

# **Muslims in Eastern Africa - Their Past and Present\***

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## 1. EARLY HISTORY

The earliest concrete evidence of Islam and Muslims in eastern Africa is a mosque foundation in Lamu where gold, silver and copper coins dated AD 830 were found during an excavation in 1984. The oldest intact building in eastern Africa is a functioning mosque at Kizimkazi in southern Zanzibar Island dated AD 1007. It appears that Islam was common in the Indian Ocean by AD 1300. When Ibn Batuta of Morocco visited the East African coastlands in 1332, all the way down to the present border between Mozambique and South Africa, most of the coastal settlements were Muslim, and Arabic was the common literary and commercial language spoken all over the Indian Ocean - Batuta worked as a Kadhi, Supreme Muslim Jurist, in the Maldiv Islands for one year using Arabic as his working language.

Islam thus seems to have arrived quite early to East Africa through traders. It certainly did not spread through conquest or settlement, but remained an urban and coastal phenomenon for quite long. Later it spread to the interior after 1729 when the Portuguese were pushed beyond the Ruvuma River that forms the present Tanzania-Mozambique border.

It would be erroneous to consider Islamic practices in eastern Africa as Arabic practices, and associate Islam with Arabs, since Islam did not arabise East Africans; on the contrary, Arab immigrants, Islam and Islamic practices got africanised or swahilised, thereby developing Islam as an indigenous African religion! This is also linguistically evidenced by the fact that Arab immigrants became Swahili speaking, adopted the Swahili dress, food and eating habits and other cultural elements.

Islam is therefore not a foreign but rather a local religion on the coast, and along the old trade/caravan routes. It is more of an urban religion also in the interior (as in Tabora, Morogoro, Moshi) and inland ports (Kigoma, Ujiji, Mwanza) of Tanzania and the rest of East Africa.

## 2. THE SWAHILI PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Swahili culture has a long history going back to pre-Christian times when the people of the East African coast belonged to the northern Indian Ocean

civilization and they practised the Zoroastrian religion. The pre-Islamic Persian New Year, Naw Roz, is even today celebrated in Zanzibar as Nairuzi. Biologically the Swahili were and are a mixture of peoples from all around the Indian Ocean, however, mostly of black African Bantu and Cushitic stock. The Swahili culture was both urban, maritime and agricultural with fishing communities. Later, the Swahili embraced Islam and became more oriented towards the Middle East and India. Their material culture also, together with their art, architecture, music, dress, cuisine etc., continues to resemble more the oriental and oceanic rather than the continental African. For example, Ibn Batuta describes in detail the custom of chewing the Indian Paan (betel leaf and betel nut with sweet spices) in East Africa in the 1330s. Material cultural elements from the northern parts of the Indian Ocean (in the form the north Indian female dress "kurta" and Indian films, the long male white dress "kanzu" from the Emirates and Oman in the Gulf etc.), continue to influence the East African Muslims, and non-muslims to an extent, up to the present.

### 3. PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

By the time of the arrival of the Portuguese (Vasco da Gama) in 1498, Islam was firmly established all along the coastal belt. Almost all the Swahili ruling families of the towns, islands and city states had Arab, Persian, Indian, or even Indonesian blood ties because of their maritime contacts and political connections with the northern and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean. Muslim or Arab colonisation or conquest of non-Muslims, as in north and west Africa, did not exist in East Africa.

### 4. COLONIAL PERIOD

Within a short period after their arrival, the Portuguese brought almost all the ports in the Indian Ocean under their control, with brutal violence and a very mobile naval force.

After ousting the Portuguese from Oman, the Omani Arabs were invited in 1652 by the local rulers of East Africa to come and drive the Portuguese out. In 1729, the Portuguese were finally pushed to Mozambique, and the coasts of Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania came under Omani/Arab influence. Oman established its direct rule in East Africa beginning in 1821, and it was replaced by European rule in 1890.

During the Omani period, there was further growth and expansion of Islam in East Africa, especially in the interior following the caravan routes; but in the Portuguese areas, Islam was limited to the coast. After 1890, Muslim communities lost political and economic control, but being urban, literate and having administrative experience, they were employed by the Europeans at all junior levels. Later their place was taken by the newly converted Christians from settlements of freed slaves and tribal areas. Muslims thus became increasingly

alienated from administration and politics until World War II when political agitation among Muslims in India and the anti-colonial teachings of Jamal ad-din Al-Afghani spread to East Africa. (Some of Al-Afghani's treatises were translated into Swahili in the 1920s by the Mombasa theologian Sheikh Al-Amin Al-Mazrui.) Later in 1950s, Pakistani and north Indian preachers regularly visited eastern, central and southern Africa to rejuvenate Islam and redevelop Muslim political consciousness. This was a reaction to the alienation of Muslim communities by the European colonial administrations, increased Christian missionary activity, and improvement and expansion of educational and health facilities in the non-Muslim or Christian dominated areas. In the Muslim areas, Arabic was removed as a literary language, and was replaced by English; even the Swahili-Arabic script was replaced by the Roman script in the 1920s. However, this resulted in greater expansion and development of the Swahili language and literature.

This was not profound in the predominantly Muslim protectorate areas of the state of Zanzibar and Mombasa (Kenya coast) where education and health services were offered by the state and the various (Asian) Muslim and non-Muslim communities, without racial segregation, and where Muslims and non-Muslims were given equal status.

## 5. ISLAMIC DENOMINATIONS AND MUSLIMS IN EASTERN AFRICA

It is Sunni Islam of the Shafii school which is mostly practiced by the Swahili, Somali and other African Muslims of eastern, central and southern Africa. Sunni Asians follow mostly the Hanafi school.

A minority of the Muslims belong to the various Shia schools: the Ithna-asheria, the Aga Khan Ismailia and the Bohra/Wohra, and they are mostly of Asian origin; they are also the wealthiest of the Muslim communities. There is documented evidence of Indian Shia settlements along the Kenya coast during the 1400s. (Vasco da Gama was in fact shown the way to India by an Indian Muslim captain settled in Malindi, Kenya, and who had the Swahili/Indian Ocean title Maalam/Mwalimu meaning Pilot.)

East Africans of Omani origin, almost all of them Swahili-speaking and africanised, usually belong to the Ibadhi sekt, whereas those of Yemeni or Hadhrami origin follow Maliki or Hambali schools of Sunni Islam.

Dozens of Muslim Brotherhoods and Sufi Orders exist in Tanzania and a few in Kenya, but little is known about their organisation and work. However, they are not politically or economically involved in any activity. They are rather loosely organised and deal mostly with theological teaching and discourse in the mosques, performing religious rites and rituals, and also practise healing and provide

therapy to individuals and families suffering from psychic problems of various kinds.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN TANZANIA

Tanzania has the largest number and proportion of Muslims in eastern Africa. Relations between Christians and Muslims had been very good until recently when Muslim writers/researchers started claiming that between 50-60% of the population of the country is Muslim, whereas Christian writers claim that Muslims cannot be more than a third of the population of the country. (The British administration in Tanganyika had estimated the proportions of Christians, Muslims and followers of traditional religions to be roughly one third each.) There has been a lot of controversy over this issue. Similarly, in the other countries in this region, no reliable figures are available as to the classification or breakdown of population by religion (race or tribe) since no census has taken into account this factor. Generally in the case of Tanzania, the population is given as one third Muslim, one third Christian and one third tribalist i.e. following traditional religions. However, according to official statements, more than two thirds of all the government and party positions are held by Christians. (See the various articles and letters in JIMMA which deal with Tanzania.)

In Tanzania, Muslims are represented, more than in the surrounding countries, in government, politics and business, but not in proportion to their numbers in the population, it is claimed by Muslim activists. Politically they have been mobilised more than the Christians because of their traditional inherent opposition to the Christian European colonialism; and many dissatisfied voices have been raised demanding increased educational opportunities for Muslims and recruitment of more Muslims to administrative and bureaucratic posts. Muslims have expressed at many occasions that they have been discriminated in favour of Christians who are claimed to dominate the country. The publicist Professor Walter Bgoya, former head of Tanzania Publishing House, and now an active private publisher, admits that "It is a fact that Muslims are generally unfairly treated educationally." ("Det är ett faktum att muslimerna i stort är missgynnade utbildningsmässigt." Strömberg 1993) The same conclusion was drawn by the researcher Abdalla J. Saffari at the Centre for Foreign Relations in Daressalaam during the middle of the 80s. (Personal communication with Saffari during his visit to the Department of Peace and Conflict Research in Uppsala.) Other grievances expressed by Muslims are that proportionately fewer Muslim officers were promoted in the defence forces after the war with Portugal in Mozambique in the 60s and early 70s while aiding the Frelimo, and also after the war with Iddi Amin in the late 70s and

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<sup>1</sup> An enlightening paper on this subject was presented by an American social anthropologist at the International Conference On The History And Culture Of Zanzibar in December 1992 in Zanzibar.

early 80s. Muslims claim that an unproportionately large number of Zanzibari officers and soldiers fought at the fronts during these wars of liberation.

Muslim organisations in Tanzania are tightly controlled under the umbrella of BAKWATA (Tanzania Muslim Council) which is closely related to the ruling Revolutionary Party - Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM). A new Muslim organisation called BALUKTA for the spread of Koranic knowledge has been founded, which is competing with BAKWATA.

Wealthy Muslim families and associations, mostly of Asian origin, such as the Karimjee family and the Aga Khan community and Foundation, have donated enormous funds for building hospitals and schools all over the country. Asian Muslims have been instrumental in establishing various industries. For example in August 1966, half a year before the Arusha Declaration which turned Tanzania into an ideologically socialist country, the Aga Khan Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) and the Ismaili Holding Companies accounted for investments for almost \$ 5 millions. Christian Tanzanian individuals, families or associations have not been involved in such activities which on their part have been initiated and funded by Western missions and international charity organisations, since Christian Tanzanians historically and traditionally lacked economic structures for large scale commercial activities and capital accumulation.

## 7. IMPORTANCE OF THE TANGANYIKA-ZANZIBAR UNION

In the context of Tanzania which is a union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, the special religious situation in Zanzibar needs particular attention. The autonomous state of Zanzibar is almost 98% Muslim and it does exercise certain Islamic influence in eastern Africa which it has done since the beginning of the last century. All Muslim holidays are celebrated as national holidays in Tanzania, just as all Christian (international) holidays; but in Zanzibar, the fasting month of Ramadhan is also officially recognised as a holy month which means that all restaurants and caffeterias are closed upto late afternoon; smoking, eating and drinking in the street are taboo, and a heavy fine is charged for being drunk. However, because of increased tourism and an ever-increasing presence of Westerners in the past few years, such Muslim practices are not rigorously enforced.

Zanzibar had joined the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), a move which was vehemently opposed by Christian leaders and writers who claimed that it was unconstitutional for Zanzibar to do so since Tanzania is a secular state. The Zanzibar government likened its membership of OIC to the Tanzanian union government recognising the Vatican State and sending an Ambassador there. After much hesitation, to avoid a major constitutional crisis, the government of Zanzibar opted to leave the OIC in August 1993.

Muslim-Christian relations are somewhat strained in Tanzania, and small groups of fundamentalists on both sides have been involved in skirmishes and

violent confrontations which have received much coverage in the media. Recently, in April 1993, a small group of angry Muslims (described by the Prime Minister John Malecela as "thick headed idiots") attacked three pork butcheries in the Kinondoni area of Daressalaam and destroyed them. About 30 individuals were arrested and are undergoing trial at the time of writing (December 1993). Kinondoni is a mixed residential area where rearing of pigs and selling of pork was unheard of according to an unwritten taboo in respect of citizens following different faiths. Also due to mutual respect, neither were pigs reared nor pork served in public schools, hospitals, army etc. Today, pigs are reared and they move around freely in several mixed residential areas, and at least one case has been reported where a dead pig was found in a mosque in Ubungo Kisiwani area of Daressalaam in September 1985. Such incidents have brought to the surface the religious questions in Tanzania.

Recent political developments towards the establishment of a multi-party system in Tanzania and greater freedom of press and speech has brought to light the hidden discontent growing among different groups of Tanzanians against the ruling party Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), its control over BAKWATA and the advantage the Union gives to the CCM (which through the Union government rules the Mainland of Tanzania with the full participation of Zanzibari MPs and Ministers), while Zanzibar continues to enjoy great autonomy. This has been interpreted by Reverend Mtikila, a Catholic leader of the Democratic Party (DP), as a Muslim conspiracy. He is therefore opposing both the CCM, the Union, all the Muslim organisations, and all Tanzanians of "non-indigenous origin", including those of Somali origin! Christian Tanzanians also criticize financial aid from the Arab countries to renovate and build new mosques and clinics in the country. The debate seems to be more sentimental and prejudiced rather than scientific since, for example, aid from the Middle East is considered islamization and arabisation whereas no questions are posed to draw attention to the widespread Western Christian missionary activities and aid projects. About a hundred years ago, there were only about a dozen Christian churches in Tanzania. According to some Muslim sources, today churches outnumber mosques, and none of the churches have been built by local Tanzanian finance. Ironically, educational and health facilities started and/or supported by Christian or Muslim effort are all open to citizens and residents of all religions!

Expression of Muslim discontent in Tanzania may be traced to the 1950s when during the struggle for Independence, the All Muslim National Union of Tanganyika (AMNUT) called for religious representation since it claimed Muslims lagged behind Christians as far as modern education was concerned and thus Muslims would be politically dominated by Christians.

Dr. G.A. Malekela, Professor of Education at the University of Daressalaam, found in his investigation in 1970 that 75% of the MPs in Tanzania were Christian, and that 75% of them were Catholics. Similarly in 1983, it was officially reported that 78% of the intake in the secondary schools was Christian, mostly Catholic, and only 22% was non-Christian.

According to the non-governmental association Daressalaam University Muslim Trusteeship (DUMT), during 1986-90, out of a total of 4 191 students only 582 were Muslim i.e. 13% of the student body. And may be by coincidence, during President Nyerere's long rule of 24 years, the Minister of Education was never a Muslim. These are the figures and arguments presented by the Muslims in the current debate and conflict that is going on between the Muslims and Christian (especially Catholics) in Tanzania.

Today, during the reign of the Muslim President Ali Hassan Mwinyi who is a Zanzibari, 16 out of the 24 Cabinet Ministers in the Union Government are Christian, 20 out of the 24 Principal Secretaries are Christian, 15 out of the 20 Regional Commissioners are Christian, and 105 out of the 113 District Commissioners are Christian. (Mfanyakazi 20/2-93)

## 8. MUSLIMS AND ISLAM IN THE REST OF EASTERN AFRICA

In the context of Islam and Muslims in eastern Africa, Tanzania takes a central role, not only because Tanzania is geographically situated in the middle of eastern Africa, but also because many Muslim leaders and theologians in the neighbouring countries are in fact educated in Tanzania. Many Muslim priests working in Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire and Uganda are even recruited from Tanzania; and Swahili is in practice the language of the mosques in the region.

In Kenya, an estimated 25% of the population is Muslim, a few thousand of them are organised in the unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) which has two supporters in Parliament after the first multi-party election in December 1992. However, there are 25 other Muslim MPs in Kenya representing the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU). Since 1991 Muslim youth led by the IPK and its fiery leader Khalid Balala have staged violent demonstrations in Kenya demanding more educational facilities and employment opportunities in the predominantly Muslim areas, primarily the coast - it is argued by the IPK supporters that of the 6 universities and dozens of colleges in Kenya, none is situated at the coast, urban unemployment rate is highest on the coast, while the Coast Region brings in the bulk of the foreign exchange earnings through tourism. There are about 120 Islamic societies in Kenya dealing with mosques, schools etc. The best known among them is the Kenya Muslim Welfare Society started in 1973 and the recently established Kenya Islamic Foundation which plans to start Muslim nursery, primary and secondary schools and even a university in the future. There are also a number of housing schemes run by the various Shia communities, as it is in Tanzania. Much Islamic literature is produced and distributed by the Bilal Islamic Mission in Kenya and Tanzania. Recently, some KANU party officials have gone to the offensive against IPK with racist propaganda where they try to divide Muslim Kenyans and their leaders into those of 'African' origin and those of 'foreign' origin.

In Uganda, the Muslim population is estimated by various writers to be between 20-45%. Uganda is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) since 1970. During the dictatorial rule of Iddi Amin, tens of thousands of Ugandans converted to Islam and enjoyed certain privileges such as maintaining their high offices in the military and government. After Amin's fall there was a small exodus of Muslims from Uganda to Kenya and Tanzania.

In Mozambique, with an estimated Muslim population of 40%, the situation is somewhat similar to that in Tanzania - Muslims in the north of the country were mobilised in the freedom struggle led by FRELIMO, but it is complained by the Muslims that the country is dominated by mission-educated and Tanzania-trained Christian/Catholic leadership. Swahili is generally used in the mosques. There is no Muslim minister in the government, and only one ambassador who is Muslim.

In Malawi, a fifth of the population is reported to be Muslim having several Muslim organisations, and is spread all over the country. There are a few thousand Asians and the Muslim clergy mostly comes from Tanzania, hence Swahili is frequently the mosque language. Muslim grievances here are also similar to those in Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. It was reported that two Christian bishops (one Catholic and one Protestant) were invited at the discussions held in February 1993 by the government on the question of going over to multi-partism, but no Muslim Malawian leader was invited. Such reports, true or false, increase the tensions between Malawians (and East Africans) following different faiths.

In Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire, there are about 5% Muslim minorities concentrated in the capitals of Bujumbura, Kigali and the copper mining areas of Shaba Province in eastern Zaire where Swahili is spoken as a first or second language. The Muslims are usually of mixed Afro-Arab, Afro-Asian or slave descent. They are usually shopkeepers, traders and transporters. After the civil war in 1960, there was an exodus of Muslims from these countries to Uganda and Tanzania, but lately the Muslim population has been slowly increasing, partly through immigration.

In the (Islamic Federal) Republic of Comoro, the population is almost 100% Muslim. (Less than 3000 of the total population of 335 000 is Christian/Catholic.) Since August 1993, after 14 years as Observer in the Arab League, the Republic is now a full member of that organisation, having declared Arabic as its official language, whereas in Mayotte/Maore, the fourth island in the Comorian archipelago still under French administration, 98% of the population is Muslim, the rest are Roman Catholics.

In Madagascar there is a dwindling Muslim minority of a few percent in the north-west of the country. There has been no increase at all in the number of Muslims who are usually of mixed African, Arab, Malagasi and Indian descent. Quite a few of the Muslims in the towns of Madagascar are of Asian origin following different denominations and they are French citizens. The Arabic script is no longer used by the Malagasi since the beginning of this century when the French missions replaced it with the Latin script. However, many malagasi

language documents in the Arabic script survive and are preserved in various archives in the West.

## 9. ROLE OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN EASTERN AFRICA

The Muslims opened up the hinterland of eastern Africa, particularly Tanzania; and through their activities, slavery and slave trade, which were originally African phenomena, were expanded with quite devastating effects on some districts, especially in Tanzania. Through the commercial activities of the Muslims, eastern Africa was brought in closer contact with the rest of the world, which finally made European colonization easy and fast, though delayed up to the end of the last century. Islam also brought literacy and literature and gave the Muslims of diverse origins a common uniting language - Swahili - which has also been a blessing to non-Muslims. In the wake of Muslims came urbanisation and modern innovations such as electricity, telegraph and telephone. Consequently, political mobilization and opposition to European colonial rule was easily realised in Tanzania and Kenya as was the case in Nigeria.

One of the few negative consequences of the spread of Islam in eastern Africa was to some extent the development of feudalism which changed the concepts of land ownership and tilling rights among the Bantu-speaking people. Women in many Muslim agrarian societies lost some of their traditional rights of tilling or ownership of land. However, Islam gave them among other rights the right of inheritance which did not exist earlier.

Islamic fundamentalism does not exist in the countries of eastern Africa. However, there are several very small groups of Muslim activists especially in Tanzania and Kenya, similar to the Christian fundamentalists in the region. No fundamentalism, but rather Islamic revivalism is the case, especially through Shia influences to rejuvenate the Muslim societies which are emphasising their Islamicity.

\* This is a revised version of the paper ISLAM IN EAST AFRICA - ITS PAST AND PRESENT, presented on 30 October 1991, at one of the Seminars in the series ISLAM IN AFRICA, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden. A shorter version of this in Swedish written together with David Westerlund entitled AFRIKANSK ISLAM I TANZANIA is forthcoming as a chapter in the Swedish book MAJORITETENS ISLAM, edited by David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg, Centre for Multiethnic Research, Uppsala University, 1994.)

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