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too long, and the response to this application will be a closely watched public test for those who claim to oppose continued colonial domination in any area of the world.

- George M. Houser  
*Executive Director*  
*American Committee on Africa*

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE  
OF MUSLIMS IN TANZANIAN POLITICS

The conflict between the world of Christianity and the world of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is, if not as old as in the Mediterranean, at least as troubled; and Tanzania provides a good example of an area with sizeable groupings of Christians, Muslims and traditionalists. Probably because the Europeanized elements predominate politically, in addition to the fact that the country seems to look more toward the Western world than to the Middle East for its cultural inspiration, no writer, to my knowledge, has considered Islam a critical influence on the development of Tanzanian nationalism. Admittedly, it is difficult to get an exact measure of the role that religion plays in the politics of nations, and the sizeable Muslim population in the country (about 1/4 of the total population, and slightly more than the Christians) does not appear to exert any visible political influence in terms of its voting patterns.

It seems to me, however, that it would be wrong to completely ignore the Muslim factor in Tanzanian politics. Not only did the Muslims play a considerable role in the pre-Independence nationalist movement, but also recent indications appear to suggest that the question of religious affiliation is far from being a dead political issue. The view expressed in this paper has been partly influenced by recent conversations with four persons: a Zanzibari Muslim, an Asian Muslim who lived in Kenya and Tanzania, a Christian from Malawi who taught in Dar es Salaam, and an American linguist who spent

several years in East Africa studying Swahili. The Muslims insisted that although the Tanzanian government is sincere and responsible, it does not care for the Muslims. The other two emphasized the disadvantageous position of the Swahili and other Muslim communities, resulting from changes in the economy, the educational system and the political power base. The heated tone of the conversations gave one the impression that the subject of Islam and of Muslims in Tanzania is a highly controversial and emotional issue, of no small relevance to the current times.

The Arab settlement of the East African coast with the subsequent development of trade cities is, if not well documented, extensively discussed in histories of East Africa and will not be presented here. Out of this settlement came the Swahili society with its blend of African and Islamic elements and its language based on Bantu grammatical structure but including about a third of Arabic words in its vocabulary. The colonial period brought a spread of both Islam and Christianity and a challenge to the established societies.

The initial, futile efforts such as the Arab resistance and the Maji Maji rebellion gave way to other means of dealing with the new situation. Muslim religious orders which flourished during this period became active in promoting anti-European feeling. The most important of these, the Qadariya order and the associated *dhikr* congregations are discussed by B.G. Martin as proto-nationalist movements (See *JAH*, X, 1969, pp. 471-86). While this may be an overstatement, it is true that the ceremonies were sometimes a vocal form of expression of discontent and an outlet and a channeling of resentment.

The Mecca Letters Incident of 1908 was an occasion of alarm by Muslims and Germans alike. The letter was said to have been sent to the Servitor of the Tomb of the Prophet and told of the approach of the Day of Judgment. Considerable unrest followed the arrival of the letters in various parts of Tanzania and elsewhere as people ceased to cooperate with the infidel colonials; but the authorities were quick to suppress the exponents and bearers of the letters and an apocalyptic Islamic movement just failed to arise.

Such symptoms of unrest gave way to more practical forms of dealing with the new situation. During the 1930's persons who perceived the exploitation built into the colonial political system began to form associations to protect and further

the interests of the Africans. The Tanganyika African Association was a secular organization which grew out of these early associations. Muslims were very active in the initial stages of the development of the association, particularly in the Lake Province of the north-eastern interior where the agricultural economy was well-developed and the colonial power felt severely. These Muslims were descendants of the early Swahili civil servants and of Swahili traders who had begun to penetrate the hinterland during the colonial period. Living near the lines of communication and being exposed professionally to the inequities of the colonial system, as well as existing outside of the rather closed tribal system, put such persons in a position conducive to political activity.

As nationalist sentiment and hopes for self-rule increased, large portions of the region became politically organized. The political development of the 1930's and 1940's culminated in the formation of the Tanganyikan African National Union (TANU) in 1954. Although the party, which called for independence, was secular, about half of the 17 founders were Muslim. They did not, however, acquire the reins of party control. Several other political parties were also formed but none had the nearly universal appeal of TANU. One of these parties was the All-Muslim National Union of Tanganyika (AMNUT). AMNUT attempted to win seats in parliamentary elections but did not succeed. The leadership of the party was Arab and not representative of the general Muslim population. The party was never very strong, and it was commonly believed that the party funds, mostly sent from Cairo, were misspent. When a one-party system of government was chosen by the independent government, AMNUT was banned. Another party, the United Tanganyika Party, was a multi-racial party, commonly held to be initiated by the British Governor. This party would have set quotas requiring specific numbers of parliamentary seats going to Africans, Asians, Europeans, etc... Like AMNUT, the UTP was unsuccessful at the polls and by Independence, it was clear that TANU was the popular party.

After Independence, Muslims continued to play a role in the national party and in government. The able Rashid Kawawa, a founder of TANU, was Prime Minister and is now Vice-President. Kawawa had been associated with the trade union movement in which many Muslims were active. The Central Committee of TANU and the Cabinet contain several Muslims. It is, however, very difficult to ascertain the extent to which religion plays a role in their political orientation.

In Zanzibar, the UMMA party, a breakaway from the Arab-dominated ZNP, had a more pro-African, leftist ideology. This party furnished much of the ideology behind the Zanzibar revolution which was eventually consolidated by the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) with its predominately African membership. Several leaders of UMMA have become leaders in the united government. The best known of these is S. Abdulrahman Muhammed (Babu), who was Minister of Commerce until he was dropped from the cabinet in January, 1972. UMMA leaders also held prominent positions in the government of Zanzibar until February, 1972, when the ASP leader and President of Zanzibar, Sheikh Abeid Karume (assassinated April 7, 1972), dropped most of them in a cabinet reshuffle. The ASP is closely though not officially united with the mainland TANU. It is, therefore, the only party in Zanzibar. Like TANU, its platform is secular, though most of its members are Muslim, reflecting the composition of the Zanzibari population. It usually follows TANU but it has been known to prevaricate and even act independently of mainland policy.

In 1965, a new organization was founded under the auspices of TANU. BAKWATA (Baraba Kuu WaIslam Tanzania) was meant to be a counterweight to the influential Christian association and to lobby in the interest of Muslims, in such matters as religious education, mosque building, etc... (It is rumored that at least some Muslims consider it as a puppet organization and argue that it is not headed by representative Muslim leaders.) BAKWATA was, perhaps, intended to fill a need which the East African Muslim Welfare Association (EAMWA) might have aspired to. EAMWA was founded in 1945 by the Ismaelis to promote the welfare of all Muslims in educational, economic and religious affairs. Headed by Sheikh A. Fundikira, who was a member of the first Council of Ministers and is now head of East Africa Airlines, the organization has been based in Dar es Salaam since 1961. EAMWA became an important aid for Muslims but was banned in Kenya and Uganda, presumably because of its potentially divisive activities. It has been allowed to function in Tanzania but is confined to minor charitable activities. Schools built by EAMWA cannot be for Muslims only, in keeping with the government's non-sectarian policy in education. Significantly, though, EAMWA recently contributed a mosque to the University College in Dar es Salaam.

Nyerere has frequently commented on the explosive nature of religion in Tanzania. All mention of religion is avoided in public political discussion, parliamentary debate, campaign speeches and the like; and the recent census did not ask for religious identity. The policy of keeping religion out of

politics stems from the fact that religious antagonisms could dramatically retard the building of a unified and modern state.

In terms of voting, this policy has been remarkably successful. Cliffe gives ample evidence that such factors as religious and tribal identity did not play a critical part in the 1965 general elections; he provides examples of Christian constituencies returning Muslim candidates and vice versa (See his *One Party Democracy*, 1967). The government would hope that its current spirit of non-sectarian, non-racial socialism is able to accommodate the cultural tendencies of its citizens; it is not likely that the government would willingly permit a politically-conscious Muslim leader to emerge, and it certainly hopes this will not happen. Tanzania seems, therefore, to be doing much better than many areas with large Christian and Muslim minorities. One can, however, detect undercurrents of trouble.

The Qadiriya order and other brotherhoods still exist with *dhikr* and loyal congregations. In the 1950's, the Mecca Letters were temporarily revived, with the accompanying unrest and fear that the Day of Judgment was at hand. To date, no effective Muslim voice has been heard, in terms of unified political action; but the Swahili community feels itself to be at a disadvantage in the new state. In Tanzania, one can find a variety of conflicts: secular versus religious, Christian versus Muslim, African values versus European values, socialist versus capitalist, and so on; and one suspects that these and other tensions will be reflected in the politics of years to come.

It is true that in Tanzania today, the dominant themes are nationalism, *ujamaa* and African political unity. But Islam is far from being a spent political force. It still provides a profound feeling of identity to its adherents and confers a sense of history and community as one of the world's greatest universal faiths and civilizations. There is a certain mediating role Islam plays between East, West, and Africa, as an alternate cultural tradition of high attainment; it is distinct from the Western experience and not so closely associated with European colonialism, and it crosses ethnic and national lines as a source of unity. Clearly, its moral value and religious message remain meaningful and vital in modern times and, as its history shows, can assume political reverberations.

The militant Islam of the nineteenth century will not recur; the world is more sophisticated and people are more aware of the power of modern weapons. Society is on another

footing. But perhaps political Islam has given way to a subtler but more profound motivating force. This, however, is not to say that its political influence is nil. Nyerere, for example, makes a point of associating himself with the Muslims in attending some of their religious celebrations, continually reminding Muslim leaders that they are a part of the state and that the government takes an interest in them.

Passage of time and further study will be necessary to ascertain the direction of Tanzanian society. The world-wide increase of secularism has affected Tanzania where a form of socialism has been functioning remarkably well, despite recent economic and political difficulties. But it would be unwise for social historians or political observers to discount or neglect the role of Islam in present day Tanzanian society.

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- Ed. note.]