in Haḍramawt. This was most explicitly formulated in his spiritual connection to his Sufi master in Ḥaḍramawt, the renowned teacher, saint and scholar ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī (d. 1915). The two men actually never met in the “real world”,2 but al-Ḥibshī’s impact on the Riyadha Mosque can nevertheless not be under-estimated.

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2 On the relationship between Habib Saleh and ʿAli al-Ḥibshī, see Badawi, Al-Riyād, 24. Here, it is stated that “there existed between [the two] a strong bond and connection, even though the two never met in their lives”.

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Al-Ḥibshī was one of several scholars who founded religious schools (riḥāṭs) in Ḥaḍramawt. The school founded by ʿAlī al-Ḥibshī in Sayʿūn was named al-Riyāḍ (“the garden”), and received students from the wide diaspora of Ḥaḍramī ‘Alawī migrants in the Indian Ocean. The efforts of al-Ḥibshī and his contemporaries influenced like-minded scholars who founded similar institutions in the Indian Ocean, including Indonesia. In Lamu, the Riyadha Mosque was explicitly modelled on that founded by al-Ḥibshī, and in its library, we find manuscript copies of al-Ḥibshī’s writings, his khūṭbas (Friday sermons) and his mawlid text Simṭ al-durar.

The construction of the mosque itself was made possible through the intervention of Sayyid Maṣḥab b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (1828–1922). He was a Lamu-born Ḥaḍramī ‘Alawī scholar very much in touch with reformist ideas then current in Ḥaḍramawt and Mecca. In 1903, he transformed some of his land in Lamu into a waqf (pious endowment) for the purpose of building the Riyadha.

The main hallmark of the Riyadha was the incorporation of rituals derived from ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī (notably the Simṭ al-durar, known as the Mawlid al-Ḥibshī). Another important trait was the inclusion of a Ḥaḍramī-oriented “core curriculum.” Finally, an enduring legacy of the Riyadha was the inclusion of students from groups previously considered “outsiders” by the traditional Lamu aristocracy, many of them former slaves (Oromo, Girya, Pokomo and others).

The Manuscript Collection of the Riyadha Mosque

The manuscript collection of the Riyadha consists of approximately 150 manuscripts, presently housed in the mosque library. The manuscripts date from the


4 The works of al-Ḥibshī can be found in EAP466_RM 49, EAP466_RM 52, EAP466_RM 69.


6 Waqfyya dated 1320/1903 (both years are given in the waqfyya), and stamped by the East Africa Protectorate Lamu Registry, 21 Feb 1903. In the possession of the Riyadha Mosque.