THE HISTORY AND 'RE-CONVERSION' OF THE VAREMBA OF ZIMBABWE

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Section I. The History of the Varemba

In 1810 Senhor Ferao, Captain of Sena, gave an account of the Portuguese possessions within the captaincy of Rios de Sena, in which he remarked:

To the east-south-east of Sofala, at about four hundred yards distance, is situated the Moorish town, where the number of females is much greater than males, in consequence of the latter being merchants principally engaged at Mozambique, to be initiated into their several occupations. The only circumstance that distinguishes them from other inhabitants is refraining from pork, and rejecting all sorts of meat that is not killed by the hands of one of their sect. In their habits, customs, languages, superstitions, songs and dances, they imitate the native.¹

This constitutes the first reference in modern times to the presence of people in the Zambezi region possessing notably Islamic characteristics without being clearly Muslims. The people here referred to are given no name but their cultural characteristics have much affinity with those we know today as Varemba.² Moreover, this important piece of evidence connects what we may judge a case of 'vestigial Islam' with Sofala and Mozambique.

Returning to the preceding two centuries of obscurity, we observe that since the end of the 16th century the Portuguese effectively controlled trade along the Zambezi, having turned both Sena and Tete into staging posts. Along the East African coast, north of Mozambique Island, however, the immigrant Muslim Asian communities, reinforced from their homelands, maintained the conflict with the Portuguese. By the early 18th century these Arabs had forced the Portuguese to abandon Mombasa and all settlements on the coasts of what are now Kenya and Tanzania. Nevertheless, no Arab reinforcement or resettlement affected the area of the Zambezi. Here the old links with the African tribal chiefs were
severed for good by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Despite this it was discovered in the 19th century that there were African tribes in the old Mutapa Empire which, it was quickly suggested, could have descended from Muslims.

South African trek Boers and individual European adventurers who, in the middle of the 19th century, reached the old Mutapa Empire from the south discovered a number of tribal groups whose habits and customs, especially the draining of blood from meat animals, were reminiscent of those of Cape Malays. To distinguish these Africans from Hottentots and Coloureds the South Africans described them as Islamic Kaffirs. For instance, Thomas Baines—who provides the first literary evidence of “Islamic” Africans after Ferao—wrote thus: “In 1850 I myself visited the then little village of Potchefstroom and heard of gold among the Slaamzyn (Islaams or Mahomedan) Kafirs, achter (beyond) Zoutpansberg”.

Moreover, the occupation of both the Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia facilitated a closer study of the so-called Islamic Kaffirs by ethno-historians. By the end of the 19th century it was suggested that these “Islamic” Africans were members of broken tribes who flourished among the Shona in Southern Rhodesia and among the Vhenda, the Sutho and the Thonga in the Transvaal. For instance, Andrew Anderson, who himself travelled to the old Mutapa Empire, made reference to these peculiar tribes thus:

Were these Monomotapa people black or white, and from whence did they come? They were evidently a separate people from those who now occupy the country. May not an Arab tribe have passed down along the east coast, and established themselves in the Mashona region...? for the word Emperor is not a word used by any African races south of the Zambezi .... except they are of Arab blood, or closely connected with that race. There is at present that tribe ... to the north of my explorations ... may not this remnant be descendants of the Monomotapa people, and those the Mashonas call “Abbalemba”?

This passage, inter alia, describes the peculiar tribes as a distinct people; links them with the Mutapa, the Zambezi, the Mashona, with the East coast, and with Arabs. And, though Anderson seems to speculate about the origins of these people, he is the earliest writer I have come across to identify them by name.

It appears that the various dispersed Varemba groups have been in the past conscious of themselves as constituting ‘one group’, ‘the same’ even though many hundreds of miles apart. By the end of the 19th century in Southern Africa these tribes with “Islamic” culture