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A nineteenth-century Kurdish scholar in South Africa

Martin van Bruinessen

One of the most remarkable cases of cultural brokerage performed by Kurdish `ulama was that of Abu Bakr Efendi, a scholar from southern Kurdistan, who in the 1860's settled in South Africa and wrote a book on the religious obligations of Islam in the local Dutch dialect for the benefit of the "Malay" Muslim community of South Africa.¹

This somewhat elusive scholar arrived in Cape Town in 1862, as an emissary of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz,² in order to teach Islamic law and doctrine to the Muslim community and to resolve certain religious conflicts that were dividing that community. He taught Arabic but also learnt the language of the local community, Afrikaans, and he wrote a major work, *Bayan al-din*, in the latter language, adapting to this purpose the Perso-Arabic alphabet. Not only is this one of the very few works in "Arabic-Afrikaans" (as van Selms has baptised this literature), it is one of the earliest texts written in any variety of Afrikaans at all, and it is therefore of great interest to historical linguists.³

The "Malay" community of Cape Town descends from rebels and other undesirable elements banished from the East Indies by the Dutch authorities in the seventeenth century, and of compatriots who were brought there as slaves.⁴ The best known of these exiles was Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar, a learned scholar and Sufi, who in a local power struggle in the sultanate of Banten in West Java in 1682 had taken the anti-Dutch side and as a result was

¹ I was first set on Abu Bakr Efendi's tracks by a letter from his great-grandson, Mr. Ismat Efendi, who enquired whether I could help him find out more about his ancestry. Abu Bakr Efendi is a well-known person in the history of the Malay community of Cape Town and has been the subject of scholarly studies by Brandel-Syrier, van Selms and Kähler.

² According to Abu Bakr's son, Osman Effendi, it was the (better-known) previous sultan, Abdulmajid, who had charged Abu Bakr with this mission (interview, in Van Selms 1960: vii-viii). Abdulmajid was succeeded by his brother Abdülaziz in 1861.

³ The *Bayan al-din* is bilingual in Arabic and Afrikaans: each Arabic sentence is immediately followed by its Afrikaans equivalent. An English translation was published by Brandel-Syrier in 1960, and a transcription of the Afrikaans text was later published and analysed by van Selms (1979). Earlier the first part of this text had been transcribed and translated into German by Kähler (1971: 70-79).

⁴ A sympathetic account of this community, its history and cultural life is given by Du Plessis & Lückhoff (1953). In a number of later writings, the "Malay"-ness of the 20th-century Cape Muslim community has been contested and rejected as a colonial construction. Du Plessis' emphasis on exoticism and difference came to be seen as paving the road for the community's incorporation in the Apartheid system as a legally distinct group.

sent into exile to Ceylon and finally the Cape of Good Hope.⁵ Although his bones were later, at the request of the royal house of Gowa, sent back to his native South Celebes, his shrine in Cape Town is still an important centre for the local Malay community. Shaykh Yusuf is considered as the first spiritual authority of the Muslims of the Cape.

In the following centuries, the community retained an emotional attachment to Islam but, lacking well-educated `ulama and being out of touch with the rest of the Muslim world, its knowledge of doctrines and obligations gradually declined.⁶ After a series of religious controversies had seriously divided the community, requests for books explaining the orthodox position on a number of questions and for other religious guidance were sent to the Sultan and Caliph in Istanbul, then considered the highest ultimate authority on such matters. The Sultan apparently did not think that books would be sufficient, and that is how in 1862 Abu Bakr Efendi was dispatched, by way of London, to the Muslims of the Cape. He established a *madrasa* where he taught Arabic and the basic Islamic sciences, and he wrote his own teaching materials. The *Bayan al-din* was completed in 1286/1869 and printed in Istanbul at the government press in 1294/1877.⁷

Who was this Abu Bakr Efendi? In the Arabic introduction to *Bayan al-din*,⁸ he calls himself a descendant of (*min nasl*) Amir Sulayman ibn Amir Muhammad ibn Amir `Abdallah ibn Amir Zayd, *min khanadan ahali Suhran tabi` Shahrazur wa Baghdad*, “belonging to the dynasty of native rulers of Sohran, a dependency of Shahrazur and Baghdad”. In other words, he claims descent from the ruling house of the Kurdish emirate of Sohran or Soran, to the North of Shahrazur, which comprised the city of Arbil and the mountains beyond. Abu Bakr’s great-grandson, Mr. Ismat Efendi, kindly sent me a reproduction of a photograph with a legend

⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, "Shari`a court, tarekat and pesantren: religious institutions in the Banten sultanate", *Archipel* 50 (1995), 165-200.

⁶ This is certainly the impression Abu Bakr’s preface to the *Bayan al-din* wishes to convey: among there were Arabs among the founders of the community, the Arabic language has been forgotten, in matters of religion they are ignorant and have adopted numerous *bid`a*. This assessment was confirmed in a pamphlet published in 1878 by a Malay follower of Abu Bakr: “The great fault of our people is that [...] they are wholly ignorant about their religion. Very few indeed know anything of the Arabic language [...] What is still worse, our Imams, too, know very little of the Koran or its language” (quoted in Rochlin 1939: 218). This negative image has been corrected by Achmat Davids’ studies (1980, 1994), which have identified a number of `ulama active in the community between the time of Yusuf Makassar and that of Abu Bakr Efendi.

⁷ The date of printing, briefly after Abdulhamid II’s accession to the throne, appears to indicate a changing, more activist, attitude towards the Muslims outside the Empire.

⁸ There is a copy of this rare work in the Leiden University Library. The Turkish and Arabic introductions are translated by Brander-Syrier (1960: xli-xlv) but this translation contains a number of serious errors.

containing a more complete genealogy.⁹ Here Abu Bakr gives himself the *nisba* al-Khushnawi, indicating that he belonged to the Khoshnaw tribe, which lives east of Arbil (in districts that used to belong to the emirate of Soran). There are six generations between Abu Bakr and his ancestor Amir Sulayman, all of them apparently `ulama, for they bear the titles of Mulla or Mawlana. This genealogy continues several generations upwards from the said Amir Zayd, through the latter's father, `Izz al-Din Muhammad al-Fadl (who is honoured with the title *al-hibr al-kamil*, "the perfect scholar"). The most distant, and apparently most illustrious, ancestor named is a certain Abu Nasr al-Amir Sulayman "the warrior of Quraishite descent from Amjad (*al-ghazi al-Qurashi al-Amjadi*).¹⁰

None of these names, unfortunately, can be unambiguously recognised in the biographical dictionaries of Kurdish learned men (Mudarris 1983, Mardukh 1364-6, Zeki 1998). The *ghazi* Amir Sulayman is perhaps identical with Sulayman Beg ibn Quli Beg ibn Sulayman Beg, who ruled Soran in the second half of the sixteenth century, and of whom the *Sharafnama* records that he carried out several successful campaigns against his eastern, Shi`i neighbours (Bidlisi 1343: 360-1). None of the other ancestors given, however, can be identified with later members of the ruling house mentioned in local chronicles (Mukriyani 1935). The *Sharafnama* does confirm that the rulers of Sohran used the title of Amir, that is also worn by several of Abu Bakr Effendi's ancestors, whereas other Kurdish dynasties used different titles, such as Khan or Beg. There is, however, no reference to Qurayshi descent, nor is the *nisba* al-Amjadi mentioned in the chronicles. Kähler notices that Abu Bakr Efendi himself also used the *nisba* al-Amjadi, and he believes that this refers to a village in Kurdistan.¹¹ No such village is known to me or could be found in any written source so far. Abu Bakr's precise origins may always remain obscure.

In the 1950s, Van Selms interviewed Abu Bakr's aged son `Umar Jalal al-Din and recorded from his mouth a few biographical data on the father. Abu Bakr had studied in

⁹ This is substantially identical with the family tree that van Selms saw and summarises (1960: vi-vii).

¹⁰ In full: Al-bahr al-muhaqqaq wa al-hibr al-mudaqqaq shaykh al-`ilm wa mufti al-arba` al-a'imma ma'mur al-dawla al-`uthmaniyya il janub Afrika li-nashr al-`ulum al-diniyya wa al-ma`arif al-rabbaniyya fi sana 1278 Mawlana Abu Bakr Efendi al-Khushnawi ibn Mulla `Umar Big ibn Mawlana Salahuddin [ibn] Mulla Mustafa Big ibn Mawlana Baba Pir Sulayman ibn Mulla Mustafa ibn Mulla Ibrahim ibn Mawlana Amir Sulayman ibn Mawlana Amir Muhammad ibn Mawlana `Adud al-Din `Abdallah ibn Zayd ibn Mawlana al-hibr al-kamil muqtada al-amajid wa al-amathil dhi al-janahin `Izz al-Din Muhammad quddisa sirruhu ibn Amir `Abdallah ibn Zayn al-Din [ibn] Mulla Ahmad ibn `Abd al-Haqq Sulayman al-Khushnawi min nasl Mawlana Abi al-Muhsin Mulla `Uthman Hamid ibn Abi Nasr al-Amir Sulayman at-ghazi al-Qurashi al-Amjadi.

¹¹ Kähler 1961: 102. Arabic books distributed by Abu Bakr's *madrasa* bear stamps giving his name as Abu Bakr Efendi al-Amjadi.

Shahrazur, in the *madrasa* established by his ancestor Amir Sulayman (it is not clear which of the two) and continued his studies in Istanbul and Baghdad. While he was in the latter city, an invasion of Beduins into the Soran country forced Abu Bakr's family (or tribe) to migrate to the Erzurum area, where Abu Bakr later joined them. When one winter the clan suffered from famine, he went to Istanbul to plead for assistance from the Sultan. By coincidence, the imperial court had just received the request for religious guidance from South Africa. Rather than sending food to Erzurum, it was then decided to send Abu Bakr himself to Africa (van Selms 1960: vii-viii).

Whatever may have been the actual degree of willingness on Abu Bakr's part, he carried out his mission with great loyalty to the consecutive Ottoman Sultans. Although the Malay community nominally followed the Shafi'i *madhhab*, and Abu Bakr, as a Kurd, must initially have adhered to it as well, he set forth to teach Islamic law according to the school of Abu Hanifa, the official *madhhab* of the Ottoman Empire. He established an Ottoman madrasa in Cape Town, which initially attracted prominent Cape Muslims as students, who believed it was a Shafi'i school.¹² His intervention in a number of the conflicts that divided the local Muslim community established his reputation as a Hanafi, however, and the *fiqh* text that he wrote in 1869 for the Cape Muslims, *Bayan al-din*, could only confirm this reputation. The Arabic text of the *Bayan al-din* appears to lean heavily on a well-known Hanafi *fiqh* text used in Ottoman madrasas, *Multaqa al-abhar*, written by Ibrahim b. Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Halabi.¹³ It explains the prescriptions for Muslim ritual in accordance with Hanafi *fiqh*; Abu Bakr's translation and commentary repeatedly it also mentions the different opinions of Imam Shafi'i, but usually with the addition that these opinions have weak textual foundation.

In the preface to his book, Abu Bakr actually describes himself as a *mufti* of the four *madhhab*, and in one court case in 1873 in which he was a witness, he actually swore that he was and had always been a Shafi'i,¹⁴ but his opponents were not convinced. He was even accused of attempting to convert as many Shafi'is as possible to the Hanafi *madhhab* in the

¹² The historian of the Cape Muslims, Achmat Davids, claims in fact that Abu Bakr "established the Ottoman Theological School (...) under the guise of it being a Shafi-yyah educational institution" (1994: 82).

¹³ According to the translator of the Arabic text, Mia Brandel-Syrer, it is almost identical to al-Halabi's work. On Ibrahim al-Halabi (d. 1549) and his *Multaqa al-abhar*, see Brockelmann, *GAL* II, 432; *S* II, 642-3. Uzunçarşılı notes that this text was, from the mid-18th century on, the standard reference work most frequently used by Ottoman *qadis* and *muftis* (1965: 115n, 173).

¹⁴ Davids 1994: 99.

hope of getting a pay rise from the Sultan.¹⁵ One cannot help getting the impression that the accusations at Abu Bakr's address and the whole so-called Shafī'i-Hanafi conflict among the Cape Muslims had more to do with local power rivalries than matters of the *madhhab*.

Abu Bakr's modest criticism of Imam Shafī'i in a number of passages of the *Bayan al-din* appears to be related to the local controversies that had been the reason for addressing a request for guidance to the Sultan in the first place. In the Turkish preface to this book — which was obviously meant for readers in Istanbul and not for the Cape Muslims — he remarks that the Muslims of South Africa had been so long out of touch that they had forgotten much of Islam and adopted practices alien to that religion. Actions that they performed as worship were deviant and in conflict with the shari`a, their controversies and debates irrelevant and futile (*ibadet niyetiyle ikamet etdikleri ümur ve işleri na-meşru` ve zalalet olduğunu ve dahi emr-i dinde vuku` bulan ihtilafat ve münaza`atları saçma ve `abes olduğunu*), he charged. He refrains from telling us what they were. As Hans Kähler observed (1961: 107-9), the nature of these controversies was completely forgotten by later generations of Cape Muslims, but it was the position adopted by Abu Bakr in them that prevented him from gaining the influence to which his learning and linguistic gifts appeared to entitle him. Archival research by the Cape Muslim historian, Achmat Davids, has brought to light some of these controversies as well as information on Abu Bakr's role in them.

It was apparently a former police official and member of parliament sympathetic to the Malay community, Mr. P.E. De Roubaix, who had been instrumental in the request for guidance from Istanbul. He had written to the British government, which in turn had approached the Ottoman authorities. It is not clear to what extent De Roubaix acted on his own initiative or at the request of Cape Muslims. His involvement in (and efforts to settle) a number of conflicts in the community, however, is documented. The most recent of these conflicts concerned control of one of the two mosques of the town following the death of its imam. The late imam had appointed someone to be his one and only successor but most of the community refused to recognise him and demanded the right to choose their own imam. This conflict caused several fights in the mosque.¹⁶ Soon after his arrival, Abu Bakr had to give his

¹⁵ One Isaac Muntingh in 1873 even alleged, in a letter to a newspaper, that Abu Bakr had confidentially told him this (Davids 1994: 82).

¹⁶ Davids 1980: 119-121; Davids 1994: 82. Another matter in which De Roubaix had been involved, a decade earlier, concerned protests against the practice popularly known as "khalifa", consisting of loud recitals of a Rifa'i *ratib*, during and after which people put knives and skewers through their bodies. Non-Muslims objected

verdict on this conflict. He declared that each community should choose its own imam and that the position cannot be hereditary or transferred by deed, and the court followed his verdict.

Another conflict erupted in 1870 when the young imam of the oldest mosque, Abdurraqib, who was one of Abu Bakr's students, led Friday prayers with fewer persons present in the mosque than the forty who constitute the minimal requisite according to the Shafi'i *madhhab*. It is true that the Hanafi *madhhab* does not insist on this quorum,¹⁷ and Abdurraqib was understandably accused of having become a Hanafi. When the trustee of the mosque attempted to have Abdurraqib removed from his position and the conflict was taken to court, Abu Bakr gave testimony again, strongly supporting his former student. It was on this occasion that Abu Bakr swore that he still was a Shafi'i. The court ruled in Abdurraqib's favour, but his opponents refused to accept the ruling on the grounds that Abu Bakr was a Hanafi.¹⁸ The opposition to Abu Bakr increased, and the community became polarised between the Shafi'i majority and a small Hanafi minority around Abu Bakr Efendi.

There is at present a number of Hanafis among the Cape Muslims, probably due to Abu Bakr's activities, but they remain a small minority. The polarisation along Shafi'i and Hanafi lines that began within a few years after Abu Bakr's arrival prevented him gaining more influence, in spite of his efforts to open more schools. By the time of his death around 1880, increasing numbers of the community performed the *hajj*, and some of them had the opportunity to study with Shafi'i teachers in Mecca, which soon neutralised Abu Bakr's influence. After his death, members of the Cape Muslim community sent letters to the Hanafi *mufti* of Mecca, requesting a condemnation of Abu Bakr's criticisms of al-Shafi'i, which duly followed (Kähler 1961: 109-12).

Abu Bakr Effendi exemplifies an extreme case of the role of cultural broker that Kurdish

to the noise of this ritual, and at least some Muslims thought this was not an Islamic practice at all. Van Selms and following him, others have suggested that the controversy over the status of the *ratib* was the major issue Abu Bakr was called in to solve. There are no indications, however, that Abu Bakr ever gave an opinion on this ritual.

¹⁷ In the *Bayan al-din*, Abu Bakr writes that the requisite minimum is three men besides the imam. He adds in the Afrikaans commentary that the leading Hanafi scholar Abu Yusuf puts the quorum at two and Imam Shafi'i at forty, but that their opinions on this issue are not well-founded (*Bayan al-din*, p. 185; cf. van Selms 1979: 118; Brandel-Syrer 1960: 100).

¹⁸ Davids 1994: 99.

ʿulama have so often played because they grew up and worked in a region where the three major languages of Islam met. His linguistic abilities, due to which he quickly learnt English as well as Afrikaans, enabled him to act as a mediator between the Cape Muslims and the seat of the Caliphate in the Ottoman capital, which the Cape Muslims also considered as the highest Muslim authority. He had been invited to the Cape as an Ottoman, and carried out his duties as a loyal subject of the sultan, establishing an “Ottoman school” and translating a major reference work used by the Ottoman religious establishment into the local language. Hanafi and Shafi`i *fiqh* differ from one another in relatively minor details only, and Abu Bakr pointed out these differences in his commentary — though in terms that appeared to reject the Shafi`i point of view as inferior to that of the Hanafi authors.

Abu Bakr arrived at the Cape more than a decade before the accession of Sultan Abdulhamid II. His activities precedes those of Abdulhamid’s emissaries in the service of Pan-Islamism and the Ottoman caliphate — although it is significant that the *Bayan al-din* was only printed under this sultan, and at the Government Press. In his study of Abdulhamid’s pan-Islamic policies, Deringil claims that the effort to strengthen the position of the Hanafi *madhhab* over the other schools was one of the central elements of these policies. He relates this to the fact that unlike the Shafi`i school, the Hanafi school does not insist that the caliph should be of Quraishite descent.¹⁹ The Ottomans therefore could in theory only expect recognition of their claim to the caliphate in regions where the Hanafi *madhhab* was dominant.²⁰ This may be help to explain why Abu Bakr Effendi, while himself a Shafi`i, taught primarily Hanafi *fiqh* to the nominally Shafi`i Muslims of the Cape. His case shows that these Ottoman missionary policies were not an initiative of Abdulhamid II but had already begun under his predecessors, although Abdulhamid was to pursue them with greater vigour.

Sultan Abdulhamid’s envoys to the Muslim communities outside the Ottoman Empire were in most cases not very successful because they lacked sufficient linguistic skills. In this respect, Abu Bakr Effendi was much better equipped and capable of communicating effectively with the people to whom he had been dispatched. His influence lasted only briefly, however, and was soon eclipsed because of a shift in the Cape Muslim community’s orientation from Istanbul to Mecca, where Shafi`i scholars of authority were available in abundance.

¹⁹ Deringil 1998: 46-50.

²⁰ In practice, however, the Ottoman claims to the Caliphate were never contested by the most numerous community of the sultans’ Shafi`i subjects, the Kurds, nor by the large Shafi`i communities of Southeast Asia.

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