

## THE FIRST SIGNS OF “AL SHABAAB” IN CABO DELGADO: SOME STORIES FROM MACOMIA AND ANCUABE

Sérgio Chichava

### Introduction

“Al Shabaab” began its armed attacks in Cabo Delgado province on 5 October 2017, specifically in Mocímboa da Praia district. However, before this attack, members of the public and religious leaders of the Muslim community of this province were already speaking about the presence of this group. The press also reported the presence of certain “strange elements” in Cabo Delgado who were inciting the population to oppose the lay state through the defence of a radical version of Islam. The purpose of this article is to discuss the first signs of the presence of “Al Shabaab” in Cabo Delgado province. To this end, it tells of some episodes that occurred between late 2015 and mid-2017 in Macomia and Ancuabe districts and which show the influence of “Al Shabaab” before the attack on Mocímboa da Praia. It also shows the reaction of the Cabo Delgado Muslim community to the arrival of “Al Shabaab” in that region.

### 1. No alcohol and no schools in Macomia

In November 2015, several reports published in the papers “Notícias” and “Domingo” indicated that in the locality of Pangane, in the coastal district of Macomia, local Muslim religious leaders were banning the sale and consumption of alcohol, arguing that this was against the principles of the Islamic religion, and was one of the main causes of the deviant behaviour of young people in this region (Notícias 2015; Wazir 2015; Domingo 2015). Because of this, they resorted to force and destroyed all the alcoholic drinks found in local shops, in an action that enjoyed the support of part of the local population.

Once the authorities were alerted, a police contingent was sent to the place. As a result, a religious leader, accused of leading the “operation”, was detained. This provoked fury from the population who reacted to the detention by attacking members of the police. In these clashes, a policeman was killed, two civilians were injured, and a sizeable part of the local population took refuge in the bush and on nearby islands.

The report in the paper “Domingo” said: “... Pangane was an unusual locality; everything done there obeys

rules given by the religious leaders who, from what we could witness, do not share the same ideals as the state authorities (Domingo 2015)”.

The same newspaper also said that the local Muslims, who happen to be the largest population group, rejected and jeered at the head of the locality, because he was a Makonde and a Christian. It also said that other religions were unable to establish themselves in Pangane. It gave the example of the Assembly of God church, which ended up abandoning this region because of local rejection and hostility (*Ibid*).

At that time, there was nothing to suggest that these were activities of “Al Shabaab” and none of the items published in the press mentioned this name. However, elements of our research lead to the conclusion that this was the initial phase of “Al Shabaab”. Currently, the locality of Pangane is one of the areas most affected by the attacks in Macomia district.

For their part, the authorities of the Quiterajó administrative post, which is also one of the areas most affected by the “Al Shabaab” attacks, complained in August 2016, that, under “certain Islamic religious influences” of a local sect, the Pequeué Complete Primary School registered high drop-out rates from pupils who went to the madrassas instead (Abubacar 2016)<sup>1</sup>.

The situation remained so tense in Macomia that, in October 2016, the population of Cogolo village, in the Mucojo administrative post, destroyed a “mosque” of “Al Shabaab”, accusing its adherents of being “youth who do not follow the roots of the old Islamic religion” (Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia 2016a)<sup>2</sup>.

In December of that year, the Macomia authorities said they now had no doubt about the existence of a group called “Al Shabaab” in the districts. They urged the population to reject its ideas and to fight against them. The Macomia authorities were convinced that

“the ideology of the al shabab [Al Shabaab] group supposedly seeks to use religion for armed incursions, and hence the government should take measures (Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia 2016b)<sup>3</sup>”.

In June 2017, the newspaper Notícias cited the police as saying that three members of the “Al Shabaab” sect had been captured in Macomia district. They were accused of disinformation, lack of respect for the state, and preaching a radical Islam. The journal added that others had been detained a month earlier, in Quissanga, for the same reasons. At the time, the leader of the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO), in Cabo Delgado, said “This group is no more than a political movement that is making claims on the government, using a certain means to try and win over the community, as if they were Islamic principles when in reality they are not” (Notícias 2017).



Mosque destroyed by the population of Cogolo  
(Photo: Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia)

Despite this, and contradicting these facts, the Macomia police was cited a month later, in July 2017, denying the existence of the “Al Shabaab” sect in that region, stating that what existed was “disturbance of public order by youths who left other mosques because of internal contradictions” and, as a result, “criminal proceedings” had been initiated (Abubacar 2017).

However, Amade Abubacar, one of the first journalists to be arrested by the Mozambican authorities in 2019, because of his reporting on the attacks in Cabo Delgado, reiterated that “since last year [2016] there has

<sup>1</sup>In September 2017, the administrator of Macomia declared again that, under the influence of “Al Shabaab”, children were abandoning the schools. He said that this group wanted “to destroy the nation and the future of the children”, (Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Two news items published in the paper “Carta de Moçambique”, on 5 and 7 December 2018, and probably written by Amade Abubacar, reporting an attack on Cogolo village, said that young people from the mosque destroyed by the local population had joined “Al Shabaab”. It should be mentioned that, between December 2018 and July 2019, Cogolo was attacked three times by “Al Shabaab”. For more details, see “Carta de Moçambique” (2018a; 2018b; 2019).

<sup>3</sup>At the time Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia, which is very influential in this district, used to say they were “sons” and “brothers” of Macomia who were following an “ideology”, and insisted that the option should be for dialogue and not for violence as some local people advocated. For more details see Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia 2016b).

*been talk in Macomia of the supposed existence of youths with connections to the Islamic group Alshabab [Al Shabaab] which operates in Somalia, and whose mission is to set up an Islamic state in east Africa*" (ibid).

## 2. The "Al Shabaab" assault on the locality of Intutupué

In July 2016, Saíde Bacar, a religious leader affiliated to CISLAMO, issued a circular warning the Muslims of Cabo Delgado and the official authorities about a situation that was happening Ancuabe district, caused by people who called themselves "Ali-Xabab". According to Saíde Bacar, individuals from Chiure district had entered a mosque of CISLAMO in Intutupué, between 4 and 5 June 2016, where they began to preach an Islam which offended Muslims, because it contradicted what was practiced in Mozambique and, in general, their principles were not part of this religion (Bacar 2016).

Among the principles defended by these individuals, Saíde Bacar pointed to the following (see table 1).

**Table 1:** Some principles defended by "Al Shabaab"

Pray while wearing shoes
Rejection of lay education in favour of Islamic religious education
Obligatory use of the Islamic veil, covering the face, leaving only the eyes visible
Restrict the work of women to looking after the house
Ban on the use and possession of civil identification documents
Do not greet State leaders
Do not take part in national events
Reject the National Flag
Amputate the limbs of adulterers and thieves
Do not collaborate with or form part of the government or of State institutions
Reject the state's courts in favour of Islamic courts

**Source:** Saíde Bacar (2016)

Saíde Bacar said that the principles defended by these individuals were "anti-Islamic, they originated in Somalia, and their goal was to destroy the Islam practiced in Mozambique". He called on the relevant authorities to take measures to prevent their expansion in the country. However, "Al Shabaab" had managed to attract some of the believers from the Intutupué mosque, persuading them to follow its precepts. This caused riots, leading to the intervention of the police. The situation ended with the detention and injury of some members of the sect. But, despite the police intervention, the influence of "Al Shabaab" in Intutupué has continued, in such a way that, in the only local Complete Primary School, children were dropping out en masse, which greatly alarmed the school authorities. The deputy director of the school said, for example, that "Al Shabaab" was spreading messages that discouraged school attendance, on the grounds that children should not attend public and state schools, because these were schools of the *Kāfir* (infidels or non-Muslims). "Al Shabaab" advised them to attend only the madrassas. As a result the number of children at this school was falling. Furthermore, the children who continued to attend the school suffered threats. The situation was made worse by the threat of "Al Shabaab" to close down the school in 2017. The school management tried to talk to the members of "Al

Shabaab", but this attempt was in vain because they would only accept a dialogue if the local school authorities converted to their ideals and began to attend their mosques (UJOMU 2016a).

In order to solve the situation, the management of the local school asked for support from the Muslim leaders of CISLAMO in Pemba. One of the actions taken by CISLAMO was to send to Intutupué a team from the Cabo Delgado Union of Young Muslims (UJOMU) to hold a dialogue with the local community and show them the "evils" of the actions of "Al Shabaab".

The strategy used by UJOMU to confront the propaganda of "Al Shabaab" was, in addition to denouncing the actions of this group to the government authorities, to hold awareness raising campaigns against terrorism. In these campaigns, the youths of UJOMU explained who "Al Shabaab" were by showing films about radical Islamic movements from other countries, such as the "Al

Shabaab", of Somalia, and Daesh, among others. These films showed, among other things, young people undergoing military training, attacks against public buildings, and against Christian and Muslim civilians who did not share the ideals of these groups. They also showed cities destroyed and abandoned in various parts of the world as a result of the attacks of these groups. Furthermore, UJOMU raised awareness about the importance of education showing that, unlike what "Al Shabaab" preached, the Muslim religion was not incompatible with the education offered by the State (UJOMU, 2016b).

These actions by UJOMU show, once again, the foreboding among the local community that probably "Al Shabaab" would follow the same path as other radical Islamic movements. But the Muslims say that the government delayed in taking measures, so that the situation took on alarming contours, to the point that, since October 2017, "Al Shabaab" has been attacking Cabo Delgado province militarily<sup>4</sup>.

## Conclusion

This text has attempted to show the first signs of the presence of "Al Shabaab" in Cabo Delgado. These examples, in Macomia and Ancuabe districts, help us understand that, before transforming itself into a military movement, "Al Shabaab" was a simple religious sect which denied the lay state in favour of an Islamic state. The examples also help us see that "Al Shabaab" met with a certain resistance from within the Mozambican Muslim community, and particularly from CISLAMO, which always denounced its actions to the competent authorities and held some campaigns to raise awareness against the propaganda of this group.

## References

- Abubacar, Amade. 2016. Desistência de alunos na EPC de Pequeué preocupa autoridades, CAICC. Available at: <https://www.caicc.org.mz/diario/?p=6921> (consulted on 12 April 2020 ).

Abubacar, Amade. 2017. "No distrito de Macomia não há seita Alshabab, afirma comandante da PRM em Macomia". CAICC. Available at: <https://www.caicc.org.mz/diario/?p=7828> (consulted on 12 April 2020 ).

Bacar, Saíde. 2016. Circular no 1/2016 Para cinco distritos da zona sul de Cabo Delgado (Montepuez, Balama, Namuno, Chiure e Ancuabe), Montepuez: CISLAMO.

Carta de Moçambique. 2018a. Raparigas são o novo alvo dos 'insurgentes'. Available at: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/sociedade/item/305-raparigas-sao-o-novo-alvo-dos-insurgentes> (consulted on 21 April 2020).

Carta de Moçambique. 2018b. Insurgentes atacam em Cogolo. Available at: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/341-insurgentes-atacam-em-cogolo> (consulted on 21 April 2020).

Carta de Moçambique. 2019. Insurgência em Cabo Delgado. Três civis e dois militares morrem em mais um ataque em Macomia. Available at: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/crime/item/2592-insurgencia-em-cabo-delgado-tres-civis-e-dois-militares-morrem-em-mais-um-ataque-em-macomia> (consulted on 21 April 2020).

Domingo. 2015. Tumultos em Pangane provocam morte e feridos. Available at: <https://www.jornaldomingo.co.mz/index.php/arquivo/26-reportagem/7791-tumultos-em-pangane-provocam-morte-e-feridos> (consulted on 12 April 2020).

Nhampossa, Argualdo. 2020. "Sheikh Aminudin e a situação em Cabo Delgado. Governo não ligou aos avisos", Savana, Maputo.

Notícias. 2017. Detidos por desinformação em Macomia. Available at: <https://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/index.php/sociedade/68710-detidos-por-promoverem-desinformacao-em-macomia.html> (consulted on 22 April 2020).

Notícias. 2015. Distrito de Macomia: Pangane interdita venda de álcool. Available at: <https://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/index.php/sociedade/46036-distrito-de-macomia-pangane-interdita-venda-de-alcool> (consulted on 12 April 2020).

Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia. 2016a. Populares da aldeia Cogolo em Mucojo, destruíram há dias uma mesquita local, supostamente os seguidores na sua maioria jovens não seguem raízes da religião islâmica antiga. Available at: <https://web.facebook.com/radionacedjemacomia> (consulted on 19 April 2020).

Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia. 2016b. Grupo Al Shabab deve ser rejeitado pela sociedade. Apelam diversas individualidades. Available at: <https://web.facebook.com/radionacedjemacomia> (consulted on 19 April 2020).

Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia. 2017. Administradora de Macomia, apela desacato a mensagens contra acesso a educação. Available at: <https://web.facebook.com/radionacedjemacomia> (consulted on 19 April 2020).

UJOMU. 2016a. Acta do encontro com a direcção da escola primária completa de Intutupué, Pemba.

UJOMU. 2016b. Acta da palestra de Intutupué, Pemba.

Wazir, Jonas. 2015. "Cabo Delgado. Interdita pela população. Pangane volta a vender bebidas alcoólicas", Notícias. Available at: <https://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/index.php/sociedade/18-provincia-em-foco/47741-cabo-delgado-interdita-pela-populacao-pangane-volta-a-vender-bebidas-alcoolicas> (consulted on 12 April 2020 ).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the interview with the President of CISLAMO, Sheikh Aminuddin, in the weekly paper Savana (Nhampossa 2020).