

RURAL ISLAMISM DURING THE ‘WAR ON TERROR’: A TANZANIAN CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In the Tanzanian country town of Rwangwa, a bitter confrontation has developed between Sufi Muslims and Islamist reformers. The Islamists draw on Middle Eastern inspiration, but the conflict arises equally from local, regional and national context, and is cultural as well as religious and political. Situated in an economically and educationally disadvantaged region, access to land and trade forms the focus of conflicts between the young (Islamists) and the older (Sufis). Islamists criticize the closeness of Sufis to government, which they accuse of discrimination against Muslims. The main objects of debate, though, are ritual and scripture. The Islamists reject Sufi burial rites and appeal to their superior knowledge of the Quran to justify their stance, reinforcing and profiting from the on-going transition from orality to literacy. While mainstream Muslim observers condemn the Islamists’ aggressive posturing and opposition to authority, they accept their claim to superior learning and to possession of an Islamic alternative to western notions of progress.

THIS ARTICLE ANALYSES a conflict between traditionalist Sufi Muslims and anti-Sufi Islamists, which I encountered during field work in a southern Tanzanian country town called Rwangwa.¹ It is a case study of a striking feature of Islamist movements: their ability to combine a fairly unchanging and consciously universalist message, presented in near-identical form in sites as diverse as Egypt and Nigeria, with very specific local concerns. Islamists in Rwangwa expounded typical Islamist views, e.g. on returning to ‘original’ Islam as lived by the Prophet, and the importance of women’s modesty. Yet, in other regards, their stances were improvised, eclectic and dependent on local, regional and national

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1. The controversy over Sufism in Africa has been much written about. See especially Eva Rosander and David Westerlund (eds), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (Hurst and Co., London, 1997). In the present case, the wholesale rejection of Sufism was less of an issue than that of specific practices that had Sufi roots. The Sufis can be called ‘traditionalist’ inasmuch as they appeal to the example of earlier generations to justify these practices.

context. Highlighting these context-specific elements does not imply a denial of the worldwide ambition and reach of Islamist ideology. Rather, it helps understand its effectiveness. It is through these place-specific linkages that Islamism becomes relevant in a particular setting. Quoting from tape-recorded conversations, this article gives a snapshot of how obscure protagonists in an isolated rural setting represent Islamist ideology as relevant to their lives. As these conversations took place in 2003, a few months after the American invasion of Iraq, special attention is given to the way in which the events of the so-called war on terror informed debate on this rural communications frontier.

Both the methods and the social base of Rwangwa's Islamists show similarities with other African locations. In a manner reminiscent of both Sudan and Nigeria, they establish a rhetorical connection between two logically distinct agendas: a reformist religious and an activist, potentially violent political one.² As in West Africa, Islamism in Rwangwa has become the vehicle of a political-cum-religious conflict between generations, an overwhelmingly young Islamist faction challenging their Sufi elders. But, although the Rwangwan Islamists have achieved notoriety with their political challenge, it has, for now, failed. With some help from the state, the traditionalists are defending their position in local politics. In this regard, events in Rwangwa exemplify the divisions appearing in the Tanzanian polity after the demise of one-party politics and the efforts of government to limit them.³

The Islamists have, nevertheless, managed to shift the parameters for religious discussion and established a claim to primacy with regard to religious scholarship. They have, thereby, weakened the claims of Sufi elders to religious legitimacy for their political position. They have been able to do this, thanks to a belief that Islamists and mainstream Sufis share: namely that individuals with sufficient education can provide unambiguous, unassailable practical truths on the basis of the Quran. Arguably, this assumption reflects both the 'restricted literacy' of Rwangwans (which again has West African parallels) and their experience of the power of a paper-pushing bureaucracy over their lives.⁴

2. Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1997); Alex de Waal and A.H. Abdel Salem, 'Islamism, state power and *jihad* in the Sudan' in de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1997), pp. 71–114. Tanzanian Islamists are much more distant from the state than those in northern Nigeria and Sudan. Still, the rhetorical strategies are similar.

3. Paul J. Kaiser, 'Structural adjustment and the fragile nation: the demise of social unity in Tanzania', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34, 2 (1996), pp. 227–37; Frieder Ludwig, 'After Ujamaa: is religious revivalism a threat to Tanzania's stability?' in David Westerlund (ed.), *Questioning the Secular State: The worldwide resurgence of religion in politics* (Hurst and Co., London, 1996), pp. 216–37.

4. The term is lifted from Jack Goody, 'Restricted literacy in Northern Ghana' in Jack Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968), pp. 198–265. The same understanding of the unambiguous truth of Quranic injunctions as I encountered in Rwangwa is described in Robert Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and society in a west African town* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1992), pp. 10–13, for a site in Ghana.

Despite these resemblances, the Rwangwan case does not support the suggestion of a far-flung conspiracy of Islamists but rather illustrates the adaptability of their basic ideological precepts. This is evident in the fact that the Rwangwans neglected some elements of the ideology that lacked resonance in the local context (see the remarks about a Tanzanian 'Christian conspiracy' below). On the contrary, they were quick to exploit current affairs rhetorically where it suited them, as with news about the 'war on terror'. The impact of Islamism in Rwangwa gives credence to the suggestion that the construction of power in religious terms is emerging as a characteristic feature of African societies, especially after the evanescence of earlier hopes for rapid modernization. It also suggests some qualifications to this argument and further lines of enquiry, which are explained in the conclusion.⁵

The conflict and its setting

Rwangwa is a country town of about 10,000 inhabitants within Lindi Region in Tanzania. It became a town in the mid-1970s, during Tanzania's villagization campaign, and is really an agglomeration of villages.⁶ Very few houses have electricity and there are no tarmac roads; transport connections to both regional and national capitals are execrable. The town has no industry. Its inhabitants live by farming and petty trade, with cashew as the only notable cash crop.⁷ Rwangwa's isolation is not unique to Lindi region, which is one of the poorest parts of Tanzania. The town has, however, been a district capital only since 1998 and therefore has poorer-than-average services. It is an unpopular posting among administrators.⁸ No newspapers normally reach Rwangwa, except south Asian ones for use as wrapping paper. Radios are cheap but catch few broadcasts. There are

5. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa* (Hurst and Co., London, 2004), pp. 187–92.

6. See census records in Likangara ward office, Rwangwa, for population. For villagization in general, the best study is Leander Schneider, *Developmentalism and its Failings: Why rural development went wrong in 1960s and 1970s Tanzania* (Columbia University, unpublished PhD thesis, 2003). For its effects on Rwangwa, interview with Mohamed Mperemende, Rwangwa-Nachingwea, 5 September 2003, and with Hemedi Lichile, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 September 2003. Likangara is the old nucleus of Rwangwa, whose inhabitants control most of the valley plots nearby and where the disputed mosque is located. Nachingwea and Mchangani are wards that came into being during villagization.

7. On the cashew trade, see Pekka Seppälä, 'The recovery of cashew production in southern Tanzania' in Pekka Seppälä and Berta Koda (eds), *The Making of a Periphery: Economic development and cultural encounters in southern Tanzania* (Mkuki na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 1998), pp. 118–38; Seithy L. Chachage and Joyce Nyoni, *Economic Restructuring and the Cashewnut Industry in Tanzania: A research report* (Tanzania Agriculture Situation Analysis, Dar es Salaam, 2001).

8. See Juhani Koponen, 'The role of knowledge(s) in the making of Mtwara and Lindi' in Pekka Seppälä and Koda (eds), *The Making of a Periphery*, pp. 309–24, for Tanzanian stereotypes of the southeast.

three or four satellite television dishes in town, but the near-complete ignorance of Rwangwans of the English language limits interest, as far as news is concerned, to the Tanzania-centric Swahili broadcasts of Tanzanian television (for sports broadcasts and serials, the language barrier is less prohibitive). The town has one secondary school, and because of poor teaching standards in primary schools, illiteracy still occurs in all generations.

Islam in Rwangwa is young but well established, commanding the adherence of a large majority of the population. It arrived from the coast early in the twentieth century, and by the mid-1940s Muslims were numerous enough to build a mosque.⁹ Rebuilt in the 1980s, it still serves as the Friday mosque. Public observance of prayers and religious injunctions concerning dress and drink is far from strict, with beer freely available, few headscarves and few regular prayer-goers. Nevertheless, Rwangwans assert that this is a Muslim town, emphasizing the local roots and inclusiveness of the Muslim community. The Sufi brotherhood (*tariqa*) Qadiriyya has been present since the 1950s, introduced with local help by a Qadiri *khalifa* from Lindi.¹⁰ A mosque committee looks after the ritual functions and upkeep of the Friday mosque.

Both Anglican and Catholic Christianity are present, radiating from missions further south in Lindi region, but have few adherents. The religious imagination at work here, though, is not limited to book religions. An indigenous, pre-Muslim religious heritage is still influential. Both girls and boys undergo initiation rituals with pre-Muslim roots.¹¹ Expertise in spirit possession is said to be taught by the spirits of the wilderness.¹² Sacrificial huts for ancestors still exist. Concerns about witchcraft are strong. Involvement in these activities does not stop one being Muslim in the judgement of most townspeople.

The conflict between traditionalists and Islamists became acute in early 2003, when Rwangwa's Friday mosque was closed down by police after physical attacks between Sufis and Islamists. Soon after, Ahmad Usiseme, a trader from Rwangwa and sponsor of the Islamist faction, started a court case to claim the mosque as his property, based on his large contributions to the upkeep of the building. If he and his followers were not given control over it, he argued, they were at least entitled to remove the roof that his money had paid for, making the building unusable. Usiseme's opponents were the incumbent mosque committee, made up entirely of traditionalists,

9. On the history of the mosque, interview with Issa Makolela, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 September 2003.

10. Interview with Bushiri Lipyoga, Rwangwa-Likangara, 9 October 2003, and with Hassan Pachoto, Rwangwa-Likangara, 23 October 2003. A *khalifa* is a sufi leader.

11. Joachim Amman, 'Die Pubertaetsweihe. Unyago'. Undated typescript in the Ethnographic Museum, Munich; Terence Ranger, 'Missionary adaptation of African religious institutions: the Masasi case' in T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1972), pp. 221–51.

12. Personal communication, Tatu Msufi, Rwangwa-Mchangani, 17 September 2003.

led by the octogenarian *Imamu* Issa Makolela and supported by the local branch of the Muslim Council of Tanzania (Bakwata), Tanzania's state-endorsed Muslim organization. For the time being, the Sufis have won the legal confrontation. The district court in Lindi ruled that the mosque, as the work of many hands over several decades, could not pass into Usiseme's ownership.¹³ The judge did not, however, order the losers to pay the winning side's expenses, and both sides have appealed. Nevertheless, the mosque is again run by its old committee and used by their supporters. Usiseme and his supporters, meanwhile, have bought a godown for agricultural commodities and converted it into their mosque.

Usiseme's supporters were a loose group of mostly young people, its core maybe thirty strong. Colloquially, they pass by the name of *Al Qaeda*. It refers to their political stance, which includes strong opposition to the invasion of Iraq, anti-Americanism, nostalgia for 'Islamic' government and vocal admiration for Osama bin Laden. Although they do not actively reject this nickname, they normally call themselves *Ansaar Sunna*, which they roughly translate as 'companions of the way [of the Prophet]'. This term refers to their theological stance, their insistence on doing things the way the Prophet did.¹⁴

In the first instance, though, the '*Al Qaeda* boys' are recognized by their style. They are found around markets and bus stands, preferring petty occupations such as hawking to agriculture. They wear baggy trousers with baseball shirts, the sort of outfit associated with hip-hop. Some details, though, set them apart from non-Muslim purveyors of the same style. Most obviously, they often grow beards. Moreover, they wear their trousers shorter than usual, to avoid dragging up dirt and losing the state of purity required for prayer (an implicit slight against the ankle-length gown worn by traditionalist Muslims). In conversation, they evoke God assiduously, using Arabic phrases such as *Insh'allah* 'god willing'. In the way of youth cliques, they have 'their' soft drink parlour, which is the only one to close for prayers. They are very clearly a minority. So too, however, are the traditionalists who are actually active in contributing to the running of the mosque or to Sufi performances. The rest of the Muslims are, in the first instance, spectators to their arguments. While most of them continue to follow the established Sufi rites, they take note of and debate the Islamist views.

The underlying generation gap

But for their sponsor Usiseme, who is in his fifties, the *Ansaar Sunna* camp consists almost exclusively of men well under 30 years of age. On the

13. Interview with District Court Judge Rweyemamu, Lindi, 17 November 2003.

14. On this religious stance, see below. I am indebted to Zuhura Mohamed for her help in arranging a discussion at the *Ansaar* mosque and transcribing the results.

contrary, Issa Makolela, the oldest *Imamu* of the disputed mosque and representative of its 'mosque committee' in the Lindi court, is over 80 years of age, and the entire incumbent mosque committee is over 50. His supporters denigrate *Ansaar Sunna* as uncouth youth and the latter the former as block-headed and ignorant old men. The element of generational conflict in the argument, then, is very evident. Why, though, has it occurred now? Reasons for the current tension can be found on the economic and the political planes.

Economically, the young and the old are locked into an uneasy situation of competition and mutual dependency. In this agricultural town, some land can normally be found for those who want to cultivate, but good land is increasingly scarce.¹⁵ The main source of conflict is the only crop with significant cash value, cashew. As a tree crop, cashew takes several years to bear fruit and once established becomes a permanent crop with no opportunity for a yearly renegotiation of boundaries. Control over cashew trees has tended to stabilize in the hands of senior men.¹⁶ Younger men complain that cashew trees crowd out other crops and limit their access to arable land. New cashew groves in isolated locations are considered dangerous because of often-violent theft.¹⁷

Meanwhile, structural adjustment in the 1990s provoked a rush into trade with the removal of legal limitations on private business.¹⁸ Most of it is *biashara ndogondogo*, petty trade. Here, young people predominate, not least because such a business demands frequent journeys and much leg-work. This means that the old depend on the young both for household essentials such as soap and oil and for 'status goods': portable radios, shoes, clothing and bags. Unsurprisingly, they feel that they are being overcharged. Neither cashew production, with wildly fluctuating prices and yields, nor petty trade, dependent on the limited spending money of the peasants, allows for sustained accumulation. The different economic strictures felt on both sides add bitterness to the opposition between elders and youth. The conflict in Rwangwa broke out on the heels of a particularly dizzying transition from boom to bust in the cashew trade, when everyone had been left out of pocket.¹⁹

15. As emerges from interviews on the effects of villagization. E.g. interview with Mohamed Lichile, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 September 2003.

16. This recurring complaint is documented in the participatory rural appraisal reports of the local NGO-network, Rural Integrated Programme Support (Rips). Rips Library, Mtwara.

17. According to locals, panga-wielding gangs tour the countryside during cashew harvest and occasionally kill owners. During my stay in the town, one local notable died of a heart attack while chasing cashew thieves, whereas another man was said to have fled after burning down the hut in his cashew grove with six robbers inside it.

18. On this phenomenon at large, see Deborah Bryceson, *Sub-Saharan Africa Betwixt and Between: Rural livelihood practices and policies* (African Studies Centre working paper, Leiden, 1999).

19. Chachage and Nyoni, *Economic Restructuring*.

The elders are hanging on tenaciously to their place in the public life of the village. After independence, some of them acquired responsible positions when quite young, but they are not about to step aside and let today's youth do the same. Men of middle age and above predominate in village government.²⁰ They stress the consultative, consensus-oriented character of their office but tend to consult mostly with people like themselves.²¹ Moreover, although the official structure of village politics is purely bureaucratic, office holders also assert their claim to authority in terms of patriarchal, supposedly traditional values. In this, they concur with the *wazee*, elders, among the townspeople, who, albeit not bearers of administrative offices, are accorded a say in the running of the village's affairs. The elders who run the Rwangwa mosque form part of this network.²² They base their claims over it partly on a connection by descent to the founders of the mosque.

Issa Makolela, the octogenarian *Imamu* and nephew of the mosque founder, rose to prominence in the 1950s as a member of the Tanzania African National Union (TANU) Youth League. Later, he served as sub-district chairman for TANU. Although long retired, he is known not only as Imam but also as a TANU veteran. He is typical among local elders in claiming respect in both 'traditional' (descent from the mosque founder) and party-political terms. In doing so, elders exploit the heavy emphasis which the ruling party, now called Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), puts on unity, stability and consensus, an element of political discourse that has outlasted all of Tanzania's ideological phases. Even more, the ruling party has long tended to appeal to 'religion' in general, including all faiths indiscriminately, as a sort of textbook for good citizenship and a force for peace and order in society.²³ Taking this line, the elders of Rwangwa look upon their religious and party credentials as mutually reinforcing.

By age, Ahmad Usiseme, the trader sponsoring the *Ansaar*, could have been counted among the elders. He did not, however, have the requisite credentials. He has had an unsteady life, spending many years in other towns. While most larger traders are Makonde (thanks to revenue from the larger cashew production on the Makonde plateau), he is a Mwera.²⁴ He is an effusive, bullish, talkative man of about 50 years of age. His home stands right by the main road into Rwangwa, one of few brick buildings

20. Of my 46 interviewees in Rwangwa, 18 were current or former office holders. While some of the old ex-officials had held posts in their thirties, the current ones were closer to 50.

21. Interview with Somoe Namwilikiti, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 November 2003.

22. Interview with Issa Makolela, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 September 2003, and with Saidi Lihamba, Rwangwa-Mchangani, 21 October 2003.

23. On the notion of 'civil religion' in Tanzania, see David Westerlund, *Ujamaa na Dini: A study of some aspects of society and religion in Tanzania, 1961-1977* (Almqvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1980), pp. 63-77.

24. The description of Ahmad Usiseme is derived from informal conversations with him and others rather than recorded interviews.

among mud huts. The porch is graced by a row of breeze blocks that repeat the logo of the sports shoe maker Nike. A (broken) satellite television dish is displayed above. This residence dates back to before Usiseme's 'conversion' to Islamism. He had been an uncontroversial contributor to the coffers of the mosque until late 2001, when he returned from the *hajj* full of new ideas. According to him, though, the change of mind was the outcome of long soul-searching. In effect, he has supplanted a Western set of images of connectedness — Nike and the satellite dish — with another: the garb and mannerisms of the Islamist.

The slippage between religion and politics

For Usiseme, as for his followers, Islamism has galvanized a latent conflict, at the core of which lies the question of who has the right to speak for the inhabitants of Rwangwa.

Religious dissension enables the young men to challenge their elders on a ground that the latter considered unassailable theirs: that of religious competence. As their spokesman said:

A leader is a person who leads according to the law [...]. A Muslim leader, for instance our *shehe* here [...] if he leads us according to the law we are willing to follow him, as God has ordained. If he leads us to do things not in accordance with the orders of God and his Prophet, we will tell him leave us alone, you're not fit for this job.²⁵

He went further by denying the principle of deference and solidarity between children and parents in religious disputes. Loyalty to the 'right' religion cuts through family ties:

In the war of Badri, the Muslims and the kaffirs were fighting and a man called Ubaidata fought on the Muslim side. In the fracas he met his father, he killed his father who had begotten him because of his belief in the Almighty God and the Day of Judgement. And God sent down a verse [of the Quran] in order to support this companion, that he had done right [to kill his father].

Simultaneously, the *Ansaar* negate the link between party and religious credentials that the elders have cultivated. On the contrary, they imply that the elders' closeness to government weakens their credibility. The *Ansaar* denigrate the Sufi performances of their opponents by referring to them as TOT or 'Tanzania One Theatre', the name of a Dar es Salaam-based, secular band sponsored by the ruling party. The taunt not only likens the Sufi performances to pop music but also implies that the brotherhoods are poodles of the government. The slippage between religious and political critique in this invective shows that the *Ansaar* combine the challenge to

25. Interview with Musa Nangwana, Musa Kikuyu *et al.*, Rwangwa-Mchangani, 1 November 2003. Unless otherwise stated, further italicized quotes form part of the same interview.

their local elders' religious authority with elements of a political analysis critical of the national Tanzanian government. They are oppositional not only because the theocratic state they call for would be hard to reconcile with Tanzania's parliamentary system and multi-religious citizenry. Rather, they allude to a political critique that has developed among urban Muslim elites in Tanzania over the last two decades.²⁶

Use of the term *Ansaar Sunna* in Tanzania goes back at least as far as the foundation of the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre in the northern Tanzanian coastal town of Tanga, over 20 years ago. Muslim students returning from courses of study in Saudi Arabia were instrumental in it.²⁷ The anti-Sufism of this movement, then, can be seen as an influence of anti-Sufi Saudi Wahhabism. Moreover, Tanga *Ansaar* say that it was from the start a forum for young people opposing their perceived marginalization by their Sufi elders. The development of a more explicitly political Islamism paralleled the establishment of the anti-Sufi stance. A view that construes Muslims in Tanzania as victims of a Christian conspiracy has become commonplace, even among mainstream Muslims. A fairly consistent statement of this position is found in the writings of Muhammad Said. He asserts that Muslims bore the brunt of the struggle for independence and that the Catholic Church subsequently used Nyerere's commitment to Catholicism to marginalize them and usurp a hegemonic position in Tanzanian society.²⁸

State interference in Muslim organizations and the relative marginality of Muslims in formal education form the core of the accusations. The under-representation of Muslims among university and secondary students is blamed on active discrimination. Moreover, the dissolution of the East African Muslim Welfare Organisation by the government in 1967 and its replacement with the Central Council of Tanzanian Muslims (Bakwata, after its Swahili acronym) are seen as an attempt to control Muslim leaders. This is a view of Tanzanian society that obviously chimes with the disaffection of Rwangwa's *Ansaar* with their placidly pro-government Sufi elders. It is not, however, a condemnation of parliamentary democracy so much as it is a claim that Muslims get a raw deal under this system because Christians have perverted it.

Ritual and scripture: the role of literacy

Nevertheless, the immediate reasons for the falling-out between *Ansaar Sunna* and 'ordinary' Muslims in Rwangwa were ritual. One was the question of where to place one's hands at the beginning of the prayer sequence.

26. On the beginnings of this debate, Ludwig, 'After Ujamaa'.

27. Interview with Mwalimu Salim Bafadhili, Imamu Shafii-College, Tanga, 26 July 2004.

28. Muhammad Said, *The Life and Times of Abdulkwahid Sykes, 1924-1968: The untold story of the Muslim struggle against British colonialism in Tanzania* (Minerva Press, London, 1998); interview with the author, 27 July 2004.

The biggest bone of contention, however, was what to do while carrying a dead body to the graveyard. It has long been Sufi practice to recite the *shahada* or confession of faith, ‘*la illah ila’llah*’, on the way. *Ansaar Sunna* insist that in the days of the Prophet, the custom was to carry bodies to the grave in silence; hence the same should be done now.

The Prophet, peace be upon him, prohibits the corpse [to be sung to], that is to say, when we get up to go to the graveyard to bury someone, we are required to be quiet and to ponder that our fellow Muslim has died and we will die too. Therefore we must be quiet. And the Prophet says don’t follow the hearse with any sort of noise, let people be quiet and reflect.

Ansaar therefore reject the way local Sufis melodramatically chant the *shahada*.

Burial is seen as a crucial mark of religiosity in Rwangwa. Although the scant ethnographic information available makes clear that many prescriptions surrounded burial in pre-Muslim times, Rwangwans today tend to claim that before the coming of Islam and Christianity, their forebears ‘threw [the dead] away like rats’.²⁹ It was a core element of the progress brought by Islam that it lifted their ‘pagan’ forebears’ ignorance of the proper way to bury their dead. The recitation of the *shahada* is a public marker of Muslim funerals that mainstream Muslims support emphatically. Some endorse its distinguishing role by referring to themselves as ‘*La illah*’ Muslims. Moreover, the silent burial is the source of another colloquial, and slightly derogatory, name given to the *Ansaar* — *chimumuna*, which means ‘quietly, quietly’ in *KiMakonde*. With the debate on how to lay the dead to rest, then, *Ansaar Sunna* have chosen a topic that resonates very deeply with the religious sensibilities of people in Rwangwa. This was, however, hardly a conscious strategic choice; metropolitan Islamists scoff at it. Rather, it indicates that the young Islamists share the sensibilities of their elders, however harshly they criticize them.

Still, the most decisive disagreement between *Al Qaeda* and *La illah* is not about concrete ways to do things, but about how to establish the right way. *La illah* follow the example set by their teachers and forebears. They place themselves both within the tradition of Sufi brotherhoods, where *shehe* had great leeway to embroider upon the basic tenets handed down in the Quran, and within pre-Muslim oral tradition. *Ansaar Sunna* insist with Islamists everywhere that there has to be corroboration in the Quran and/or the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) for each and every aspect of religious practice and, at least in principle, of life at large:

God says, if you run into disputes concerning any religious matter [...] look inside the Quran and the *hadith* of the Prophet [...] and you will see where the truth lies. Now

29. Interview with Daniel Kanyihela, Mnacho, 29 October 2000.

our fellow townspeople, if we tell them the Prophet did it this way and here is the proof, let's have a look in the book of the *suna* [the Quran] [...] they suggest that we're just making this up. They don't want to [change] and if we defeat them in the argument they call us names. [...] that is the reason we're being called *Answari Sunna*, it refers to the fact that we adhere to what the Prophet did.

Rwangwa's *Ansaar Sunna*, then, assert a notion of book-based literate knowledge over the orally transmitted knowledge of the *La illah* elders. The importance of this step must be seen in connection with the narrow limits of literacy of many people in the town. Rwangwas, especially of the older generation, still construe knowledge as predominantly oral. It is at least as concerned with procedures as it is with definitions and is thrashed out in rehearsal and conversation. Recitation of Quranic *surahs* is treated as a form of performance rather than as a means of conveying information. A much-told story has it that in the past, village *shehe* refused to translate the Quran, fearing they might accidentally misrepresent God's word.³⁰

An emphasis on written knowledge and translation in effect cuts off many older people from the sources of knowledge. *Ansaar Sunna* push this point:

God says that a person who is educated and a person who isn't can't be equal. Now those people don't have an education, therefore if you practise *dua* [supplicative prayer] the way it is required, they call you names...

The *Ansaar* here exemplify a crucial aspect of the arrival of literacy in previously oral societies: the written text establishes a 'gold standard' for what is true in a way memory never could.³¹ It carries a dazzling promise of doctrinal security. *Ansaar* claim to be able to derive unambiguous, unassailable guidance on every question of life from the Quran. They look upon the Holy Book as the means to overcome the fallibility of memory and opinion. Their reliance on it allows them to consider their own religious opinions as of a different quality to those of their opponents. The *Ansaar* talk heatedly but propose themselves as defenders of cool reasoning — always based on scripture — against Sufi obscurantism. In this sense, they think of themselves as modernizers. Appeals to notions once associated with (Western) modernity, especially the importance of education, but also science and technology, recur in the *Ansaar's* discourse. At the same time, the respect of both sides in the argument for writing reflects a particular aspect of modern Tanzania: the power which the written word, in the shape of permits, certificates and other official documents, holds in this bureaucratic state.

30. This was one of the numerous statements of the uneasiness of earlier generations of *shehe* with literacy that occurred at women's Quran classes organized by the mosque committee, which I attended.

31. Goody, 'Introduction' in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, 1–27.

Still, the *Ansaar* are not all scribes. Among their most articulate representatives, the emphasis on the scripture is backed up by a wide knowledge of the Quran in Arabic and of its interpretation with the help of *hadith*. Although they probably would not have been in Rwangwa if they had studied abroad (a point on which they were not forthcoming), the influence of foreign-trained teachers, such as are active in Dar es Salaam and Tanga, is evident here. Many *Ansaar* supporters, however, have only a vague notion of Quranic interpretation. Their insistence on the book as an unambiguous source of truth mostly serves to strengthen their commitment to received opinions. The appeal of these opinions is emotive rather than intellectual; it stands for a masculine, aggressive, morally absolutist attitude. Why such a severe, rigid, humourless demeanour has developed such an attraction to these young people is arguably one of the great riddles surrounding Islamism.

Concomitantly, the opinions expounded by *Ansaar* consistently tend towards the imposition of stricter rules. They are more concerned than others about the loss of ritual purity through contact with the opposite sex; they support a ban on alcohol and have suggested that smoking, too, is *haram*, religiously prohibited (a suggestion all the more welcome as a member of the incumbent mosque committee trades in tobacco). They also have introduced new forms of veiling to Rwangwa, have changed standards for *halal* (religiously correct) slaughter and have questioned the acceptability of established ways of dealing with witchcraft.

Even many mainstream Muslims accept that more restrictive rules are 'more religious'. This is partly because they demand more religious awareness and commitment. Effectively, *Ansaar* and *La illah* try to outdo each other in drawing the line between *haram* and *halal* in ever-greater detail. Partly, though, the *Ansaar*'s claims are accepted because they have convinced many people beyond their immediate circle of their expertise in the scriptures. It is with their insistence on book-based knowledge that the *Ansaar* have made their widest impact in Rwangwa. Even mainstream Muslims who follow the Sufi rites and have no sympathies for *Al Qaeda*-style political posturing occasionally admit that the *Ansaar* are 'more educated' or 'more knowledgeable' than the traditionalist leaders. The notion of the Quran as an unambiguous textbook for life has been received very widely. If anything, Sufi Muslims are less likely than *Ansaar* ones to know about the way the Quran was collated. It is widely held to have been written down immediately on revelation.³²

La illah leaders do not base the defence of Sufi rites on a subtler understanding of the interpretation of written texts than the *Ansaar* display. Rather, they scour it for verses they can interpret in favour of Sufism. They do, however, assert that local conditions can modify the application of

32. According to conversations at the women's Quran class.

Quranic injunctions. Thus, they have developed a defence of the recitation of the *shahada* during funerals:

In the days of the prophet, the graves were situated very close to the houses of the living. But our graves are far from our villages. Moreover, our faith is not as strong as that of the first Muslims. Were we to go to the graveyard in silence, our thoughts might start to wander and some might start to discuss, say, football on the way to the grave! So our elders decided we had better recite the *shahada* on the way to the grave, to keep our minds focused.³³

While asserting that modifications of the Prophet's practice can be legitimate, this reasoning implicitly recognizes its primacy and explains the local practice as an outcome of weakness.

The same tendency to identify restrictiveness with religiousness is perceptible with regard to women's morality. Women in Rwangwa have so far worn headscarves on ritual occasions only, mostly at prayers and funerals. Normally, these headscarves were made of colourfully printed cotton cloth, *kanga*. The wives of Ahmad Usiseme and some of his fellows, by contrast, routinely wear *hijabu* headdresses made of monochrome, sweaty and expensive synthetics. Occasionally, they put on facial veils. The rapid spread of this practice is deterred by the fact that many women must perform hard physical work and that they dislike the veils. Still, many more women than actually wear them admit the religious desirability of the *hijabu*. Mama Issa, one of the most accomplished Sufi *maulidi* performers in the town and normally bare-headed, observed with bewildered resignation that 'for a woman, whether she goes to heaven depends largely on how she dresses'.³⁴ The relaxed praxis notwithstanding, the *Ansaar* are winning the argument in principle. *La illah* supporters lack the textual knowledge to challenge *Ansaar*'s interpretations of the Quranic injunctions and do not deny that the Quran should be followed to the letter.

The lack of consistency in the application of standards of women's decency highlights an important aspect of mainstream religiosity in Rwangwa, namely the coexistence of different frames of reference in words, actions and attitudes. The inclusiveness and pragmatism of pre-Muslim indigenous religion still underlies attitudes to religion among mainstream Muslims. Although Mama Issa accepted that religious reasoning should induce her to go veiled, practical considerations and local usage — but not an alternative interpretation of the scripture — suggested otherwise, and following them was a valid choice. Similar pragmatic decisions were being made every day, not only by women. But this pragmatism does not preclude local orthodoxy from shifting

33. Interview with Mohamed Kawambe *et al.*, Rwangwa-Likangara, 6 October 2003.

34. Personal communication 2003.

towards greater restrictiveness if some people push it hard enough. Given that the most vocal representatives of both the conflicting stances are men, women may easily become the object of competitive gesture politics in both camps.

Islamist rhetoric and 'war on terror' rhetoric

Busy with the controversies on ritual, the *Ansaar* in Rwangwa were not very vocal about the second pillar of Tanzanian Islamism, the grievances against a 'Christian' state. Even so, they were seen as opponents of the incumbent government. Rumour suggested a connection between the local *Ansaar* and Shehe Mponda in Dar es Salaam, who is associated with some of the most violent incidents of Muslim youth protest in the country and an outspoken opponent of the current government.³⁵

Vague awareness of Muslim terrorism and the Western 'war on terror' influenced the townspeople's view of the *Ansaar* and heightened concern over them. Their opponents often remarked on the fact that Adam Usiseme's 'conversion' to sponsorship of the group followed his pilgrimage to Mecca in 2001. They insinuated that he was 'bought' there and that he in turn had 'bought' his following ('they are after an income').³⁶ The rumour of involvement of Middle Eastern money served to attack the *Ansaar's* credibility. The *Ansaar* themselves were sensitive to this slur and insisted that they had no outside resources; although they saw their own stance in the context of a perceived global attack on Islam, they portray themselves as a grassroots movement inspired by religious zeal. While fear of myself as a 'western spy' out to uncover international links may have partly motivated the *Ansaar's* insistence on their local character, it also shows that they considered local roots and relevance important to their project. Their eagerness not to be portrayed as stooges of foreign interests indicates the persistence of the mistrust against foreign influences that characterized Tanzanian policy and propaganda under Nyerere.³⁷ This nationalist concern, moreover, chimes with the parochialism of the country town.

Still, the *Ansaar* also saw themselves as participants in a worldwide confrontation. They portrayed the American invasion of Iraq as an attack on Islam and Saddam Hussein as a hero of Muslim resistance. A much larger section of public opinion in Rwangwa, as in Tanzania at large, considered the war religiously motivated. Its condemnation in Tanzania, as an act of

35. Shehe Mponda himself claimed to have no knowledge of the Rwangwa disturbances. Interview in Dar es Salaam, 4 August 2004.

36. 'They' being the *Ansaar*, a claim that recurred in conversation with market traders and employees of the district administration.

37. The paranoid mood of the late Nyerere years was particularly pronounced here due to the proximity of Mozambique.

imperialism if not of religious aggression, crossed religious and political boundaries.³⁸ The Iraq war therefore offered little opportunity for the *Ansaar* to heighten their sense of victimhood within Tanzania. Nevertheless, it underpinned their self-image of defenders of a religion under attack. The wider Rwangwan public gave this notion some credence, not least because the rapid defeat of Saddam Hussein, who had been seen as a powerful military leader, shocked many people beyond the *Ansaar*'s circles. The events made American power appear overbearing. Rumour had it that I was American and reported daily to the CIA. An old lady told me that I was said to carry explosives with me and to have come to assess Rwangwa as a target for an airborne bombing campaign.

This last concern in particular indicates the problems Rwangwans encountered in making sense of the pronouncements of the 'war on terror', which reached them in the curt and little-commented form presented by the Swahili media. Because *Ansaar* did not disavow the epithet *Al Qaeda*, and because they had a tenuous Middle Eastern connection through Usiseme's *hajj*, a literal interpretation of 'war on terror' rhetoric, with its insistence on hunting down terrorists everywhere, might suggest that Rwangwa was sliding into the firing line.

Rwangwans' understanding of the 'war on terror' was based on the same notions as their understanding of conflict in their town. They interpreted both mostly with reference to the character of the opponents involved and the potential effect of their principles if applied to Rwangwa. From this vantage point, George Bush, Osama and Saddam were equally seen as recklessly wasteful of human life, stubborn and ruthless. The emphasis on leaders' character also meant that Rwangwans took no solace from the fact that their town was so unimportant. The absence of oil or other strategic assets from Rwangwa did not reassure them that they were safe from an aggression they considered motivated by personal pride and spite. This view of Rwangwa's position in world affairs forms part of the key to understanding the relevance of their own stances to the '*Al Qaeda* boys' in the town.

The insistence of 'war on terror' strategists that they will take their war anywhere in effect gives a spurious significance to the declared readiness of Rwangwa's *Ansaar* to die for Islam:

If an enemy appears who wages war against Islam, [the believer] is ready to die for Almighty God. [...] *Al Qaeda* is based on commitment to the belief in Almighty God, you are ready to be killed for God's sake [...] that is where this word derives from.

38. The Christian president Benjamin Mkapa was widely said to have condemned the invasion. The critical mood is reflected in the main Swahili newspapers, *Majira* and *Nipashe*, of March and April 2003; e.g. Kashaza Bengari, letter to the editor, *Majira*, 29 March 2003, p. 10.

The above was the only explicit reference to *Al Qaeda* in my interview with the *Ansaar*. Its apologetic content, though, was consistent with the combative, indignant tone of the *Ansaar* leaders' pronouncements.

The *Ansaar* do nothing to dispel the impression that their stance is incompatible with the assertion of the government that followers of all religions can be equally good citizens. The stance of the *Ansaar* amounts to a challenge to what has been called the Tanzanian version of civil religion, according to which all religions are equally guides to good citizenship and equally private matters in a non-religious state.³⁹ Although this conclusion is merely implied by their insistence that loyalty to Islam overrides every other allegiance, it is clear enough:

God says: you who believe, obey the Almighty God and his Prophet. And to obey the Prophet means to follow all the orders given by the Almighty God. And to obey the Prophet likewise means to follow all his ways that he followed in his lifetime. All 24 hours [of the day]; whatever he did.

From this point of view, any non-Muslim government and many Muslim ones can be construed as blameworthy for standing in the way of the application of the *Ansaar's* interpretations of the sacred laws. The *Rwangwa Ansaar*, however, never made this point explicitly. Instead, they cited the Quran to construe themselves as threatened by an anti-Muslim environment:

God says, you who believe, don't make those who are outside the Muslim religion your friends, don't love them, because if you are with them they will try to bite your fingers [...] they will say [...] Muslim women wear these Muslim dresses, [...] Muslim law says it needs to spread. [...] Those enemies, those who are not Muslims, have already started to say words [against Islam] in their mouth and what they have hidden in their hearts is much more than what they say, [namely] that they must kill Muslims to stop Islam from spreading.

The passage is characteristic in the way it starts with a Quranic quote and intertwines it with interpretation without clearly marking the distinction; a rhetorical means to make the given interpretation seem inevitable. Its paranoid tone is reinforced if one considers the *Ansaar's* narrow view of who qualifies as Muslim. Of the mainstream Sufis, they say that

Those [people] have refused to follow the law [of Islam] and therefore they are outside our religion, while we are in the realm of the [religious] law. So we aren't the ones starting a split, they are the ones who secede by leaving the ground of the Muslim religion. We have no business with them, we consider what God has said, and what the Prophet has said. So decide for yourself.

FB: So you're saying they are not Muslims?

R2: Yes.

R1: Yes, they are not Muslims according to the Quran.

39. Westerlund, *Ujamaa na Dini*, pp. 63–77.

The *Ansaar*, then, view themselves as the lone defenders of Islam among hostile pseudo-Muslims. Although they use very general terms, accusing neither Sufis nor government directly, their opinions could justify violent conflict.

The reaction of mainstream Muslims

Appreciation of this divisive potential is a strong reason why public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the *Ansaar*. Rejection often took the form of slurs against their character. Ahmad Usiseme was described to me, by a not normally very opinionated mainstream Muslim, as a king of thieves who owed his wealth to directing a gang of burglars. Keeping *ndonodcha* zombies was said to be another source of his wealth. Ironically, members of the district administration, including some Christians, were subject to the same allegation, because like Usiseme they had opposed a witchcraft-cleansing campaign that could have driven out the zombies, albeit not for reasons of religious doctrine but of public order. Young women living near the godown that the *Ansaar* were using as their mosque claimed that they were more given to trying to seduce them than less ostentatiously religious youth. One of the *Ansaar*, who tried to make a living out of hawking fish imported from Lindi out of a bloodstained, malodorous, fly-encircled Styrofoam box, was said to be a notorious drunk.

The knee-jerk reaction of the public against the *Ansaar*'s implicit challenge towards the state supports the characterization of local politics in Tanzania as consensus-focused.⁴⁰ The official portrayal of religion as a source of cooperative public spirit is much repeated in conversation. Another typical statement in favour of the ruling party was that 'since we got independence, no blood has flown in our country'.⁴¹ A key term in discussing the proper conduct of public affairs is 'respect', which is said to be required between different parties, between voters and candidates and between office holders and members of the public. The reluctance to antagonize anybody stopped most townspeople from criticizing either current or past office holders by name, even while vocally condemning the lack of public spirit among officialdom at large. Mistrust of dissent is also evident in the great uneasiness that is remembered to have accompanied the introduction of multi-party politics in 1992.⁴²

Still, this orientation towards consensus does not amount to a blind authoritarianism. Criticism was more vocal 'off the record' in informal conversation. Multi-partyism is now appreciated for putting competitive

40. Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an uncaptured peasantry* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1980); Kaiser, 'Structural adjustment'.

41. Interview with Somoe Rashidi Namwilikiti, Rwangwa-Likangara, 3 November 2003.

42. Interview with Ismaili Makotha, Rwangwa-Nachingwea, 14 October 2003.

pressure on the ruling party.⁴³ Condemnation of the most authoritarian acts of the post-independence state, above all in connection with ‘villagization’, is widespread if hesitant.⁴⁴ Moreover, in spite of the strong disapproval they provoke, the *Ansaar* are not treated as outcasts. Around the market area, shop owners and food sellers made friendly fun of their beards and used the name *Al Qaeda* as a good-humoured taunt (commenting, it seemed, on the distance between their romantic ‘guerilla’ aspirations and mundane reality). In everyday life, both the *Ansaar* and their detractors were practising an ethos of live and let live. Possibly, the fact that so many of the *Ansaar* were young made this tolerance easier, as one could hope that some of them might simply grow out of it.

The only practical challenge that the *Ansaar* have so far launched, i.e. their court case, was both within the law and unsuccessful. This inaction reflects their failure to find a pitch that could connect their political views to the everyday concerns of villagers. Muhammad Said-style analysis of conflicts within the Dar es Salaam elites is of limited interest to the parochial townspeople. It also reflects a lack of concrete political options in the face of the dominance of the ruling party. Even though officials in public kept their distance from the religious dispute, government agencies provided support for the mosque committee through the local office of Bakwata. Moreover, government officials work hard to shore up the official view of amicable and cooperative relations between public, ruling party and administration, and of religion as a lubricant of these relations.⁴⁵ Arguably, their greatest advantage in their effort lies with the fact that they are certainly able to do what Usiseme is accused of doing, namely ‘buy’ consensus. As the provider of education, health care, famine relief (which was needed in 2003) and road maintenance, the government is undoubtedly the biggest patron in the town. The *Ansaar* are in no position to compete with it.

The focus on immorality and witchcraft in the invective against the *Ansaar* was to be expected in a village whispering campaign. Nevertheless, combined with the fears of spies and bombs, of harvest failure, of low cashew prices, of violent theft of profits from cashew sales and of rising concerns about AIDS, these rumours added to the sense that Rwangwa was a community in crisis. Ultimately, both factions believed that religious factionalism, and the moral uncertainty and improper religious practice that accompanied it, was harming their town.

43. Interview with Omari Bakari Chanyunya, Rwangwa-Nachingwea, 12 October 2003.

44. Interview with Omari Salum Njalimbo, Rwangwa-Likangara, 10 October 2003, and with Hemedi Lichile, Rwangwa, 3 September 2003.

45. This was very evident, e.g. during the meeting that introduced me to Rwangwans, when the sub-district chairman invoked their religious commitment and tolerance as reasons to welcome me.

Conclusions

Observers of Islamists in many parts of the world, both in Africa and beyond, would recognize many elements of the situation described here. The instrumental role of international contacts, especially study abroad and the *hajj*, the undercurrent of generational conflict in the confrontation, its focus on control of a site of worship, and the oscillation of the Islamists' discourse between the political and the religious plane are all elements that recur widely. Nevertheless, Rwangwa's Islamists fed off and had to respond to specific local and national conditions. The gerontocracy they challenged is a legacy of the autocratic Tanzanian state of the 1970s. The discourse of the Tanzanian state as an enemy of Muslims has been developed by educated, metropolitan Islamists in Tanzania over the last two decades, during the liberalization of the state. That the Rwangwan notables, although they depend on state patronage and do not share the interests of urban elites, were cognizant and very wary of this line of reasoning is noteworthy. It underlines its divisive potential.

For now, the Rwangwan public disassociated the two planes that the Islamists' discourse oscillates between. Many townspeople rejected their political stance but accepted their scripturalist arguments in principle. The longer-term implications of this response remain in the balance; it could be a prelude to the political radicalization of the rural Muslim public or the beginning of lengthy negotiations for a way to integrate a reformist Islamic way of life into a pluralist Tanzanian polity. At any rate, the audience, however poorly educated, examined the arguments carefully. Their appreciation for the Islamists' scripturalism, in turn, is itself partly an outcome of poor education. Improved access to formal education would not change it automatically but would make it easier for the townspeople to extend their critical reasoning to scripturalist arguments.

On the contrary, the distinction made by Rwangwans between the Islamists' political and religious stances should not lead us to consider the fusion of the two in Islamist rhetoric as merely a rhetorical ploy. It may be on the part of some leaders, as de Waal asserts for al Turabi, but for the young Islamists in Rwangwa, it had a strong intuitive and emotive appeal.⁴⁶ It would be hasty to declare them all dysfunctional individuals or dupes. Their personal reasons for committing to this harsh ideology, and the extent to which they may be willing to go for it, form an intriguing, if hard to investigate, subject.

Amid fierce dissension, the two factions in Rwangwa agreed on the fundamental importance of their religious life to collective well-being. Attitudes on both sides support the claim put forward by Ellis and Ter Haar

46. Alex de Waal and A.H. Abdel Salem, 'Islamism, state power and *jihad* in the Sudan', pp. 71-114.

that religion is emerging as a crucial factor in African politics because people in Africa find religious notions good to think with about political issues. In the Tanzanian context, the high profile of religion in public life is reinforced by the place accorded to it in the official formulation of citizenship. But the persistent strength of African religious notions also means that reformist Islam, like other forms of Islam before it, is likely to become to some extent recuperated into local cosmologies. Against this background, it makes sense that Rwangwa's Islamists were particularly indignant but also particularly divided on the subject of traditional healers. With high incidences of illness due to AIDS, healing is likely to remain a crucial site of encounter between Islamism and the local religious heritage, both Sufi Muslim and African.

Ellis and Ter Haar also argue that religion in Africa is filling a vacuum left behind by the evanescence of hopes for speedy modernization. In the Rwangwan case, the failure of state-led development initiatives indeed helped undermine the respect of the younger generation for the state-sponsored notables among their elders. However, the former dominance of Western notions of modernity should not be overstated. The Tanzanian notion of citizenship, placing all religions at its core rather than none, was arguably never quite secular. On the contrary, core aspects of modernity, such as technological control of nature and the improvement of living conditions, also form part of the Islamist agenda, even if often only by accusing the state of preventing Muslims from achieving these things. What is being supplanted is not the notion of modernity but the claim of the state to being the sole or main purveyor of modernity. Instead, Islamists now promise to provide it, especially in the form of education. Islamism has not merely taken the place of the great political ideologies associated with classical modernity but has come to represent modernity to young people in Rwangwa.

There is a bitter irony in the situation in Rwangwa. The townspeople felt their isolation clearly and would have liked to overcome it. At the same time, they were disconcerted by the international influences that did reach them and felt threatened by international news of 'war on terror'. Their experience is a reminder that increasing connectedness to ideas and information in this globalizing age does not remove the disadvantages of illiteracy and poverty.

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