

**Sixty Letters in Arabic Script from the**  
***Mozambique Historical Archives***  
***(Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique)***

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**Abstract**

This book contains sixty historical letters written in Arabic script (Ajami) found in Mozambique Historical Archives in Maputo, with their scanned images, respective transliteration into Latin script, translation into Portuguese (for now), and the description of the historical contexts and lives of each of the authors of the letters. At the end of each section, a list of relevant bibliography is included.

**English Introduction**

This work contains sixty letters written in Arabic script in local languages (also called *Ajami* writing) found in the *Mozambique Historical Archives* in Maputo, with translation into Portuguese, a description of their historical contexts, some details about the lives of the authors, and a relevant bibliography for each of the letters. These documents were identified within the scope of the 2009 six-month long pilot study funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Mozambique. The study envisioned identifying, indexing and digitizing this type of document and making them available to the general public and in particular to researchers. Despite their abundance, presumably even from the period preceding the arrival of the Portuguese in the region at the end of the fifteenth century, it is surprising how little they were used or addressed in historical scholarship. It is even more

surprising if we take into consideration the fact that this type of script is in use daily in northern Mozambique even today.

Only Eugeniusz Rzewuski<sup>1</sup> (1991/2) has done some linguistic research on the documents in *Ajami* in northern Mozambique, which he collected during his fieldwork in the Palma/Tungui region of the Cabo Delgado province. Nancy J. Hafkin (1973)<sup>2</sup> seems to have made extensive use of such written materials from the Portuguese archives - *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino* - in Lisbon for her PhD dissertation, though she does not elaborate on them. Jeremy G. Prestholdt (1998)<sup>3</sup> has cited one document in Arabic, a letter written by the Sharif of Mozambique Island, Muhammad al-Alawi in 1517 to the King of Portugal, D. Manuel, which was published in a collection of documents from the Portuguese archives of Arquivo de Torre do Tombo in Lisbon by Friar João de Sousa.<sup>4</sup> And finally, Liazzat J. K. Bonate<sup>5</sup> has explored some of the Arabic-script manuscripts at the Mozambique Historical Archives in Maputo with the assistance of *Shaykh* Abu Dale. The contribution made by *Shaykh* Abu Dale was considerable both to these initial explorations as well as for the pilot study because of his fluency in Ki-Mwani, Emakhuwa, Ci-Maconde, Ci-Makwe and Ki-Swahili languages, but also due to his deep knowledge of the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the region that only someone born and raised within a particular language and cultural context can possess.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Rzewuski, "Origins of the Tungi Sultanate (Northern Mozambique) in the Light of Local Traditions," *Orientalia Varsovenia* (1991–92): 193–213; E. Rzewuski, "Mother Tongue/Father Tongue Convergence: On Swahilization and Deswahilization in Mozambique," in *Akten des 7. Essener Kolloquiums über "Minoritätensprachen/Sprachminoritäten," vom 14–17.6.1990 an der Universität Essen*, ed. J. R. Dow and T. Stolz (Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer: Bochum, 1991), 267–30

<sup>2</sup> N. J. Hafkin, N. J. 1973. "Trade, Society, and Politics in Northern Mozambique, c. 1753–1913," Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 1973

<sup>3</sup> J. G. Prestholdt, J. G. 1998. "As Artistry Permits and Custom May Ordain: The Social Fabric of Material Consumption in the Swahili World, circa 1450 to 1600," in (*PAS Working Papers* No. 3, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998, 156 pp.)

<sup>4</sup> Frei J. de Sousa, *Documentos Árabicos para a Historia Portuguesa* (Lisboan: Officina Real das Ciências, 1788–89), 85–86.

<sup>5</sup> Bonate, L. J. K., "The Use of Arabic Script in Northern Mozambique" (*Tydskrift vir letterkunde, University of Pretoria*, 2008, pp. 133 – 142); Bonate, L. J. K. "Islam in Northern Mozambique: A Historical Overview" (*History Compass*, 8/7, 2010, pp. 573-93); Bonate, L. J. K., "Documents in Arabic Script in Mozambique Historical Archives" (*Islamic Africa*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010, pp. 5-9).

During the pilot study, after the initial research in the collection called *Fundo do Século XIX* (Nineteenth Century Fund), 103 boxes (caixas) were selected from the following collections: Governo Geral de Moçambique, Governo do Distrito de Moçambique, Governo do Distrito de Cabo Delgado and Governo do Distrito de Angoche. Among these, the majority of the documents written in Arabic script were found in 49 caixas of the Distrito de Moçambique and 54 of the Distrito de Cabo Delgado, from which a total of 782 letters were identified, catalogued and digitized. Of these, 114 were from the Distrito de Moçambique and 568 from the Distrito de Cabo Delgado. The materials represented correspondence written by the African leaders to the Portuguese administrators and dated from c.a 1870 to 1900.

During the second phase of the pilot study, 60 letters (28 from the Distrito de Moçambique and 32 from the Distrito de Cabo Delgado) were read, transliterated into Latin script, and finally translated into Portuguese. These letters were chosen on the basis of the historical importance of their authors. The third phase of the project consisted in taking these letters to their respective geographic locations in contemporary provinces of Cabo Delgado (former Distrito de Cabo Delgado) and Nampula (former Distrito de Mocambique) with the aim of showing them to the local people in order to clarify whether or not they could still read these letters, understand their contents and identify the events and people that they referred to. The design of the fieldwork included collecting the memories and oral histories related to the letters.

The final goal of the project was to identify the letters, evaluate their relevance and create empirical data for the development of a long-term research project that would be undertaken by a multi- and inter-disciplinary team of experts including historians, linguists, anthropologists and scholars of Islam and of Swahili culture, among others. The future project should include, besides deepening the research on the documents, ethnographic and historical fieldwork, as well as collecting other *Ajami* documents in private hands, and expanding the indexing such materials

housed in the archives of Portugal, Goa in India, and of East African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and the Comoros with relevance to the history and culture of northern Mozambique.

The documents at the Mozambique Historical Archives were generally written in Ki-Swahili language influenced by major local languages, such as Ki-Mwani, Ci-Makwe, Ci-Makonde, Emakhuwa, Ekoti e Esangaji (language of Sangage and Mogincual regions, also known as Enattembo). They contained formulaic Islamic salutations and greetings in the Arabic language, and some words in Portuguese or English written in Arabic scripts as well.

The KiSwahili language was the *lingua franca* in the regions that are usually described as part of the so-called Swahili world, including the East African coast, the Comoros, northern Madagascar and northern Mozambique until the beginning of the twentieth century. Andrey Zhukov<sup>6</sup> maintains that the populations of the East African coast started using the KiSwahili written in Arabic script probably in the ninth century. Before the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century, the Swahili world included regions of the Somali coast in the north and up to the Chibuene littoral of the actual Inhambane province of southern Mozambique, which were drawn into Swahili trading networks already in the eighth century.<sup>7</sup> Several archaeological excavations done in the 1960s and 1970s in coastal regions of Cabo Delgado, Nampula, and Inhambane provinces confirmed this hypothesis.<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, the excavations undertaken by Ricardo Teixeira Duarte<sup>9</sup> demonstrated the time of the initial Swahili occupation of the northern Mozambican littoral as the twelfth to fifteenth centuries at Somana, the twelfth century at Lumbo, and twelfth to sixteenth centuries at Vamisi. The 1994 Christian Isendahl excavations on the continental part of

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<sup>6</sup> A. Zhukov, "Old Swahili Arabic Script and the Development of Swahili" (*Satanic Africa*, 15, 2004, 1-15).

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo T. Duarte, *Northern Mozambique in the Swahili World* (Central Board of National Antiquities, Sweden. Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique & Uppsala University, Sweden, 1993); Paul J. J. Sinclair, "Chibuene – An Early Trading Site in Southern Mozambique" (*Paideuma* 28, 1982: 149-64); Paul J. J. Sinclair, *Space, Time and Social Formation. A Territorial Approach to the Archaeology and Anthropology of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, c. 0-1700 AD* (Uppsala, 1987); Thomas Spear, "Early Swahili History Reconsidered" (*International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No 2(2000), 257-290), 263-64; Randall L. Pouwels, "Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean to 1800: Reviewing Relations in Historical Perspective" (*International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2-3, 2002: 385- 425), 393-94.

<sup>8</sup> R. T. Dickinson, *Surface Survey of Archaeological Sites on Angoche Island, 28-19 May 1975* (Salisbury: The Central African Historical Association); Paul J. J. Sinclair "An Archaeological reconnaissance of northern Mozambique (part I: Nampula province: part II: Cabo Delgado province), *Working Papers in African Studies* 12 (Uppsala: Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 1985); Francois Balsan, "A la recherche des Arabes sur le cotes du Nord Mozambique (Unpublished Transcript)" (*Monumenta* II, Lourenço Marques: Comissão dos Monumentos Nacionais de Moçambique, 1966: 57-62); Fernando A. Monteiro "Pesquisas Arqueológicas nos estabelecimentos de Kiuya, Mbuesi e Quisiva", *Monumenta* No 2, 1966: 51-56.

<sup>9</sup> Duarte, *Northern Mozambique in the Swahili World*, 60-78.

Angoche suggested that the initial date for Swahili cultural influence in this region could be from the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to the period following the arrival of the Portuguese, at the end of the fifteenth century, the collection of Portuguese historical documents published by George McCall Theal<sup>11</sup> indicate clearly that Sofala, Ilha de Moçambique, Quelimane and Angoche were part of the Swahili world in terms of their economy, culture, religion and kinship ties. These regions clearly had intimate relationships with Kilwa (Kisiwani), Malindi, Mombassa, and Zanzibar. The documents also reveal that the official correspondence between different Swahili and other local settlements, and between Africans and the Portuguese was done in Arabic (probably in Ki-Swahili written in Arabic script, though the Portuguese documents mention only Arabic as the epistolary language of the time). The exchange of letters written in Arabic script between the Portuguese officials and the local African rulers became a norm and continued to persist until the end of the nineteenth century, when the military conquest of the “effective occupation” and the actual imposition of modern colonial rule unfolded. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Portuguese language replaced Swahili, and the Arabic script was replaced by the Latin one in the official correspondence of the colonial state. Meanwhile, the use of Arabic script applied above all to local African languages continued to persist among Mozambican Africans, though marginalized and off-stage and invisible in an official public sphere.

The sixty letters discussed below are dated from the second half of the nineteenth century and reflect the situation and context of that period. In terms of their contents they represent an aspect of official correspondence, except for some few letters that were written by ordinary people soliciting Portuguese intervention in order to start a business or protect them from the alleged abuses of local African rulers. In general, the documents from Cabo Delgado reflected the relationships between local rulers, the Portuguese and the people of the mainland; issues related to the Nguni invasions (the so-called Mafiti invasions); disputes of legal and other nature among different actors, and questions pertaining to the international slave trade. The letters from the Mozambique District also reflected the slave trade-related issues, in particular with the Comoros and Madagascar, but they also contained important details about the war of the “effective

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Isendahl, “Angoche: an Important Link of the Zambezian Gold Trade”, in [www.arkeologi.uu.se/aft/projects/BOOK/isendahl.pdf](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/aft/projects/BOOK/isendahl.pdf), last accessed March 24, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> G. M. Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa, Collected in Various Libraries and Archives Departments in Europe* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1901), 9 volumes. Ver em particular, “Extractos do Livro de Duarte Barbosa,” em Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, V. 1, pp. 87-92.

occupation” (a Guerra de ocupação efectiva”) and the attitudes and positioning of different African rulers in the face of the Portuguese military invasions of the region.