

The Arrival of Islam in Malawi

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Abstract

This paper seeks to shed more light on the question of when and how Islam arrived in Malawi, who introduced it and what was the motive for its inauguration. The paper also attempts to make an inquiry into how Christian missionaries sitting aloof observed, processed and responded to the growth and developments of Islam within Muslim communities in Malawi. It will also discuss the social, economic and political implications on Muslims, due to their refusal to send children to missionary school on account of “Education for Christianity”. And how the church, carefully drafted contemptuous desolations for Muslims which were borne due to church’s noble ambition to Christianize the already religious Muslims instead of strengthening their membership to the heathen hordes who at the time outnumbered both Muslims and Christians all together. The research data were obtained through library study of books, journal and articles on the history of both Islam and Christianity.

Keywords: Yao, Nkhotakota, Chewa, Jumbe, Muslims

1. Introduction

The Republic of Malawi is a landlocked country bordered by Zambia to the west, Tanzania to the north, and Mozambique to the east and south. It is pertinent to say here that the population of Malawi is composed of people belonging to various faith groups and religions, namely Islam, Christianity and some traditional believers from different tribes. According to the 2018 Malawi has a population of 17,563,749, Muslims consist of only 13.8 % of the total population whereas 2 % represents those traditional believers locally known in Malawi’s national language as ‘*Chipembedzo chamakolo*’ or ‘*Nyau*’, while Christianity makes up the majority.

The exact date of the introduction of Islam to Malawi is not certainly known. Suggestions vary between the 15th and early 19th century onwards. It is certain, however, that Islam landed at the hands of the Yao and the Chewa of Nkhotakota before other tribes via the east coast of Africa. On the whole, Islam had primarily spread in Malawi as a direct result of economic and political factors. Nevertheless, there are mainly two scholarly opinions in the quest for an answer to the question of when and how Islam landed in Malawi.

One such view is that held and supported by all European chronicles such as I. M. Lewis, 1966, Christoff Martin Pauw, 1980, David Bone 1982, Pachai B. 1972, Anne E.M. Anderson-Morshead 1899, suggesting that Islam was introduced in the nineteenth century. Thereby awarding the honour to Salim bin Abdullah famously known as Jumbe for the introduction of Islam to Malawi. While other reports points to the emergence of Islam in southern part of Malawi especially among the Yao. Starting with the Yao as the dates suggest then the Chewa on Nkhotakota will be discussed accordingly.

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2. Yao in the Southern Malawi

The view and philosophy that “commerce is a civilizing agency” as defined by Christian Missionaries as well as other observers, does not favour a particular section of people. Looking at how Islam came to Malawi, one will discover that it was through commercial contacts. Various reports indicating the Yao to have been the agents of Islam to Malawi from the east of Lake Malawi and not Jumbe as it is generally held. Before going further into when and how Islam reached the Yao, let's first outline two or three expositional reports on Jumbe of Nkhotakota. Lewis, urged that there was neither trade nor Islam prior to the nineteenth century in East African Interior, as he explains, “and finally, the vital general significance of the trading factor in the spread of Islam is especially apparent in the case of the East African interior, where, prior to the nineteenth century, there was neither trade nor Islam”. (Lewis, 2017, p. 24)

David (1982), explains that the first man who introduced Islam in Malawi was Salim bin Abdullah who with his keen interest in establishing petty sultanate ended up at the shores of Lake Malawi near Nkhotakota around 1840. He then got into details illustrating how Salim bin Abdullah cunningly established himself by first asking a piece of land from the local chief and setting up a trading post and eventually, by virtue of his clever diplomacy managed to attract a large crowd of people. In order to ascertain the loyalty of his followers, he forced them to convert to Islam, the majority of whom were Yao and some Chewa refugees. However, David's detailed account of Salim bin Abdullah's usurping of power to rule over Nkhotakota leaves some questions to be answered. The questions arise as he strategically putting the arrival of the Yao into Malawi in 1860, as he explains, “by far the most important source of Islam in Malawi stems from the conversion of large numbers of the Yao people. By 1860 many groups of Yao had migrated south from their original home in Rovuma region and had moved into the southern part of Malawi”. (David, 1982).

David is, therefore, geographically allocating the Yao into Nkhotakota 20 years before their actual arrival into the southern region of Malawi from the Rovuma region. Or else, is he insinuating that the first arrival of the Yao was to the central region district of Nkhotakota before to the southern region districts of Mangochi and Machinga? Whatever explanation Bone might furnish, the overwhelming majority scholars suggest a much earlier arrival of the Yao into the southern region of Malawi and their adhering to Islamic teachings for at least a complete century prior to Salim bin Abdullah leave alone Dr David Livingstone. Bone, however, in his later writings has receded this opinion as it will be discussed later. In the same way Christoff Martin (1980) in his thesis “Mission and Church in Malawi” he argues that the Yao just like the Ngoni made their arrival in Malawi in the nineteenth century. A common denominator among the fore-mentioned scholars is their reliance on Anne Anderson-Morshead (1899) in her book entitled “The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa” as she manifestly stated that “the Yao had just settled in the southern part of Malawifew years prior to the arrival of Dr David Livingstone on his journey accompanied by Bishop McKenzie in 1861”.

A larger number of reputable scholars such as Alan P. Thorold 1995, Edward Alpers 1972, Sam Mchombo 2005, Valiant Musa 2005, Ferhat Aslan 2014, Luious Ndekha 2015 and David Bone 2000, in his later writings and many others. In their fields of studies, mainly ranging from history, ethnography, anthropology and religious studies have unanimously agreed that the arrival of Islam in Malawi was much earlier than that of Christian Missionaries. Atterbury (1969), insinuate the coming of Islam to the Lake Nyasa Region much earlier around the dawn of sixteenth century when the Arabs sailed from Arabia and threw themselves upon the eastern African coast. Where they discriminately dispossessed the inert Portuguese who held control of South-Eastern Africa since the time of Vasco Da Gama. He commented, “persistently, rapidly, Mohammedan agents made progress throughout the interior, establishing small settlements, proselyting among the natives, obtaining political control, and terrorising throughout. Their scorching presence has been manifested as far as south as Mozambique and throughout the Lake Nyasa region”. (Atterbury, 1969, p. 62).

Rangeley (1963), asserted that the Yao had long been involved in trade and by 1768 they were trading between Kilwa and the Congo basin. Most probably he had held opinion from the Portuguese records that mentioned the Yao by name. This is one pristine documentation of the Yao's early involvement in long-distance trading. The Yao's engagement in this cross country trading is in itself clear evidence of having exhausted an elongated time in the trade industry. Other investigations suggest that the Yao had already started to trade with the Arabs at the East Coast before the 1505 Portuguese ravage of East Africa, the 1587 Zimba ravage of Kilwa and at the time of Gaspar Bocarro's 1616 journey from Tete to Kilwa.

Richard Grey (1975), elaborates, “the Yao appears to have enjoyed a mild revival of trade under Portuguese tutelage after having been disastrously ravaged by both the Portuguese and the Zimba in the sixteenth century”. While others like Edward Alper (1972), suggested that the Yao come in contact with Kilwa for just above quarter-century from 1590 to 1616. He explains that in 1616 Gaspar Bocarro travelled for 53 days overland from Tete to Kilwa right through the heart of the Yao territory. Bocarro also virtually observed that the Yao had already developed commercial skills which were set to dominate trade industry within interior East Africa. Edward (1972), has elsewhere in his book indicated as to what kind of trade was the Yao involved. He said, “the Yao produced salt from grasses, manufactured cloth from barkcloth, they have also accomplished smiths as they had built forges, furnaces and workshops working on Iron Ore. Making hoes, knives, arrows, axes, small knives, razors, chisels, needles and borers, as iron ore in Yao country was plentiful”.

David Bone (2000), after his initial conferment of the merit of introducing Islam to Malawi to SÉlim bin Abdullah Jumbe. In his later writings, *an outline History of Islam in Malawi* he has acknowledged the role of the Yao in the preliminary introduction of Islam in Malawi. He opined that within the first century of the introduction of Islam (in Arabia) it had travelled as far as the shores of the East Coast of Africa. As for the arrival of Islam in Malawi, he stated that it was probably almost five hundred years ago. The Arab traders in 1530 CE to be exact, established a settlement at Tete along the Zambezi not far from present Malawi.

He then supposed that their trading took them further interior Malawi. Although the Arabs were later curtailed by the Portuguese incursions, it is the presence of the Amwenye in the present Malawi that points to the traces of Islam left by the Arabs. The Amwenye’s eccentric culture to the African traditions, such as their practice of circumcision, their observance of food taboos as well as the Islamic names is yet another indication of their past Islamicization. He further stated, “by the end of the seventeenth century, two major trade routes worked by the people probably including the Yao, linked the Lake Malawi region to the coast, one to Kilwa via Rovuma and another, more southerly, to Angoche and Mozambique”. (David, 2000, p.13)

Therefore, what the aforementioned reports are establishing is that the Arab Muslim traders had already made contact with some Malawian tribe identified as the Yao as earliest as 1505. Musa (2005), contend that there is strong evidence indicating that both African and Coloured people in the Lower Shire practised Islam prior to the Portuguese in the 16th and the Scots in the 19th century. Names such as “Hassan”, “Fatima” were commonly used in the region and one of the incumbent tribes of the Lower Shire called Mwenye in particular and others had refused to eat pork and animals not slaughtered in fashion inherited from their forefathers. All this, therefore, not only suggesting but rather indicating to the passed down Islamic way of life inherited from the legacy of Islam left behind by the Muslim traders who were driven out by the Portuguese. Other pieces of evidences of the presences of Muslims long before the arrival of the Europeans can be found from Yohanna Abdallah accounts of the Yaos events. While explaining the dances and initiations of the Yao Abdallah mentioned that the boys underwent *Jando* (circumcision). The circumcision practice was so common that the uncircumcised boys were not allowed to attend funeral services, they were bounded to their houses until the dead were buried. Though he did not equivocally state that this was Islamic practice, elsewhere when he discussed the girls’ initiation ceremony *Msondo* he stated the following: “*Msondo* is of recent introduction from the coast, it is not one of the old ceremonies”.(Abdallah, 1973, p. 19)

Another indication from Abdallah’s discourse which intuitionally establishing the presence of Islam in the Yao is his description of the Yao burial. He said, “in the burying of a man the corpse is placed on the side as though asleep, with the head to the east. The old people say that the reason a man is so laid is to let him the direction from which the original people came before they become split up into different nations and tribes”.(Abdallah, 1973, p. 17)

Apart from the fact that Muslims had already established themselves for about at least two centuries before the arrival of the British colonizers, the Muslims could also read and write in contrast to the report filed by David Livingstone. Panjwani explained that “the education prevalent in Malawi before the coming of the Christian missionaries was Arabic and Kihwili, it was reverted to English by the missionaries”. (Panjwani, 2000, p. 191). As a result, the once learned Muslims, were challenged to learn English, as per set conditions they could not learn as they were required to give up their religion and embrace Christianity. In his further exposition, he stated that the missionaries reached a consensus of no education before baptism after their first attempt to Christianize the Muslims of Chief Mponda. The mission at Cape Maclear from 1875 to 1881 managed to convert only one Muslim for the entire period of 6 years. (Flint, 1976)

Musa (2000) explained that one unique characteristic of the Muslim is that at least they kept written records on the death of each household. And that Malawians who converted to Islam were the first to learn how to read and

write by using the Arabic alphabet before others did in the country. If the mortality rate was to be studied, such record in the hands of Muslims could have proven to be useful. Nevertheless, Dr David Livingstone went on to characterize Malawians in general as the people who neither read nor write. Their records were preserved in a religious sense of what is known as an “*usulu thawab*” a list of names of dead family members of each household normally, produced and called out during invocational rites and prayers known as “*Fatiba*” or “*Sadaka*”. However, this could have been so because of the language barrier as Muslims could read and write in Arabic a language alien to the European colonizer. On the other hand, it could also be due to long-held prejudices developed roots in Western Christendom against Islam as John Flint (1976) explains, “for centuries Western Christendom had regarded the ideology of Islam with abhorrence and the power of Muslim peoples with apprehension. For centuries European commentators on Islam had adopted the bitter tone for polemic, denouncing the central figure of the Muslim faith as imposter, sensualist, arch-intrigue and man of blood”.

Another evident reason could also be the European’s thirst for discovery. On account of these insatiable desires, they erroneously attributed to themselves many explorations that were discovered by others. Though, they acknowledged the presence of the Yao along the south-east of Lake Nyasa as Oliver relates Livingstone’s ordeal upon his arrival at the Shire Valley. The whole Shire Valley was a sight of sorry, weak and disorganized the Mang’anja population who had shortly been raided by a branch of the fierce Yao tribe. The Yao tribe were en route from their main centre to the south-east of Lake Nyasa and had for a lengthy period acted the part of middleman to the half-caste Portuguese and Arab slave-traders of Kilwa. (Oliver, 1966, p.14) Here Oliver like many others as explained earlier had geographically placed the Yao along the region of Lake Nyasa and the Lower Shire region for at least two centuries before Dr David Livingstone had set his foot into the continent leave alone Lake Nyasa and yet contemptuously claimed of its discovery.

According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2005, p. 355), the word ‘discovery’ means; to find information, a place or an object, especially for the first time: *who discovered America?* If one takes a closer look at the wording of the definition will find that the word “especially” has opened up some other possibilities, which means that the word “discovery” can be used to refer to findings that were not original or first. One can, therefore, assume the usage of the word “discovery” here is referring to later explanation and not to the first. If there were any legitimacy to the claim of the discovery of the already discovered Lake Nyasa the Arabs could have taken the honour to the claim since they were the first to cross along the region two hundred years, to say the least before Livingstone.

For the sake of clarity, Dr David Livingstone’s second expedition come to a standstill right at the mouth of the Zambezi as he could not find any way out. Oliver explains, “Bishop Mackenzie and his party arrived at the mouth of the Zambezi in 1861 to find that Livingstone’s second expedition had disproved the existence of an open path, at least for commerce. No navigable entry had been found to the Zambezi and rapids had been located on the mainstream above Tete”. (Oliver, 1966, p. 13).

Yuya Kudo (2014), delivered a well-thought-of paper at the Institute of Developing Economies in Japan after conducting his fieldwork in Mangochi, Machinga and Zomba he commented on Dr David Livingstone. He said the British Government sponsored the Scottish missionary to go to Zambezi River between 1858 and 1863 with two mandates. Firstly, to catalogue the natural resources of the Zambezi River. Secondly, identifying a route for transporting goods from Interior Africa to the coast that could eventually be sold on British markets. While himself preferred to use the “3Cs” Commerce, Christianity and Civilization as his motto just like many other European colonizers.

Though Dr David Livingstone did not make his name into the books of Missionaries as much as he did as an explorer and that was so as Mark Galli justifies that the Church history is littered with theologians who spared their entire life for Christianity of which Livingstone was not. He explains: “He definitely, started as a missionary. But behold, in his entire life he converted only one African, who subsequently, reverted to paganism. Unlike other Missionaries, he established no hospitals, neither translate the Bible into a foreign [African] tongue”. (Galli, 2019)

According to Christopher Hibbert, the Portuguese had told Dr David Livingstone about the great Lake Nyasa when he first encountered them at the coast. Musa asserts that it was rather Said bin Habib an Arab business leader, who informed him about Lake Nyasa. It was rather odd that Livingstone was set to discover a lake already discovered and that the Portuguese and the Arabs had been there few hundred years ago.

One of his contemporaries Jumbe Abdullah bin Salim had crossed it in 1840 and he was residing at its shores in Nkhatakota during the arrival of Livingstone to Malawi. Richard Grey (1975), beautifully explained, “some of the

events in which Europeans were involved in Africa between 1790 and 1875 were of quality so dramatic that they were well calculated to impress themselves on the consciousness of contemporaries". Lulus Ndekha (2015), cited World Christian Encyclopedia that in the year 2000 Muslims constituted 17% of the total population of 10 million. The 2008 Malawi Population Census, which established the total population for the nation at 14 million, placed the Muslim community at 13%, Christianity at 82.7%, other religions at 1.9%. while the 2018 census indicated to have risen just above 1%, still far away from the 17% accounted for in the year 2000.

To make sense of this declining population, Ibrahim Panjwani (2000), explained that, "the direct consequence of Muslims not attending (missionary) schools was that they could not earn more lucrative jobs other than labourers, cooks, domestic servants and other poorly paid employments. On the other hand, those who embraced Christianity, witnessed a high level of prosperity and well-being as they were employed as clerks, supervisors of labour, teachers and decent jobs". The onliest Muslims who could afford such advantageous livelihood were those who sort employment abroad such as Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa.

He also reasoned that, "since some Muslim males went to seek employment outside the country, their wives, mothers and sisters were left to parent and up bring their daughters. As they were engulfed in abject poverty, they were at the crossroad of making tough decisions affecting their religious life. Educated Christian men soon come and sought the hands of Muslim maidens in marriage. A society dominated by females, parents had no choice but to welcome these strangers, who often offered very high bride prices. The strangers who were equipped with education plus greater economic prosperity they soon become influential in their respective villages".

They, eventually, converted not only their wives and children but other community members as well. This has since become the tragic of Muslims and Islam in Malawi as Islam and Muslims began to be associated with inferiority and backwardness. No wonder it becomes the order of the day for Muslim women to marry non-Muslims as it mounted to progress and prosperity. David Bone (1982) commented, "contrary to the Shari'a (sharĒÑah) Malawian Muslims are much more tolerant of a Muslim woman marrying a Christian man than of a Muslim man marrying a Christian woman".

Although, post-independence the government brought about a considerable change in educational modus operandi to facilitate the Muslims into the education system, but the inferiority complex is as evident as daybreak among the Muslims. In a complete reversal situation, interfaith marriages involving male Muslim youth are on the rise. The rate of the practice of interfaith marriages in Malawi among the Muslim youth has risen to a frightening level. The researcher while collecting data for his PhD thesis he encountered 23 Muslims in the small village of Chamba 3 in the Traditional Authority Malenga Chanzi in Nkhokotakota who were either in active interfaith relationships or divorced. While Nkhokotakota used to be a majority Muslim in the early introduction of Christianity.

A South African Dutch Reformed Church Missionary A. L. Hofmeyr was tasked in 1910 to conduct field research. The research was meant to find viable and sustainable means of sharing the Gospels to the Yao of Chitundu in Dedza district and the Chewa of Nkhokotakota district. After spending a considerable amount of time in these two areas, he wrote his observations, findings and finally the recommendations for practical application in his article entitled, *Islam in Nyasaland*. Among his observations, "... it is due to them that the Chewa in the vicinity of Kotakota (Nkhokotakota) are today all Mohammedans". (Hofmeyr, 2000, p. 165). The above statement Hofmeyr is equivocally stating that during his stay in Nkhokotakota he did not encounter any Christian in 1910. The year 2018 marked 108 years after Hofmeyr conducted his research in Nkhokotakota. The 2018 National Population Census Statistics revealed that Nkhokotakota has the total population density of 393,077 people out of that figure 94,487 were Muslims. The district that had housed "are today all Mohammedans" according to Hofmeyr has been reduced to only 24.04% Muslims.

Yao traders who took their ivory to Mozambique could also deliver the tusks to Kilwa and from early in the nineteenth century they began doing so. They did so because the Makua, who stood between them and Mozambique, having obtained firearms through trading slaves with the French, prevented the Yao from going to the coast, making this route rather dangerous. Moreover, at a time when the price of ivory on world markets was rapidly rising, the Portuguese increased the duties on Yao trade and took steps to establish a government monopoly in the trade in ivory. (Alpers, 1972, p. 9). Although, the exact date of the arrival of Islam in southern Malawi is not known, the overwhelming majority of reports suggest at least two centuries before the arrival of Dr David Livingstone as explained above.

Furthermore, the names of those who brought Islam in the South are just vaguely given as Arab Swahili Traders and no specific individuals are mentioned which is contrary to Nkhotakota as we will see in the following chapter.

3. Jumbe and Islam in Nkhotakota

As expected from the people of higher ranks, Jumbe Salim bin Abdullah had travelled with an entourage comprised of family members, followers and servants. Musa explains that Jumbe Salim bin Abdullah had left his homeland of Zanzibar somewhere before 1833 with the sole intention of going to the country of the Nyamwezi [the Yao] on the East African mainland. While travelling overland en route to the east of Lake Malawi he had two stops at Ujiji and Kilwa. (Pachai, 1973, p. 43).

Finally, in 1840 Jumbe and his associates crossed over the Lake Malawi by dhows arriving at Nkhotakota. Immediately, as he got in Nkhotakota, Jumbe sought an audience with the Chewa chief Malenga Chanzi and registered to the Chief that, “we are traders and we wish you could grant us permission to trade in your country”. (Musa, 2005, p. 24.). However, according to Pachai (2000), there were many local inhabitants of Nkhotakota who confronted Chief Malenga Chanzi for being too friendly to Jumbe. He further reported that Chief Malenga Chanzi lost his life on account of a scuffle with his people over the issue. As soon as Jumbe ventured into the trade he was perplexed to find that the Yao and the Bisa had long preceded him into the ivory trading and to his dismay the Yao and the Bisa had established Nkhotakota as their trading post, Musa (2005). As quoted in *Malawi Muslims*, Fabiano Kwaule explains, “in his career as an Ivory trader, Jumbe encountered competition from the Yao and Bisa traders, both of whom had established permanent posts in Nkhotakota”. (David, 2000, p. 74).

It is pertinent to mention here that all the Swahili Arab traders who come to either southern part of Malawi, Nkhotakota or Karonga were all from Shirazi communities who come from Yemen. The name ‘Jumbe’ was a title and the installation of which used to be a very elaborate ceremonial that involved a seven-day retreat by the new Jumbe. Pachai (2000), stated that there were four Jumbes in the history of Nkhotakota. The first was Salim bin Abdullah the one who seceded the Jumbe’s base in Tanga along with his entourage to Nkhotakota. He went on to live as Jumbe of Nkhotakota for over 30 years. He was later succeeded by his nephew Mwenye Nguzo, whose reign as Jumbe of Nkhotakota last for less than a year. The third Jumbe was Tawakkal Sudi, from 1875 to 1894. The final Jumbe of Nkhotakota before the British abolished their sultanate was Mwenye Heri, the son to the second Jumbe. He ruled for few months between 1894 and 1895, he was charged with murder by the British later found guilty subsequently, deposed and banished to Zanzibar. (Pachai, 2000, p. 43-44). The Jumbe apart from being a wali (representative) of the Sultan of Zanzibar they were also internally, to forge a good working relationship with the Chewa, Yao and Tonga. Obviously, because of their possessions of guns, they become very useful allies to the Chewa local chiefs.

As discussed elsewhere before, Jumbe Salim bin Abdullah was not the first Swahili Arab trader to arrive in Malawi. At the time of his arrival in Nkhotakota, the Yao had been involved in trading with the Chewa for a long time. Josia Ntara reported that in those days the Chewa used to sell their ivory and slaves to the Yao in exchange for hoes, cloth, beads and other things. As interest in trading rapidly grew, the Chewa began following the Arabs and the Yao up and down. (Beatrix Hentze & Franz Steiner, 1973).

The inference from Ntara is therefore that, there were two phases of the Chewa’s involvement in trading. The first phase where the Yao went to the Chewa and trade with them. The Yao would sell them hoes, cloth, beads etc. in return the Chewa would sell ivory and slaves to the Yao. Subsequently, the Arab traders at the coast were fascinated with the Yao’s swift success in their trade that they too were curious and wanted to follow the Yao into interior Malawi and have a first-hand trade with the Yao business counterpart. Ntara further explains, “(the Chewa) chiefs liked the exchange (battering goods) very much because they wanted to have guns. The bow and arrow have now outdated. They realized that a brave man was the one who had a gun. At first, the traders went as far as Mbwani (the Indian Ocean coastland). From Mponda... they went to Makanjira... to Lujenda... to Ruvuma River and stopping at all the villages along the coast”. (Beatrix Hentze & Franz Steiner, 1973).

In the above explanation just like the first citation, Ntara is also indicating to the Chewa’s second phase in trade, where they now joined the Yao and the Swahili Arab traders in their long-distance trading. This discourse here is yet proving the fact that there were itinerant Swahili Arab Muslims who come to Malawi before Jumbe’s arrival in 1840.

David Bone (2000), has even theorised that Jumbe could have been one of the Swahili Arab traders who had made their way into the Southern Malawi region of Mangochi and Machinga.

Considering the unavailability of the individual names of the Swahili Arab Muslims who had visited this part of Malawi it will be hard to ascertain and hence until then, Jumbe's visit to the south will remain a theory.

However, Jumbe had gotten more attention from historians even Missionaries because he was the first Swahili Arab trader to settle and establish his sultanate interior Malawi. The Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in Likoma Island opened a missionary station at Nkhokotakota on 2nd September 1894 with Arthur Fraser Sim as a head, seconded by African teacher Joseph William. (Pachai, 2000). In 1895 a mission school was inaugurated. The management complained of slow registration of the children to the school, forgetting that they had set a condition on baptism upon registration. As contended by Harvard economics professor that education was "the main reward used by missionaries to lure Africans into the Christian sphere". (Nathan, 2010). He further stated that, by 1897 a batch of 9 boys were baptised as Christians followed by 3 women in 1898.

Nevertheless, the missionaries had encountered stiff competition in Nkhokotakota. Though the founding Jumbe did not propagate Islam to the local masses of Nkhokotakota he strategically brought the chiefs in his vicinity into the fold of Islam, a development which saw Islam flourishing in the district during the arrival of the missionaries as reported by David (2000), "by the time the missionaries were in a position to try and spread their influence there, Islam had been established to the extent that the town had a mosque. Friday prayers and the fast of Ramadhan were fairly strictly observed and instruction in the Qur'an was offered by *waalimu*". Unlike the Yao in the southern Malawi there is consensus among the historians and missionaries that Islam was introduced to Nkhokotakota by Jumbe in 1840. According to Hofmeyr despite Christianity's arrival in Nkhokotakota in 1894 he failed to encounter a single Christian during his visit to the district in 1910. But the tables have since changed as there are more Christians in the district now according to 2018 National Statistics Office report.

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