

“Islam of the Spirits”, “Islam of the Mosque”: Spirit Possession and competing claims on being Muslim in northern Mozambique

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Encounters between bush spirits and Muslim spirits in the possession cult in Nampula city, northern Mozambique, constitute what traditional healers define the “Islam of *Majini*”. In this paper I will examine the ways in which the interactions between this Islam of the spirits and official Islamic discourses validate multiple, and often competing, conceptions of Muslim selfhood in the local community.

In northern Mozambique, local matrilineal ideology has, since the period of the slave trade, interacted with different kinds of Islam: doctrinal Swahili, Sufism and Waahabi. Additionally, Islam has come to be identified locally with the powerful healers who claim to have embraced Islam after being possessed by *Majini*.

If spirit-forced conversion means a partial Islamisation of local healing through the incorporation of Muslim practices and the use of Islamic objects, words and symbols in the system of divination and healing, it also gives foundation to an Islamic discourse distinct from that of the local “official” Muslim community. While the Swahili and Sufi schools have acknowledged and recognised local customary practices, today *scripturalist* interpretations of Islam dismiss possession and traditional healing as corruption and superstitious vestiges of ‘the past’.

Drawing from my ethnographic experience in Nampula I will address the following questions: how do healing practices differ from or resemble the local versions of “official” Islam? In which ways does “official” Islam respond to possession and healing practices? To what extent does spirit possession turn to be the forefront of debates about what constitutes correct Muslim beliefs and practices?

For this purpose, I will examine the case of a woman who, after being possessed by local and Muslim spirits embarks on a path toward healing power and a new Muslim identity under the banner of the “Islam of Matxini”. By adopting a dialogical approach I will describe the modes in which possession comes to be perceived and experienced in the local Muslim community.

If healers are enabled by possession to adopt Islam as a language of empowerment, this is, in turn, creatively adapted to the local context of healing. Similarly, if Islamic discourse officially tends to demonise these beliefs as “sorcery”, practices suggest a more ambivalent and complex involvement of the Muslim community in local spirit possession. The ambivalence through which possession and Islam look at each other will reveal ongoing struggles over authority in the local Muslim community.

Additionally, it will highlight the ways in which the encounters between local culture and Islam still contribute to the creation of novel systems of beliefs and social practices which challenge, contradict and help to define the *scripturalist* versions of Muslim selfhood.