

A Poem about Pride and the Religious Poetic Heritage of Brava

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The Town of Brava

Brava is situated on what is now the Benadir coast of Somalia, the Indian Ocean seaboard south of Mogadishu. One of its unique characteristics is that its language, which is called Chimiini or Chimbalazi, a Bantu language that is not intelligible to Somali speakers, is spoken only in Brava. Chimiini gives evidence of the rich cultural diversity that exists in Somalia but remains insufficiently studied. However, it has also marked the Bravanese as a minority in Somalia and this has negatively affected them both before and after the outbreak of the civil war, especially from 1991 onwards. Chimiini is now an endangered language.¹

Brava's existence as an urban settlement goes back for over one thousand years, but our knowledge of its past history is limited. It was – quite literally – put on the map by the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi (1100-1166 CE), who, residing in Sicily at the court of the Norman King Roger II, compiled a major geographical treatise encompassing the whole world known at that time. In his *Book of the travels of one who cannot travel*

himself, Brava is mentioned for the first time with its modern name, even though it is spelled as “Berouat”.

The Islamisation of Brava was almost certainly completed by the late 9C. History shows that, in times of political or religious persecution, dissident groups would often flee Arabia (especially Yemen and the Persian Gulf) and settle in East Africa, bringing with them their cultural and linguistic heritage but very soon being integrated into the local communities. This is also visible in Brava, some of whose families, while closely intermarried with the local Tunni, remember having immigrated from other parts of the western Indian Ocean circuit. From olden days and until today, Brava is known for its Islamic (Sufi) learning and has, for this reason, been especially targeted for recent violence by the militias of Somalia's *al-Shabaab* movement, which uses Islamic fundamentalist ideas to justify its violent participation in the struggle over the Somali state and land- and other resources.

The 15C marked the peak in the development and prosperity of all the coastal towns of East Africa. The Portuguese left records of impressive, well-built cities



with stone houses several storeys high. Maritime trade was flourishing as part of a carefully maintained network that encompassed Arabia, Persia and Western India. The towns were independent city-states, each of them ruled either by councils of elders (as was the case for Brava) or by dynasties of sultans (as at Mogadishu and, further south, Kilwa). These small city-states perched on East Africa's Indian Ocean shoreline were socially stratified, with the members of the upper classes, men and women, enjoying more wealth and claiming prestigious ancestries, and the presence, certainly in the second half of the 19C, of slaves.² Islam was firmly established and, during this century, peace reigned all along the coast.

This situation changed dramatically with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16C. The Portuguese had two main aims: to monopolise the Indian Ocean trade and to extract, by force if necessary, as much tribute as possible from the coastal towns. In this period, many coastal towns, including Brava, were attacked and looted. A period of economic stagnation, which lasted beyond the end of the Portuguese military presence in East Africa, came to an end with the rise of Sayyid Said, Sultan of Oman since 1806, who settled in Zanzibar and boosted the economy of his African dominions, encouraging both the Indian Ocean slave trade and trade with Europe and the United States.

The last decade of the 19C saw great political changes on the coast: Zanzibar became a British Protectorate and the Sultan granted the administration of the Benadir towns to Italy. Italian travellers and officials arrived in Brava and the town, which had previously been under a purely nominal control by the Zanzibar Sultans, lost its autonomy. The colonial period had begun and Brava became part of Italian Somaliland. When Britain defeated Italy in the Horn of Africa in 1941, Italian Somaliland first came under British military rule and then became a U.N. Trust territory, which Italy was charged with preparing for political independence (1960). After a period of civilian administrations (1960-1969), Somalia came under military rule, which ended with a civil war that drove many Bravanese out of their beloved town and Somalia as a whole. Whatever pockets of peace may exist in Somalia today, Brava has not been returned to the Bravanese.

Didactic Religious Poetry in Chimiini: The *Steenzi*

The most prestigious genre of religious poetry in Brava is that of the *shteenzi* (plur. *steenzi*). The term itself is related to the Swahili *utendi* or *utenzi*, which refers to a genre of epic and religious didactic poetry that has existed on the Swahili coast of East Africa for several centuries.³ The *shteenzi* of Brava has its own characteristics. Its hey-day was the period between

the 1880s and 1920s and it appears that the *ulema* (Islamic religious scholars) of Brava composed this didactic poetry in the vernacular (Chimiini) rather than Arabic because they feared that the presence and rule of Christian foreigners required boosting their people's knowledge of, and allegiance to Islam.

What is certain is that the Bravanese consider this genre of religious poetry in Chimiini, which is normally chanted and a regular part of religious gatherings (especially those associated with the Sufi brotherhoods), at the core of their cultural heritage and identity and regard the *steenzi* as the quintessential representation of the proper and devout conduct to which the Bravanese aspire. Women actively participate in Islamic learning in Brava and they are the ones who usually sing the *shteenzi*, whether individually or in gatherings.

The text given below is an example of one short *shteenzi*, one that warns against pride and its pitfalls for Muslims who want to lead upright lives. It is part of an Anthology of the religious poetry of Brava currently being prepared by the authors of this article.

The author of this poem is Sheikh Maallim (or Moallim) Nur Haji Abdulqadir (1881 – 2 August 1959 CE; 1299 AH – 27 Muharram 1379). Better known as Maallim Nuuri, he was native to Brava and a member of the local Tunni community, bilingual in Somali (spoken by the Tunni) and Chimiini, the language of the town of Brava. Maallim Nuuri's family house was located in Brava's Biruni neighborhood. His father was a prominent leader of the Tunni Dafarad and his brother Menye Mudhir (better known as Aw Menye) later also became a leader of this Tunni clan. Sheikh

Maallim Nuuri studied under Sheikh Qasim al-Barawi and Sheikh Nureni Mohamed Sabir al-Hatimi. Like the latter, he belonged to the Ahmadiyya Tariqa, and it appears that there was no inkling of antagonism between these Sufi religious brotherhoods in Brava in this period. Maallim Nuuri composed many of his poems in the last part of his life.

One of his major achievements is the translation of a key classical text of Islamic jurisprudence according to the Shafi'i school, the "Matn al-zubad fi al-fiqh" by Sheikh Ahmad bin Raslan (d. 1441 CE), from Arabic into Chimiini verse. Maallim Nuuri's *Zubadi*, which is a summary and has the same metre as Sheikh Raslan's "Az-Zubad,"⁴ lays out the basic tenets of Islam and the correct ways of performing the daily prayers, the Zakat, the Ramadan fasting, and the Hajj pilgrimage. Maallim Nuuri's *Zubadi* was for many years required reading in Brava and was memorised by most Qur'anic schools students. The fact that a Bravanese who was ethnically Tunni was also one of the most accomplished and prolific religious poet in Chimiini also testifies to the communal identity of the

townspeople of Brava. This identity allowed the Bravanese to integrate people of diverse ethnic backgrounds into the identity of “the people of the town,” as they called themselves. In this they stand as an example to Somalia and Britain alike.

The poem below speaks volumes about the values to which the people of Brava have aspired. It reminds us once again that when a community becomes the victim of a hate-crime, it targeted not because of who they are but in spite of it.

Maallim Nuuri’s *Shteenzi Cha Kibri* (Poem about Pride)

1. *Akhuaaniza laṭaani niingi kibri huhalika waantu shikaani sabri*
My brothers, abandon excessive pride, for this leads people to ruin: practise forbearance

2. *Kibri ni garbasaari ya Mojiitu hutaandriko kuzaamake si chiintu*
Pride is God’s mantle.⁵ Whoever [else] wraps himself in it will founder

3. *Ibliisi waaliko maḷayka mkulu shfaanya ibaada niingi nṭiini na ilu*
Iblis was a great angel. He used to worship constantly everywhere:

4. *Ntaku mahaḷa yaa ye sho khsujuuda numa ka kibri shkufura chiruuda*
In every place he prostrated himself, [but] later, because of his pride, he disobeyed God.

5. *Chirujumoowa ye chilapizoowa chihada mi nakhsuula kulindroowa*
He was reviled and cursed.⁶ He said, “I want to have [my punishment] delayed.

6. *Hatta qiyaama naa ye chambiloowa takulindroowa karka walindroowa*
until the Day of Judgment”. And he was told: “You will be among those who will be given respite”.

7. *Kibri ni asḷi ya fiṭina zonte ni mbovu bayaana laṭaani wonte*
Pride is the root of all discord, It is manifestly wrong: all of you should abandon it.

8. *Ni sunna muuntu khtawaḍa ka sababu ya kibri iyo ni suu’i siwo adabu*
It is recommended to perform the ritual ablution for pride is an offence, not proper conduct.

9. *Ilo ni qowli ya Rasuuli Mhamadi na Ahmadi inna iwiilo Samadi*
These are the words of Prophet Muhammad or Ahmad⁷ - verily it is God, the Eternal, who knows.

10. *Mooja hadiile na menye kulaana naa mi ka kibri nzito kuḷiwaana*
God said, “Whoever challenges⁸ me because of pride will not easily achieve eternal bliss”

1. For Chimiini as an endangered language, see the *Journal of the Anglo-Somali Society*, 50, Autumn 2011, p. 18.
2. For details on social stratification and other subjects, see *Servants of the Sharia: The Civil Register of the Qadis’ Court of Brava, 1893-1900*, ed. by A. Vianello and M. M. Kassim (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
3. Alessandra Vianello, “The Poetic Heritage of Brava: An Introduction.” *Halabuur: Journal of Somali Literature and Culture*, 3, 1-2 (2008), pp. 5-10.
4. Both Zubad and Zubadi mean “cream.” The original poem is widely known by its shortened title of Zubad.
5. Here Maallim Nuuri is referring to the hadith “Pride is my cloak and greatness My robe, and he who competes with Me in respect of either of them I shall cast into Hell-fire”, (Hadith Qudsi – 19) and alluding to “al-Mutakabbir” (the One Supreme in Pride and Greatness), which is one of the ninety-nine names or attributes of Allah (See Qur’an Chapter 59 (Sura Hashr), verses 22-24). In Islam this is a characteristic that is inconceivable for anyone but God.
6. In Arabic *rajama* means both to curse and to stone. This is the origin of the ritual stoning of the devil during the Hajj. The devil is reviled because he refused God’s command to prostrate himself before Adam.
7. The text gives ‘and’, but the two names refer to the same person.
8. The literal meaning of the verb is “to fight”, “to quarrel”.

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