Islamic Incantations in a Colonial Notebook

A Case from Interwar Zanzibar

Incantations islamiques dans un cahier colonial à Zanzibar pendant l'Entre-deux-guerres

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/27437>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.27437

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 5 December 2019

Number of pages: 1025-1046

ISBN: 9782713227813

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Anne K. Bang, "Islamic Incantations in a Colonial Notebook", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 236 | 2019, Online since 03 January 2022, connection on 06 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/27437> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.27437>

Islamic Incantations in a Colonial Notebook

A Case from Interwar Zanzibar

The focus of this article is a certain type of Arabic handwritten texts, namely what we may call “small text.” By this, I mean supplications (*ad‘iya*), pieces of poetry, *dhikr* and various types of formula noted down in notebooks and on pieces of paper. This type of text is clearly different both in scope, circulation and content from the “big texts” (Quran and *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* texts, works of Arabic grammar, logic, standard manuals of Sufism, genealogical and historical works). However, both types of text were well known in East Africa by the early 20th century, having circulated widely in manuscript form throughout the 19th century. By that time, both “big” and “small” texts were increasingly becoming available in printed form.

This article discusses how “small texts” were used and understood in the period when Islamic modernism (in various forms) was becoming more widely known on the East African coast.¹ Beyond this lies a larger question that has to do with the understanding of text in general, on a broad spectrum from magical absorbing of letters to intellectual analysis. Academic discourse on the Zanzibari understanding of Islamic texts range from the magical understanding that Michael Lambek (1990, 1993) described from Mayotte as late as 1990 to the “great canon” outlined by Roman Loimeier (2009) in his study of Islamic education in Zanzibar?

This paper offers three different readings of a specific *du‘ā* copied in Zanzibar sometime in the 1920s or 1930s into a colonial notebook. The text is an invocation of the spirits (*jinn*), set in a cosmology where the world is magically constituted through spirits, words, and letters. These three readings will take into account both the materiality of the text (paper, ink, style of writing, orthography), and the position of this type of text in the Zanzibari

1. On the complexities of Islamic modernism in East Africa, and its inherent scholarly and personal links with organised Sufism, see N. MATHEWS (2013).

and East African intellectual tradition. The three interpretations may be summarised as follows:

– The text was written as part of a living tradition anchored in an existing—and still relevant—knowledge tradition. The argument here is that while the world of Islamic print capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s moved increasingly towards a modernist (and later Salafi) understanding of the Islamic textual tradition, transmission of esoteric knowledge continued as part of an intact Sufi tradition.

– The text was written as a deliberate intellectual exercise to consciously maintain esoteric knowledge. If, by the 1930s, modernist Islamic texts and practices were becoming increasingly dominant, even within the Sufi knowledge networks, counter-efforts were made to keep the tradition “intact.”

– The text was written as a curated piece of ethnographica, produced in the colonial context and possibly on commission.

Case Study: “Hidden Knowledge” in a Colonial Notebook

The text examined here is part of the private collection of the late Maalim Idris (1934-2012) in Zanzibar Town.² The provenance of this collection as an entity is difficult to assess, as it derives from several different family collections and mosques/madrastas throughout Zanzibar, as well as several items of unknown origin. The collection contains books (from the earliest late 19th century print to the 2000s), manuscripts (from the 1860s to notebook copies dating to the 1940s), photos, coins, stamps, and various types of collectibles. Maalim Idris’ motivation was to preserve Islamic heritage, broadly defined. The manuscripts and the early printed works are currently in the process of being digitized, financed by the Endangered Archives Program (EAP), British Library.³

In terms of origin, a substantial part of the collection derives from the Mkelle family in Zanzibar, which in the 20th century produced several intellectuals and teachers, within the Shādhili Sufi tradition but also in the secular Government schools. This was a family of Comorian origin, to which Maalim Idris himself was related. Another bulk of the collection derives from the Madrasa Ba Kathir in Zanzibar, which from the 1890s until the 1940s was an important scholarly hub within the ‘Alawī—and general—Sufi tradition. It is likely, but not at all certain, that the notebook examined here derives from one of these two sub-collections.

2. See obituary and interview with Maalim Idris by the author at: <http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/blog/entry/muhammad_idris_muhammad_saleh_maalim_idris_1934-2012/>.

3. EAP 1114, Endangered Archives Program. The digitizing started in July 2018 and is estimated to be online in the latter half of 2019.

FIG. 1. — THE NOTEBOOK BEARING THE IMPRINT
OF THE ZANZIBAR PROTECTORATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Photograph: Anne Bang.

Materiality: General Description of the Notebook and Text

The notebook examined here has not yet been digitised under the above-mentioned EAP project. However, a provisional digital copy has been made, with the reference MAALIM MS 34.

In terms of materiality, the support is an unlined notebook measuring 16 x 20 cm, bound in soft, blue carton. The front of the notebook bears the imprint of the Zanzibar Protectorate Education Department. The reverse cover lists “Colonial Weights and Measures” plus the multiplication tables

up to 12 x 12. Judging solely by the cover itself, we can draw some tentative conclusions. The Zanzibar Protectorate Education Department, whose imprint the notebook carries, was only established in that form by the 1920s. Judging also by the red and black pen used, a qualified guess would date this writing to the late 1920s or early 1930s. Its provenance is unknown; it bears no name, *waqfiyya* or stamp that might indicate previous owner or usage. There are no audition or reading notes that might indicate that the text has been used for any specific purpose.

The use of colonial notebooks for writing of Islamic texts was relatively common in the first decades of 20th century East Africa. In the Maalim Idris collection alone, at least ten such items can be found, dating from approximately the same period. We also find notebooks from the Education Department of the Kenya Colony as support for Islamic texts in the Riyadha Collection in Lamu.⁴

The Notebook

The notebook contains three different texts, all in the same hand and copied in the same style. The handwriting is clear and “schoolbookish,” indicating a hand that has been well trained in Arabic writing, but not necessarily in any particular type of *khaṭṭ*. None of the texts carry any title or date. The different texts are divided by blank pages.

1. *‘Aqīdat al-Īmān* (Tenet of faith). Prose text, 25 pages. The text is in black ink and partially vocalized in red. Introductions are in red ink in the same hand. There are some corrections where words or clusters of words have been added in red ink, correcting the original text in black ink.

The *‘Aqīdat al-Īmān* is a well-known text in East Africa, used for religious instruction. Its author is unknown. The later *qāḍī* of Zanzibar and famous scholar ‘Umar b. Sumayṭ wrote a commentary on it, entitled *Hadiyyat al-ikhwān bi-sharh ‘Aqīdat al-īmān*. This commentary has been published several times in the twentieth century and was used for instruction in madrasas in Zanzibar.⁵

2. *Khutba for the ‘Īd al-naḥr tis‘a takbīrāt* (Sermon for the ‘Īd al-Aḏḥā, nine *takbīr*/cycles). Poem of 48 lines, 5 ½ pages. Black ink. The first two pages are vocalized in red ink, the remaining lines are unvocalized.

3. *Du‘a al-Sabāsib al-Sab‘a* (Prayer of the Seven Deserts/Wastelands). The text is written in black ink, with vocalization throughout the text in red ink.

4. See the Riyadha digitized collection: <<https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP466>>.

5. *Hadiyyat al-ikhwān bi-sharh ‘Aqīdat al-īmān*, published in Cairo (Hallabi Press), 1356/1937-38; Mombasa (Maktaba ‘Alawiyya al-Islāmiyya), n.d., Cairo (Halli Press, reprint), 1960.

In total, the text consists of 14 handwritten pages. The first page consists of 11 lines, while the remaining fourteen vary between 13 lines (1 page) and 16 lines (1 page), in total 199 lines. The fact that the number of lines varies between pages indicates that the text is written with little care about its visual presentation. There are also no particular signs or indications at the beginning and end of Quranic quotes.

The text contains a number of corrections, added in the same red ink as the vocalization. There are instances where single words or clusters of several words have been added in smaller, red letters between lines, adding content that were missing in the initial copying. In other instances, letters have been added (*alif* or *wa* to indicate long vowels). Finally, there are spelling errors in the text that have not been corrected, even in the Quranic quotes.

All in all, this indicates that the writer was educated, perhaps a scribe or teacher trained in Arabic, but most likely not a fully trained Islamic scholar who would be able to write Quranic quotes from memory without errors, and who would make fewer (or no) spelling errors in the regular text.

The Jinn in the Text

Before the actual text of the *Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a*, there are two pages of [unidentified] text containing a summoning of a number of *jinn*—detailing their names and locations in the universe, specifically “in the east,” “in the west,” and in the corresponding set of elements; “in the water” and “in the fire,” “in the earth” and “in the water.” The invocation gives the names of a number of spirits that reside or originate in each location, as for example in this segment:

And the jinn whose name is Jamānūb and Ibn Jusūs and Ibn Majūs and Ibn Lawbūs al-Jinn and Jinān. And the jinn whose name is Sulṭān and Ibn Qabānūb and Ibn Shamhūrūsh and Ibn Sulṭān al-Jinn Yākfūsh and Ibn Ḥarūsh and Ibn Jabāl Amm al-Ṣubyān whose place is in the west [al-maghrib].

Specific incantations separate the description of the different locations, such as *Yā Qamaymūn*, *Yā Sulūb*. The final line, on page two, invokes the name of the Prophet Muḥammad for *tawaṣṣul* (intercession) for the text as a whole.

Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a :

An Invocation of the Spirits in a Textual Tradition

The actual text of the *Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a* starts on page 3, following a *bismillah* written in red ink, marking the beginning of a new text. The first stanzas are as follows:

الحمد لله الذي احتجب عن الابصار فلا عيون ترى خالق السموات السبع بالاركان والارضين وما فيهن من الورى
الذي عجز كل ذي لب عن يكيف كيف كيفية ذاته وكل واصف عن توأصف وصف صفاته المنفرد

Praise be to God, He who has veiled himself from view, so no eye can see the Creator of the seven heavens and its very foundations, nor the two earths and what is in/upon them of men, incapable of moulding their beings and selves, and every description describing his being [...]

FIG. 2. — THE TEXT OF THE *DU'A AL-SABĀSIB AL-SAB'A* STARTING AFTER THE *BISMILLAH* MARKED IN RED INK ON THE RECTO PAGE

Photograph: Anne Bang.

The *Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a* is known from several copies held in European manuscript collections and has been ascribed to different authors. In a manuscript copy held in Leiden, authorship is ascribed to Abū 'l-Ḥasan

al-Shādhilī (d. 1258 CE), the founder of the Shādhiliyya Sufi order.⁶ Two copies are held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), both of which also list al-Shādhilī as the author, possibly because it appears together with the Shādhilī litany *Hizb al-Baḥr* (Litany of the Sea).⁷ A variant of the same text has also been ascribed to one “‘Abd al-Azīz al-Maghrebī,” in one out of two manuscript copies held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford.⁸

In the Islamic tradition of litanies and incantations, this text is considered one of the most powerful invocations of the spirits. Like most such formulas, it is understood as capable of achieving a specific set of purposes such as curing of illness, protection from theft or robbery, to conceive a child, to overcome an obstacle, to remove *jinn* or to obtain the love of a man or woman, etc. As a particularly powerful text, the *Du‘ā al-Sabāsib al-Sab‘a* is able to achieve a broader set of purposes than other, more “ordinary” invocations.

Also, like most such texts, there are several conditions tied to its use, meaning that whoever uses it must fulfil certain criteria for it to be effective. These criteria are typically tied to notions of purity, for example through extended periods of fasting before applying the *du‘ā*, and to specific ways of breaking the fast, for example with salt. Another condition is the knowledge and ability to recite in exactly the proper way, with the correct pronunciation of the various spirit names and the seemingly nonsensical phrases that derive from numerology. Finally, the invocation should be made at specific times, after the regular prayers, and be combined with different expressions of *niya* (intent), depending on what outcome one wants.⁹ Interestingly, there are also conditions that refer to the nature of the writing itself, for example that it should be written by the light of one single lamp, or by the light of candles of certain colors. This is interesting considering the very modern and straightforward reproduction of the text under scrutiny here, which may well have been produced under electric light.

As a text, the *Du‘a al-Sabāsib al-Sab‘a* also has commentaries where later scholars have made notes about the specific ways in which the incantation

6. Leiden Arabic Manuscript Collection, Leiden, Or. 14.090, <<http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/inventories/leiden/or15000.pdf>>. I am grateful to Jan Just Witkam for this reference and for providing me with details about this manuscript.
7. BNF, Paris, Arabe 6400, <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10031446s/f62.image.r=al-sab%C4%81sib>>; BNF, Paris, Arabe 5519, fol. 182b, <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9065454f/f189.image.r=al-sab%C4%81sib>>. I am grateful to Jean-Charles Coulon for these references and for providing me with information about similar texts in the BNF.
8. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Huntington 532. The Bodleian also holds a second manuscript version of the same text, but in the latter no author is ascribed (Bodleian, OR830). See <<https://www.fihrist.org.uk/?utf8=&q=Sabasib>>.
9. Personal communication, informant MTS, Zanzibar, March 2018.

can be used, as well as details about the conditions for various uses. One such commentary was written by Sayyid b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Zaʿrab of “Bandar al-Jīza”, e.g. Giza in Cairo.¹⁰ This commentary lays out more than seventy purposes for which the *al-Sabāsib* can be used, thus confirming it as a particularly “powerful” or “effective” text.

This type of text was not at all unknown in Zanzibar by the 1920s or 1930s. On the contrary, the Maalim collection contains several manuscripts dating from the nineteenth century that have a similar type of content. For example, Maalim MS 4¹¹ contain *al-Duʿa al-Barhatiya*,¹² which is an invocation of magical numbers for the purpose of healing, understood to derive from the oath of Solomon.

Magic and Modernity

Like the *al-Duʿa al-Barhatiya*, the content of the *Duʿa al-Sabāsib al-Sabʿa* draws heavily on Ibn ʿArabī’s ontological view of the cosmos as divided into three levels; the perceptible world (*ʿālam al-shahāda*), the hidden world (*ʿālam al-ghayb*) and the world of the imagination (*ʿālam al-takhayyul wa ʿl-bar-zakh*).¹³ Ibn ʿArabī understood the latter domain as one where—as expressed in the biography by Claude Addas (1993: 117-118)—“spirits are corporealised and the bodies are spiritualized.” This is the realm of “invisible realities” which are nonetheless seen and even more real than the physical, everyday world.¹⁴

As literary texts, Islamic occult sciences of geomancy, numerology and *jinn* invocations were for a long time referred to in Western orientalist literature simply as “magic,” or, as Noah Gardiner (2014: 7) has stated: “an ancient but persistent detritus, an irrational and antisocial atavism thriving primarily among the poorly educated and flourishing in moments of cultural decline.” With decadence, in other words, comes intellectual regression, magic instead of rationality, opinions instead of law and visions instead of reality. Conversely, in this view, the rise of modernity will relegate magic into shadowy corners from which it will eventually disappear. Where rationality reigns, magic will recede.

However, as Gardiner (2014: 61) points out, Western orientalists overlooked the complex ways in which occult knowledge is “anchored” in *silsilas*

10. Commentary, MS, 39 pages. Copy in the possession of informant MTS, Zanzibar.

11. Provisional number. To be assigned EAP number when collection is placed online.

12. *Duʿa Barhatiya*, Jāmiʿ al-Adyān Muḥammad b Jaʿfar al-Azkawī.

13. On the divisions of the cosmos according to Ibn ʿArabī, see M. H. KATZ (2013).

14. Ibn ʿArabī’s ontological perspective is very thoroughly discussed by W. C. CHITTICK (1989).

in the same way as general Sufi knowledge, to Ali b. Abī Tālib, to the Prophet and onwards through all the prophets to Adam himself. These are, argues Gardiner, texts of knowledge and mastery, although of a mainly invisible world that lies beyond the immediate cosmology of the Quran. The favoring of knowledge acquired through “other means” (*i.e.* through *kashf*—“unveiling,” insight—or *maʿrifa*—“knowing”), was a hallmark of Sufi knowledge transmission from an early stage. In this context, the *Sabāsib*, like any other text, transmits knowledge, but a particular type of knowledge that is meant only for the *khāṣṣ*—the select few.

It is interesting to note that since the 2000s, texts like the *Duʿa al-Sabāsib al-Sabʿa* have achieved new lives on the internet, in specific sites concerned with the “occult,” with Solomonic wisdom—and with “recipes” for solving life’s troubles. Rather than disappearing, magic (or its modern, self-help cousin) has moved from the “select few” to anyone with a smartphone and basic Arabic.

The Names of God and Numerology in the *Sabāsib*

The *Sabāsib* text includes seemingly nonsensical words derived from the Islamic science of *ḥurūf wa-ʾl-asma* (letters and names). This tradition owes much to Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 1225 or 1232 in Cairo)¹⁵ who outlined an entire cosmology where the letters of the Arabic alphabet somehow form the basis for the manifest world, and that the manifest world consequently can be manipulated by the use of letters. Al-Būnī commented both upon the *Duʿa al-Sabāsib al-Sabʿa* and on the *Duʿa Barhatiya* mentioned above. The “science of letters and names” has been controversial throughout Islamic history, denounced by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Khaldūn as pure “star-worship,” or worse.¹⁶

One example from the Zanzibar version of the *Sabāsib* goes as follows:

sabāsību, sabāsību,
sabukatⁱⁿ, kaṭaḥṭumⁱⁿ,
taqalqalat, taqalqalat,
tanqalat, tanqalat,
takhalkhalat, takhalkhalat,
tazalzat, tazalzat, tazaʿzaʿat, tazaʿzaʿat, tazaʿzaʿat
muṭāqⁱⁿ, muṭāqⁱⁿ,¹⁷

15. For a detailed study on Al-Būnī, see N. GARDINER (2014).

16. On the wide circulation of these sciences despite their denunciation, see N. GARDINER (2012).

17. In another version (<<http://www.eddouali.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7988>>), the incantation here reads “*muṭāghⁱⁿ, muṭāghⁱⁿ*”. It is not clear if this is intentional or a spelling mistake.

The phrases that are repeated in slight variations (such as *tazalzat*, *tazalzat*, *taza 'za 'at*, *taza 'za 'at*, *taza 'za 'at*) are thought to be amalgamations of the numerical values of the various names of God and meant to be spoken out loud.

The *Sabāsib* (as well as the *Barhatiya*) partly quote or paraphrase the so-called *Kitāb al-Ajnās*,¹⁸ thought to have been authored by the scribe of King Solomon, 'Asif b. Barkhiyya.¹⁹ This text is understood to be either the wisdom of Solomon that 'Asif wrote for his master, alternatively as wisdom later promoted (falsely) as such by the Jews. In either case, the text was purportedly buried under the throne of Solomon. Today, the *Kitāb al-Ajnās*—like the *Sabāsib*—circulates in the more occult/Kabbalistic corners of the internet, in Arabic and in various and partial translations in English, Malay, Bosnian and Swahili, to mention a few.²⁰

The role of Solomon in popular belief has been documented among several Muslim populations in Africa and the Middle East. For example, there existed until very recently (or perhaps there still exists) in Sudan—and elsewhere—the widespread belief that Solomon was able to speak the language of all living beings, including non-humans. He could thus communicate with *jinn*s and demons as well as animals and potentially also thwart the evil plans of malevolent spirits (Eltom 1984).

According to Islamic tradition, Solomon knew the Divine Names, of which these phrases are derivatives, and at least some of these were imprinted on his ring. According to the Mu'taziliyya and Ash'ariyya, the names of God—as mentioned in the Quran—were understood as literal attributes. However, for Ibn al-Arabī, and many of the subsequent mystical tradition, they are perceived as “cloaks that cover the names of God” (*i.e.* His reality) and thus make up part of up the *'ālam al-takhayyul wa 'l-barzakh* (the world of the imagination) and which form an “isthmus” between the known and the hidden worlds. In this sense, the names of God given in the Solomonic wisdom traditions are words and utterances that cloak (in Ibn 'Arabī's words) specific meanings

18. *Kitāb al-Ajnās*. *Yashtamil 'alā istikhdāmāt wa-'azā'im wa-khawātim wa-ghayrihā*. 'Asif b. Barkhiyya (aka Asaph b. Berechiah in the Hebrew version) is said to be the one who magically brought the throne of Queen Bilqīs of Sheba from Yemen to Palestine. For one (out of many) versions of the text, see <<https://www.scribd.com/doc/162639094/Kitab-al-Ajnas>>.

19. On the role of Solomon (Sulaymān) in Islamic textual traditions, see F. E. PETERS (1994: 24-27 *sq.*).

20. Several versions of this text exist on websites or blogs dedicated to popularizing the kabbal, for example, see: <<http://www.eddouali.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7988>> and <<http://algenh.yoo7.com/t18-topic>>. Commentaries to this *du'a* are also available online: <<http://digitaloccultmanuscripts.blogspot.no/2008/06/sherh-da-as-sabasib-al-kubra.html>>.

detailed in works such as the *Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a*. They are, in other words, not intelligible to humans except when made manifest in the *barzakh*.

The Summoning of *Jinn* in the *Sabāsib*

The *Du'a al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a* explicitly calls upon several spirits and legendary characters within Islamic cosmology. Among the specific references made are the so-called “companions of the cave” (Banū Ghaylān Aṣḥab al-Kahf).²¹

The list is long and the following excerpt serves merely to give the flavor of the text:

(Calling upon) the Red [al-Aḥmar]²²

(Calling upon) the Ṣāhib al-Jabal al-Dukhān (the master of the mountain of smoke)

(Calling upon) Qamarishi, (calling upon) Qārishi

(Calling upon) Ghalbūshī, (calling upon) Ghalmāshi, (calling upon) Ghalmūshi

(Calling upon) Ba'alūsh, (calling upon) Kandarūsh

(Calling upon) the rider of the elephant [al-Rākib 'alā Fīl]

Quranic Quotes in the *Sabāsib*

From page eight the text turns to a series of Quranic quotes, given in an order that is not immediately clear, but which is understood to be structured in such a way as to create a powerful *du'a*. The following verses are cited in the entire text: Quran, 6:18, 2:255 (*Ayat al-Kursi*, repeatedly), 42:4, 37:1-37:10, 46:29, 6:59, 6:75, 45:29, 36:82-83, 67:16, 51:42, 36:53.

Notably, as is the case in many texts of this type, the *Ayat al-Kursī* (the Throne verse, Quran 2:255) is the most extensively quoted, as this verse usually is associated with protection from the ill will of other humans, and from the unseen spirit world:

21. This is a tradition within Christianity and Islam about a group of Christian believers who sought refuge in a cave in Ephesus to escape persecution. According to the legends, they slept there for 300 years and then emerged awake. The story is mentioned in Quran 18:9-26. In the Quranic narrative, the companions also had a dog who stayed with them for all 300 years, keeping watch as they slept.

22. “The Red One” (al-Aḥmar) is a common name for the “king of the *Jinn*,” and is sometimes understood to be a designation for the biblical Seth. In the temporal system of the *jinn*, he is understood to be the master of Tuesdays. The use of color to differentiate between *jinn* and to connect them to specific abilities is a common theme in the *‘ilm al-ruḥānī* (science of the spirits) (LEBLING & SHAH 2010).

Allah—there is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Sustainer of [all] existence. Neither drowsiness overtakes Him nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is [presently] before them and what will be after them, and they encompass not a thing of His knowledge except for what He wills. His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and their preservation tires Him not. And He is the Most High, the Most Great.²³

Quranic verses that refer to cosmology, the position of spiritual beings in the universe are also frequently cited:

By those [angels] lined up in rows [Quran 37:1]

And those who drive the clouds [Quran 37:2]

And those who recite the message [Quran 37:3]

Indeed, your God is one [Quran 37:4]

Lord of the heavens and the earth, and that between them, and lord of the rising sun [Quran 37:5]

Indeed, We have adorned the nearest heaven with an adornment of stars [Quran 37:6]

And as protection against every rebellious devil [Quran 37:7]

[So] they may not listen to the exalted assembly [of angels] and are pelted from every side, [Quran 37:8]

Repelled; and for them is a constant punishment [Quran 37:9]

Except one who snatches [some words] by theft, but they are pursued by a burning flame, piercing [in brightness] [Quran 37:10]

As noted above, there are occasional spelling errors in the Quranic quotes, some of which have been corrected in red ink.

Three Readings: Why Summon the *Jinn* in Colonial Zanzibar?

Before turning to the three possible ways of reading the *Sabāsib*, some background is needed on the modalities of text circulation in Zanzibar in the interwar period.

Zanzibar has a limited corpus of manuscripts dating primarily from the nineteenth century and a larger set of printed texts circulating as of 1900,

23. Quranic translations by Sahih International, <<http://tanzil.net/#trans/en.sahih/1:1>>.

increasing sharply in number after World War I. There also exists a deep and long-standing tradition of writing in Zanzibar, in the Swahili poetry and chronicle tradition, which even the early proponents of the “non-literate Africa” theory had to acknowledge.²⁴ This tradition has existed alongside the Arabic, and the historical relationship between the two is one that has yet to be fully explored. Likewise, in Zanzibar there is also a deep and long-standing tradition of oral knowledge transmission, from the recitation of religious prayers to incantations. These, including the example studied herein, stride the highly permeable boundary between religion and *ganga* (magic).

In the latter half of the 19th century, Islamic texts were being produced, copied, imported and otherwise circulated in Zanzibar at a higher rate and more rapidly (Bang 2014). This was in no way unique to Zanzibar, but rather a phenomenon common throughout the Muslims world, as has been outlined in several earlier studies.²⁵ By the 1880s, textual religious knowledge transmission was still mostly taking place in manuscript form but early lithographs and soon printed works were increasingly finding their way to Zanzibar through the Indian Ocean trade. These texts were in Arabic and the process made Zanzibari Islam (like so many other places) increasingly “bookish” and—by implication—Arabized.

By the early 1900s, printed works were increasingly circulated and used, also in the settings of Islamic education. Texts formerly laboriously circulated as manuscripts were now purchased via middlemen or by direct order from Cairo, Mecca or Bombay. Books were bought, circulated (and presumably read) by the Bū Saʿīdī sultans themselves, scholars and teachers in mosques, teaching institutions as well as individual *ʿalims*. The overall impression, after a survey of book collections in Zanzibar, is that the import of printed books started in earnest in the 1890s, and really picked up between 1910 and 1920.²⁶ Furthermore, by the early 20th century, journals and newspapers from the Middle East were available to the scholarly community in Zanzibar (Ghazal 2010). By around 1930, Zanzibar had become firmly integrated into the textual economy of the broader Islamic world.

24. The special position of Swahili (as perceived by European scholarship) as an African literary tradition is clear from the historical and theoretical depth of studies of Swahili poetry, chronicles and epics. The first English language grammar of Swahili appeared in 1850 (KRAPF 1850) on Kisuaheli and the Kinika dialect. Studies of Swahili poetry and prose tradition became established in the first half of 20th century thanks to scholars such as J. W. T. Allen, J. Knappert, A. Werner and others.

25. To mention but a few: ATIYEH (1995), AYALON (1995), GREEN (2009, 2013), GHAZAL (2010), KAPTEIN (2014).

26. This phenomenon is studied in BANG (2014: 108-139) and in LOIMEIER (2009).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite the apparent steady emergence of a Zanzibari print culture, the actual transition from manuscript to print was a long process in Zanzibar. For perhaps as long as 50-60 years, and certainly well into the 1930s, printed text and manuscript copying existed side by side in Islamic *madrasas* (Bang 2011).

In Zanzibar, as everywhere else in the Islamic world, the rise of different currents of Islamic modernism coincided with, and was partly driven by, the emergence of print. The impulses reached Zanzibar from throughout the Islamic world, including Mecca, Cairo, Aden and Hadramawt, Oman and further afield (Reese 2012). In East Africa, the new ideas brought about the same changes as everywhere else: new journals emerged, new associations (*jam'īyyāt*) were formed and existing practices were subject to constant negotiations.²⁷ The period 1900-1940s was, in short, a period of social change and transformation, with new populations becoming Muslim and established Muslim communities taking on new practices, new interpretations, new teaching methods, new ways of being “good Muslims” (Becker 2008; McIntosh 2009). The question is why, in this context, an apparent Arabic-literate person would sit down and write a text like the *Sabāsib* in a notebook from the Zanzibar Education Department.

Reading 1: The Continuity of Tradition by Modern Means

The first reading simply views this copy as part of a living tradition. This is a reading in line with Gardiner's view of magical invocations as part of the broader Sufi tradition. We assume here that our unknown copyist saw little, or no difference between this text and other texts in the Islamic canon; to him (most likely a male), they were simply ways to achieve knowledge and insight. This argument is strengthened by the fact that the text is found in a notebook together with two other texts that are much more clearly within the “mainstream” Sufi-Islamic tradition (the *'Aqīdat al-Īmān* and a *Khuṭba for 'Id al-Aḍḥā*).

Read in this way, we may assume that our copyist viewed the *Sabāsib* as a living tradition *to be used*. To him, the careful vocalization was made to assure correct pronunciation in order for the spell *to work*. Furthermore, we must stipulate that to the writer, these were all part of a broader realm of Islamic knowledge, which included as a matter of course various invocations based in an Ibn al-ʿArabi-ish ontology.

27. On this reform period, see HAJ (2009), LOIMEIER (2009), GHAZAL (2010), MATHEWS (2013) *inter alia*.

Such a reading is also in line with Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (2013 [2007]), who in their work, *Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam*, take issue with the notion that Sufism—the esoteric understanding of Islamic ritual practice as a path towards intimacy with the Divine—was destined to die a slow death in the 20th century. They place the blame for this ominous prediction (especially) on Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, whose understanding of Sufism was that of “maraboutism”—the semi-sane, half literate (at best) miracle worker of the uneducated masses. Instead, so went the prediction, Islam would move towards a more individualized, more text-based orthodoxy, as typified by the famous early 20th century reformists in Egypt, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. This was understood to be more “sober,” clearly more urban, and essentially more text-based. Authority was understood to rest in the ability to understand and interpret text, not to somehow magically absorb it or relate to it through induced states, let alone through “the sciences of the letters and names.”

The presence of invocations like the *Sabāsib* in interwar Zanzibar—and indeed today—challenges this linear notion of movement, from the “semi-sane” to the modernist mode of Islamic faith.

This interpretation is also strengthened by the anthropological works by Kjersti Larsen (2008) for Zanzibar, and by Janet Macintosh (2009) for Kenya, both showing the continuous prevalence of spirit possession beliefs and healing practices, as well as the use of Islamic religious text (both written and oral, in Arabic and/or Swahili) as central to a wide range of rituals. In other words, this reading is strengthened by living knowledge of the *Sabāsib* and similar invocations in Zanzibar to this day.

Reading 2: Choosing Words from the Past in the Modernist—and Modern— Present

A second possible reading is that our copyist made a conscious and selective choice when he picked up his red and black pen, and put them to colonial paper. He intentionally acted in terms of a given readership, namely for an audience intent on learning their tradition—to “keep the tradition intact,” in a period during which this was being challenged and where occult texts in particular were being shredded even from within long-established Sufi transmission as a result of reformism within the Sufi orders.

The writing of text in order to know one’s tradition is a part of the intellectual endeavor at all times and we may view our copyist as engaged in precisely this activity. How do we explain the apparent lack of care for visual presentation, the lack of attention to the number of lines, or breaks between

pages, the many errors and corrections? We hypothesize that these words were inscribed, mainly to be known and understood (in the intellectual sense), and placed in a “vault” for posterity.

The counter-argument is that a copyist who actually *believes*, who is himself a keeper of knowledge obtained through other means—in Ibn ‘Arabī’s sense—would decidedly *not* place this out in the open for all to see. He would, so to speak, not leave that vault open. The errors that we find in the text—most of which probably elude this author—is a known way of “covering” knowledge that should not be made available to the masses. Our copyist may have done exactly that, leaving “fail-safes” that render the text accessible, but useless. Here we have a text redacted for the initiated and not for others.

The assumption here is that the *Sabāsib* has followed the trajectory of many other prayers and *du’as* in the Islamic tradition, from oral to written to printed knowledge. By the 1920s, all the Sufi orders in Zanzibar (notably the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya) promoted a text-based type of authority, insofar as the writing down of *dhikr* and prayers promoted an authority based on Arabic literacy. Printed versions quickly followed, with selected well-known *du’ā* or *dhikr* being imported from India or Indonesia and later printed in East Africa itself. Examples of early printed prayers are the *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt*²⁸ and the *Rātib al-Ḥaddād*.²⁹ To some extent, one may assume that the same texts moved from the esoteric realm (to be used) to the intellectual one (to be known).

Such a reading follows an argument outlined by Michael Lambek (2011) on the future of anthropology in the face of the apparent lack of the ethnographic object, the crisis of representation, and ontological concerns. Lambek turned to the concept of “tradition,” which very much stands in opposition to that of reform, or even more so, counters the idea of revolution. He emphasizes the human inevitability of being situated in tradition as a “condition for understanding,” and not simply with “objects” of the past that we can either know or not know.

In the present day, even the Salafi preacher in Egypt, as Richard Gauvain (2013) has shown in his eminent study, is rooted in a tradition from which he (or she) “picks and chooses” what to break with and what to keep. As he shows, for example, the Salafis use the concept of the *jinn* and the notion of “purity of the heart” (not only understood as technical, ritual purity) in ways that derive from classical Sufi works. In other words, even modern day Salafi practice is deeply rooted in Sufi tradition.

28. Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Jazūlī (d. 1465), *Dalā’il al-khayrāt wa-mashāriq al-anwār fī dhikr al-ṣalāt ‘alā al-nabī al-mukhtār*.

29. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1719), *Rātib al-Ḥaddād*.

This is not—as is often portrayed—a process of “shredding” un-Islamic practices, but rather a process whereby the same text goes through various stages of understanding (of words, but also of the role and function of the words). Here, the *Sabāsib*, like any given religious-spiritual text, is re-written as part of a cultural practice that over long periods have “made religion matter,” even though it periodically has been firmly placed outside the realm of religion.³⁰ In conclusion, we may tentatively view this rendering of the *Sabāsib* as processed through a new rewriting that allows it to be reproduced and understood in a new context: Zanzibar’s emerging colonial modernity.

Reading 3: A Curated Piece that Belongs to the Realm of Heritage

Finally, we must consider the possibility that this text was written simply as an example of a cultural practice that was no longer in use (simply as “ethnographica”). By the 1920s and 1930s, Zanzibar had already been the object of several more or less academic historical and ethnographic studies, often written by officers connected with the colonial authorities (Lyne 1905; Pearce 1920; Ingrams 1931). “Educational pieces” on Zanzibari history and culture was run in serialized form in the *Supplement to the Zanzibar Gazette* in the 1920s. For example, the book *Zanzibar. The Island Metropolis of Eastern Africa* by British Resident Major F. B. Pearce (1920) was published in parts in the Arabic section of the Supplement in 1923-1925, under the title *Jazirat Zinjibar. ‘Āsimat al-Ifriqiyya al-Sharqiyya*.³¹ Likewise, the study of Sayyid Said b. Sultan by Rudolph Said Ruete (1929), the son of Zanzibar’s perhaps most famous daughter, Sayyida Salme, appeared and was duly presented, serialized and discussed in the *Supplement*. The Peace Memorial Museum, built after World War I, featured ethnographic items and “folk tales” collected over the first decades of colonial rule in Zanzibar. Historians of the British Empire, like Reginald Coupland were frequenting Zanzibar as academics, researching the archives and sites. There was even an emerging notion of Zanzibar as a tourist destination.

In this context, the presence of the *Sabāsib* in a colonial notebook, and the “schoolbook” style of handwriting, may even indicate that it was commissioned by the colonial authorities as a sample of a text to be displayed in museums or by academics to discussed in academic circles. As such, the text

30. Ibn Khaldūn clearly placed this type of magic beyond the realm of religious practice. For a discussion of the boundaries drawn by Ibn Khaldūn between the orthodox and the occult, see M. ASATRIAN (2003).

31. *Supplement to the Zanzibar Gazette*, 1923-1924-1925. Zanzibar National Archives, BA104/42-44-46.

may have been put to paper as an exercise in heritage conservation or on the instigation of Western scholars who wished to study the Islamic traditions prevalent in Zanzibar.

However, as mentioned above, colonial notebooks make up the foundation for many 20th century Islamic texts in East Africa, thus this alone does not indicate a “commissioned” text. Also, the fact that the *Sabāsib* appears in combination with a widely known—and still used—educational text (*‘Aqīdat al-Īmān*) and a *khuṭba* also argues against the idea that this was written as a “sample text”.

By the 1920s and 1930s, Islamic modernist ideas were becoming increasingly prevalent in Islamic thought in Zanzibar. At the same time, Islamic ideas rooted in Ibn ‘Arabī’s mysticism co-existed with this emergent modernity, often in the form of handwritten pamphlets and what may be called “small texts.” The sample of the *Du’a al-Sabāsib al-Sab’a* examined here can be understood as either a sample of a living tradition, as a repositioning of a text to be acceptable in the era of rising modernity and finally as a curated ethnographic and didactic piece. The very fact that all three readings are possible shows that the distinction between emergent Islamic modernity and deeply rooted notions of reality anchored in Sufi traditions was—and remains—neither clear nor absolute. At the same time, each reading is “disturbed” by the colonial presence and the emergence of Zanzibari intellectual traditions as an object of academic study.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines an esoteric text entitled *Du 'ā' al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a* (Prayer of the Seven Deserts/Wastelands) copied onto a colonial notebook in Zanzibar, probably sometime in the 1930s. The content of the text itself is examined and placed in the tradition of Islamic esotericism and occult writing, as well as against the backdrop of emerging Islamic modernism at the time. Three potential readings are offered of this particular copy of the *Sabāsib*, based on the materiality of the copy, the content and nature of the text, and the position of this type of invocation in colonial and post-colonial Zanzibar: 1) as part of a living tradition anchored in an existing knowledge tradition; 2) as an intellectual exercise to keep alive knowledge in the process of waning; 3) as a curated ethnographic piece in the colonial context. A tentative conclusion is that this text was written as part of a living tradition, especially in light of the fact that texts of this type are still in use in Zanzibar today.

Keywords: Tanzania, Zanzibar, colonialism, cultural heritage, Islamic mysticism, Islamic reformism, manuscript tradition, print culture.

RÉSUMÉ

Incantations islamiques dans un cahier colonial à Zanzibar pendant l'Entre-deux-guerres. — Cet article examine un texte ésotérique intitulé *Du 'ā' al-Sabāsib al-Sab'a* (Prière des sept déserts/terrains vagues) lequel fut copié sur un cahier colonial de Zanzibar, probablement pendant les années 1930. Le contenu du texte est étudié et situé au sein de la tradition de l'ésotérisme islamique et de l'écriture occulte, ainsi que dans le contexte du modernisme islamique émergeant à l'époque. Trois lectures potentielles sont proposées de cet exemplaire particulier du *Sabāsib*, en fonction de la matérialité de l'exemplaire, du contenu et de la nature du texte, de la position de ce type d'invocation au Zanzibar colonial et postcolonial, à savoir : 1) une partie de la tradition vivante ancrée dans un savoir traditionnel existant ; 2) un exercice intellectuel pour ranimer un savoir en voie de disparition ; 3) un objet de collection muséale et ethnographique dans un contexte colonial. Une conclusion provisoire est que le texte en question a été rédigé dans le cadre d'une tradition vivante, compte tenu en particulier du fait que ce genre de textes est toujours en usage à Zanzibar aujourd'hui.

Mots-clés : Tanzanie, Zanzibar, colonialisme, culture de la presse, mysticisme islamique, patrimoine culturel, réformisme islamique, tradition des manuscrits.