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MUAMUDO SAHA AND THE “HOLY” WAR AGAINST “THE PIGS”: THE INITIAL STAGE OF THE INSURGENCY IN CABO DELGADO

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Macomia district was one of the first regions in Cabo Delgado province, in northern Mozambique, where the radical Islamic sect Al Shabaab established itself, long before its first military attack against the Mocimboa da Praia district capital, on 5 October 2017.

One way to understand that initial shape and objectives of the insurgency is to analyse the profile of some local leaders of Al Shabaab. Based on an analysis of the profile of Muamudo Saha, who is seen in Macomia district, particularly in Rueia village, in the Mucojo administrative post, where almost the entire population are Moslems, as a prominent figure in the expansion of the insurgency, this article intends to contribute to an understanding of the initial phase of Al Shabaab. This work is the result of interviews with friends and neighbours of Muamudo Saha and consultation of secondary material, namely newspapers and videos.

Who is Muamudo Saha?

Muamudo Saha is from the Mwani ethnic group. He is described as about 40 years of age. From a peasant family, Muamudo Saha is the oldest son of a religious leader (now deceased), from whom he learnt the Koran. Muamudo Saha had four siblings (three sisters and a brother), two wives and three children. Initially, Muamudo Saha studied in the Mucojo Sede primary school, in his home district of Macomia, and later in Mocimboa da Praia. Among other activities, Muamudo Saha was an informal trader. According to Chissale, Muamudo Saha “sold burkhas, headscarves and trinkets recommended by the fundamentalists of his wing” [of Al Shabaab] (Chissale, 2022). Muamudo Saha’s neighbours say that he was also a peasant and a fisherman. There came a time when Muamudo Saha, who was complaining of living in precarious conditions, unable to sustain his family, began to change and to act harshly against situations which he believed endangered the norms of the Islamic religion.

It is not known for certain from where Muamudo Saha received radical Islamic influences, and there is also no

sign that he ever travelled outside the country to learn the Koran, but he went frequently to Nampula, Pemba and Mocimboa da Praia, presumably to deal with business. It is thought that it was in Mocimboa da Praia, that he had contact with radical *sheiks* (both local and foreign, particularly Tanzanians) who convinced him to embrace their ideals. Like others who joined the insurgency, Muamudo Saha and his companions spent time listening to speeches of the radical Kenyan *sheik* Abdou Rogo. The influence of Abdou Rogo, whose discs, videos and cassettes were sold in the local markets, was very strong among the youth of Macomia and of almost the entire province of Cabo Delgado.

Although Muamudo Saha was the leader of the Al Shabaab group in his village (Rueia), his influence was felt in almost the entire district, because he also travelled to other parts of Macomia, where he preached radical Islam, calling on people, particularly youths, to embrace the ideals of his group. Before his conversion to radical Islam, Muamudo Saha was described as an *Amir* (or highly respected spiritual leader), not only in the community where he lived, but also among other religious leaders. Muamudo Saha is also characterised as a straightforward and highly communicative individual.

Muamudo Saha and Al Shabaab

The first signs of Islamic radicalisation in Macomia began to be noted in the decade beginning in 2010. In 2013, for example, radical Muslim leaders were accused of discouraging attendance at formal school education, favouring instead religious education in the madrasahs. This situation, according to the Macomia authorities, disturbed education in that region (Abubacar, 2013). It is not known whether, at that time, Muamudo Saha was one of this group of religious leaders. However, it can be stated with some certainty, that the activities of Muamudo Saha began to be noted as from 2015 (STV, 2018). At that time, more precisely in November 2015, Muamudo Saha and other religious leaders banned the sale and consumption of alcoholic drinks in local commercial establishments, on the pre-

text that it was against Islam. This attitude, which was denounced to the police, led to the detention of one of the religious leaders of Muamudo Saha’s group, provoking clashes between the population and the police. Between 2016 and 2017, Muamudo Saha was also strongly opposed in public because of his interpretation of the Koran, which was not looked upon kindly by many local Muslims. Muamudo Saha was, among others, accused of having a negative influence on education in the local schools; and of obliging women to use the Islamic veil that covers the entire face.

Muamudo Saha’s mother, and other relatives, when they understood the conflicts his attitudes were bringing within the family and the community, tried to persuade him to change his mind without success. He always replied to them with hostility.

Expulsion in the Nanga B mosque

Before his radicalisation, Muamudo Saha attended the *Alfurcan* mosque of *Sheik* Sujai Aifa, affiliated to the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO) and located in the Nanga B neighbourhood, in the Macomia district capital¹.

This mosque arose in the context of internal contradictions between “reformers” and “conservatives” which began to characterise Islam in Mozambique as from the 1980s². These contradictions can be summarised in the fact that the “reformers”, who are mostly linked to CISLAMO and undertook higher Islamic studies outside the country, believe that the “conservatives” have a defective understanding of Islam³. Previously the *Alfurcan* mosque had been a simple hut: the mosque was built later thanks to contributions from the faithful and with support from the *Africa Muslim Agency* (AMA)⁴. It was in this mosque that Muamudo Saha began to spread his radical ideas, bringing him into contradiction with the other local religious leaders. In Macomia, some of the youths who set up the Al Shabab group used to attend the “mosques of AMA”, that is, of the “reformers”, but abandoned them because they thought they were telling

¹ CISLAMO is a Wahabbite organisation founded in 1981 and legalised in 1983.

² On this matter, see Bonate (2020); Morier-Genoud (2007).

³ In general, the “conservatives” are linked to the Islamic Congress.

⁴ According to Bonate (2009), AMA was founded in 1981 in Malawi by a doctor from Kuwait. The relationship between CISLAMO and AMA is (or was) so strong that, in Cabo Delgado, the two institutions are (were) seen as a single entity.

lies, and were not acting against the injustices committed by the government against Muslims.

Led by Muamudo Saha, these youths asked why Muslims should remain hostage of Christians when they are all Mozambicans and have the same rights; they asked why, in the lectures given in the mosques or at Friday prayers, Islamic jihad is not mentioned, although it is cited in the Koran. These youths also stated that the government – whom they accused of favouring the south of the country – had never been fair to Muslims and to the people of the North, and that the only way of living freely was under the leadership of an Islamic government⁵.

For these reasons, Muamudo Saha and his group began to preach in favour of “holy” war and disobedience to the government of Mozambique which it believed consisted of “pigs” or “Kaffirs”. Muamudo Saha’s group also argued that the *sheiks* should play their role in Islam and abstain from politics, or from joining political parties led by “pigs”. This accusation was aimed at the local *sheiks* who are politically active in some parties, particularly in Frelimo.

For their part, the leaders of the *Alfurcan* mosque said there were no reasons for Muslims to rebel against the government, because there was religious freedom in Mozambique.

After he had been expelled, Muamudo Saha and his companions built a mosque in the same neighbourhood, in the yard of one of the members of the group. They began to issue death threats against *Sheik* Sujai Aifa. Apart from expelling them, they also accused him of denouncing them to the authorities (STV, 2018). Not only was Sujai Aifa pursued by Muamudo Saha’s group, but he was also harassed by the authorities who suspected that he was financing the insurgency, because most of the members of Saha’s group had attended his mosque⁶.

Detention and flight to Mocimboa da Praia

Muamudo Saha continued his radical religious propaganda. He was detained again in 2017 in Macomia, and then transferred to Ancuabe district along with two of his followers. Among other things, Muamudo Saha was accused of agitating the population not to take part in the population census of August 2017, not only because it was allegedly *haram*, but also because he believed that the government wanted to know the number of Muslims, to decimate them. At the time, referring to the causes of the detention, the police said: *These three citizens are stirring up disinformation, calling on the public not to take the existence of the government into account, urging disrespect for the authorities and non-attendance at the schools, as well as using knives and other such instruments for self-protection* (Notícias, 2017).

However, although before these detention rumours had circulated locally that Muamudo Saha’s group intended to overthrow the government through “holy war”, the police, when questioned, said there was no group called Al Shabaab in Macomia and that the confusion in the mosques was the work of “youths who are leaving other mosques because of internal contradictions” (Nacedje Community Radio and Television, of Macomia, 2017). This statement contrasted with the fact that several times the Macomia government had recognised the existence of the Al Shabaab sect in that region, particularly as from 2016.

After he was detained for about three months, Muamudo Saha was released for lack of proof, since the judicial authorities thought the way in which he interpreted the Koran was acceptable in the context of religious freedom. After he left prison, Muamudo Saha stayed in Rueia for only three days and then went immediately to Mocimboa da Praia, accompanied by his wives and about 20 other youths. It is assumed that in Mocimboa da Praia he joined other members of Al Shabaab who carried out the attack of 5 October 2017.

Where is Muamudo Saha and what does his story teach us?

There are at least six versions of the whereabouts of Muamudo Saha: the first claims that he was mortally wounded by the authorities during the attack of 5 October 2017. The second is that he committed suicide in the company of his wives so that he would not be captured alive by the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) who were looking for him after the attack against the town of Mocimboa da Praia; the third believes that he died of cholera or acute diarrhoea in one of the houses where he was hiding in Mocimboa da Praia town after the attack of 5 October. The fourth says that, in 2021, Muamudo Saha was one of the chiefs of of the six insurgent bases in Cabo Delgado; the fifth claims that, in February 2022, Muamudo Saha was one of a group of six insurgents who took temporary refuge in Tanzania to escape the hunger that was gripping the Al Shabaab bases in Mozambique, because of the action of the FDS (Pinnacle News, 2021, 2022). The sixth is that Muamudo Saha was part of a group of insurgents who, in March and April 2023, were in the town of Mucojo in Macomia where they spoke peacefully with the local population (Carta de Moçambique, 2023).

The brief story of Muamudo Saha shares traces in common with other figures in the insurgency whom we have analysed on previous occasions: they are individuals who, in the name of a radical Islam, which puts them into conflict with other Muslims who do not share the same version, want to reshape the concept of the State in Mozambique, by introducing Sharia. Most of these youths, from poor families, from regions where the State is almost absent, are frustrated with the current leadership of the country which they accuse of favouring

the South and the Christians, marginalising people from northern Mozambique, particularly Muslims⁷. They are also youths who, before embracing the ideology of Al Shabaab, had been supporters of *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah* (adepts of the prophetic tradition and the community). This is part of the Wahabi trend, most of whose followers are regarded as “reformist”, speak Arabic and attended university⁸.

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⁵ It is not strange that, at the start of the armed subversion, there was a certain distrust towards CISLAMU, on the part of the government authorities and of other religious bodies

⁶ Sujai Aifa was beheaded by Al Shabaab in June 2020.

⁷ See Chichava (2020, 2022).

⁸ In Cabo Delgado, some members of Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah were also part of CISLAMU. Ahl al-Sunna wal Jamaah was set up in 1998 (and never legalised by the State) by youths who had taken Islamic studies in universities outside the country, and then clashed with the leadership of CISLAMU whom they accused, among other things, of mismanagement, and of being close to the Frelimo Party. In addition, the members of Ahl al-Sunna wal Jamaah were frustrated at the lack of economic opportunities and of jobs in the country (Bonate, 2020).