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Colonialism and Muslim Mobility

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East Africa

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The European attitude towards the Muslims in East and Central Africa can be seen in two different, almost antithetic phases. The first one covers the exploration and the conquest periods, when Muslim traders helped Europeans to reach the most remote areas and Muslim soldiers were enlisted as indigenous soldiers. The second phase covers the settling period, when Muslims were almost rejected from society. Both were closely related to the Europeans' perception of the African and Arab cultures.

Since the very beginning of their arrival in Central Africa, the Europeans were in contact with 'Arabs' (in European sources, 'Arab' often refers to Muslims as a whole, including Asians, Swahilis, and 'half-cast' Arab-Africans). Every explorer's diary mentions the presence of these ivory- and slave-traders, even in remote areas like Manyema (Eastern Congo). The presence of Arab (and Persian) traders on the East African Coast goes back to the 10th century, and their contacts with the African population gave birth to the well-known Swahili culture. In 1840, the Omani Sultan even decided to transfer his capital from Mascate to Zanzibar. They were in contact with the Nyamwezi and Yao African traders, who seem to have penetrated the inland since the 18th century. Using these people as guides, Arab traders followed the same path in the first half of the 19th century and went deeper and deeper into the Dark Continent in order to find ivory and slaves. This created a Muslim society composed of different communities. Some of them were of Omani descent, having settled on Zanzibar and the East African coast since generations, but it included also Persians, Indians, and Baluchis as well as Swahilis and other 'mixed' Arab-Africans. Finally, the so-called Wangwana, literally 'freemen', constituted local Muslim African tribes.

Arab blood, African blood

When the first Europeans decided to explore the forests of Central Africa, the area was already well known to Muslim traders. That is why most of the European expeditions departed from Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, where they could find carriers and soldiers but above all guides that knew the roads, the habits, the material needs, and the languages of the local population. On the road, they could also benefit from the information given by the ivory- and slave-traders. That is why 'Arabs' and Muslims were quite well considered by the European explorers; yet that was not the only reason. The European mentality of the last century firmly considered that the world's population was divided in different cultural levels: Westerners were of course the most civilized nations and the Africans were nothing but savages. The Arabs stood obviously in between: Arabo-Islamic contribution to civilization was recognized, even if the relations between Europe and Muslims have not always been easy. This conception influenced the way they were considering the Arabs in Africa.

It is interesting to notice that the Arabs described by the explorers are almost systematically compared to the Africans: the latter are depicted as nude or half nude, lazy, stupid, cowardly, and ugly. Arabs, on the other hand, are well dressed, proud, noble, but also cruel and cunning. Descriptions of mulattos are even more interesting: they inherited their good characteristics – whether physical or intellectual – from their Arab ascent and the negative ones – often limited to their physical features – come from their African blood.

Colonialism and Muslim Mobility

The information gathered by the European explorers about Africa reached Europe, and some European governments – Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain – decided to colonize these new territories. At the beginning, Europeans continued to see Muslims as potential allies in a totally new world.

Military, politics, and religion

Germany – which ruled Tanganyika (Tanzania), Burundi, and Rwanda until 1918 – seems to have been the more open-minded towards the Muslim communities. They adopted Kiswahili – which was then closely associated with Muslim culture – as an official language in their territories, which attracted a lot of Muslims to work in the administration as well as the local army and police. The fact that the Germans founded a city like Bujumbura also attracted many Muslim merchants. At the beginning of the 20th century, Johanssen, a missionary, considered that it was the German colonial administration itself that opened Rwanda to Islam. And when Germany had to leave the administration of both Rwanda and Burundi to Belgium, the majority of the inhabitants of Bujumbura, Burundi's capital, were Muslims. Most of them were not Burundians, but Swahilis, Arabs, Indians, and Congolese.

In the last decades of the 19th century, the British chose Muslim 'tribes' to help them conquer or rule East Africa: Zanzibari, Sudanese, Somali, Swahili, and later even Indian troops. Yet, after the Sudanese mutiny of 1897, British officers decided to diversify their recruitment and enlisted more and more local soldiers, like Baganda and later Acholi. Of course, most of these soldiers, sometimes accompanied by their wives, settled down where they were brought by their British officers. For instance, Captain Lugard enlisted 'Nubi' soldiers from Southern Sudan and brought them to Uganda. Actually, these warriors belonged to various Muslim populations originating from Southern Sudan. Later, they continued to serve the British Crown and went to Kenya, Tanzania, and even Somalia. Nowadays, their descendants still live in these countries. Some of them continued to serve the British Crown during the two World Wars and even helped the British colonial troops to fight the Mau Mau rebellion. In the same way, today most of the inhabitants of Isiolo, Kenya, are the grandsons of Somali soldiers enrolled in Kismayo and Aden during the First World War.

But if those Muslim tribes were well considered by the colonial rulers for their military purposes, they had to stay away from any political aspirations. The main reason for this segregation was the religious factor itself: the British wanted to favour Protestant Africans, through education as well as selection for local power. In Uganda for instance, Muslims – and Catholics – were soon marginalized and they were denied access to some political posts and even chieftaincies. On the Swahili coast, the British tried to emphasize the Arab origin of the Muslims in order to make Islam look like an alien element, despite its presence in East Africa since many centuries. For instance, colonial law did not consider the Arabs, Abyssinians, Baluchis, Somalis, Comorians, and Malagasies of Kenya as 'natives', even though they had been there for generations.

In the beginning, the Belgians also recruited many Muslims to the army. Between 1874 and 1900, many mercenaries were enrolled to help King Leopold II's officers 'conquer' the Congo Free State (Etat Indépendant du Congo). At first, they mainly came from Zanzibar. Later, Somalis, Ethiopians, Hausas, West Africans, and even Sudanese were enlisted. In 1894, some of these Sudanese left Congo and were recruited by the British in Uganda.

Due to the political influence of the Swahili merchants in Eastern Congo, the colonial administration even gave them some administrative posts. In 1887, Stanley appointed Tippeo-Tippe, a famous Zanzibari slave-trader, as governor of Stanley Falls (now Kisangani). But the Arab and Swahili merchants quickly understood that the Belgians did not aim to share anything and that they had to fight if they wanted to keep their power in Eastern Congo. Between 1892 and 1895, several battles opposed Europeans and 'Arabs'. A couple of years later, colonial troops fought against the Sudanese Mahdists in the northern province. The Europeans finally won those conflicts and put a term to any Muslim political influence. This was the start of a radical change in the nature of the relations between both communities, the former allies becoming enemies.

But the major element explaining the change of attitude towards Muslims is the role played by the Church, whether Catholic or Protestant. The missionaries had been active since the exploration phase, yet their impact grew considerably during the settling period due to their monopoly on the education system. Missionaries were afraid of Islam, seen as a serious rival in the area, and they had to fight its spread by all means. In the 1880s, the Church organized a campaign in Europe against the slave trade in Africa. This also had a strong impact on the way Muslims were seen, although it often – not always – was a political tool more than a real humanistic feeling in the colonial administration. After that, Belgian authorities were very suspicious towards the Muslims and this until the Independence of Congo. A report about Manyema's Muslims issued in 1959 – one year before the Independence – underlines the way Muslims were systematically harassed by authorities: building of new mosques and introduction of religious books as well as Islamic education in general were forbidden. Arrival of alien Muslims – seen as potential preachers – was made difficult. Nevertheless, Muslim merchants coming from West Africa or from British East Africa were numerous in the region.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the widespread idea that Muslim Africans were more educated, more civilized, and were better fighters helped Muslims to move easily inside the European colonies. Yet, the very same reasons for their inclusion later excluded them from society. But the colonial administration still needed many hands to exploit 'their' territories. They thus began to favour some of the local peoples, with whom they also began to become better acquainted. For instance, the Belgian administration moved numerous Baluba from Kasai to Katanga province and Rwandans to Kivu in order to exploit those rich areas. In the same way, they enlisted the Bangala in the

army because they considered them as the best warriors.

So, the relationship between Muslim communities and colonial powers was an ambiguous one. Muslims were seen as materially and culturally more developed than the other Africans, and thus as more valuable interlocutors. But this meant, too, that they could eventually have a kind of influence on the local populations, whether in religion or in politics. The colonial powers quickly understood that the most efficient way to diminish this potential influence was to make Islam and Muslims into an alien culture, not only different but even opposed to African values.