

Indian Ocean

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The post-independence period from 1976 to 1985 was witness to a great number of young Comorian students heading for the Arab world, particularly to Medina, to receive the necessary training to become the future ulema of the Comoros Islands. Their return home began to have an impact even during their summer vacation, a time during which the *da'wa* (mission) could be spread and during which they, having studied in different countries, manifested differing influences.

The Comorians had the tendency to distinguish between those studying in Medina, having the reputation of being the least evolved of all, and those studying in other cities in Saudi Arabia or in Kuwait, considered to be the 'evolved youth'. The latter were said to be comparable in intellectual terms as well as in their mentality to those who came from France and those educated in the *lycées français* of the country. Indeed, those not coming from Medina emphasized their difference by dressing in the latest European fashion and bringing with them the latest modern gadgets: radio-cassette recorders, hi-fi stereo systems, cameras, and the like. Their mannerisms starkly contrasted them with their Medinian counterparts: the Wahhabis. The latter wore sombre clothing consisting of a white robe and skullcap. They stayed in their villages to carry out preparatory work, first amongst their families, for their definitive return. The 'apprentice cleric' defined himself as an adversary of traditions and he expressed this within, among others, his female family members by attempting to impose the veil and preventing them from frequenting men outside of the family. Furthermore, he tried to put an end to the marabout practices, which his family may have resorted to in the case of need.

His intervention would then be carried out at the village level: the mosque, the *école française*, and the public square. At the mosque, he would ask the village *ālim*, who generally administers religious instruction between the *magrib* and *al-ʿiṣā* prayers, to accept being replaced by him during the school vacation. The same went for instruction, such as the *tafsīr al-qurʿān*, which takes place at the mosque during the Ramadan. As with every period of school vacation, the local students organize a special course at the *école française*, where the young Wahhabi would propose to administer Arabic courses. In the public squares, he would set up debates on a topic relating to local religious practice. During the month of the Prophet's birth, the *maulid* month for Comorians, he would seize the occasion to preach. In this sense his preaching indicates a capacity to adapt his strategy to the reality of the country: although the Wahhabi ideology condemns the practice of the *maulid*, young Wahhabis were happy to participate in it with the intention of taking advantage of the podium offered them to propagate their message. The same holds true for the *dāyira* ceremonies or for the religious ceremonies of the grand marriages (locally called *madjlis*).

The Wahhabis thus challenged local practices, customs, and institutions judged as contrary to pure, original Islam. However, these reformist claims of the Wahhabis in the villages strongly contrasted their absence on the national scene. Their silence at the level of the state is especially remarkable in a country that calls itself an 'Islamic Republic'. The entire field of contestation of the political regime was occupied by the Marxists of the ASEC and the groups emanating from it, such as the Front Démocra-

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tique. But as the Wahhabis were home on vacation, it was not reasonable to risk imprisonment or being stopped from returning to Medina. It was thus necessary to keep a low profile. This, however, would no longer be the case after 1985.

The *da'wa* after the Wahhabis definitive return home

From 1985 on, when some of the Wahhabis completed their studies and returned home, they began to attack the regime, criticizing the – by now – Islamic Republic for not applying the *shari'ca*. In their point of view, the term Islamic Republic was pompous and had, for those who had invented it, but two objectives: to legitimize their policies by means of Islam, and to attract financial aid from the oil-rich monarchies. Indeed, this intention cannot be excluded considering the volume of aid that Abdallah's regime received from these countries. For example, the total amount of aid he received from the Gulf monarchies amounted to 93.2 million dollars in 1981 and did not cease to increase until at least 1986. Apart from a few infrastructure projects such as expanding the port of Mutsumudu, the money mostly landed in the pockets of the government officials. Furthermore, the Wahhabis' accusation launched against the government was confirmed and rejoined the comical public criticism that called the republic, instead of a 'République Fédérale' (Federal Republic), a 'République fédérale' (*feda rile*: literally, money, let's guzzle it).

This description of the way Wahhabis spread and are still spreading their propaganda brings at least three permanent factors to the fore:

The nostalgic desire to perform their *da'wa* as the Prophet Himself did. First, they tried to impose their doctrine within their families: the Prophet did so for Islam first with his clan. Then, they spread to the village level: the Prophet had done so for Mecca. Finally, they spread their message to the national level: here again, the Prophet had done the same after his immigration to Medina. In all of these steps, there would certainly be obstacles that the Wahhabi *dā'ī* would face with respect to the means demanded by the state of the power struggle: persuasion or physical confrontation. All would depend on the opportunity presented. Even this was inspired by the Prophet. The origin myths, the obsession with the founding act, and the supposedly perfect paradigmatic model which must be reproduced, are common to all proselytizing doctrines that promise adepts the 'great eve'. This dream feeds their desire to re-institute in the here and now the prophetic State of Medina, the ideal City.

The second permanent factor is the denunciation the Wahhabis perform at the place of the elder ulema. This is done despite the fact that most of the latter were teachers who, in the *madrassas* they had founded, gave these Wahhabis a solid basis in the Arabic language and a modern religious education – in comparison with that which they themselves had received from their own predecessors. They had sought out scholarships for these young Wahhabis and organized their departures for the Islamic centres in the Arab world. Today they consider their former students ungrateful.

The third permanent factor is the fascination, with all the envy and rejection the term implies, that the Arabophones or *arabisants* hold for the Francophones or *francisants*. The latter alone monopolize the state apparatus carrying the name *école française*, considered to be the sole legitimate educational institution. Yet, (as the Arabophones justly hold) the state belongs to all citizens and not merely to one caste. And while the ulema that had founded the *madrassas* were attracted and recruited to the political parties of the period ranging from internal autonomy to independence, and while the new Arabophones (other than the Wahhabis) believe themselves to be obliged to borrow the mannerisms of the new generation of the 'Jules Ferry school', the young Comorian Wahhabis distance themselves from such attitudes. They want to mark their difference in every way. Nonetheless, in many ways, they resemble the youth of the Marxist ASEC-FD. The former oppose their elder ulema, the latter contest their elders in power and the political establishment. All are against French imperialism. The Wahhabis are against French imperialism based on the ideology of the Muslim Brothers which combats the *ḡazwīl-fikrī* (colonialization of the spirit of Muslims by that of Westerners, especially through their schools). The youth of the ASEC-FD do the same, but based on Marxist ideology which is anti-colonialist, being understood that the imperialism, for this Marxist ideology, is the 'supreme phase of capitalism'. Both movements were to invent a 'counter-culture': on the one hand, the 'new culture' (*msomo wa nyumeni*) of the ASEC-FD, which is a mixture of anti-conformist behaviour slightly hippy-like and a revolutionary Marxist militancy; and on the other hand, the Wahhabi puritanism of the 'Medinians'. It seems that the Wahhabis have imitated the young Marxists of the ASEC-FD in their propaganda and in their mode of organization: firstly, by their seasonal propaganda during the school vacation and then by their transformation into a political party. They generated the FNJ (Front National pour la Justice, National Front for Justice) in the same way that the ASEC produced its 'Front', that being the FD (Front Démocratique, Democratic Front). However, in their criticism of the magico-customary traditions (*mila na ntsi ugangi*) such as the grand marriage, they are much closer to revolutionary Ali Soilih than the youth of the ASEC-FD, which consider this domain as secondary. For the latter, it was necessary to defeat French imperialism as well as its 'Comorian servants', meaning the elders of the political establishment, to install a 'true democracy' (*demokrasi mpiya*).

The greatest difference that separated the youth of the ASEC-FD and the Wahhabis is an attitude of political culture. The Wahhabis are, just as their elder ulema and the politicians that evolved from internal autonomy to independence, much closer to the 'oral political culture' than the 'written political culture'. When it comes to expressing a political opinion, they often use verbal means (preaching at the mosque or on the national radio) rather than written means. But the youth of the ASEC-FD are the genuine promoters in the country of a 'graphic political culture' as witnessed in their journals such as: *Usoni* (Up Front), *Ushé* (The Twilight), and *Darbini* (Microscope). They came to master

the art of tract making. The famous 'Voice of the People' (*sauti ya umati*) that so annoyed the Abdallah regime is one illustration of this. That did not, however, stop them from joining the written political culture with the oral, particularly in their records and tapes of folklore music and revolutionary songs. Another difference, and not the least important, that distinguishes them is their atheism, they so like to show, and their preaching thereof to those younger than themselves, the members of the ASEC-FD were in a way decidal, which is contrary to the Wahhabis. However, the militants of the two movements are both parricidal and liberticidal. Parricidal, because the members of both movements aspired to taking the place of their elders, the traditional ulema for the Wahhabis, and the politicians for the members of the ASEC-FD. Liberticidal, because both movements aspired to the power and installing a supposedly salvational dictatorship: the dictatorship of the proletariat for the ASEC-FD and the dictatorship of the *shari'ca* for the Wahhabis. But the inauguration of the 'Shariatocracy' is not possible in a 'deus ex machina'. For that, a political combat in the framework of new democratic era must be lead. ◀

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