

Eric Morier-Genoud. 2023. *Towards Jihad? Muslims and Politics in Postcolonial Mozambique*. Oxford – New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 240 pages. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780197769348. € 135.19.

The topics of Islam in Mozambique remain in some historical shadow. In the past, it was caused, firstly, by the pro-Catholic orientation of the Portuguese colonial empire and, secondly, by the commitment to atheism claimed by the leftist decolonial movements and political parties that remained central in the early postcolonial period and the civil war. Islam has come to the fore quite recently, due to the jihadi insurgency that began in the north of the country in October 2017. Such is the starting point of Eric Morier-Genoud's book, as far as the opening paragraph of the Introduction is considered. In reality, as the author confesses, much of the research had already been done previous to the attack on police stations in Mocímboa da Praia which marked the beginning of the armed conflict. This is why he is able to situate the recent issue in a broader historical context of the relations between various religious factors and political power.

Although the book focuses on the present time, it is important to remember that Islam in Mozambique is a pre-colonial presence. What is more, the Islamization of the society went on under Portuguese rule. The colonial period coincided with the development of various branches of Sufism. Progressively, the forms of religious life typical for the Swahili cultural orbit started to coexist with other paradigms, introduced by Indian and Pakistani immigration and the formation of the Indo-Mozambican *mestiço* community. This is why we should not be surprised to find the Deobandi movement in the country. Also, Wahhabism appeared in Mozambique already during the declining years of the Portuguese empire, in the 1960s, when the liberalized politics of the regime made contacts with Saudi Arabia easier and more frequent. Finally, there exists also a small Ismaili minority. Overall, Islam, just as Christianity with its variety of Pentecostal churches, contributes to the phenomenon of what may be classified as 'religious proliferation,' forming a fractal picture of growing complexity.

The title of the book should be read as deliberately provocative. The hypothesis that the Mozambican Muslims have evolved towards a violent and warlike understanding of religion since the country's independence is utterly resolved by the negative. The appearance of al-Shabaab sect in the early 2010s was perceived as a disturbance and a serious problem by both Sufi and Wahhabi established leaders. The author presents the insurgents as a sect opposed not only to the state but also to the rest of the country's Muslim community. Its emergence is analysed not as a consequence of but as a rupture within the historical trajectory of Muslim inscription inside the social and political structures.

Although occasionally the author needs to delve deeper into the past, referring, for example, to the origin and evolution of Sufi brotherhoods in Mozambique, the main narration starts with the

independence, in 1974. In Chapter I, the tumultuous postcolonial decades going from 1974 to 1994 are treated as a period of the 'rise' of Islam, which should be seen rather as a period of organic growth and consolidation in the background of national politics. The proper entrance of the Islamic community on the public stage is narrated in Chapter II. The narration is centred on the 'Muslim holidays' affair in 1996, when the claim of recognizing two major feasts of the Islamic calendar as bank holidays was voiced for the first time. If the date 1996 is merely a symbolic turning point, the proper watershed is situated in 2004, coinciding with the division of Chapters III and IV. The relationship between Islam and Mozambican politics in the decade 1994-2004 remained under the prospect of secularization. After this date, to the contrary, the tendency is inverted: the importance of religion in social life is growing. Finally, Chapter V speaks of the jihadi insurgency of 2017, as the author tries to deduce and interpret the causes of this little-understood and still unclear event. The volume is completed with a Conclusion and a series of documents and materials added as appendices; they refer to the foundation of the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO) in 1981, the contacts between Muslim World League and the first president of the independent country, Samora Machel, the aforementioned affair of Muslim national holidays, and the First National Islamic Conference in 2003. Last but not least, the author provides the transcripts of jihadi insurgents' video messages emitted in 2018, 2020, and 2022.

Towards Jihad? adopts a socio-political perspective based on the research done by the author on the terrain since 1994. He asks multiple questions involving not only the central interrogation about the true nature of the insurgency but also the evolution of state religious policy concerning traditional and reformist Islamic currents and the internal competition between them. Both as a result of a methodological choice and for the sake of making his narration more compelling, Eric Morier-Genoud puts in the limelight symbolic gestures and individual cases causing controversy, such as Samora Machel walking into a mosque without taking off his shoes, or the burqa affair in 2011-2012 which was essentially provoked by the singular case of a young woman who appeared veiled at school, causing the outcry of her teachers. Overall, as the author suggests in the Introduction, the analysis is oriented by five main axes. Firstly, the aim is to capture the evolution of the state's policy toward Islam. The second axe is the evolution of the concept and practice of secularism. The third accent is on Sufism as a key factor since the rise of Islam in South-East Africa that is nowadays counterbalanced by anti-Sufi movements. This internal division inside the Muslim community reflects not only a divergence in theological intricacies but also a process of modernization that can be seen inside the religious group, with the surge of new scholars educated abroad and new networks of international contacts. Naturally, the issue is connected to the fourth topic, the emergence of a new Muslim elite and counter-elites that mark not only the religious and economic but also the intellectual life of the country. Curiously,

modernization coincides with the revival of old Swahili elites that often claim pre-colonial roots as the source of their exceptional status. Finally, the last theme is the conflictive side of the religious competition, leading from ideological to physical conflict that contrasts with the general Mozambican background of relatively good interfaith relations in the early postcolonial decades. What is significant, the author treats the appearance of ‘exclusivist strands of faith’ as a broader phenomenon visible both in Islam and Christianity. This new exclusivism consists in the rise of groups that enter into rupture with the state, their own community, and the society as a whole to proclaim the adoption of strict religious rules. The case of al-Shabaab sect is thus presented as an exemplification of a larger phenomenon.

Against this broad historical panorama of Islam in Mozambique painted in the book, the chapter dedicated to the 2017 insurgency is likely to focus the attention, due to the widespread lack of understanding of the deep nature of the movement, its aims and the possible solutions of the crisis that has been felt both internally and on the international forums. Since 2017, the initial local insurgency against the police forces has grown to the level of guerilla war in which the insurgents became strong enough to attack bigger and bigger targets: not only isolated villages and army outposts but also district capitals. The situation escalated to such a point that in 2021 an international intervention hardly managed to contain the insurgency to a limited geographical area in Cabo Delgado province. Certainly, religion is not the only source; also socio-economic inequality and marginalization are likely to play a role as one of the decisive factors, especially if the poverty is contrasted with the fact that important discoveries of gas created disproportionate expectations and objections concerning the development of LNG industry by international companies. Some Mozambican and international scholars try to explain the insurgency through the influence of foreign preachers; the events should thus be seen in a regional context involving Kenya and Tanzania. Eric Morier-Genoud realized two research stays in Cabo Delgado in 2018 and 2019, interviewing Muslim leaders, officials, and other members of the local society, as well as two former insurgents. He aimed to provide social identification of the insurgent group, trace its beginnings and early history, and throw some light on the causes of violent escalation. As a conclusion of this research, the author identifies the insurgents as al-Shabaab sect that started around 2007 and shifted to armed violence after years of relatively peaceful existence.

As the author lists the peculiarities identifying the members of the group, such as their shaved heads, distinctive dress code, or the habit of keeping their shoes on in the mosque and praying only three times a day (as well as other unusual practices, some of them inverting traditional Muslim usages), a curious vision of a ‘counter-society’ emerges. Eric Morier-Genoud suggests they “demanded that their members not engage with the secular systems of justice, health, and education; instead, they

offered these services within their mosques” (: 123). The escalation of violence may be thus explained as the evolution of a group that, having initially withdrawn from the ‘corrupt’ society, switched to an attempt at provoking a widespread social change according to the lines of their religious ‘truth.’ Although, as he stresses, more research is needed on this point, Eric Morier-Genoud suggests the hypothesis that al-Shabaab sect is not actually a novel movement but should instead be inscribed in a longer history and/or a broader dynamic of Islamic sects in Mozambique. The revival of a sectarian tradition may be influenced by the increased mobility of the young generation, their stays abroad, and increased permeability to ideas outside the limits of what is locally considered as ‘the orthodoxy.’ This picture grows in complexity as a larger network of regional and global connections is drawn. In August 2018, the Mozambican jihadists pledged allegiance to ISIS, and ISIS supreme leader al-Baghdadi announced the creation of Central African *wilayat* (province) of his organization to include Mozambique. As the links between al-Shabaab and ISIS strengthened, a separate *wilayat* of Mozambique was announced in 2022. Meanwhile, the author muses on the possible consequences of the racial divergence among the black Africans and the predominantly Arab organization. Also, the divergence of religious practices is likely to create a further fissure. A division into factions, rather than further consolidation, seems thus to be the most probable scenario for the future.

In the Conclusion, Eric Morier-Genoud refers to the law drafted by the Mozambican government in 2019-2020, aiming at controlling and regulating the proliferating movements. This Freedom of Religion and Worship Law still did not gain final approval in 2023 at the time the book went to print leaving us in suspense as to its utter consequences. Nonetheless, the debate on secularism as a fragile counterbalance to faith and religious conflict remains at the centre of political and intellectual life. The author quotes the Mozambican philosopher Severino Ngoenha claiming that “secularism cannot be understood as indifference in relation to religious organizations” (: 142). The book shows how the understanding of the term has changed since the early post-independence period, when sites of prayer, festivals, and even wearing religious clothing in public were banned, the decade of 1980s in which faith organizations were tightly controlled, and the ‘free religious market’ policy in the 1990s. After the end of the civil war and the beginning of the multiparty system, Muslims progressively started to conceive themselves as a political entity. In 1999, it was the politicization of certain religious groups, interfering with the elections, that led Frelimo (the party in power) to adopt a new form of ‘strong secularism’ that still presents, in the aftermath of the insurgency, a strong temptation for the government. On the other hand, there is also an ever-present temptation of Islamizing the state administration. As the author argues, the members of the Wahhabi Islamic Council, apparently accommodating themselves to the secular reality, “might prefer a soft secularism to better Islamize institutions,” marginalizing the

jihadists who remain the only fraction “to oppose secularism fully, frontally, and violently—in all its forms and degrees” (: 144).

Overall, the focus proposed offers an insight into the dynamics of Islam in Mozambique, depicting a complex pattern of competing and criss-crossing strands of faith, activism, elitism, and contestation. Quite understandably, violence is likely to get increased attention, yet Eric Morier-Genoud shows that it is only a part of a larger picture. The clarity and persuasiveness in the depiction of this complex landscape, the detailed, informed narration of the debates and ongoing processes, and, last but not least, the insightful indication of the blank fields that require further research, make this contribution invaluable.

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