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ARYE ODED

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Arye Oded



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# Introduction

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Muslims in Kenya form a minority, but a significant minority. Their number is estimated at 5 million (1998), which represents 20 percent of the population. This large figure, together with the fact that the Muslims are concentrated in areas that are economically and strategically important, gives them at least potential political weight, especially in periods of municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections.

During the colonial period and since independence, however, Muslim community leaders have repeatedly complained of discrimination. They have pointed out, among other things, that before colonialism Muslims were the most advanced in culture and development and were the rulers of Kenya's coastal region, whereas today Muslims are less advanced than the country's majority Christian population and lag behind them in education. Widespread feelings of discrimination among Muslims were exploited by extremists, leading to serious outbreaks of violence in 1992–1994. This study probes the political standing of Islam in Kenya, especially since independence (1963), and identifies the factors that, respectively, strengthen and weaken Islam's position.

## Historical Background

The nucleus of the Arab community on the coast of East Africa, from Somalia to Mozambique, came into being even before the advent of Islam. Written evidence to this effect from the second century A.D. indicates that Arab traders would sail from the Arabian Peninsula to the coast of East Africa to trade with local inhabitants. When some of them remained and intermarried with women from local Bantu tribes, the Swahili community was formed. This community adopted



Islam during the first centuries of its existence, and Swahili culture absorbed significant Arab influences. About 30 percent of the vocabulary of the Swahili language, Kiswahili, derives from Arabic, whereas the structure and grammar of Kiswahili are based on Bantu languages.

During the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, the Muslim cities that were established along the coast—such as Mombasa, Kilwa, Lamu, Malindi, and Pate—and the islands of Zanzibar (Unguja) and Pemba flourished, reaching the peak of their economic and religious development. The Portuguese occupation of the coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries put an end to this prosperity and caused destruction and misery all along the coast as a result of frequent conflicts between the Christian Portuguese and the Muslim populations. The Omani occupation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought the coast, from Somalia to the Rovuma River (north of Mozambique), under Muslim rule again. Of special importance was the reign of Sultan Sayid Sa'id ibn Sultan (1832–1856), who moved his capital from Muscat in Oman to Zanzibar in 1840. Zanzibar became an important trade center for ivory and slaves, from which large numbers of trade caravans were dispatched to the interior of East Africa, with the encouragement and protection of the sultan, who himself owned some of these caravans. Arab commercial centers and large trade depots were established along the trade routes, which penetrated even deeper inland.

These trade routes became the main channels by which Islam was disseminated. The trade centers in the interior eventually became the foci of Islamic expansion. The most important trade centers that were established by Arab and Swahili merchants, such as Bagamoio, Tabora, and Ujiji (the latter on the shores of Lake Tanganyika), were located along the trade routes in Tanganyika—this is one of the reasons Islam is more widespread in Tanzania than in Kenya or Uganda. In Tanzania today, Muslims constitute around 35–40 percent of the population; in Uganda they are 10 percent and in Kenya, as noted, 20 percent.

During Sayid Sa'id's rule, the Arabs penetrated deep into the interior of East Africa, reaching the great lakes of Victoria and Tanganyika and establishing important trade centers; but their main interest remained ivory and slaves, not religion, and they rarely made any effort to convert the native tribes to Islam. As of the mid-nineteenth century, Muslim influence on the Bantu peoples was weak. The Omani Arabs, who belonged mainly to the Ibadiya sect, did not try to disseminate their religion among the natives. In contrast, the Arabs from Hadramaut of southern Arabia, who followed in the footsteps of the Arab traders, included religious teachers who

preached the Sunni-Shafi'i school of Islam. Among these were Sunni teachers who introduced the Islamic Sufi orders or brotherhoods (in Arabic the *tariqa*, which means "a way," i.e., a way to God). From the late nineteenth century Sufism played a major role in disseminating Islam in East Africa. However, most of these teachers arrived in inner East Africa only at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the development of transportation in the region. This late start seems to have hindered the expansion of Islam in the interior of East Africa, especially when compared to West Africa.

Among the groups that contributed to the diffusion of Islam throughout East Africa were Muslim craftsmen who found employment in trade centers and in African settlements. They included metalworkers, builders, carpenters, leather tanners, and goldsmiths. In West Africa their influence was felt in places such as Togo, Dahomey (today Benin), and Kumasi (a city in Ghana); in the Horn of Africa they were influential in Mogadishu and Harar and in East Africa in the coastal towns, in the interior trade centers, and in the bustling areas around the railway stations that began to sprout in the early twentieth century. Some of the Muslim missionaries in East Africa were dependent on Swahili craftsmen (*fundi*) and would take them along to the mission stations in the interior. The missionaries often found that the Swahili craftsmen had been more active in spreading Islam than the Muslim traders had been. Once aware of this role, the missionaries began to provide the indigenous people training in crafts. For example, King Mutesa of Buganda (1856–1884) used Muslim craftsmen's services, and they exerted great influence in his court.

Muslim traditional healers and writers of amulets also spread Islam in East as well as West Africa. Kings and chiefs, as well as ordinary people, respected them and believed in their power to invoke blessings or curses. To this day there are considerable numbers of Muslims among the "medicine men" of East Africa.

Nomadic tribes, such as the Berbers of the Sahara, and the Beja and Somali tribes in the Horn of Africa, also contributed to the expansion of Islam. A large part of Kenya's Muslim population in the northeast originated in Somali nomadic tribes who came from the north.

Islam's ability to adapt to local customs, sometimes by imbuing them with Islamic meaning (such as ancestor worship), was an important factor in the Islamization of tribes such as the Baganda of Uganda and the Yao of central Africa. The prestige that accompanied acceptance of the relatively advanced civilization and technology of the Muslims also contributed to the diffusion of Islam, the spread of spoken and written Arabic, and the adoption of certain

Arab and Swahili customs. Because of their literacy, some Arabs and Swahilis had already been integrated in the precolonial era into the ruling hierarchy of tribes such as the Ha in Ujiji, Tanganyika, and the Ganda in Uganda.

Interestingly, there were important developments in Islam in precolonial Buganda, even though it was relatively distant from the coast. The first Muslims arrived in Buganda in the mid-nineteenth century through the trade routes that crossed Tanganyika, and they established their center in the *kabaka's* (king's) capital. On the coast of Kenya and Tanganyika, the arrival of Islam preceded Christianity by hundreds of years, and by the time the Christian missionaries arrived, Islam was already well established. In Uganda, on the other hand, the Christian missionaries arrived shortly after the Muslim traders and before Islam could become deeply rooted. In Uganda, therefore, the clash between the two monotheistic religions was much fiercer. This violent struggle between Muslims and Christians was intensified by certain distinctive features of the kingdom of Buganda and by the political and economic interests of Kabaka Mutesa I, who sought to exploit the two religions for his personal benefit and to consolidate his position in his kingdom and in the Lakes Region in general.<sup>1</sup> Mutesa, an intelligent and experienced king and a cunning diplomat, knew well how to maneuver between the two religions. During part of his reign he even declared himself a Muslim and imposed Islam on all of his subjects. But immediately following his death, when his young and inexperienced son who succeeded him proved unable to deal with the complicated religious situation, a bloody struggle broke out between Christians and Muslims. For a short period the Muslims had the upper hand and installed a Muslim king, Kabaka Kalema (1889–1890), but finally, with outside help from Christians, the Muslims were routed. Their defeat and subsequent marginalization during the Christian colonial period afforded the Christians the power they still wield today, Christians constitute about 80 percent of Uganda's population and Muslims only 10 percent.

In Kenya, Islam lost the preeminence it had enjoyed on the coast when the coastal strip was annexed to the protectorate of Kenya by the British colonial authorities. Nairobi, in the interior, became the center of government. The struggle of the coastal Muslims to retain their superiority by joining the sultanate of Zanzibar or by receiving wider autonomy from the protectorate did not succeed. Instead, it created deep suspicion among the Christian leadership, the ramifications of which are still felt today, as we shall see. To this struggle should be added the lengthy and violent campaign that independent

Kenya launched against the Muslim Somali tribes in the Northeastern Province, which wanted to secede from Kenya and join Somalia.

The significant number of Muslims in Kenya, and their concentration in important regions of the coast, in the Northeastern Province, and in the large towns, are factors that should give them strength and political influence. On the other hand, historical developments in this area fostered distrust toward them by the Kenyan government, and this weakens their position.

### The Book in the Context of Related Scholarly Works

The general issue of religion and politics has occupied many scholars and been widely researched. Some attribute to religion a decisive role in politics. "Religion appears as a source of enormous creative political energies," asserts Daniel H. Levine, who has reviewed ten books dealing with religion and politics in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and, in one case, South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Most of these works, however, deal with these issues in general and theoretical terms. Terence Ranger, in his illuminating article "Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa,"<sup>3</sup> focuses mainly on traditional and Christian religious movements and gives a long and impressive list of books and articles on this subject.

Likewise, there exists a voluminous literature on Islam in Africa. J. Spencer Trimingham has written several works on Islam in various regions of Africa. His *Islam in East Africa*, published in 1964, focuses particularly on "the traditional type and forms of East African Islam."<sup>4</sup> In a pamphlet published in 1962, Trimingham notes that he was encouraged to write his books on Islam in Africa by the Church Missionary Society because "misconceptions exist in Christian circles in East Africa concerning Islam and, without deeper knowledge of the actualities, it is impossible for them to develop any clear attitude to Islam and shape their policy."<sup>5</sup>

A more recent book is *Religion and Politics in East Africa*,<sup>6</sup> edited by Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, a compilation of papers presented in 1990 at the international conference in Denmark on the subject of religiopolitical conflict in East Africa, including Sudan. The papers deal with specific topics connected with Islam or Christianity.

*Islam in Kenya*, edited by Mohamed Bakari and Yahya Saad, is a compilation of the proceedings of a seminar on this subject held in Mombasa in 1994. According to the editors, the book's main purpose is to correct "the perception of Muslims as a group, as foreign tissue

in the national body politic" and also to correct "the misconception of Muslims by their compatriots." The chief concern of the seminar participants was to show that Islam had played a significant role in the development of Kenyan society "so that politicians, administrators, policy-makers and ordinary Kenyans are furnished with some information about Islam and Muslims as an integral part of Kenyan multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society."<sup>7</sup> The essays reflect the attitudes of Muslim intellectuals and have great value as a reference source.

The contribution of the present study is that it focuses on Islam as a political factor in Kenya, systematically taking into consideration all the elements that contribute to its strength and its weakness in this role. In addition to analyzing the Muslims' point of view, the book examines the attitudes toward Muslims of the government and of the Christian churches. I believe that an adequate understanding of religiopolitical dynamics in Africa can be achieved only by in-depth and locally focused investigations in different countries. Only then can one draw systematic comparisons between countries and reach well-founded conclusions. As Michael Gilseman points out, the interaction of Islam and politics is not the same everywhere and at all times, and it is necessary to specify the "specific conditions" of each relevant location.<sup>8</sup> Victor C. Ferkiss likewise asserts that "before any generalizations [about Africa] can be raised from the level of hypotheses to developed theories," studies must provide reliable information on "the social, ethnic and national backgrounds of the religious leadership in each country," as well as the correlation of religious affiliation with other politically relevant factors within each nation.<sup>9</sup> That is what the present study on Kenya attempts to achieve, in the hope that it will be one link in a chain of studies on other African countries that will enable us to understand better the impact of religion on politics in Africa and the relationship between the two. Ferkiss concludes that only when other data are available in all areas will it

be possible to discuss the interrelationship of religion and politics in Africa with greater authority. Greater knowledge of religiopolitical interaction in Africa will fill an important gap in our knowledge of Africa, help us understand how and to what extent African politics do, in fact, differ from politics elsewhere, and contribute significantly to the development of a universal theory of the relationship of religion and politics in the contemporary world, thus extending the study of comparative politics.<sup>10</sup>

This study also deals with relevant contemporary issues not discussed in previous studies, such as Arab-Muslim activities in Kenya,

their influence on the political and social standing of local Muslims, and the attitude of the government and the Christian churches toward these activities. Christian fears of Arab-Muslim activity are shown to derive from mutual distrust, stemming from historical events. The study pays special attention to Iranian operations in Kenya in the religiopolitical field, including the Iranians' main goals and the methods they use to promote their influence. Chapter 12 also looks at Kenyan Muslims' attitudes toward the Middle East conflict. The chapter considers whether the Kenyan Muslim position has affected government policy on this issue.

Another topic discussed—one that occupies the attention of the world at large—is the rise of Islamic extremism. Chapters 13 and 14 analyze the emergence of radical Muslim groups in Kenya and the methods used by the government to contain them. The main exponent of Islamic extremism in Kenya during this period, Shaikh Khalid Balala, demanded the legalization of the Islamic Party of Kenya, which was banned by the government in the context of a prohibition on political parties based on religion. Balala stressed that in Islam there is no separation of religion and state, and he also challenged the legitimacy of President Moi's regime. This development fits in with Levine's observation that "much of the struggle around religion and politics centers in some way around legitimization."<sup>11</sup> In Kenya, Shaikh Balala called for an alternative structure of power and authority that, according to him, would be more democratic, considerate of Muslim interests, and based on *shari'a* (Islamic law). However, unlike the churches, which tried to strengthen their position and achieve democracy and human rights by peaceful, unified actions, Balala preached violence, which was one of the reasons for the government's harsh reaction leading to his fall. Balala also, however, acted out of a deep religious conviction that enabled him to struggle for a considerable time, with unprecedented vigor and audacity, against overwhelming odds and against the government security forces. His courageous stand against the government attracted mainly poor and unemployed youth and marginalized groups. Initially Balala enjoyed wide Muslim support, and here one can observe similar developments in other countries experiencing Islamic extremism. As Gilseman puts it: "A rhetoric of liberty and independence breaks on the barren shores of food scarcity or low-paid and dead-end government jobs. . . . Out of instability, unease and immobility comes the call for a transformation of society through the application of the Qur'an and the Holy Law to the whole of social life."<sup>12</sup>

This study analyzes the religiopolitical situation in Kenya from a strictly objective viewpoint. It is empirically grounded rather than

theoretically oriented. Although the book concentrates on Kenya, Chapter 15 compares the relationship between Islam and politics in Kenya and in the two neighboring countries, Uganda and Tanzania; all three countries were under British colonial rule. This comparison reveals that several similar factors underlie the increased activism of the Muslims in the three countries:

- The democratization process and the introduction of a multi-party system in Kenya and Tanzania allowed greater freedom of expression, including criticism of the government. This emboldened the Muslims to publicly express their frustrations and to try and establish Islamic parties, charging that the other parties were led by Christians who neglected Muslim interests. In Uganda, too, there has been greater freedom of expression under President Museveni's unique no-party system of government.
- The Iranian Islamic revolution has spread its ideology by means of the growing number of Iranian embassies and cultural centers in Africa as well as through Iran's radio broadcasts in major African languages. Iran emphasizes that the main purpose of the revolution is to unite all Muslims, Shiites, and Sunnis alike and to restore Islam to its former glory and dignity in the face of the defamatory propaganda of "imperialism and Zionism" (see Appendix 5). As explained in Chapter 11, Kenya is one of the Iranians' major centers in East Africa.
- The Arab oil boom of the 1970s, and the resulting increased Arab-Islamic activity in sub-Saharan Africa, intensified the politicization of Islam.

The awakening of the Muslims in recent years has brought the emergence of militant Muslim groups in all three countries, especially among the young. This study also analyzes the local causes of Islamic extremism, its conflict with the regimes in question, and its demand for the redistribution of authority.

Ferkiss suggests that the influence of what he calls African nationalism "can be expected to be thrown against any tendencies for religious cleavages to be reflected in politics."<sup>13</sup> He points out that Africans are especially conscious of the need for unity in nation building and especially prone to see in any kind of subnational division a device of neocolonialism. He refers to the resolution passed at the All-African People's Conference of December 1958 that condemned religious separatism as a tool of imperialism. Forty years later, however, it seems that the efforts to create unity and national

consciousness in most African countries have not yet succeeded and that ethnic and religious factors still play an important role in African politics. This is certainly the situation in Kenya, Uganda, and (to a lesser extent) Tanzania.

Kenya is a case where the separation of religion and state has created potential religiopolitical conflicts not only between Muslims and the mainly Christian government but also between the government and the Christian churches, as discussed in Chapter 7. Moreover, in view of the fact that neither Kenya, Uganda, nor Tanzania is predominantly Muslim, it seems that the conflict between Islam and the state derives not only from Islam's identification of religion and state but also from the special association of Christianity and Christian institutions with colonialism in the preindependence period. In Kenya, the close association of the postindependence regime with Christianity, especially during Moi's presidency (despite the ongoing controversy between Moi and the Christian churches concerning democratization and human rights), enhanced the tension between Muslims and the government.

Concerning the role Muslims in Kenya have actually played in the recent social and political changes, Muslims' own opinion, as expressed in *Islam in Kenya*, has already been mentioned. The Muslim minority in Kenya, because of its numerical significance, constitutes a political factor that the government must take into account, especially during elections, and some of whose demands it must accede to, as shown in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, the Muslim impact on all aspects of the democratization process, including the introduction of the multiparty system, was, as a whole, marginal compared to that of the Christian churches.

In addition to the suspicion toward Muslims felt by the mainly Christian regime, Muslim marginality in these areas also reflected the lack of any significant cooperation between Muslim and Christian opposition groups. Attempts at joint political action, such as that on the eve of the 1997 general elections, were rare and unavailing because of the long-standing mistrust between the two sides. Moreover, ethnic, religious, political, and personal rivalries within the Muslim community (analyzed in Chapter 6) have weakened its ability to contribute significantly to political and social changes.

Finally, the concluding chapter assesses the possible future impact of Islam as a political factor, based on historical and current trends in Kenya, including Islam-state relations and the development of Islamic extremism. The chapter also discusses the possible involvement of local extremist elements in the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998.



I collected most of the sources for this study while living in Kenya during 1977–1981 and 1990–1994. I was able to interview leading Muslims and to gain firsthand impressions of events and developments, some of which I had the opportunity to witness myself. In 1960–1968 I lived in Uganda, part of the time as a research fellow at the University of Makerere, in Kampala. During this time I also carried out fieldwork for my Ph.D. thesis on Islam in Uganda, which was eventually published as a book. While in East Africa, I visited Tanzania, including Zanzibar, several times in the 1960s and 1990s, allowing me to compare the position of Muslims in the three countries.