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Central Africa

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Today, mentioning Burundi evokes directly the conflicts which opposed Tutsis and Hutus in 1993 and 1995-6, just as in Rwanda. The Muslim community in Burundi does not exceed two to five percent of the population, but their history and their behaviour in the last tragic conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis deserve to be analysed.

Muslims in Burundi live mainly in cities such as Gitega, Rumonge, Nyanza, Muyinga, and Makamba. The largest Muslim community lives in the capital, Bujumbura, especially in the neighbourhoods of Buyenzi, Bwiza and the *quartier asiatique* (originally created for the Indian and Arab traders by the colonial Belgian rulers), where the main mosque is situated. The Islamic Cultural Centre, built by the Libyan government under the Bagaza presidency (1976-1987), is also located there.

The Muslims in Burundi have miscellaneous origins. Besides a small number of converts from among the 'original' Burundians – Hutus and Tutsis – an important Congolese population settled in Bujumbura, which lies some kilometres away from the border with Congo. The large Rwandan community also includes numerous Muslims. The *Warabu* – Kiswahili for 'Arabs' – are Omani and Yemeni traders who have lived in Burundi or in other neighbouring East African countries since several generations. Most of them have forgotten Arabic: they speak Kiswahili and the national language Kirundi, or even French. Other Arabs from Sudan, Mauritania and Lebanon have come more recently to trade in the capital. Muslim *Bahindi*, a name given to the Indians and Pakistanis, also settled in the country long ago and are often confused with the *Warabu*.

Besides those communities, West Africans arrived in the country in the last decades. Originally, they were traders coming from Mali, Senegal and Ivory Coast, importing clothes and fabrics or dealing with gold extracted from Congolese mines. Most of the West African traders left the country when conflict broke out in 1993, although some still have small shops in the central market or in Bwiza.

Diverse Origins

Islam was introduced by Arab and Swahili traders. Since the early 19th century, caravans coming from the Indian Ocean coast penetrated as far as Ujiji (today in Tanzania), on the bank of Tanganyika Lake looking for ivory and later for slaves. Around 1850, they created a colony at Uvira, on the Congolese edge of the lake. Both cities became the meeting points of the caravans and traders – Arabs as well as Africans like Swahili, Banyamwezi, Bamanyema – began to exchange their products with Nyanza and Rumonge, coastal cities located in Burundi.

Little by little, Islam penetrated the country. In 1885, the governor of Ujiji, Mohammed Bin Khalfan (called *Rumaliza* in Kirundi, 'the one who takes everything'), decided to extend his power to the North, aiming to reach more ivory and slaves. Bin Khalfan was a member of the Barwani's, a famous Omani family that had settled in East Africa. He multiplied his incursions on the Burundian coast of the lake – although he never succeeded in penetrating the country in a long-lasting way – firmly defended by King Mwezi Gisabo.

In the 1890s, when the first missionaries arrived in what is now Bujumbura, they found some *Wangwana*, a name given at this time to the Muslim Africans in Central

Africa. The presence of Islam in the city then increased with German colonization: a large part of the *askaris* – indigenous soldiers included in the colonial troops – were Muslims, while Indian and Arab traders hastened to the city, wishing to profit from the developing site. The Germans also incorporated many Swahili and Banyamwezi into the police and the administration. Kiswahili became German East Africa's official language, alongside German of course. When World War I broke out, the majority of Bujumbura's population professed Islam. At this time, the Burundians preferred to live inside the country, far from the lake. A local tradition even held that the King could not look at the Tanganyika Lake, for if so he would die. The Burundians started to settle down in this city with the Belgian colonization, which began in 1919. But even then, the phenomenon was slow to increase: in 1957, Burundians constituted not much more than 27 percent of Bujumbura's population. Besides them, there were more than 80 so-called 'tribes' speaking 34 different languages and using Swahili as their lingua franca. And Muslims still constituted 35.6 percent of this mixed population. The Burundian Muslims are Sunnis. However, a small Shiite mosque is located in the *quartier asiatique*, mostly frequented by Indians and Pakistanis. There are also some Ibazi – Swahili for Ibadites – coming mainly from Zanzibar and Oman.

In Burundi, Muslims have a close relationship with Kiswahili, a Bantu-language containing an important vocabulary from Arabic. It is even rare to meet a Muslim who does not speak this language. In the same way, 'Swahili' is the term commonly used to say 'Muslims' in Burundi, and the Muslim neighbourhood of Gitega, the second city of the country, is called the *quartier swahili*. Prayers are uttered in Arabic, as is the reading of the Koran, although believers use Kiswahili translations of the *masafi* (from Arabic *mushaf*) and the *juzu* (Arabic *juz*) of the Holy Book as well. Recently, a local intellectual translated some prayers into Kirundi, which were published in Kenya with Saudi funds. It should be said that Kiswahili does not belong to the Muslims alone: most of Bujumbura's inhabitants understand it. It is even used for mass in some churches, and television and radio programmes are broadcast in this language.

Away from Politics

During the tragic conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis in 1993 and 1995-6, Muslims stayed out of the clashes. In Buyenzi, a man remembers that 'during the events, our neighbourhood was called 'Swiss', until the army threatened to transform it in a new Tchetchenia!' In 1995, when the army did away with the Hutu neighbourhood of Kamenge, its inhabitants fled directly to the 'neutral' Buyenzi, which is now overcrowded. In Rwanda, the situation was much the same. This does not, however, mean to imply that all Muslims completely withheld from participation in the massacres. Certain Muslims are wanted by the Burundian Justice for their participation and some are now being judged in Arusha for participation in the Rwandan genocide.

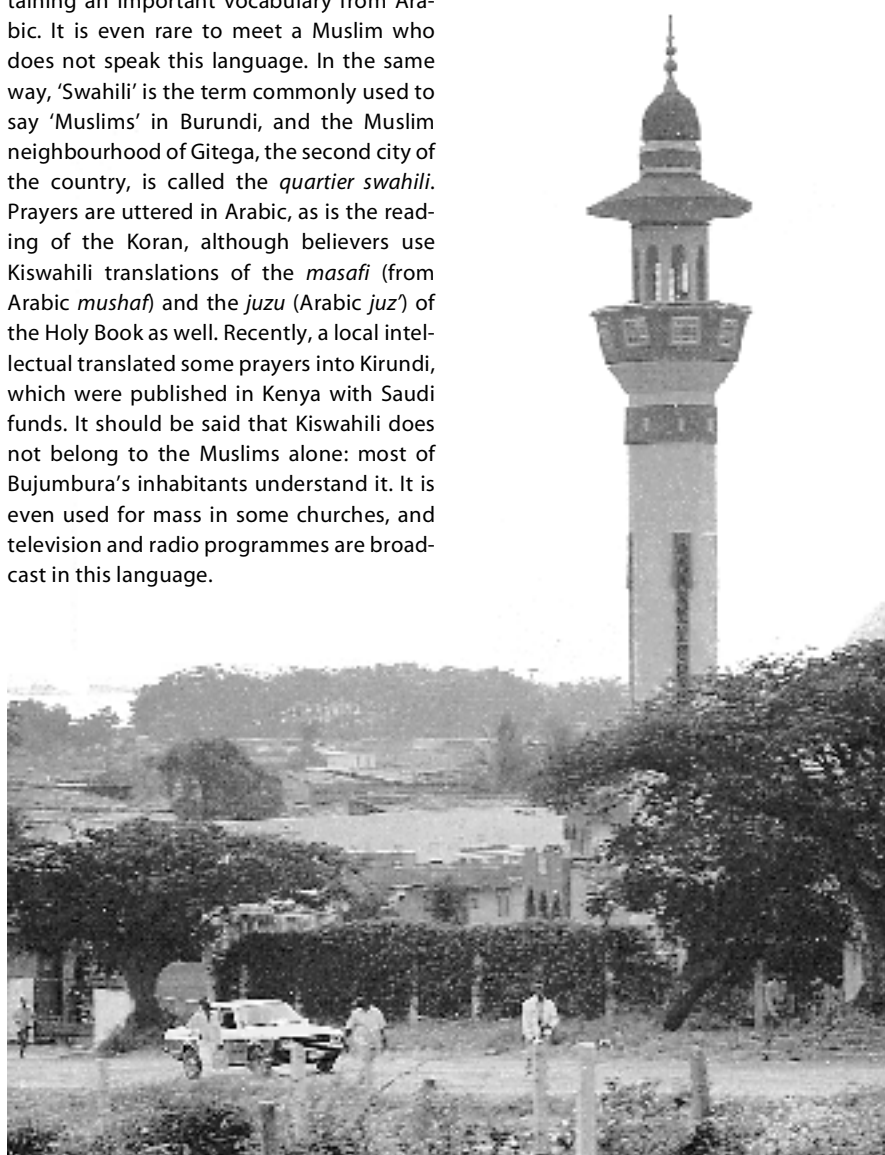
During the last years, conversion to Islam in both Burundi and Rwanda has firmly increased. Of course this could be due to a general need for spirituality after such a tragedy. There is also an observable new enthusiasm for Catholic and especially Protestant churches. It is nonetheless obvious that Islam attracts many for its having been neutral during the conflicts. How can this neutrality be explained? Many Muslims say it is due to the fact that they identify themselves as Muslims, and not as Hutus or Tutsis. This idyllic point of view, however, is not always true. Some Burundian Muslims emphasize their 'ethnic' roots; others do not. A Muslim

clerk of Bujumbura stated that the newly converted insist more than the others on their ethnicity and he does not hide his fear of this new phenomenon.

Issa Ngendakumana is a Muslim and a former minister, currently residing in Belgium. He remembers very well that he understood his ethnic origin only in 1972, when the army killed thousands of Hutus. Before this, he never wondered whether he was a Tutsi or a Hutu. According to him, this was not due to his religion: at the time, a lot of peasants did not really care whether they were Hutu or Tutsi. Ngendakumana stresses that most of the Muslims are of foreign origin and so they do not identify with this dual vision of society. He also recalls that Muslims do not participate in political life. And it is the politicians who emphasize the so-called difference between Hutu and Tutsi. To date there have been only five Muslim ministers, and this, only since the nineties.

How can the distance from power be explained? A local Muslim journalist in Burundi asserted that his co-religionists were excluded from schools, and thus were excluded from political activities. Some have taken a Christian name in order to pursue their studies. Again, Ngendakumana placed that assumption into perspective: 'There has never been a real discrimination toward Muslims at school, even if we can observe much less education among Muslims. But schools in Burundi have been first created and managed by the Catholic Church. Thus, Muslim students didn't feel at ease in these institutions...'

This leads to another part of the explanation. The Catholic Church cannot be separated from Burundian (and Rwandan) contemporary history. It may be positively or negatively perceived, but it is never seen as a neutral observer. Catholicism was implanted in Burundi and Rwanda as a tool of colonial power, and it has developed theories which reinforced the difference between Hutu and Tutsi. After the independence, it maintained the role at times of an ally, at others as an opponent of the government. The churches were used by some priests to exhort or to justify their crimes. But Islam is never associated with political events in the area. On the other hand, the few Muslims who took part in the massacres generally acted as individuals, never as believers using their faith to exterminate their brothers. A last point to put forward is that Muslims are traders and live in towns. They are not directly involved in land possession and exploitation, both key elements in the understanding of the conflict in an overcrowded and agricultural area. Whatever the reasons, the behaviour of Burundian Muslims is worth mentioning. It is a proof that the 'ethnic' scission is not a fatality in Burundi. ◆



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