

THE KINGDOM OF SAMAMO IN THE DIARY OF PAULO RODRIGUES DA COSTA

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Late in January of 1613 a modified caravel, captained by an aging and reluctant Portuguese mariner with five daughters to support – four maidens and a widow – sailed from Goa to Mozambique where it was to spend no more than two days before proceeding to Madagascar, its main destination. The mission of Captain Paulo Rodrigues da Costa was spelled out in a *Regimento* of Goa's Vice-Roy Jeronimo de Azevedo. First and foremost, there would have to be a search for stranded Portuguese, shipwrecks of yore, and for their descendants who might well become a beach-head for the «spiritual and temporal conquest» of Madagascar. Dom Jeronimo was himself searching for a lost brother-in-law but he also wanted a «rock by rock» exploration even if the vessel, the *Nossa Senhora da Esperança*, were to remain in local waters for : (1)

«another year in laboring to discover... all the secrets and peculiarities of the islanders, find out who their kings are and what is the extent for their (effective) power, what are their ways of fighting, what types of arms they employ and what they wear, the food and the types of local farms ; if there are metals of gold silver, what is their way of cultivating the land, what kinds of cattle they have, the quality of the people...»

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1. Humberto Laitao (ed.), *Os Dois Descobrimentos da Ilha de Sao Lourenço mandados fazer pelo Vice-Rei D. Jeronimo de Azevedo nos anos de 1613 a 1616*, Centro de Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, Lisbon, 1970, «*DIA-RIO*,» (pp. 47-192), 1613. For the entire *Regimento* (22-1-1613, Goa) text see pages 50-57.

Da Costa was ordered to return «with a lot of description» to please «the Count of Salinas who is (most) curious about such details.» After forty-three days on rough seas, the caravel reached Mozambique ; another 12 days were needed to effect the needed repairs ; and it was only the first day of April 1613 that the winds would let the ship back into the Mozambique Channel. Da Costa took on board Father Luis Mariano, «Master of the Jesuit Order», and a Moorish nobleman named *Facaboulai*, «very good friend of the Portuguese» and personal interpreter of a former Captain of Mozambique, its highest official. A smaller craft, capable of employing oars, followed the caravel and both attained Boina Bay or *Mazalagem Nova* to the Portuguese on 15 th April 1613.

About a year before this event there was a tentative treaty between Estevao de Ataide, Mozambique's Captain from 1610 to 1613, and Samamo, ruler of Boina Bay residing in the town of *Boene* situated in the Bay itself. There had been long-standing differences between Mozambique and the «Moors» of northwestern Madagascar but as Portuguese Mozambique entered into a period of food shortages Ataide took his interpreter and went to Samamo to bury the differences and obtain the needed supplies. According to Father Mariano, the treaty's text provided that Samamo would not trade with the «enemies of Portugal ;» that Portuguese vessels visiting *Boene* could engage freely in trade ; that a portuguese factory could be established there at any time ; that priests could be brought to preach the Christian faith to those who would listen ; and that the Portuguese would favor any of Samamo's ships at ports controlled by them as well as provide military aid in any «just wars» upon Samamo's request (2). As Ataide was removed from his post by higher authorities and his interpreter still held the document the treaty was not confirmed by Ataide's successors. Confirmed or not, as least two of its provisions were entirely unworkable . Muslim trade of the western Indian Ocean had created the commercial ports of northwestern Madagascar, including Boina Bay. Samamo could not hence abandon trade with the «enemies of Portugal» or Muslim traders from East Africa, Arabia and the Persian Gulf without dismantling the town of *Boene* itself. On the other hand, the Portuguese rarely extended *military* aid to the «Moors» and neither *Mazalagem Velha* nor *Mazalagem Nova* (Lulangane and Boina) had been regarded as friendly toward Mozambique. Three days after the arrival of *Nossa Senhora da Esperança* at Boina, Captain da Costa went ashore with 12 musketeers, Fathers Mariano and Freire (the ship's priest), his pilot, the interpreter and the ship's scribe. A salvo was fired from the caravel's guns «so that the Moorish King could perceive the state of artillery.» There were two vessels from the «coast of Melinde» (Malindi) in port at the time along with a number of local dhows containing two of Samamo's brothers and about 400 men. Samamo received the visitors at some fifty paces from his residence, «under a foliage covering, with two fine mats

2. *Collection des Ouvrages Anciens Concernant Madagascar*, II, 1904, p.16.

placed underneath... on top of beautifully clear sand.» After an exchange of greetings Samamo was told that East African Moors friendly to the Portuguese had informed them that there were many of their missing compatriots inside Madagascar, especially closer to the eastern side of the Island. The Portuguese informants could not, however, actually verify this claim because they «could not pass to that side without permission to cross the many kingdoms, infinite in numbers and hostile to one another (3).

Samamo was in his mid-fifties and appeared to be of «Moorish lineage.» His predecessor and uncle named *Farmafamede*, man of enormous wealth, had resided at *Mazalagem Velha*, some 30 leagues away from the Bay of Boina, but was killed in a battle against the *rei cafre* of *Sada* (Anorontsangana) whose name is spelled in three different ways within Da Costa's Text. The same enemy had injured Samamo, forcing him to move to *Boene*, most likely in 1599. This did not end hostilities between the *rei cafre* and the *rei mauro* as they were still at war in 1613. To Samamo, Portuguese *military* support against his rival was worth the whole treaty, duplicate of the 1612 version. Immediately, Samamo requested firearms «to rid himself of a constant enemy» but da Costa refused, using a religious excuse. It was an article of the Christian faith, argued the Captain, that arms could neither be given nor sold to the Moors, even the friendly ones, for such an act would lead to Hell. Only the Pope in Rome could issue a dispensation and he was too far away to be asked. Da Costa must have felt at least some of Samamo's contempt but the king surprised him by suggesting a minor and clearly face-saving compromise : the Moorish interpreter from Mozambique would sell a musket directly to Samamo for a future personal duel between the two enemy kings, suggestion da Costa quickly perceived as «just». And, since the Captain was clearly in violation of a binding treaty, he promised to commit military support at once should Samamo come to be attacked by the king of *Sada*. The Captain's men ashore would not, however, pass arms on to anyone. If the enemy attacked he would be *castigado* but even if nothing happened at all, Samamo's decision to become the vassal of the king of Portugal meant that Samamo now had powerful allies in the Portuguese (4).

Da Costa estimated the population of *Mazalagem Nova* at about 10,000 with a third of that number perhaps consisting of men within fighting age. But, while Samamo had access to inexhaustible quantities of iron, neither the king nor his people were well-armed by any standards as chains and small knives made up just about their entire arsenal. There was no standing army and no discernible defenses on the islet stood to suggest fear of attack, apparently because the inland enemies of Samamo could not sail across the bay. Although Samamo claimed that his kingdom went beyond Boina Bay all the way to the Cape St. André da Costa was able to find out later that the

3. «Diario,» 1613/1970, p. 62.

4. «Diario,» 1613/1970, pp. 68-89.



claim was not true. There was also no doubt that *Mazalagem Nova* owed its very existence to trade. No one even locked doors as the Moors of Boene «did not rob one another». From north and south, ships were arriving every day with a variety of cargoes, as many as fifteen in a single day. Da Costa called these vessels *pangaio*s (and Mariano compared them to the craft used by fishermen at Santarem and to the *cangalhas* of the Indian coast). Three local kingdoms in particular traded with *Mazalagem Nova*, providing it with almost all of the food supplies since its residents did not «cultivate anything.» The cattle came from the mainland, along with sheep and goats weighing at times 75 kilograms and some bulls packing four times the weight. Salves from the mainland were constantly imported as well. The high-quality iron, worked by Boene's blacksmiths, came from the mainland too, as did silver. Indeed, silver was the most coveted of metals. Even silver chains in coins were commonplace and were used as currency to buy rice, flour, fish and meat. The worth of a silver coin was defined as «400 links,» worth developed in connection with turtle exports. It was an economy accommodating barter, money and trade on an international scale at the same time. The Portuguese could purchase a cow for 3 cruzados * and a bull for 6 ; and they estimated 6 pesos to be the equivalent of a local silver coin in terms of purchasing power. The silver coins were not used on the mainland where cotton became currency. There was an abundance of sandalwood, cloth and slaves waiting to be taken to the markets of Asia, Africa and the New World. *Mazalagem Nova* may have had as many as 500 vessels of its own according to Da Costa's estimate. He came to admire the dexterity of local fishermen and of local women, «superb weavers» of fine clothing, «which they make of certain herb and... in great variety of colors» He felt that if the local women could have the «silk» or the «herb» of Bengal, they would be the «best weavers of all nations» because of «their talents»(5). Da Costa also reported a number of local customs. The king, for instance, could have only one principal spouse but as many subordinate ones as he wished to maintain. The subordinate wives were taken from vassals and clients; each one had her own hut and the king had to visit all of them. Inheritance was lateral as brothers and sisters alone could inherit titles and possessions. Adultery, while serious enough to be judged at the highest level by Samamo himself, entailed only economic sanctions based on the ability to pay. Royal daughters and nieces had complete sexual freedom and could not be punished for any form of sexual conduct. Da Costa noticed that women shaved their heads and believed that this was also a general custom. He was particularly struck by the status of local slaves. Noble females could marry them on demand and slaves shared meals with their masters «at the same table,» each slave having a per-

* According to Eric Axelson, around 1600, the cruzado was a silver coin of 400 réis equal to about 4 shillings. It is curious to note the unit of 400 for the silver coin of *Mazalagem Nova* and the cruzado.

5. «*Diario*», 1613/1970, pp. 66, 65, 67, 70 passim.

sonal bowl called *movimo*. None of this was common among the Moors, wrote da Costa in his *Diario*, excepting the Moors of *Mazalagem Nova* (6).

Despite the inevitable association of «Moors» with Islam in the Portuguese mind Da Costa shows with slight chance of error that the Moors of Boina Bay were hardly the «worst of that accursed doctrine.» The town's single mosque, despite a high population density, was attended only by «coastal» Moors, outsiders who came to trade and buy and whom the Captain perceived as responsible for every form of «evil.» He also learned that when local rulers passed away their bodies were placed on elevated «wooden cots,» resting on four wooden stakes several meters high and surrounded by spears stuck into the ground, while a large pot collected the humours until the «flesh went dry». These, too, were customs remote from Islam even if its influence could be seen in the battlements and arched structures, where the «accursed» marked their «memorials» (7). This observation of da Costa was sustained by Mariano who found that local «Moors» neither observed sustained by Mariano who found that local «Moors» neither observed the ritual nor yet learned through Quranic study. Mariano was convinced even during his first visit to Boina Bay that its inhabitants were «incited» to convert to Islam by Moors of «Melinde and Arabia» who came every year to buy large contingents of slaves and take them home «for infamous and abominable uses»(8).

The situation depicted in 1613 in respect to the depth of Islamic influence upon the residents of *Boene* shows that Islam was the religion of trade. The Swahili-Malagasy ethnic, linguistic and cultural amalgam did not call for piety or zealotism, repudiation of non-Islamic antecedents or a domination of any particular component over the others. Yet, by the time of Mariano's second stay at *Boene*, 4-18 June 1619, a distinct change was in the making. Despite Samamo's expressions of friendship — and there is little doubt that he wanted the Jesuits to stay for reasons of state — Mariano and his companion Francisco Ribeiro were told that under no circumstances could they reside and preach at *Boene*. Samamo himself was warned at an assembly of the most important men in the area that if he allowed the priests to remain his own subjects would be made to abandon him and migrate elsewhere. Mariano's threats to request the intervention of the Portuguese naval might in the event of the Jesuits' expulsion prompted Samamo to convoke another assembly of elders. When only four kinsmen arrived it became evident that Samamo was being boycotted by his own supporters and Mariano placed the blame on two dhows «from Pata» (Pate) and some of the crews who swayed the local merchants against Samamo and the Jesuits. When a fire broke out at one of Samamo's warehouses, the Jesuits could no longer stay (9). By 1620, both

6. «*Diario*,» 1613/1970, pp. 69-71.

7. «*Diario*,» 1613/1970, p. 66.

8. *COACM*, II, 1904, p. 14.

9. Mariano to de Madeiros, 24-8-1619, *COACM*, II, 1904, 303-312.

Samamo and the most important of Boina Bay's residents «observed scrupulously the law of Mahomet» and «went to the mosque every day» (10). It is evident the new attitude toward Islam was the direct result of Portuguese pressure itself, religious and secular, which forced a reluctant Merchant-King to take sides against his better judgement.

The incomplete *Diario* of Captain Paulo Rodrigues da Costa, found in 1965 amid the family papers of the first Conde da Ponte and published five years later by Humberto Leitao, with some linguistic annotations (11), also reveals to us a fundamental truth. Several features associated with royalty and hitherto attributed to the Sakalava and their Maroserana rulers were in fact features of pre-existing culture in northwestern Madagascar, hardly modified by Islam. The elevated funerary platform, the symbolic spears around it, the draining of royal humours (which the Sakalava attendants would come to call *hanitra* in what must be a stunning reversal for the senses), the unrestricted sexual freedom of noble females (even the taking of *biiby* among male slaves), and the shaving of heads after the death of an important person — all of this and more came with the populations accepting the Sakalava-Maroserana rule and not the other way around.

10. Letter of Father João from Mazalagem Nova, 1620, *COACM*, II, 1904, p. 327. He added that «all» of its residents were «Mulims» but it is difficult to take such an observation as seriously as the specific one involving Samamo and other important men of Boina.

11. Pierre Vérin has briefly and indirectly alluded to some of the passages in da Costa's *Diario* relating to Boina Bay in his doctoral dissertation on the commercial ports of northern Madagascar, *Les Echelles Anciennes du Commerce sur les Côtes Nord de Madagascar*, Lille, 1975, I, 190n, 203n, 251n, 256n, 377, direct quote ; II, 530, 932, 942 and 947.