

# The Rise of Islamic Radicalism in Tanzania

From 1998 to 2005, Dr Felicitas Becker conducted hundreds of interviews in Tanzania, both to discover why and how many people had converted to Islam and to investigate why these Muslim congregations have produced Islamic radicals. This edited extract from her book, *Becoming Muslim in Mainland Tanzania, 1890–2000*, gives an account of conflicts among Tanzania’s Muslims, in particular the role of Muslim reformists – often referred to as the *Ansar* – who were highly visible and vocal during her period of research.

INITIALLY, the *Ansar* sought to establish their dominance by attending the mosques in large numbers and marginalizing other worshippers – especially in the mosque in Lindi, founded in the 19th-century by an Arab immigrant called Saidi Mthanna. They quickly became numerous enough to contend for space with other prayer-goers, and they made their presence felt not only during prayers and funerals, but also on the streets. *Ansar* were recognisable by a style that combined elements of what, for brevity’s sake, can be called Western street fashion (running shoes, low-cut blue jeans, basketball shirts and shades) with what they considered elements of ‘Islamic’ dress (skullcaps and beards). They were rarely seen in the sandals, cloaks and gowns favoured by mainstream Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Their eclecticism extended to manners, which combined a street-wise swagger inspired by representations of African-American culture – widely available on videotape – with the frequent use of Arabic idioms. It was thus clear from the beginning that they continued the practice of marking social allegiance through style, while introducing new associations and meanings.

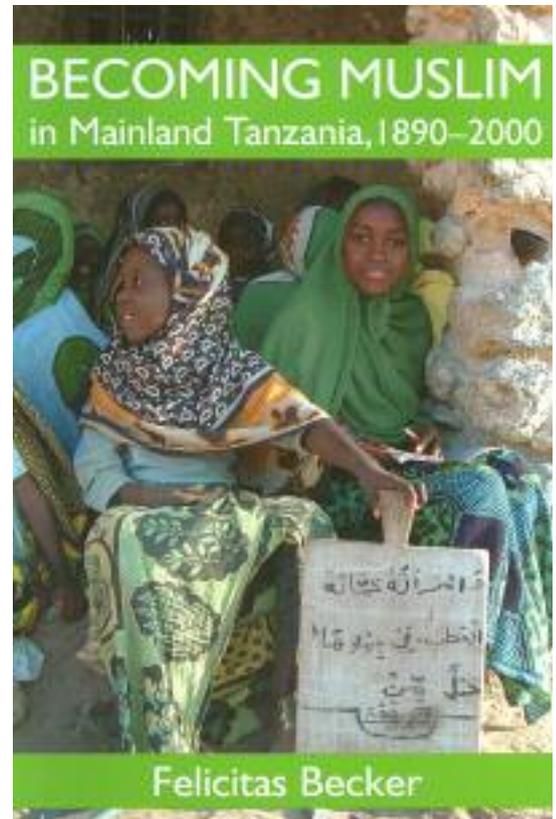
Their main demand was a revision of ritual practice. The reason for their refusal to share the mosques with other users lay with the way mainstream Muslims prayed: normally they fold their arms over their stomachs at the beginning of the prayer sequence, while the *Ansar* insist on the arms being folded over the chest, or stretched out besides the body. Even more divisive, though, was their insistence that funerals should be performed quickly and in silence, while established practice was to proceed slowly and recite the *shahada* (Islamic creed) on the way to the grave. These silent burials have earned the *Ansar* the nickname *Chimumuna* (Makonde for ‘quietly, quietly’) in Lindi.

The *Ansar*, in turn, condemned the established practices with a term much used by Muslim reformists in Africa and beyond: *bida*, ‘innovation’. By fulminating against *bida*, they presented themselves as people who sought to emulate the practice of the Prophet’s lifetime in everything. In the words of an *Ansar* spokesman in Rwangwa:

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 twenty-four hours [of the day]; whatever he did.<sup>2</sup>

Setting out from this premise, the *Ansar*’s criticism of the practice of other Muslims was wide-ranging and aggressive. It included gender relations and the comportment of women among mainstream Muslims, educational institutions, relationships with authorities and all practices characteristic of the *tarika* (Sufi orders): *dhikr* (devotional acts), *ziara* (gatherings), *maulid* (public celebrations), Quranic healing and the respect in which the followers of the *tarika* held their *khalifa* (leader).

The *Ansar*’s polemic was powerful because it operated at several levels: it questioned the merits of local notables, of the ruling party, and the government; it criticized local ritual practice and also asserted the need to change the way ritual was legitimized. Nevertheless, we can group these attacks around two main foci: the political role of Muslim notables,



and the way to establish knowledge of correct Muslim practice.

## The attack on Muslim notables and their relations with government

Given the ubiquitous, rhetorical and performative nature of village politics, it is clear that the *Ansar* posed a challenge in its terms. In Rwangwa, they summed up their objections to the Central Council of Tanzanian Muslims (Bakwata) and the incumbent mosque committee by referring to them as ‘Tanzania One Theatre’, the name of a popular Dar es Salaam-based dance band (Figure 1). By this, they implied that Sufi ritual



Figure 1: The mosque in the country town of Rwangwa, founded in 1947 and at the centre of a recent controversy between mainstream Muslims and Ansar reformists.

performance was no more religious than pop music. Moreover, the band was widely known to be sponsored by the government. The designation as ‘Tanzania One Theatre’ therefore also ridiculed the Sufis’ deference to government and the determination of mosque elders to translate religious authority into a right to be heard by officials.

The conjunction of political and generational conflict was evident in the *Ansar’s* attacks. While a handful of men of middle age or above provided them with financial and ideological support, the people who vocally proposed and defended their views were overwhelmingly young. As they saw it, they were taking on a Muslim establishment

corrupted by its association with the government. *Ansar* asserted that the Bakwata served to control Muslims, rather than further their interests. Bakwata functionaries were ‘bribed’ with trips to the capital and similar perks, and were motivated predominantly by concern with their own well-being. The poor state of repair of Saidi Mthanna’s mosque, they said, proved their point.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: Young people’s precarious economic ventures at work: selling eggs and water, and loading the ‘Ng’itu Express’, the bus that was the only form of public transport to Rwangwa.

The political stance of Rwangwa’s *Ansar*, in particular their insistent representation of themselves as a community under siege, was also bound up with their interpretation of world politics. Arguing that the Sufis could not really claim the name of Muslims, their rhetoric elided their Sufi detractors in Rwangwa with Christian aggressors against Islam the world over, epitomised by the US-led invasion of Iraq. It was sometimes hard to know which adversary they were fulminating against, their local mosque committee, the Tanzanian government, or the government of the United States.

If an enemy appears who wages war against Islam, [the believer] is ready to die for the Almighty God. ... God says, you who believe, don’t make those who are outside the Muslim religion your friends, don’t love them, because if you associate with them they will try to bite your fingers ... Those enemies, those who are not Muslims, have already started to say words [against

Muslims] 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.<sup>4</sup>

A particularly pointed form of the adoption of the notion of a worldwide struggle between 'true' Muslims and their enemies lay in the use of the term *Al Qaeda* for Rwangwa's *Ansar*, employed half-jokingly by bystanders to the conflict, and sometimes by *Ansar* themselves. The rhetoric and counter-rhetoric of 'war on terror' and 'defence against Christian aggressors' helped energize the rural radicals.

Within a regional frame of reference, moreover, the *Ansar* were further developing the long-standing theme of relations between coast and interior. They were flaunting knowledge obtained through connections abroad, bypassing both local elders and the coast. Observers in town were alert to this. Some attributed the intensification of religious debate up country directly to influence from abroad:

These differences started in Arabia. This contrariness is not ours. ... Those who go on the hajj bring these issues here. In the past, people from this region used not to go on the pilgrimage. Now they do, using the proceeds from their cashew [when cashew prices were high in the late 1990s]. Every year five to ten people from [rural] Newala and Masasi [districts] go. We here on the coast don't go like we used to, we don't have money. All we can afford is three fish!<sup>5</sup>

Thus Muslims in the coastal towns have become bystanders to religious debates up country. In effect, coastal urban observers feel that the *hajj* has become an act of emancipation from the coast for villagers. This is not least because of the knowledge participants bring back from the *hajj*.

#### Notes

- 1 The term 'mainstream Muslims' here is used to encompass both followers of the *tarika* (Sufi orders) and other Muslims who had no objections to Sufi practice and did not actively endorse *Ansar* stances.

2 Discussion at the 'godown' mosque, Rwangwa-Kilimanihewa 1 November 2003.

3 The Lindi *Ansar* recruited the heirs of Saidi Mthanna to their cause. This was probably made easier by the fact that the mosque had already in the past been the object of inheritance disputes.

4 Discussion at the 'godown' mosque, Rwangwa-Kilimanihewa 1 November 2003.

5 Interview with Mzee Athumani Musa Mfaume, Mtwara-Kiganga 5 November 2004.

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## Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of 'Dislocated Communities'

In 2008, the British Academy published *Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of 'Dislocated Communities'*, by Dr Toni Erskine.

In this innovative book, Dr Erskine offers a challenging and original normative approach to some of the most pressing practical concerns in world politics – including the contested nature of the prohibitions against torture and the targeting of civilians in the 'war on terror'.

Dr Erskine's vision of 'embedded cosmopolitanism' responds to the charge that conventional cosmopolitanism arguments neglect the profound importance of community and culture, particularity and passion. Bringing together insights from communitarian and feminist political thought, she defends the idea that community membership is morally constitutive – while arguing that the communities that define us are not necessarily territorially bounded and that a moral perspective situated in them need not be parochial.

Dr Erskine employs this framework to explore some of the difficult moral dilemmas thrown up by contemporary warfare.

Can universal principles of restraint demanded by conventional laws of war be robustly defended from a position that also acknowledges the moral force of particular ties and loyalties? By highlighting the links that exist even between warring communities, she offers new reasons for giving a positive response – reasons that reconcile claims to local attachments and global obligations.

*Embedded Cosmopolitanism* provides a powerful account of where we stand in relation to 'strangers' and 'enemies' in a diverse and divided world; and provides a new theoretical framework for addressing the relationship between our moral starting point and the scope of our duties to others.

The volume is published in the *British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monographs* series. More information can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

