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## God, Anti-Colonialism and Drums: Sheikh Uways and the Uwaysiyya

by  
Christine Choi Ahmed

The tomb of Sheikh Uways B. Muhammad al-Barawi, hereafter referred to as Sheikh Uways, in Biyooley, Somalia is visited every year by Somalis, Tanzanians, Eastern Congolese, Zanzibaris and many persons from the rest of East Africa. Historians specializing in Somalia dismiss Sheikh Uways as just a holy man. However, analysis of Arabic sources indicates that Sheikh Uways was in fact the leader of the most effective pan-Islamic movement in East Africa. The Uwaysiyya not only revitalized East African Islam, but changed its nature from the religion of the elites to a mass-based movement, a movement that clearly challenged European colonialism.

To understand the development of Sheikh Uways' movement it is necessary to understand both the history of Islam in Somalia and the 19th century changes that occurred in the southern portions of the country.

### History of Islam in Somalia

The Somali people are totally Islamized today and the vast majority observe the Shafi'i Sunnite school of law. Zanzibar and Somalia are the two most thoroughly Islamized countries in tropical Africa.<sup>1</sup> This adherence to Islam has produced in the Somali people as strong a relationship with the Islamic world as with the rest of Africa:

For despite their geographical presence in Africa as well as ethnic, linguistic and cultural affinity with other neighboring African communities, the Somalis identify through their religion, emotionally and culturally with Arabia and the wider world of Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Islam probably arrived on the Somali Peninsula peacefully with Arab merchants sometime in the second half of the 7th century AD.<sup>3</sup> The Horn of Africa was not invaded during the wars of Arab conquests probably because there was no Muslim navy and the lands of Iraq, Syria and the Byzantine provinces of Egypt were a much richer prize. Another reason might be as:

..many Arab authors, claim that the Muslims, who because of Meccan persecution took refuge in what was then Abyssinia during the early years of the Prophet Muhammad's preaching,

passed through Zaila on their way to and from Abyssinia, and that some of these stayed behind on the Zaila Coast.<sup>4</sup>

The safe refuge given by the Abyssinians to the group of Muslims reportedly entreated the Prophet to tell his followers never to attack the Abyssinians so long as they remained nonbelligent. The Arabs have historically had problems distinguishing between Abyssinians (Amharic Ethiopians) and the Cushitic people of the Horn (Somali, Oromo, Afar-Saho, etc.) and since Zaila is a town situated along the Red Sea in an area inhabited by Somalis, then and now, it is possible that there was Islamic conversion among the Somalis during the life of Mohammed.

Somalis claim that they were among the first non-Arab people converted to Islam, but in reality it appears that the total conversion of the Somali people took about 700 years. The Muslim merchants who arrived on the Somali coast brought Islam with them. Even if the merchant was not inclined to preaching, he always brought along a holy teacher to educate his children and attempt to convert the locals. There is archaeological evidence that Islam was present in Somalia at an early period as is shown by two inscriptions on tombstones found in the city of Mogadishu. The tombstones are dated to A H 138 and show that the two women buried there had Islamic names.<sup>5</sup>

In the mid eighth century Shiite Zaydis arrived on the Southern (Benaadir) coast of Somalia and dominated that area for the next two hundred years. As previously stated the Somalis are Sunni Muslims, yet there are indications of some Shiite influence.

The excessive reverence with which Ali, Fatima and their Sada and Ashraf descendants are held among the Somalis today also reveals a strong Shiite influence in the past which centuries of Sunnite teachings could not wipe out altogether.<sup>6</sup>

Of course Sunni Moslems were also arriving in Somalia during this period.

There are three Muslim Sheikhs that are remembered as having brought Islam to Somalia. One was Sheikh Yusuf ibn Ahmad Al-Kownyen who is best known for his system of rendering Arabic vowel function and usage into Somali which makes the reading of the Koran much easier for Somali speakers in around 1150 AD.<sup>7</sup>

Islam was introduced to the hinterlands during the 12th and 13th centuries by learned Somali scholars who had studied at Zabid in the Yaman and the Azhar University in Cairo.

In the Horn of Africa there has been a tension between the Christian Ethiopians and the Muslim populations since the introduction of Islam. First it manifested itself in missionary work, but in the 15th

and 16th centuries the struggle became jihadic in nature. Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, popularly called, Gurey [the left handed one], who is considered to be a Somali, led the great Jihad against Christian Ethiopia and was able to at least nominally Islamize the Ethiopian empire. The soldiers of this jihad were the nomadic people of the Red Sea coast, the majority of which were Somalis. The Islamization of Ethiopia was reversed once Gurey died and his over extended Islamic empire collapsed. But one result of this jihad was that the partially or non-Islamized Somali and Afar groups were converted wholly to Islam.

Meanwhile in the interriverine area of Southern Somalia, between the Juba and Shebelle river (the fertile agricultural area of Somalia), the Hawiyye clan created the Ajuuran empire in the 16 century. The Ajuurans like most of the Somali clans claim descendance from an Arab Sheikh who came to their territory in Somalia and married a daughter of a local clan leader. This claim of Arab descendance is representative of the clans' conversion to Islam and the submission of traditional laws to the Islamic legal system<sup>8</sup> rather than any large influx of Arab "blood" into the Somali population. This same story is found among most of the Islamized people along the East African coast. The Ajuuran centralized state may well have consisted of groupings of Hawiyye Islamic polities, each headed by an imam and held together by clan and religious ties. Whatever the Ajuuran state was, it consolidated the Islamization of the hinterlands of the Benaadir sections of Somalia

Given the jihad in the Northwestern section of Somalia and the Ajuuran theocracy in the South, it could be said that by the 17th century Islam was the only religion of the Somali people. A clear indication of this was the extreme decrease in the amount of slaves coming from Somalia to the Arab world.

The Somali clans in both the South and the North have the same story of conversion to Islam. It involves a battle between the pagan magician and the Muslim Sheikh. The Sheikh finally wins when he invokes the might of God and imprisons the magician forever in a mountain. This story is so widespread in Somali clan lore that it might reflect one particular clan or group's conversion that was popularized by a Sheikh throughout the country.

Often clan lineage ancestors are in effect canonized as saints along with the saints of Islam. The channel of communication to God is as follows: "the ancestor [or saint] stands in the gateway of the Prophet, who in turn, stands at the door of God."<sup>9</sup> The religion of the saints was often associated among the people with the practices of astrology, divination and magic. In fact since the middle ages Somali Sheikhs have traveled from the Benaadir coastal cities spreading Islamic learning and rainmaking ceremonies (both of which were equally important) to the East African Islamic cities.

Islam has provided the cement for the creation of a Somali consciousness. Even though Somalis are ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, the various clans and sub-clans were in constant warfare with each other for the meager resources of the Somali peninsula. Their universal adherence to Islam has helped to forge a unified identity.

One of the more recent Islamic movements in southern Somalia was the Baardheere Jihad. The Baardheere Jihad started out with a few settlements founded on the Jubba river in 1819 and grew to as many as 20,000 followers by 1840. The movement was founded by Sheikh Ibrahim Hassan Jeberow. While some say he was a member of the Alimediya order, others say he was a member of the Qadiriyya. Whatever order he belonged to, he was actually more of a reformer and tried to get back to "pure" Islam. Baardheere produced the only Somali jihad in modern times except for the anti-colonial struggle of Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan.

The Baardheeres prescribed the veiling of women and outlawed the use of tobacco, popular dancing and social intercourse between the sexes. Also, the movement was opposed to the ivory trade because the elephant was considered an "unclean" animal. In the middle of the 1830's, the movement became very militant. At this time they united with Daarood nomads from the northern areas of Somalia who were forced by drought to migrate to the South. They attacked Oromo settlements and sacked Barava in 1840.

It is important to remember that the Baardheeres' jihad occurred at a time of economic expansion in the areas affected by the jihad. The Jihad was defeated by a conglomeration of southern clans. It may well be that their main reason for opposing the Jihad was not religious but economic since the Baardheeres wanted to end the ivory trade which was expanding at the time, and many of the jihad supporters were members of the Daarood clans, whose massive migration was threatening the precarious pastoral ecology in the area. After the jihad the Daarood migrated through Southern Somalia into an area that is today part of Northern Kenya.

The jihad opposed saint worship, clan affiliation and the inheritance of baraka by relatives of the Sheikh. Besides threatening the economic foundations in the area, the jihad also challenged the various power structures and justifications of the local clans' leadership.

This jihad showed the diversity and sophistication of Islam in Somalia, but it failed precisely because it attempted to strike against both the economic base and social legitimacy of the local power structure. It is clear that Sheikh Uways' organization was much more compatible with the economic needs of the local Southern Somali leaders, and was less strict on the question of merging Islamic and traditional African beliefs. It appears he learned a lesson from the Baardheere Jihad and decided it was impossible to launch a movement that challenged both

the economic and political foundations of society. This could well account for the involvement of slave traders and other Arab businessmen as members in the Uwaysiyya. Whether he summed up any of the above is only speculation at this time until more work is done on his writings in Arabic and Somali. But given the jihad's historical proximity to the development of the Uwaysiyya and the fact that it was also developed in Southern Somalia, it would be improbable that Sheikh Uways was unaware of this particular movement.

### History of Southern Somalia in the 19th Century

To understand the rise of Sheikh Uways and the Uwaysiyya, it is important to look at the historical developments in the Southern Somali area. The Somali Benaadir is the only coastal district of East Africa to have for its immediate hinterland a fertile riverine plain. Agriculture was never fully developed in this region because of three very important reasons. First Somali society held and still holds that the nomadic way of life is "noble" and agricultural production is only done by the lower caste persons. The nomadic way of life is very precarious in the Somali peninsula, therefore Somali nomadic clans have a relationship with those involved in agriculture in the riverine area. The agricultural groups, for both social and protection reasons, have attached themselves to a pastoral nomadic clan, this is called *Sheegad*. *Sheegad* was a term originally used when one nomadic group was forced to be the client of another nomadic group in order to be able to use <sup>10</sup> good grazing land, the form of clientage was extended to the agricultural areas. The agriculturalists appear to be a combination of early Bantu speaking peoples and Somalis who had lost their pastoral capital and were forced to become agriculturalists. But by the 19th century all the agriculturalists were thoroughly Somalized, in that they spoke Somali and were Muslims. The nomadic clans use the agricultural groups as an escape valve: they send their excess populations (old people, children, women) during a drought to live in the areas of their client agriculturalists. In this way the herds had only to support a small population, and they were able to maintain some of their herd capital during difficult times. Yet because agriculture was considered such lowly work, the nomadic peoples return to pastoral nomadism as soon as it was possible.

A second reason for the underdevelopment of agriculture in the region was due to a lack of labor. Since status in society was based on the amount of camels, and to a lesser degree cattle, a family owned, people would attempt to leave agricultural production whenever possible. And finally, there was a very small market demand for the agricultural production, a demand that did not encourage increasing



production of surplus. Therefore the area only had to be self sufficient and produce some surplus for their particular nomadic Somali clan and to maintain the small urban populations of the coastal cities.

Since Pharaonic Egypt, trade had existed along the southern Somali coast, but it usually involved exotic woods, hides and ivory. This all changed with the rise of Zanzibar and the accompanying increase in trade by the Busaidi Sultanate at Zanzibar in 1840; the agricultural region of Somalia was suddenly developed. The inter-riverine area started exporting food to East Africa and the Arab peninsula. Slaves were imported to the region and the beginning of plantation agriculture was started. Two of the three reasons for under-utilization of agriculture had now disappeared.

Those who worked the land were considered of lower status, but they still had rights to the land they worked. And as in any client-patron relationship each side had certain rights and responsibilities. Since the main element for prestige in Somali society was the amount of camels owned, land ownership was not that highly desired. The important aspect of land was not the land itself but the relationship between those who tilled it and those who expropriated the surplus. It is not clear to what extent these relationships were changed by the sudden creation of a plantation economy, but suffice to say that the slaves imported to the regions did not have the same rights as the clients. Cotton and sesame seeds were being grown with the use of slave labor by the 1840's and a few Somali plantation owners became rich. It is clear, though, that the wealthy slaveowners along the riverine area never developed into an independent political force at the expense of traditional clan leaders.<sup>11</sup>

As early as 1843 there were records of runaway slave communities in the area. By 1860 the British were patrolling the Indian Ocean in an attempt to stop the slave trade. Of course the Zanzibari slave traders just moved inland along the East African trade routes. But the British were able to slow down the slave trade in the area and increase the cost for each slave.

Another important aspect of the economic situation in Southern Somalia was the non-agricultural long distance trade. It is important to realize that even at its peak, Somalia accounted for at the most, between 1/5 and 1/3 of the Zanzibar-East African trade.<sup>12</sup> Ivory was a big commodity in the 19th century, but the reserves of elephants along the coast in Somalia had been depleted so the need arose to develop the ivory trade further inland. By the middle of the 19th century agriculture was playing a larger role, along with increased demand for hides and exotic animal furs. No one Somali clan was able to monopolize the long distance trade, and because the trade routes had long been established, no foreigners, including Arabs, were able to control it. Clans who

would usually be fighting with each other found themselves working together in certain parts of the long distance trade. This is not to say that some clans did not raid the caravans, but usually if they did raid, they only took a tribute payment for protection of the caravan to the next clan's territory. Islam was the main unifying force in this caravan trade. Often wadaads (Somali Sheikhs or holy men) mediated any of the problems along the routes and between clan territories. With the great increase in trade, more and more Somali clans were forced to work with one another. Regardless of their nomadic pastoralist ideals, no clan wanted to miss a chance "to make a buck".

The southern section of Somalia already had the mixed economy of agriculture and pastoralism, the greatest heterogeneity of clans living in proximity of each other, and now an upsurge in the economy of the area. An excellent example of this increased economic activity was the textile industry along the southern Somali coast which was at first hurt by the import of British or US manufactured cloth, but soon was able to compete because it was discovered cotton could be grown in the riverine areas very cheaply.

While all these changes were going on in Southern Somalia the European powers were becoming dominant in East Africa. In Zanzibar the British informally occupied the area in 1843 and in 1890 officially declared a protectorate over Zanzibar.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile Zanzibar, actually the British, had ceded the Benaadir to Italy in the same year. At first the Italians were hesitant to stop the slave trade, because they did not want to stop the economic development of the riverine area and because they were having a hard time getting Italians to settle the region. If Italians worked the land themselves, they were looked down upon by the Somalis as slaves, therefore the proper colonialist needed to own slaves in order to have any status.<sup>14</sup> But much pressure was placed by the British on the Italians and soon the Italians were effectively limiting slavery and the accompanying economic development of the agricultural regions of the Benaadir. Another important factor was that British and Italians competed with each other for the use of Somali ports. Each imperialist power exacerbated various clan rivalries in order to secure access to certain ports. Thus the Europeans, together with the invading Ethiopians, were effectively able to stop the economic development of the inter-riverine area and increase the inter-clan rivalry.

As European imperialism was carving up East Africa, the Somalis were faced with another danger and that was from Christian Ethiopia. Ethiopia under Menelik started moving into Somalia in 1886.<sup>15</sup> The British signed a treaty with the Ethiopians<sup>16</sup> and the Italians did nothing to help the Somalis. Therefore many Somalis felt that they were being squeezed by various Christian powers in alliance against them. This summation gained much support in Islamic Somalia



because of the British attack on the Mahdi in the Sudan during the same period and the general rise of pan-Islamic consciousness in the Muslim world. The Ethiopians were primarily motivated by economic necessity due to the long drought in the country. They were not a modern imperialist army and therefore tended to loot and pillage in order to survive. They took livestock, even camels, which they refused to eat, but were used as negotiating tools with other Somali clans. This forced more and more Somalis to leave the areas the Ethiopians had conquered and many Somali refugees arrived in the Southern part of Somalia.

On the one hand, the Somalis never faced the kind of persecution that the Shona of South Africa or the Kikuyu of Kenya faced by the British, but the fact that the colonialists were determined to cut up the Somali traditional lands into at least five pieces added fuel to anti western sentiment. On the other hand, during the 1890's, especially due to the Mahdist and other jihadist movements, a pan-Islamic sentiment was in the air in Somalia. These two elements plus the disruption of the economic growth in southern Somalia all added to the anger the Somali people were developing towards Christian colonialism in all forms.

Sheikh Uways ibn Muhammad al-Barawi al-Qadiri, was born in Brava (or al-Barawa) in the spring of 1847. He was born to a poor family of the Tunni clan. In Somalia various clans are divided into "noble", "not-noble" and "outcast." This paper will not go into the differences among these particular Somali clans, suffice it to say that Sheikh Uways' lineage was less than "noble". His background has been described as being from "client agricultural communities rather than powerful nomadic clans."<sup>17</sup> He apparently was a brilliant student in Koranic school in Brava and studied Arabic, religious subjects and Islamic sciences with two local Sheikhs. One of his teachers, Sheikh Muhammad Zayini al-Shanshi, was a member of the Qadiriyya, and he encouraged Uways to continue his sufi studies in Baghdad.

In 1870 Uways arrived in Baghdad where he studied under the Qadiri master Sayyid Mustafa ibn al-Sayyid Salaman al-Kaylani, the son of a principal Sheikh of the order, Salaman al-Kaylani, who was a descendant of the prophet. This relationship was to be very important in Uways' development as a pan-Islamic leader.

The Qadiriyya tariqa was founded by the Baghdadi saint Sayyid Abd al-Qadir Jilani who died in AD 1166. This was the first sufi order in Islam. Being older and more established, the Qadiriyya had a larger membership in Somalia. It also tended to be less puritanical than the other sufi orders in Somalia. Records indicate that the Qadiriyya was established in Harrar before 1508.<sup>18</sup> In Somalia it has long been an educational institution devoted to Islamic literacy rather than propagandist tradition. The Qadiriyya is split into two powerful

branches which reflect the North/South division in Somali society. The northern branch, the Zeyli'ya, named after Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Zeyli'i, who died in the Ogaden region of Somalia in 1883. In the south Sheikh Uways was the most important leader of the order. The sufi order transcended the contradiction between North and South.

In the 18th century the revivalist movement in the wider Islamic world was having an impact in Somalia and the Qadiriyya was being accepted by more and more Somalis even in the interior. The Qadiriyya seems to have made a transition from just being primarily a sufi order to that of converting large sections of East Africa to Islam.

In 1880, two separate Muslim brotherhoods were making progress in East Africa. The larger and more influential was the Uwaysi branch of the Qadiri order named for its Somali leader, Sheikh Uways Bin Muhammad al-Barawi. They [sufi orders] accounted for a considerable expansion of Islam in Tanganyika, southern Somalia, eastern Zaire, parts of Mocambique and Malawi, the Comoro Islands, and northwest Madagascar.<sup>19</sup>

Since the middle ages, Ulamas and Sheikhs from Brava and Mogadishu traveled to the coastal cities of East Africa. They served in dual roles as masters of rain-making ceremonies and as "bush Teachers, teaching prayers, the Koran and elementary Arabic."<sup>20</sup> Therefore with the increased importance of the sufi orders, it is not unexpected that the leadership of any widespread order in Islamic East Africa would come from Brava or Mogadishu. The last half of the 19th century saw a change in the holy man who traveled up and down the East African coast. These religious men travelled a great deal more than their predecessors, their religious horizons had grown since most now were educated outside of East Africa, and they were better trained in the written sciences.<sup>21</sup>

Also at this time in Somalia, the power relations between the nomadic clan leader and the wadaad (Somali holy man) were in the process of changing. With the spread of Islamic revivalism and the changing economic relations in the Benaadir, the power of the wadaad had increased. The Baardalle Jihad is an excellent example of the rise to power of the holy men. The sufi orders were preaching against clan affiliations, labeling such loyalties as impious acts.<sup>22</sup> The combination of the need for more clan cooperation, first in developing the economy of Southern Somalia, and later, in fighting the various colonial incursions into Somalia; and the rise of pan-Islamic movements in the Islamic world all contributed to the new power of the wadaad was. It is important here to remember that Somalis always identified with the Islamic world as much as they did with the rest of Africa. Though in

the case of the 19th century Islamic revivalism there was no contradiction between the two. Whereas Sheikh Mohammad Abdulle Hassan combined the warrior and the wadaad in his leadership, Uways was clearly only a wadaad, since his primary weapon was the word:

...The emergence of organized sufism allowed these religious men to exercise autocratic powers unknown to secular men in the fragmented politics of clan organization<sup>23</sup>

Even though the Qadiriyya was much less hierarchical than the other orders (the Salihyya for example had a leader in the Arab world that all members of the order must obey), still for the first time the wadaad had an organization that could rival that of the clan leader and the sufi orders' struggle against clanism helped to erode the clan leaders power base. Also, the loyalty of a disciple to a sufi leader is much more intense than the loyalty the Somali would give his clan leader.

The Uwaysiyya branch of the Qadiriyya was quite successful in converting many groups in East Africa. Part of its ability to do so was in the fact that it was much more accommodating to local customs. The Qadiriyya often used banners and drums, both of which are frowned upon by more orthodox Muslims.<sup>24</sup>

Another important change that was increasing membership in the Qadiriyya was its appeal to both the poor, ex slaves and the disenfranchised of society and the elites who had been displaced by colonialism. In Uwaysiyya settlements in Southern Somalia there were many ex-slaves and those considered outcast by the "noble" Somali. Remember Uways himself was a Tunni, a clan considered "less than noble". Muhammad was now seen by the poor as the prophet of the downtrodden.<sup>25</sup> Europeans became more and more worried as Islam, which in many areas of East Africa had been the religion of the elites, now was clearly attracting the have-nots, especially as it took on more and more the cry "Africa for Africans".<sup>26</sup>

Uways made the required Hajj to Mecca and Medina and visited various important saints' tombs in the Hijaz and Yemen. After his studies he stopped at the British enclave on Aden and then returned to Somalia in 1881. He returned to the Benaadir Coast and became the most important religious figure in Brava and Southern Somalia. He set up settlements in the southern interior of Somalia, the main settlement being at Biyole, near Tiyyole, on the upper reaches of the Juba River. He started a mosque-school which became the most important Qadiriyya education center in Southern Somalia and possibly in all of East Africa.<sup>27</sup> Sheikh Uways composed many mystical poems in Arabic. But he also wrote poetry in Somali and his Somali poetry is the first recorded Somali literature written in Arabic script.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly,

when the Somali government was trying to decide on a type of script for the Somali language in the late 1960's, the pro-Arabic forces were using Sheikh Uways' poetry as an example of Somali written in Arabic script. The irony is that the current Somali script is not capable of satisfactorily writing the southern dialect of "Mai", the dialect spoken by Sheikh Uways.<sup>29</sup> Sheikh Uways followed a long tradition of Somali holy men, wadaad, travelling to East Africa and spreading the Islamic sciences. With the 19th century rebirth of the Sufi orders, this educating role included proselytizing of Muslims for the Qadiriyya and bringing new peoples into Islam through the tariqas.

From the early 1880's to his death in 1909, Sheikh Uways was involved in missionary activities in the south of Somalia and throughout East Africa. This was facilitated in the early period by the fact that the Benaadir, Kenyan and Tanganyikan coasts were until 1892 and 1888 respectively, under nominal Zanzibari control.<sup>30</sup> Two hagiographies of Sheikh Uways, *Al-Jawhar al-Nafis* and *Jala al-Aynayn*, list 150 of Uways' followers. The names show the varied groups among whom Uway's fame had spread--in the Comoro and Bajun Islands and the Ogaden of Somalia from Zanzibar to Hadramawt; among the clerical families like the Aliwis of Mogadishu and Lamus; among Bantu speakers, perhaps from inner Tanganyika; among Swahili speakers, possibly among the coastal Yao. The Missionaries of Sheikh Uways were even found in Java.<sup>31</sup>

After his first trip to Zanzibar, he made his mission center outside of Somalia in the capital:

...he cemented good relations with the sovereigns of the island, beginning with Barghash bin Sa'id al-Bu Sa'idi (to 1888) and with his successors Khalifa b. Sa'id (1888-90), Hamid (or Ahmad) b. Thuwayni b. Sa'id (1893-6) and with later rulers.<sup>32</sup>

Besides good relations with the Zanzibari ruler, by 1896 the Italians were well entrenched in Benaadir and made it impossible to maintain a permanent center there. The rulers of Zanzibar gave him food from their own table, provided him houses and money to continue his ministry. Both Barghash and Hamid ibn Thuwayni are listed as sufis of moderate rank in the Uwaysiyya, and this is very surprising since both men were adherents of the Ibadiyya sect and of Umani descent. For them to be members of a Sunni Qadiriyya order would require very special circumstances. B. G. Martin feels the circumstance is a political necessity. From his base in Zanzibar Uways moved to the mainland with his missionary activity and people adhering to the Uwaysiyya are found as far as the Eastern Congo. German sources state that Uwaysiyya movement penetrated the mainland areas near Zanzibar and

some of the Tanganyikan ports in the late 1880's.<sup>33</sup> The German records state that:

They frequently ended in the phase of *La ilaha illa llah* (there is no god, but God) chanted by a circle or *halaqa* of Qadiris sitting in a mosque, swaying together to the beat of a drum and singing the *qasidas* of Shaykh Uways.<sup>34</sup>

It is interesting that again the use of drums is found in the religious ceremonies of the Uwaysiyya, especially in areas where drums are essential to the Bantu culture.

By the late 1880's various Arab ruling classes were being disenfranchised in East Africa. These people including the two famous Arab slave runners Tippu Tib and Rumliza, who were losing their position, income and power to the encroaching British and Germans. They definitely were unwilling to capitulate:

Between 1884 and 1888...the policy of the Arabs changed abruptly all over Central Africa. What were the connecting threads in this movement, and in particular what part was played in it by Sultan Barghash bin Said at Zanzibar will probably never exactly be known. The fact that the same thing happened in so many different places, must, I think, be taken as proof of central planning and, since there was no direct communications, say between the Arabs of Nyasa and those of Tanganyika, the planning must have taken place at the coast...the Arabs were now aiming at political power, and they were seeking to drive out the Europeans.<sup>35</sup>

A. Nimtz in his book on Islamic tariqas in Tanzania comes to a similar conclusion but specifically points to Sheikh Uways:

The Qadiri leader (Sheikh Uways) was invited to Zanzibar at the same time that European imperialism was looking covetously at the Busa'id empire. Hedged in by foreigners, and under constant pressure from them, Sayyid Barghash was ready to use all the political weapons he would find as a means of rallying his old supporters among the Sunni Shafiis of inner Tanganyika

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The Uwaysiyya was the organization that connected all these regions. The incident of the Muslim coup in Buganda in 1888 is a good example. the leader of this coup was a trader who was also a leading member of the Qadiriyya in Buganda. He was a close friend of Barghash, sultan



of Zanzibar and he was able to oppose the Europeans and their missionaries in Buganda for a couple of years. When he returned to Zanzibar he was heavily fined, but there are indications the punishment was for show only.<sup>37</sup>

Sultan Barghash was also helping the Islamic insurrection against the Germans at the coast, and it is quite possible that his capitulation to the European powers was superficial. Whether the Uwaysiyya was involved can only be speculated, but it is the one organization that was found in all the areas fighting against the colonialists. And given the fact that the Zanzibari and coastal Arabs have had a long relationship with Barava and the Somali wadaad's from there, it could well be that Sheikh Uways was not just the holy man, but the most important leader of the anti-colonial struggle in East Africa.

In German controlled Tanganyika, the Uwaysiyya appears to have played an important role. From 1905 to 1907 the Maji Maji rebellion which was an uprising in the southern regions of Tanzania occurred. For the first time it united Africans of diverse ethnicity in opposition to colonial rule. Islam was reported to have made its greatest gains directly after the defeat of the Maji Maji, especially among the Ngindo and Pogoro people.<sup>38</sup> The main reasons for this increase are possibly the fact that Muslim teachers, probably of the Uwaysiyya (since they were quite active in the area) helped spread the revolt. But more important was the fact that the prevailing ideology of the Maji Maji was animist and with its defeat a new ideology was needed in order to continue the struggle against colonialism. The Germans were increasingly afraid of the spread of Islam in the area and this was due in part to the role Islam played in the Maji Maji rebellion. But more importantly, Germans saw that with the Mahdi in the Sudan and the Jihad against the British in Northern Somalia, Islam was becoming synonymous with a call for African nationalism in East Africa.

Sheikh Uways was constantly sending followers into the mainland across from Zanzibar which included German Tanganyika. As more and more support was being built for the sufi order, the Germans were becoming nervous about the Uwaysiyya. This culminated in the incident referred to in German documents as the "letter from Mecca". The letter contained clearly anti-colonial statements and was an attempt to instigate struggle against the German colonialists.

The governor of the colony, von Rechenberg, suspected that there was associated with the letter's dissemination an Islamic movement whose ritual was a 'zikri or dervish dance.' Furthermore, he thought the movement was pan-Islamic: "The trail leads to Barawa on the Italian Somali Coast....This fits in



with the view that Barawa Arabs....are the bearers of the movement.<sup>39</sup>

Some German colonial authorities did not believe the Qadiriyya was involved or that significant in the area, but the Qadiriyya was in the town of Mpapwa when the letter was circulated in 1908.<sup>40</sup> It appears that at least two of those accused of circulating the letter were part of the Uwaysiyya and the Germans began trying to suppress the brotherhood. One might conclude that suppression from the colonialist was a guarantee of longevity for a sufi order.

The Germans debated the impact of Islam in the area, but the district officer at Bagamoyo stated:

Although I should not like to go so far [as] to impute to Islam a staunch anti-European and aggressive tendency as an intrinsic characteristic...I am in favor of any measures suitable to impair and stop Islamic teachings which impede any healthy cultural progress, for the benefits of the Christian and Germanic Culture.<sup>41</sup>

In 1911 the Germans saw the Muslim reaction in Dar es Salaam to the Italian invasion of the Ottoman empire. Mass protests were staged in coastal and upcountry towns in opposition to the invasion. At Zanzibar, six to seven thousand Muslims demonstrated, many bands of Arabs and Swahilis had holy flags with them. Flags and banners were used almost exclusively by Muslims in the Qadiriyya in East Africa.

One important link between Sheikh Uways and the pan-Islamic movement is that the father of Uways' teacher, Salman ibn Ali (1843-1895) was on very close terms with Abd al-Hamid II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. It is very possible that the Sultan used his connections with Uways to further the pan-Islamic movement in East Africa. This could also explain the explosion of Islamic sentiment with the European invasion of the Ottoman Empire a few years later.

Sheikh Zahur ibn Muhamad, originally from Brava, and a khalif of Sheikh Uways, was responsible for many conversions to Islam by first teaching the *dhikr* ritual in the Tabor region. He became increasingly popular with the African masses of the towns, especially the Manyema who had been former slaves. During a successful rainmaking ritual, he angered the Arab elites in the area and was exiled to Zanzibar by the Germans.<sup>42</sup>

This raises the interesting question of who were the followers of the Uwaysiyya? In various parts of East Africa the disenfranchised Arab elites joined the order as seen by Tippu Tib and the Sultans of Zanzibar, but the order apparently also appealed to many of the lowest

members of the social order. From Somalia to the Eastern Congo many former slaves were Islamized by the order. Various persons joined for various reasons, but the unifying element, besides the belief in God, was the anti-imperialist stand of the order.

In summation the spread of the Uwaysiyya from Brava to Zanzibar to the Tanganyikan mainland and from there to the Eastern Congo establishes the order as a major Muslim movement in East Africa. In 1883 the Uwaysiyya reached the coastal region across from Zanzibar and was responsible for massive conversions to Islam in many areas. After the death of Uways, the order continued to spread. In Rwanda and Burundi, and through the Congo-Tanzanian border region, the order was called the Muridi movement. The relationship of its leaders and the Khalifas from Tanzania, Ujiji, Dar es Salam and Zanzibar show that they are all connected.<sup>43</sup> It is also clear that the Uwaysiyya was more than strictly a "religious movement"; it included anti-imperialist ideology and actions. In fact it seemed to grow in direct proportions to the encroachment of European colonialism.

One point cannot be stressed too much and that is the importance of viewing any Islamic movement that includes political action as still essentially a religious movement.

Islam is the religion which has most completely confounded and intermixed the two powers so that all the acts of civil and political life are regulated more or less by religious law.<sup>44</sup>

The idea of "give unto Caesar what is Caesar's" is a Christian concept, not an Islamic one. The line between political and religious is indeed very fine in Islam.

I am stressing this because in the literature Uways is portrayed as either a very good holy man or a great pan-Islamic political leader. I tend to believe he was both, and that in Islam they are in no way mutually exclusive.

Many scholars feel that the Uwaysiyya was a millenarian movement led by the charisma (baraka) of the great mystic Sheikh Uways who called himself "Friend of the Time".<sup>45</sup> Most of Sheikh Uways' writings have not been researched by scholars, and until this is done, I am not sure how much of a millenarian movement it was. But there is evidence to show that this movement was revivalist among the already Islamized populations of East Africa, but it also converted to Islam large sections of people in the area. As in most of the revivalist movements of the period, the success of the colonial powers was blamed on the Muslim laxness:

These movements tend to justify the erosion of the Muslim Position vis-a-vis the Christians on grounds of divine displeasure--Muslims were allowed to suffer under the Christian infidel because they were under divine disfavor brought by their wickedly sinful way in wandering...away from the Straight Path  
46

The Uwaysiyya went further, as seen in the Islamic conversions after the Maji Maji Rebellion, to show those who were not Islamized or only partially that Islam practiced correctly was their only defense against the colonial powers. And given the large numbers and varied class and ethnic groups who joined the Uwaysiyya, Islam was perceived as an effective belief system that would enable the people to fight the colonialist. Islam had also once been the belief primarily of the traders and the elites in various societies of East Africa, but with the spread of the Uwaysiyya, Islam became the religion of the East African masses.

Was the Uwaysiyya revivalist? The Uwaysiyya and the Qadiriyya as a whole tended to be less "puritanical" or "fundamentalist" than many of the other Islamic movements of the period. As previously stated certain Bantu customs, like drums and banners were allowed within the tenets of the Uwaysiyya and undoubtedly this helped in the massive conversions to Islam. It is important to realize that Sheikh Uways was a Somali and neither drums nor banners were ever a part of the religious life of the Somali. Therefore these items were definite innovations added during the spread of the order in East Africa. It seemed that the Uwaysiyya was actually revivalist in that it "revitalized" all of East Africa's interest in Islam, but very innovative in that it allowed for certain cultural differences and changes among those that embraced it.

The death of Sheikh Uways at the hands of members of a rival tariqa, the Salihiya, raises some interesting questions. Sheikh Uways was preaching in an area where the Salihiya was quite strong. Some newly converted Jidle clansmen killed the Sheikh and 26 of his 27 disciples. Those who killed this holy man "truly repented of their deeds"<sup>47</sup> But their remorse was not shared by Sayyid Mohammad Abdulle Hassan who wrote this verse after learning of the holy man's death:

Rejoice, rejoice and shout with gladness  
Behold, at long last, when we slew the old wizard  
the rains began to come!<sup>48</sup>

For centuries Somali clans have killed each other over grazing rights, water holes and camels, but for the first time the deadly clashes

involved religious differences within Islam. But the intense hostility between the Salihiya (an offshoot of Ahmadiya) and the Uwaysiyya was based on much bigger issues than whether a dead saint could be an intercessionary to God. Sheikh Uways who was able to unite many different ethnic groups and classes under one sufi order, was killed by fellow Somalis.

The Salihiya was started by the northern Somali, Sayyid Mohammad Abdulle Hassan, who in 1894 went to Mecca and became ordained as a Salihiya khalif. The Salihiya was popular in Arabia and its popularity spread along the Red Sea area into Northern Somalia. The Sayyid returned to Somalia and started preaching a very puritanical form of Islam. His main supporters were his mother's and his father's clans, and he soon launched a jihad against the British.

As the Uwaysiyya was gaining much support in Southern Somalia and East Africa; and in Northern Somalia the other branch of the Qadiriyya, the Zeyli'ya, still had clout among various Northern Somali clans; the Salihiya was trying to survive in its battle with British colonialism and for the hearts of the Somalis. Even though Sayyid Mohammad Abdulle Hassan (dubbed the Mad Mullah, first by the Qadiriyya and later by the British) fought a very successful war against the British and is considered by some as the father of Somali nationalism; in essence his Jihad was based almost exclusively on clan affiliation. And this is logical because the economic changes that had occurred in Southern Somalia had only slightly affected the North. The majority of people in the very dry and inhospitable north were still nomadic pastoralist, dependent on clan relations to survive.

But this led to a confrontation with Sheikh Uways, who as previously stated was of less than noble lineage, from the more economically and socially integrated southern area and born in the city Brava that has historically had strong ties with the rest of the East African Coast. The confrontation started out in poetry, a traditional Somali form of struggle:

Uways wrote this poem to Sayyid Muhammad:

Blessed are Muhammad and his family  
 Turn to them in every calamity  
 The person guided by Muhammad's law  
     will not follow the faction of Satan  
 Who deem it lawful to spill the blood of the learned  
     who take cash and women too: they are anarchists  
 They hinder the study of sciences  
     Like law and grammar. they are the Karramiya  
 To every dead Shaykh like al-Gilani  
     They deny access to God, like the Janahiya

Don't follow those men with big shocks of hair  
     A coiffure like the Wahhabiya!  
 In our land, they are a sect of dogs  
     Having permission, they dally with women  
 Even their own mothers, which is nothing but incest  
     They follow their own subjective opinions  
 And no book of ours!  
     Their light is from the Devil  
 They deny God at their dhikir  
     In word and action they are unbelievers  
 Like their game of saying "God?"  
     "Lodge a complaint with Him!"  
 How they are glorified by the Northerners  
     Great clamor they make, a moaning and groaning!  
 A noise like the barking of curs  
     In divorce cases they augment the oath  
 But they abridge the religious ceremonies  
     They've gone astray and make others deviate on earth  
 By land and sea amongst the Somalis  
     Have they no reason or understanding?  
 Be not deceived by them  
     But flee as from a disaster  
 From their infamy and unbelief.

And Sayyid Mohammed Abdulle Hassan's answer was:

A word to the backing apostates  
 When the holy separated from the wicked,  
     As deer from gazelle  
 God! Pardon us! how is it / that you  
 Absconded with Bad-eyes?  
 Forsaking your lawful wives  
     How have you opted to cohabit with the hairy Dog?  
 And it never fills you with revulsion  
     that you should continue to skin the pigs  
 In addition to degrading, how is it  
     That you earned hell?  
 What on earth! Since when did you turn  
     A progeny of the Evil One?  
  
 Why've you gone astray  
     From the Prophet way, the Straight Path?  
 Why is the Truth so plain  
     So hidden from you?<sup>49</sup>



The above are only samples of many of their "battle" poems. In the future a more in depth study of the poetry could help shed more light on their particular struggle. But from the above it is clear that there was much antagonism between the two. Uways calls Hassan a dog among many other things and Hassan also accuses Uways of "skinning pigs" and working for the devil. Hassan accuses Uways of collaborating with the British which is most certainly untrue. As shown above the Uwaysiyya fought the British in East Africa and Uwaysiyya was not even present in the areas controlled by the British in Somalia. Possibly the Zaili'ya was collaborating with the British (it is not clear), but most probably Hassan was just trying to stir up the anger of his followers.

The line in Hassan's poem about the gazelle and the deer comes from the Somali belief that the two never graze together. This is very possibly a criticism of Uways' widely varied following as opposed to Hassan's pure "noble" Somali one. The skinning of the pig could represent the fact that drums and banners were being used in the various Uwaysiyya rituals, something that is found to be an abhorrence to the "noble" Somali Salihyya.

But of more significance is that Sheikh Uways clearly shows the nature of the struggle in the line "How they are glorified by the Northerners." The struggle was a north/south one. This struggle was no longer just over water or grass for grazing; it has been elevated to the question of political/religious power. In the murder of Sheikh Uways one finds the beginnings of the clan political struggles that plagued Somalis then and still plague the modern Somali nation.

Somalists tend to state that the Sufi movements of the Benaadir were not anti-imperialist.

Throughout the Benaadir, however, the tariqas had little to do with the active opposition to colonialism.<sup>50</sup>

In the Benaadir, however, the tariqas for the most part had little to do with the active opposition to colonialism.<sup>51</sup>

They cite the fact that the leaders were of lowly birth, the capitulation in the case of Uways of certain Tunni clan leaders to the Italians, and the fact that a full scale jihad against the colonialist was not launched from the South like the one led by Sheikh Hassan in the North.

The majority of the history written about the turn of the century Somalia is centered around Hassan's jihad and usually Uways' "claim to fame" is that he was killed by a follower of Hassan. This is in part due to the fact that Hassan was in the North and his struggle was chronicled by the British in English. It also behooved British



imperialism to show the struggle of Hassan as a Somali national struggle, because it would have been embarrassing to admit that it took them almost 20 years to subdue a few Northern Somali clans. The most interesting information about Uways was discovered when Arabic sources were consulted. The Colonialists in East Africa knew that there was some organized anti-colonial force, but were never able to concretely prove that it was the Uwasiyya. The reason for the lack of colonial records on the Uwasiyya is that the tariqa was well organized and able to keep much from the Europeans. The Uwasiyya was important in the formation of modern Somali political parties. Many of the founding fathers of these parties were members of the Uwasiyya. An example is that Abdulkadir Sakhaweddin, the founder of the Somali Youth League (S. Y. L.), the most nationalist of the Somali parties, is not only Uwasi, but the grandson of Sheikh Uways.<sup>52</sup> Besides the lack of documentation in English on Uways there is a tendency in Somali historiography to see all Somalis as nomadic pastoralists and negate the very different economic development that was occurring in the Southern part of Somalia, a development that gave birth to a pan-Islamic movement led by Sheikh Uways.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hersi, Ali Abdirahman. "The Arab Factor in Somali History", PhD UCLA 1977 p.109

<sup>2</sup>Ibid p.110

<sup>3</sup>Ibid p.139

<sup>4</sup>Ibid p. 78

<sup>5</sup>Ibid p.113

<sup>6</sup>Ibid p.115

<sup>7</sup>Lewis, I. M. *Islam In Tropical Africa*, London, 1966 p.28

<sup>8</sup>Cassanelli, Lee. "The Benaadir Past: Essays in Southern Somali History", PhD University of Wisconsin p.24

<sup>9</sup>Lewis, I M. *Islam In Tropical Africa*, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup>Cassanelli states that *Shegaad* in the agricultural areas represented the subordination of the agricultural clans, but Mohamed H. Mukhtar, Professor of Islamic and African History at Fiti University, Kebangsaan, Malaysia, disagrees. Dr. Mukhtar states: "The *Sheegad* occurs in migrant tribes from the north and south-west who because of droughts and wars move from their original places seeking protection and asylum. Southerners were used to offering that kind of refuge and cohabitation to the migrant people of the region throughout their history. This

doesn't negate the fact that the migrants could maintain their previous identity as well as their occupation." (personal communication).

11 Cassanelli, Lee. *Shaping of Somali Society*, Philadelphia, 1982 p.172

12 These could be over-inflated, see *Shaping of Somali Society*, p.160

13 El Sheikh, M. "State, Cloves and Planters", Phd Dis., UCLA p. 62

14 Pankhurst, Sylvia. *Ex-Italian Somaliland*, London, 1951, p.42

15 Touval, Saadia. *Somali Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1963, p.43.

16 Cassanelli, Lee. *The Shaping of Somali Society*, p. 30

17 Ibid, p.236

18 Pouwels, Randall L. "Islam and Islamic Leadership in the Coastal Communities of Eastern Africa, 1700-1914", Phd. Dis., UCLA 1979, p. 461

19 Martin, B. G. *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa*, London, 1976, p.152

20 Pouwels, opt. cit, p.462

21 Ibid, p.461

22 Hersi, Ali, Op. Cit., Phd Dis., UCLA, 1977, p. 249

23 Samatar, Said. "Poetry in Somali Politics", Phd Dis., Northwestern, 1979, p.192

24 Nimtz, August. *Islam and Politics in East Africa*, Minneapolis, 1980, p. 101

25 Pouwels, R. Op. Cit., p.595

26 Ibid, p. 597

27 Hersi, Ali. Op. Cit. p. 291

28 Ibid, p. 251

29 Martin, B.G. "Muslim Politics and Resistance to Colonial Rule: Sheikh Uways b. Muhammad al-Barawi and the Qadiriyya Brotherhood in East Africa, "JAH, X, 3, 1969, p.471.

30 Ibid, p.479

31 Ibid, p.477

32 Ibid

33 Ibid, p.474

34 Ibid

35 Martin, B G. Op. Cit., p.167

36 Nimtz, Op. Cit, p.73

37 Martin, B. G. JAH, 1969, p.476

38 Nimtz Op. Cit, p.12

39 Ibid, p.73

40 Ibid, p.76

41 Ibid, p.80

42 Ibid

43 Martin, B. G. JAH, 1969 p.485

44 Gellner, Ernest, *Muslim Society*, London, 1981 p.1

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45 Samatar, Said. "Poetry in Somali Politics", p.182

46 Ibid, p.181

47 Ibid, p.186

48 Ibid, p.187

49 Ibid, p.198

50 Ibid, p.185

51 Ibid

52 Per Dr. Mohamed Mukhtar