

ISLAM AND AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS

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Popular opinion is of the view that Islam not only supported the existence of African institutions but also strengthened them. Islam appealed to the African mind because its demands are almost similar to the established ways of life already pertaining in traditional African life.¹

Whether that assumption is true or not in the rest of Africa, I am not qualified to say. However, a closer look on Uganda reveals that in fact, Islam is just like any other destroyer of African institutions, and that in some cases it has annihilated African ways of organization, customs and traditional mode of behaviour. There are many African established ways of behaviour or organizations that Islam directly or indirectly weakened. Let us look at a few variables, which are by no means conclusive, like naming of the newly born, marriage, burial ceremonies, inheritance, African religions, the role of "technicians", some customs and pleasures, and briefly, the sport of hunting to have a vague picture of the situation.

In Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole and Busoga, the naming of the newly born baby was, and still is, of particular importance to the whole family. All members of the larger family (the uncles, grandfathers and grandmothers, the cousins, etc.) usually attended the naming ceremony.² The ceremony was usually presided over by the clanhead. The grandfather usually selected the name of one of the ancestors of the child who might be thought to have been reincarnated in the child. The selection of a name of one of the ancestors not only established a departed, whose ghost would be the guardian of the newly born, but also would keep that particular ancestor "living"—at least in the memory of the surviving members of the clan. No name of a living person could be given to the child and there "was no such a thing as family names" to which many of us have taken like fish to water.³ But when Islam was introduced into Uganda, the traditional naming ceremonies were attacked. The Muslim cleric (Mu'allim) took over from the clanhead, as master of ceremonies. Family names in the Arabic style (with *bin* someone) were introduced. Such names were, and still are of Arabic origin such as Ahmed, Mohammed, Mohmud, Hassan, etc. Islam rejected the idea of reincarnation that the Africans thought was connected or inherited in a name. It also rejected the idea that the ancestor's ghost could protect the child. For many Muslims, only God can do this. Realizing the power placed in names by the Africans, many early Muslims rejected African names that they thought had some connection with paganism. Thus Abdallah Ssekimwanyi, the African Ugandan pioneer pilgrim to Mecca, Muslim historian and teacher, was called Mukasa. After he had embraced Islam, however, he

changed his name to Ssekimwanyi because Mukasa was the name of a *Lubaale*, the Ganda god of the Lakes.

It is popularly believed that because Islam did not abolish polygamy altogether like Christianity, it did not attack the African family. This view is not correct. In the first instance, Islam restricted the number of wives to four. It is clear that African men of means married hundreds of women. Suna II of Buganda married more than a hundred and forty women and his son, Mutesa married more than eighty.⁴ Many chiefs in the country married as many women as their means allowed. But with the coming of Islam, there was a restriction. Islam thus restricted the number of wives to four and one could say it reduced the size of the African family. Amongst most Africans of Uganda, marriage is a social affair arranged, sometimes without the consent of the bride and the bridegroom, by the families of the two people getting married. One would say that some of the African marriages were diplomatic marriages arranged by families of those getting married. However, in Islam, the Sharia stipulates that marriage is a voluntary contract between a man and a woman. The bride should agree (although in most cases subject to the consent of the guardian) after looking at him. Among the peoples of Uganda, marriage does not confer upon the legal husband all the children born by his wife during the tenure of their marriage. If the wife committed adultery and had a child, the child belonged to the natural and not the legal father. But the Sharia, and possibly state law reversed this custom. In Islam, this child belonged to the legal and not the natural father. Thus Islam did not really strengthen the African family though in comparison with Christianity, its strike was less powerful.

Islam altered, completely if I may be allowed to use the term, African burial and death ceremonies. The Baganda kept the bodies of important people for days and sometimes for months before they were buried.⁵ But the Muslims preached, and still preach, that a person's body must be buried the day he dies.⁶ Many of the tribes of Uganda buried their dead in an open grave and put the dead in barkcloth or skins. They also put in some of the worldly possessions of the dead possibly for his use in the world of spirits. Mutesa I of Buganda was buried with many worldly things at Nabulagala, though he had prohibited people to bury him in the *old way*. As for the common people, the Islamic burial and mourning systems were very different from those of Africans—and in the long run affected the hierarchy of people who used to be masters of burial ceremonies under the traditional system. The Islamic burial system adopted in Uganda is as follows:

On the day a person dies, the body is cleanly and ceremoniously washed by a Mu'allim. It is wrapped in three sheets and carried on a bier (*Janeza*) to the grave. There, it is put in a niche-recess with the face pointed towards Mecca. Then a board is put against the niche-recess in such a way that loose earth does not fall on it. As no one sees what is going on in the grave, nor where the body is, non-Muslims in Uganda are accustomed to teasing their colleagues that Muslims eat people in the grave.

Matanga (mats in Swahili) is a period of three days' mourning when friends stay with relatives in most cases at the house of the dead. They end in a communal prayer.

Following is a forty-day period which ends in prayers and communal eating. This ends the ceremonies. The soul has departed and the dead is no longer living.

This was a drastic change from African traditional burial and mourning ceremonies. When Islam first came to Uganda, the contradiction between African and Islamic burial systems came to surface in regard to royal burials. The Kings of Buganda and Bunyoro were buried in a way not acceptable to Islam. In both Buganda and Bunyoro, executions of people followed the death of a King. This was done on the pretext that a dead person continues to live in the next world a life similar to that he lived on this earth. Consequently a King would need to live in the same majesty as he did on earth, with servants, wives, etc. Thus there were hierarchies of institutions, people and customs connected with death in the royal places of Kings. However, Islam rejected this wholesale execution of people at the death of Kings for each person dies for himself and answers his own deeds. In Buganda, the Kabaka's jawbone was separated and kept away from the body. It was believed that his spirit lived in the jawbone. A temple was built to honour the jawbone and people paid their respects to it. But after adopting Islam, Mutesa I halted this custom.⁷ He gathered his chiefs and told them that when he dies, they should bury him in the Islamic way. He gave an order that all the bodies of his ancestors should be exhumed, reunited with their jawbones,⁸ and reburied. He prohibited people from idealizing his spirit when he died and told them to read the Quran as their guide on life. At a stroke, Mutesa weakened or made redundant all the hierarchies whose existence depended on performance of royal burial. True offices like that of the Mugema, clanheads, etc., remained vigorously active but they were transformed. Islam therefore altered African institutions.

Islam also altered the land and inheritance law of the Africans. In most tribes of Uganda (including Buganda before the 1900 Agreement), land was owned by the group as a whole. The headman, or clan leader was only a guardian of the land keeping it for the common good of all the members of the clan or tribe.⁹ But under Islamic Law, individuals can own land and can pass it to their children. Under traditional law a woman could not inherit her father's land and we do not hear of women Kabakas, Omukamas or Mugabes. But under Islamic Law, women can inherit from their fathers and can own land. Islam also restricted the people who were to be heirs of the dead. In the past in Buganda, brothers, or any member of the clan approved by clan leaders, and not necessarily sons of the dead, could legally become heirs of the dead. But Islam restricted this. Under the influence of Islam, Mutesa ordered that in future, only sons were to inherit.

Islams, by attacking African traditional religions when it put its emphasis on monotheism, weakened the role of the traditional establishment. It is not

my intention to go into details. Suffice it to say that because Islamic emphasis is eschatological, stressing eternity, it is opposed to many beliefs and ceremonies of African religions which emphasize the present. Actions are rewarded or punished *now* in most African traditional religions. The result of this was to weaken the "technicians" of African societies and all their establishments, because they were somehow connected with the religious beliefs and institutions of the African peoples. In traditional societies these technicians were specialists who had access to secret power which they could use to manipulate or control nature to the advantage or disadvantage of society, depending on circumstances. Such technicians were the mediums who acted between spirits and men: rain-makers, who could cause rain to drop from heaven; sorcerers, who manipulated objects to foretell the future or to interpret the past; medicinemen, who helped society by curing the sick, and many others.¹⁰ With the coming of Islam, however, many of them lost their roles and their establishments were either destroyed or considerably weakened. This was the case in Buganda and Busoga.

In Uganda, the early Muslim preachers reacted very strongly against some African social customs, pleasures and sport. For example, the Baganda had a type of greeting that amazed foreigners. A typical Muganda normally took five to ten minutes when greeting and did not finish until he had inquired in all affairs of life of the person he was greeting. Kagwa gives a full account of this type of greeting as it used to be in the past.¹¹ But when the Arabs who came by way of the East African coast arrived, they reversed this trend and persuaded Mutesa to greet in the "Islamic" way of "Salaam alai-kum" or peace be unto you.

Most people of Uganda were very sensitive to the rhythm of the drum beat. In Buganda, the drum was put to a multiple of uses, announcing both joy and sorrow. On most social occasions, the drums were used to provide music for entertainment. They were also used in religious ceremonies. In areas that had hereditary rulers like Ankole, Bunyoro, Buganda, Bugweri, etc., drums signified power or sometimes, the ruler. In Ankole, the drum, *Bagyendanwa*, was "the cult of Kingship."¹² It was considered to be more important than the King for the *Omugabe* (King) dies but "*Bagyendanwa* is always with us" and the Banyankole could appeal to this drum for justice if the king had decided otherwise. In Buganda, the royal drums were called *Mujaguzo* and could only be sounded at the accession of a new King. In Bugweri, a small kingdom in Busoga, the royal drum were called *Twambuse*, *Mitango* and *Wegule*. In Karagwe, the royal drums were called *Nyabatama*. The drum therefore was central to African political institutions either as symbols of power or real cults of power. However, the early Muslim preachers in Uganda, and indeed the Christians also, thought that drums were so much associated with paganism that they were unwelcome. This was a terrible attack not only on the political institutions of the land but also on the social customs of the people. Up to now Muslim leaders do not accept the use of African drums (except duffs imported from Arabia) to be played in a Muslim social or religious gathering.

Early Muslims also opposed Baganda traditional sports like hunting, wrestling, etc. Hunting was not only a major sport but also gave people a source of animal proteins. The Baganda used to hunt very much and used dogs. The Kabaka had to go hunting not only for sport, but as part of his enthroning ceremony. His coronation was not complete unless he undertook the ceremony of hunting. Islam, however, banned the possession of dogs.¹³ Mutesa I gave up all his dogs and his uncle, Ssabaganzi Lubaga gained possession of them.

From these few variables, it can be said that popular opinion regarding Islam's role as a supporter of the existence of African institutions needs a thorough re-examination. The belief that Islam supports African ways of life, I feel, was popularised by "experts of African" Islam of the West. In fact most available literature on the History of Islam in Africa was written by Western Christian priests, colonial officials or laymen all of whom were educated and brought up in a Judeo-Christian tradition. A tradition that always saw the crescent as the arch enemy of the cross. These writers saw Islam and Arabs (especially in East Africa) as the arch enemy of civilisation. On the other hand they saw western civilisation, especially as personified in their philanthropists such as David Livingstone, Krapf, etc. as the best culture the human race has ever achieved. For that matter Christianity and western civilisation had a right to be taken to all peoples of the world.

Christianity, it was believed and popularised, was accepted by Africans because it was a true religion as compared to African tradition religions which were darkness. It was, therefore, natural that when light came into Africa, darkness had to leave. So far the explanation was satisfactory. But difficulty arose when it was realised that in many parts of Africa Islam replaced African traditional beliefs and indeed claimed many adherents. If it was true that truth always triumphs over falsehood, an explanation for the spread of Islam, which to them was a false religion (the religion of the false prophet) had to be found. This explanation had to maintain Islam in its lowly position in which the 19th Century Europeans placed it. Its content was to the effect that the moral standards of the Arabs (and therefore of Islam) were, anyway, as low as those of the Africans. Consequently, when Islam came into Africa, it did not have to make difficult demands from the Africans; it was completely at home. Such an explanation further reinforced two beliefs, namely that Christianity was a higher and thus more true religion and that Islam spread in Africa not because it was a true religion but because its moral demands were as low as those already pertaining in African Societies.

Why, it might aptly be asked, did many Africans give up their traditional religions for Islam? Such a question, I feel, should be rephrased to ask why people change from their religions to join others. Having answered the latter then we can proceed to examine how each of the foreign religions adopted by African peoples in a given locality changed their religions. Broadly, I can think of four factors that might make a given society change its religion. Firstly, there might be a change in the social structure that might not only result in the

creation of new values but also in new elites whose ideology might differ from the previous elites. Secondly, there might be a change in the means of production that might create new ways of deriving livelihood or related to this, the steadily increasing differentiation of labour in society. Thirdly, action of the leading elites of society who might, by example or decree, influence those over whom they have authority to change their religion. And finally, as a result of conquest when the conquerors either by force or by introduction of new sources of power impose their religion on the conquered. For example in many parts of Africa, people generally joined the religions of their colonial conquerors after the late 19th Century European occupation of Africa. It is true that in a few cases, the conquerors have adopted the religions and cultures of the conquered. But these examples were the exceptional rather than the norm.

Having answered the above broad question, then one can ask himself why the people of Uganda, and Buganda in particular, gave up their traditional beliefs and later on, if he has the time and space—neither of which I have here in this short paper—analyse how they adopted Islam. Taking Buganda as a sample study of a society that gave up its own traditional beliefs and adopted foreign religions, I can find five reasons why this happened. Firstly, the demise of the traditional clan aristocracy, the clanheads, which made the Kabaka a social autocrat created a power vacuum in society once the power of the Kabaka was weakened. Secondly, the demotion of the religious establishment in Buganda from the status of administering their own departments and sometimes opponents of the monarchy by the Kabaka with the simultaneous rise of the latter as a sacral monarchy weakened indigenous traditional beliefs. Thirdly, the shift of economic power in the 19th Century away from the clanheads, the traditional elites, to the Kabaka who became the richest man in the land created weakness within Ganda society that became very visible when the Kabaka's office weakened in the days of Mwanga. Fourthly, the coming of superior utilitarian goods that served their purpose better than the local ones weakened the confidence people had in the industry of their society. And finally, the attack on the Kabakaship especially in the days of Mwanga weakened the last peg upon which the Baganda had hinged their confidence. As a result a vacuum was created which foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) rushed in to fill.

Thus it was not the similarity of African customs, traditions and way of life and the demands of Islam that made Africans join the latter. Rather it was stresses and problems from within African societies that made the entrance of Islam into African societies of Uganda possible.

FOOTNOTES

1. See:

Harries P. L. *Islam in East Africa* (London 1954), pp. 35–65.

Carter, F. "The Education of African Muslims in Uganda" in *Uganda Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 2 (1965), pp. 193–9.

- Gee, T. W. "A Century of Mohammedan Influence in Buganda 1851-1951" in *Uganda Journal* Vol. 22, (1958), pp. 139-150.
2. Roscoe, J. *The Baganda*, London, (1911), pp. 61-64.
Roscoe, J. *The Bakitara*, London (1923), pp. 239-251.
Roscoe, J. *The Banyankole*, London (1923) pp. 108-118.
 3. Mbiti, J. S. *African Religions and Philosophy*, NY (1969), p. 118.
 4. Kagwa, Apolo, Empisa, London (1952), p. 65.
 5. Kagwa A. *Ibid.* pp. 196-206.
 6. Sheikh Abdulzake Matovu, Interview in 1969.
 7. Zimbe, *Buganda ne Kabaka*, p. 105.
 8. Kulumba, Ali, *Ebyafayo by'obuisiramu mu Uganda*, Kampala (1955), p. 3 Nsambu, Sheikh, Interview, December 1967.
 9. Kagwa, A. *Ibid.* p. 273.
 10. Mbiti, J. S. *Ibid.* p. 68.
 11. Kagwa, A. *Empisa*, p. 209.
 12. Oberg "The Kingdom of Ankole" in *African Political Systems* ed. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard.
 13. Dog (*Kalb*) is one of the "unclean beasts" in Islam and its flesh may not be eaten. According to a Hadith (Tradition of the prophet), there are special regulations regarding a dog. Vessels, water, plates and dishes that have been licked by dogs require to be cleaned several times including one with sand before they are used by pious Muslims.