Islam and Literacy in Northern Mozambique:
Historical Records on the Secular Uses of the
Arabic Script

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Introduction

As elsewhere in Africa,1 the use of Arabic script emerged in coastal northern Mozambique through contact with Islam. Judging by the number of documents uncovered at the Mozambique Historical Archives during a 2009 pilot study and Portuguese eyewitness accounts of the period, the outcome of this contact was a relatively widespread African literacy at the end of the nineteenth century.2 Contrary to Jack Goody’s assumption, the spread of Islam here did not result in a literacy restricted to the religious field alone or by the alleged African tendency to regard books as magical and secret; and literacy was certainly not controlled only by specialists.3 Rather it was extensively applied to

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secular affairs, such as commercial transactions, testaments, dynastic and local histories, poetry and other literary genres, and for communication. Of particular interest is the correspondence both with the outsiders, such as the Portuguese, and locally between Africans themselves. Moreover, literacy was accessed not only by Muslim religious elites and the male coastal political establishment but also by women and non-Muslims of the mainland.

This article examines how the use of Arabic script came into play historically in this region and how it evolved into African literacy before the establishment of modern colonial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century. It argues that initially the preeminence of Muslims in world trade and the involvement of Mozambique in that trade were instrumental for the expansion of Islam and the adoption of Arabic as an important language of commerce. In fact, trade was one of the important vehicles for Islamization as well as for the expansion of literacy, especially of the commercial literacy which is embedded in the Qur'an containing “instructions on how to draft, date and certify written contracts, directly or through the scribes.”

But while international trade continued to be central to these processes throughout centuries, the reach of this literacy was widened to a great extent by the adoption of the Arabic script for local languages, transmitted through institutionalized forms of teaching and learning in Qur'anic schools. As Dale F. Eickelman points out, notwithstanding their stress on religious knowledge and rote memorization, these schools have always provided Muslims with some secular ability to write and read. For example, in a remote Moroccan village agricultural overseers, merchants and traders kept accounts, while other individuals composed simple narratives of local events, and Qur'anic teachers produced amulets and charms. This point was taken up by Brian V. Street who also emphasized that the maktab or Qur'anic school taught secular literacy along with the religious one, including commercial literacy and computation skills which enabled local fruit sellers in Iranian villages to maintain accounts, sign checks, write
