

ISLAM IN KENYA

Introduction

Our paper presents a brief history on Islam in Kenya. We will see the historical background of the Muslims presence, factors that lead or hindered the spread of Islam and the organizational aspect of the Muslim communities after the country's independence. We will point out the Muslim community's political contribution. We will pay attention to the political aspects, because, Islamic presence in Kenya is not just a matter of numbers. Its influence has been felt throughout the course of Kenyan history. From the time of the presence of Muslim Arab traders on the Eastern African coast to the present day, Muslims have asserted their influence in Kenyan politics and in the society.

The disadvantages are nothing compared to the advantages for both the Muslim and non-Muslim population. Swahili as a language has played an important role in uniting the Kenyan people. The language in itself is not seen as a Muslim language but a common language to all the Kenyan tribes. In fact Swahili as a language gives a Kenyan a sense of belonging, not only to a small nation but to an entire Eastern African region.

Historical background

The Kenyan coastal area came in contact with Islam as early as the tenth century as attested by archaeological evidence and that when Moroccan Muslim traveler, Ibn Battuta, visited the Eastern African coast he found that there was an existing Muslim presence.

Having had contacts with Arab traders for a long time, Eastern African cities flourished in their economic prosperities till the coming and the occupation of the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Portuguese presence was not in any way a blessing to the local population. The conflicts between Christians and Muslims led to the decline in economy of the area making the local people to have nostalgia of the Arab presence. So they solicited the help from them which at last came from the sultanate of Oman.

1. Factors that led to the spread of Islam in Kenya:

1.1 Portuguese effect

The 16th Century saw the establishment of the Portuguese powers on the coast, but the 17th century saw its decline. Arab Authority was finally restored and after a century of independent coastal Arab settlement, a partial political unity was established during the rule of Seyyid said of Oman (1806-1856)¹

The first presence of the Portuguese in the Eastern coast of Africa dates back to the time when Vasco da Gama (a Portuguese explorer) set foot in it in the year 1498. The cities along the coast were busy in trade and this impressed Vasco da Gama. After his return to Europe he sent the fleet with a command to force the sheikh to submit and pay tributes. Worst was the attack by Francisco Almeida who is said to have captured the Eastern coast of Africa and even went to storm, capture and destroy Mombasa, leaving the city a wreck, its streets piled with over 1,500 corpses.² With the experience from the Portuguese, the locals who were used to peaceful co-existence with the Arab traders would later accept the Islamic political organization as means of protection and for economic prosperity. It is reported that when the Portuguese arrived in the Eastern coastal cities, they found that the cities' economic achievement was that of urban policies whose prosperity lay not in production but exchange. Kilwa in the south, Pemba and Mombasa in the north: these were 'city empires' in the same

sense of medieval Venice or Genoa. Their genius lay in the buying and selling.³ Owing to the negative experience of the presence of the Portuguese, the coming back of the Muslim authority in the person and authority of the Sultan of Oman helped in the spread of Islam since the locals saw the Muslims as friendly in contrast to the Portuguese.

1.2 Omani Sultanate in Zanzibar

The establishment of the Oman Sultanate in Zanzibar helped in the spread of Islam right from the time of its establishment to the present time. In the 19th Century Sayid Said Ibn Sultan moved his capital from Muscat in Oman to Zanzibar. His movement was not as such towards the spread of Islam but to guarantee security for his commercial activities for trade in ivory and slaves of which he owned some caravans.

1.3 Strategic position of the Eastern African Coast

The Eastern African coast played a very important role in the trade and facilitating the contacts between Arab traders and the local coastal communities. These Arab traders found it easy to carry out their trade by sea rather than by land. The natural phenomenon helped in their flow of the trade to and from Eastern Africa. The winds in the first half of the year blew to Africa and to Arabia in the second half of the year respectively. Having to live almost half a year carrying out trade, the Muslim traders lived their daily requirements as Muslim, observing moments of prayer and other obligations. The local communities could see their seriousness in observing them and could be moved in personal way to adhere to this new way of life.

1.4 Trade

The presence of the Muslims on the coast of Kenya was not primarily to spread Islam but rather trade. Those Africans who travelled for the trade with the Arabs used Swahili as language for trade and some of them returned as Muslims. Trade between the local people and the Arab traders could happen only with a common means of communication between the two groups. Kenya being a country of many tribes needed a language that can unite. In fact Swahili as a language spread faster than Islam. It is true that even now, businessmen dealing with petroleum products are Muslims of Somali origin and they have spread to the various parts of the country and wherever they settle a simple mosque is set. Even if they are as few as five people they put loud speakers and call for prayers.

1.5 Arabs and Bantu Intermarriage

Arab presence on the coast dates back to the 7th Century A.D and most of them came as individuals and not as families unlike those who entered North Africa and to Sudan. The situation of being there as individuals and not as families, favored their intermarriage with Bantu women. This intermarriage did not only help in the establishment of Islamic families and hence society, but also the coming to being of a language that has become an Eastern African language- Swahili. The community which came up because of this intermarriage is called Swahili. The community will later be an important group in the welcoming and propagation of Islam.

1.6 Colonialism

The coming of the Europeans in the nineteenth century was of a disadvantage to the Muslims communities on the coast and on the other hand an advantage towards the spread of Islam to the interior. The initial British administration was confined to the coastal region between Mombasa and Rift Valley. The protectorate was administered from Zanzibar, where the first commissioner Sir Arthur Hardinge lived, a clear sign that the Islamic community under the Sultan had established administrative structures. The British unlike the Portuguese recognized the existing order and incorporated in their administration which will be seen later in the negotiation on the future of the Mombasa Islamic community in post independent Kenya.

Europeans employed Muslims as their laborers going with them to the interior parts of the country. British having colonized Muslim and non-Muslim countries, acted like a pollination agent by bringing in some Asians, for the construction of the Kenya Ugandan Railway. "Most of the Kenyan Asians are Sunnis among whom; the Hanafi school of Law is wide spread. Many of the Imams in the country's mosques are of Indian or Pakistan Origin Enjoying a superior economic position, the Asians have contributed funds to the building of mosques and were an important factor in the spread of Islam in Kenya."⁴

Though Muslim saw the coming of the Europeans as a threat to the spread of Islam, it was during the colonial period that the spread of Islam managed to go the interior part of Kenya. With road and railway network, the movement to the interior part of the country was made easy.

2. Islam into the interior

It is clear even to date that Islam encountered difficulties in entering into the interior of the country owing to many factors making it an urban phenomenon. This is because of the nature and structure of the local communities with varied belief systems bounding every member. And of utmost important was the means of transport and prevalent hostilities from the tribes. The attempts to spread Islam to the interior came with the possibility to communicate with the building of the railways and the roads. Even though communication with the interior was improved with the putting up of the infrastructures, the spread of Islam was met with resistance due to the fact the societies had their own unique structure from each other and these made it difficult for Islam to penetrate. It is noted that the spread of Islam to the interior was more individual effort than communal.

There are other regions of the country where they never heard of Islam. While towns along the railway line, especially in the western Kenya, have a number of Muslims because the railway builders brought with themselves Islam from Asia, most of them being Indians and Pakistanis.

3. Tribal affiliation as hindrance to the spread of Islam

Most of the tribes in Kenya had traditional forms of government led by council of leaders; hence power did not rest on one individual, unlike in places where they had a king whereby if the king converts then the subjects must follow. These made the conversion to Islam difficult. Within a tribe there are other sub-divisions called clans. If one, then, is to convert to Islam and has to observe all the religious obligations stated by religion then he has to cut himself off from the society. Many tribes resisted conversion to Islam leaving it as an individual adherence, hence making it impractical in the rural areas where much was communal.

4. Composition of Islamic Community

Muslims are concentrated in some areas of the country making their political weight felt within those areas and also in the entire state. From the results of the census of the year 2009, Muslims are 4,304,798⁵ which translates to 11.15% of the Kenyan population. About 50% of the Muslim population lives on the coastal strip while the rest is spread within the country, with the highest population of Muslims above the Coastal province, that is, in the North Eastern province, where most of them are Somalis.

“There are also considerable numbers of Muslims in the large towns, including Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru and Eldoret. In Western Kenya they are concentrated in the areas of Mumias and Homa Bay.”⁶

The majority of the Kenya’s Muslims are Sunni, believed to be of the Shafi’ school. Among them are the Swahili groups.

5. Swahili

Swahili is an important group in as far as Islam in Kenya and in Eastern Africa is concerned. More than half of the Muslim population lives in the coastal province with the largest community being the Swahilis. In this case, it is not the language which defines one’s identity as a Swahili but the fact of having Arab origin.

“The Swahili in Mombasa area are categorized into loose confederation of twelve groups (Miji Kumi Na Miwili or Miji Ithna’ashara). The twelve groups are further subdivided into two sections: one section is composed of nine groups living in the north Mombasa (Miji Tisa); the other is composed of three groups living in South Mombasa (Miji Mitatu). Each group is headed by a leader whose title is *tamin* and who is assisted by a council of elders (Wazee).”⁷ Swahili groups in Kenya take themselves as a special group with its origin being Arabia. The colonialist treated them as a unique group and that is why, at the eve of Kenya’s independence, the Swahili groups were supporting the movement calling for autonomy.

There are other groups like the Arabs or those who claim to be descending from the Arabs, who support the autonomy movement. The Somalis occupy the North Eastern part of Kenya and some suburbs in Nairobi. Each group has its own particular and specific differences. These minor differences deal with the areas of prayer, like the annual observance of fasting. Some of the groups hold that Friday prayers should be chanted, while others hold that the daily afternoon prayers should be chanted. As for the beginning of the month of Ramadan, there is always disagreement throughout Africa concerning the day of the commencement of the fasting period.

6. Islam in the Independent Kenya

Even before Kenya’s independence, Muslims made their presence and importance felt. In the referendum of 1959, Muslim majority of the North Eastern province voted to secede and join the Somali people in the neighboring country, with whom they identified themselves better than with the Christian majority of Kenya.

Mombasa, the main city on the coast of Kenya (which at a certain time was part of the Sultanate of Zanzibar), wanted its own autonomy from the mainland on account of their Islamic background. There was fear that, if Kenya became independent, it would adopt a secular constitution which would not have respected the right of the Muslim population. Even during colonial time, when Kenya was a British protectorate, Sultan of Zanzibar had to be consulted in matters pertaining to the Muslims in the Coastal region of the country. It is

claimed that the introduction of the official implementation of the personal status law in the Kenyan constitution was because of the agreement made with the Sultan of Zanzibar and the colonial masters in exchange of the coastal territory of Mombasa. These would later cause disagreement and historical misunderstanding in the formulation of the new constitution from which a cross section of Kenyan Christian denominations fought to exclude anything religious, while the Muslim demanded the Personal Status Law Courts known as Qadi's Courts. In fact, it was in the eve of independence that a recommendation was made by a certain Sir James Robertson that Kenya's new constitution should include "guarantees of human rights and freedom of religion, including the Muslim's right to follow the Shari'a law in matters of religion and personal status."⁸

Kenya gained her independence in 1963, with Mombasa being part of the Kenyan government territory, dashing out the hope of autonomy of the coast. "Independent Kenya abolished the traditional administrative posts held by Muslims, such as the liwali, the akida, and the mudiir, which were considered remnants of the Zanzibar Sultanate."⁹

When the Islamic community did not succeed to secede and join the neighboring country (Somalia), its leaders decided to adopt a friendly attitude towards the government, so that this would take care of the Muslim community needs. They, then, decided to form organizations.

7. Muslim organizations

When Kenya became independent it prohibited the formation of political parties based on religion. Muslims on their part as well as Christians had to resort to other ways of organizing themselves in order express their views. They formed Muslim organizations of which we will mention some.

7.1 National Union of Kenya Muslims

In response to the Islamic community desire to guide and protect the rights of its members, National Union of Kenya Muslims (Nukem) was established. Nukem was established in 1968 aimed at uniting Muslims in Kenya with a hidden agenda of taming Ronald Ngala, whom they claimed he wanted to become a leader of the region, yet he was a Christian. Ngala was one the leaders of Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), a party which was dissolved after independence and its leaders joined Kenya African Union (KANU).

"Another factor that prompted the formation of Nukem was the concern that the government of independent Kenya would accede to the demands of some parliamentarians and public figures and repeal customary laws and religious laws, imposing one secular law on all citizens."¹⁰ Knowing that they were a minority and the law making organ of the government will be responsible in making new laws or repealing the existing laws with their democratic power, Nukem had to play a role in safeguarding Muslims rights, in particular the personal status law. Nukem was to check any attempt by other religious faith as what was seen as interference with Islam. "In January 1993, for example, Amin al Hinawi, Nukem's chairman in the Coastal province, sharply criticized a statement by the Catholic archbishop Otunga warning against the expansion of Islam in Africa"¹¹

Nukem acted as a link between the Kenya Muslim community and the Arab Muslim world. The organization had connection with Saudi Arabia which funded some projects of the Muslim communities in Kenya. It also had and maintained relations with Libya in the 1980s.

7.2 The Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (Supkem)

Supkem was established in 1973, ten years after independence. The organization was aimed at promoting Muslims interests with closer ties with the government. Among the leaders were cabinet ministers serving in the government. This gives a clear idea that they wanted to champion Muslims interests within the government circles. At the time, Muslims individuals were trying to heal the wounds of suspicion which existed just before and after independence, when they wanted to secede or have their own autonomy. Leaders in Supkem encouraged the Muslim community to obey the Authority. It was noted that “During their conferences, and indeed at every opportunity, Supkem’s leaders emphasize that Muslims should declare their absolute loyalty to the president, his government and Kanu Party,”¹² This might have been an opportunistic way of the leaders to maintain their seats and influence within the government rather than the Islamic teaching of obedience to Authority. Even if it might be individualistic means of acquiring or remaining in power, this attitude has enabled them to occupy important posts in the government and to influence government policies demonstrating that they could be trusted.

Supkem organized meetings yearly. In the beginning the meetings were attended by leaders only, but, after two years, the leaders decided to ask for legal advice in the preparation of their constitution. This led to improved representation of Muslims. Women had their place in the running of the affairs of the organization. Though it was not a political party, the leaders could not avoid representing their people politically owing to the fact that their leaders also held posts in the government. They organized occasional meetings between the people and the president. This was an occasion to express the needs of the people to the head of state.

Supkem, playing their cards well with the government, took care of their subjects, “obtaining scholarships from Arab-Muslim countries such as Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan as well as Islamic organization such as the Islamic Development Bank, the Arab league, and the organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).”¹³

Supkem has been active in the field of education for its members. They implemented education policies, by recruiting teachers from Arab countries and they organized fund raisings (*Harambee*) for the construction of learning institutions.

Due to their political affiliations to the then ruling Party Kanu, Supkem was not spared criticism by those who felt that the organization should have been neutral.

Within the multiparty era, Muslim leaders even those in Supkem, joined in the criticisms of the government concerning issues affecting the Muslim community, for instance continuous conflicts and lack of security in the North Eastern province.

There were also internal conflicts, in which some groups within the Muslim communities were not satisfied with how Supkem offered leadership and opportunities to all members. Many felt that the party leaders were leaning more towards the whims of the government and not representing their people as they should.

In order to push for their political rights, they felt that there was need to form a political party, taking advantage of the open window in the introduction and acceptance many political parties.

7.3 The Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK)

In December 1991 Kenya, yielding to the pressure from within and without to allow the formation and the presence of many parties, scrapping the section 2A of the Constitution held after the attempted coup in 1982. The pressure to allow many parties mounted on the then president, Daniel Arap Moi, who had ruled the country for thirteen years through a single

party system. In January the following year, there came the establishment of The Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) announced in Mombasa. Muslims activists championed for IPK recognition as a political party, but it was denied registration. At this time, in the eve of the first multi-party general elections, IPK supporters became a political force in the Coastal province. Having been refused to register as a political party by the government, IPK conducted mass demonstration across the city. Its proponents campaigned against Kanu and in favor of the opposition because they were denied registration. However, despite these sentiments of revenge against the government, some influential individuals within the then ruling party managed to rally the people behind Kanu making it win seventeen out of twenty and seven out of ten parliamentary seats in the Coastal and North Eastern provinces respectively.

Conclusion

Generally we can say that the minority Muslims in Kenya has contributed a lot towards Kenyan politics. The intention might not have been shared by all the Kenyan people but their presence in government circles has been a blessing. Muslims decided to protect their rights and hence formed organizations to express their demands and in a clever way always leaned on the side of the government, gaining favors from it. There are a number of Muslim individuals who made their contributions, Mahmud Mohamed being one of those who contributed to have upheld peace within the Country. Having been from a Somali community, the relation between Kenya and Somali is crucial for the stability of Kenya. We would say that the involvement of the Muslim legislatures in the formulation of the Kenya's constitution helped a great deal to pass the new constitution with the upholding of the personal status law in the retaining of the Qadi's law courts.

The suspicion which was being felt by the non-Muslim leaders in the government at the eve of independence diminished as the years went by. Muslim leaders on their part, given political responsibility have carried it out diligently and courageously. Hence we cannot deny or ignore the contribution of the Muslim community in governance and administration, even if the inner intention of their participation might have been towards the preservation of the rights of their people.

Four successive governments, under Kenyatta, Moi, Kibaki and currently Uhuru, have shown their commitment towards empowering the Muslim community and even entrusting them responsibilities in government's roles and services towards all the Kenyan citizens.

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Notes

¹Rosberg, G. Carl "Kenya" Encyclopedia Americana Vol 16, 1977, page 373e. Print.

²Elsbeth Huxley, *Africa and Asia: Mapping Two continents(History of Discovery & Exploration)* p. 184.

³Basil Davidson, *Africa: History of a continent*, p. 203.

⁴Arye Oded, *Islam and Politics in Kenya*, p. 1.

⁵Cf. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/36670466/Kenyan-Population-and-Housing-Census-PDF> on Religious affiliation, p. 33, 11/05/2013.

⁶Arye Oded, *Islam and Politics in Kenya*, p. 12.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸Arye Oded, *Islam and Politics in Kenya*, p. 64.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 23.