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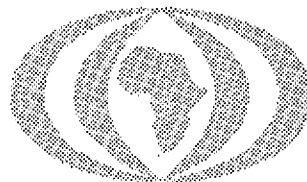
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ISLAM IN AFRICA

J.A. Naude

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Dr. J.A. Naudé is Head of the Department of Semitic Languages at the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg. From 1974 he taught Arabic at that University, and established the Centre for Islamic Studies there in 1976.

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J.A. Naudé

Islam is more than a religion

The word Islam means the action of the total surrender of one's self to God and the person who surrenders himself completely to God is called a Moslem. The prophet Mohammed did not claim for himself any supernatural qualities. He did not intend to found a new religion. He merely wanted to bring the same message God has given to the Jews in Hebrew and to the Christians in Greek, to his own people in their mother tongue, viz. Arabic. His calling was to be the apostle of God to the *Arabs* and he called on them to repent and to return to the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In the Qur'ân, 29:46, we therefore read the following words directed to the Jews and the Christians: "We (Moslems) believe in what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to you; our God and your God are the same God and we to Him surrender ourselves".

We have sufficient evidence that the Jews and for that matter the Christians with whom Mohammed came into contact, had a rather poor knowledge of their scriptures. When the strong Jewish element in Medina completely rejected Mohammed's message, he became convinced that they had rejected the true word of God and falsified it with their pens as was said by the prophet Jeremiah, 7:21-29 8:8, many years before Mohammed. Mohammed now regarded it as part of his calling to preach the true word of God also to Jews and Christians. Islam was now realised to be of universal significance, not limited to the Arabs, but meant for the salvation of the whole of mankind, including the continent of Africa.

If we are to understand what is happening in the Moslem world, there are two essential points which need to be grasped. One is that Islam is universal in the life of the Moslem, i.e. it covers every aspect of his life in its complete totality. Mohammed became a political leader when he migrated from Mekka to Medina in 622 AD, the first year of the Moslem era. Since then Islam was the state and the identity of religion and government became inseparable in the minds of the faithful. Islam is concerned with the whole life of man. Church and state, religious and political authority are not separated and, as Bernard Lewis pointed out, in classical Arabic there are no pairs of terms corresponding to lay and ecclesiastical, spiritual and temporal, secular and religious, because these pairs of words express a Christian dichotomy which has no equivalent in the world of Islam. The prophet ruled according to the will of God. Thus the Islamic concept of theocracy was established: God is the real ruler of the people and to Him the leader is responsible. In this sense the late king Feisal understood his position, but even president Idi Amin of Uganda claimed that he acts under the direct command of God. It is for this reason not entirely correct to speak of autocratic or despotic rule in the case of Moslem leaders, though in particular instances the actions of a leader may fall short of what is expected.

- 1) The section on "Arab Frustration of Communist Objectives" has already appeared in *To the Point* vol. 7, no. 34, 25 August 1978.

Democracy as government by the people for the people does not fit in with Islamic concepts. For Islam the rights of man are subject to and contained in the commands of God. The commands of God, dealing with every single detail of human life; his food, his money, his religion, his behaviour; is called the shariah. Government in accordance with the shariah is, of course, the "will of the people" in as far as the people are committed to Islam. In some Moslem countries the shariah is the law of the country; in others, as in Egypt, committees have been set up to ensure conformation of constitutional law to the shariah. In general practice the shariah safeguards the interest of ordinary people.

A striking example of the power of these religious authorities is in Tunisia where in February 1960, President Bourguiba called out a *djihâd*, a holy war, against poverty to prevent loss of work and production during the monthly fast of Ramadan in view of the poverty of his country. The religious leaders refused to endorse this interpretation of Islamic law and the autocratic Socialist leader had to abide by their decision.

The second essential point of Islam is that it is not only universal, but also central. It constitutes the essential basis and focus of identity and loyalty of the believers. Islam distinguishes those who are Moslems from those outside. Moslems share the same memories of a common and sacred past, the same awareness of corporate identity, the same sense of common predicament and destiny, whatever their country, language or colour. Therefore the only really vital responses to colonial advance in Africa and elsewhere were widespread religious reform movements, Pan-Islamic movements and Brotherhoods like the *al-Ikhwân al-Muslimûn* founded at the beginning of the 20th century by a religious teacher, Hassan al Banna. Apart from large-scale educational, social, charitable and religious work, they organized the counter-colonial activities and played a large role in putting the Free Officers in power in Egypt in 1952.

Islam as an African religion

The establishment of an intimate relationship between Islam and Africa dates back to the Prophet Mohammed himself. As the result of persecution, Mohammed sent a substantial number of the first Moslems, amongst whom was Uthmân ibn Affân, his son-in-law and future successor as third caliph, to Abyssinia seven years before the beginning of the Moslem era. Here they found asylum in the domain of the Christian Negus who refused to deliver them into the hands of their oppressors. In Medina, Bilâl, a black man of African descent and one of the very first converts to Islam, became the first *Mu'edhdhin*, calling the faithful to prayer from the rooftop of the mosque. Today Islam is evidently an African reality, because it is promoted by Africans.

Within one century after the death of Mohammed, Moslem rule extended over the whole of North Africa where the inhabitants welcomed the Arab warriors as their liberators from Byzantine oppression. Since then, North Africa has become almost completely Moslem, while Islam also spread to the rest of Africa. Islam entrenched itself in Africa and established centres of learning from which their influence could be diffused. It is worthy of mention that the three oldest existing universities in the world are in Africa, and all three were founded by Moslems: the Al-Azhar in Cairo and Fez (732 AD) and Al-Qarawuyan (732 AD) in Morocco.

Islam spread into Africa south of the Sahara in general as a result of

the caravan trade, often by Berbers, in West Africa, up along the Nile and by the Ocean trade in East Africa. In many regions the words for "trader" and "Moslem" are synonymous. Traded goods included salt, copper, handicraft, ivory, iron, gold and slaves. The slave trade from the end of the 15th century with the cooperation of some African chiefs, was an important element in the growth of Islam. Islam provided a refuge for slaves separated from their tribes. In the same manner, Islam continually provided solidarity and tribal cohesion where a people was dispersed by conquest or where traditional culture and religion disintegrated. Islamic penetration led to a more secularized society in Africa in that the authority of old customs was undermined even in those spheres of life which were not penetrated by Islam.

Since the 19th century, another important factor in the spread of Islam, apart from the marabouts in West Africa, has been the brotherhoods: the Sanusi in Libya and the Sahara; the Qadiri and Shadili in East Africa, which converted large groups.

These brotherhoods cut across kinship groups, classes, professions and lineages, and integrated these units. They created a cohesive body of men. They were first of all religiously motivated, but could be oriented toward political purposes. This was in particular the case when Moslems felt their society threatened by European invasion. Brotherhoods then played a significant role in the liberation of their countries, as in the case of the Sanusi in Libya where its chief, Sayyid Mohammed Idrîs as-Sanûsî, became the first ruler on the 24th December 1951, when Libya became independent. To this day, the Islamic Brotherhood is a force to be reckoned with in Egyptian politics.

Rulers who adopted Islam for prestigious reasons brought in their subjects to the fold. In some instances, a charismatic religious leader with "blessing" appeared on the scene and established a new and greater political unity with the focus on a distinctive form of Islamic doctrine. The most famous was Usuman dan Fodio in West Africa at the beginning of the 19th century, who declared a djihâd, or holy war, against local rulers who claimed to be Muslims but whose Islam he denied. Out of this war there developed the Fulani empire and the basis of the northern Nigeria of today. The most recent heads of state to convert to Islam are reportedly Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Empire and President Bongo of Gabon.

It is interesting that colonial rule facilitated the spread of Islam in Africa far beyond its former confines: the colonial rule provided better roads and other communication media and they not only recognized Islamic law, but, in the case of the British, also confirmed the power of Moslem chiefs and made use of Moslems in their administration. Another more important reason is that Islam in contrast with Christianity was not connected with the colonial overlords.

It is estimated that roughly one out of three inhabitants of Africa south of the Sahara are Moslems today. Islam today represents a united front which almost completely encircles the continent of Africa. From Moslem minorities like the Cape Malays up along the east coast with Mozambique, the Malagasy Republic, the Comoro islands, Zaire, Tanzania (in particular Zanzibar) to Moslem majorities in Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan; along North Africa round to Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, to about fifty percent Moslems in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau and significant minorities in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Cameroun, Upper-Volta, Ghana, Benin and Togo, and smaller groups in Gabon and the Congo (Brazzaville). On the continent itself there are Moslem

majorities in Mali, Niger, about fifty percent in Chad and smaller groups in the Central African Republic, Kenya, with a fast growing majority in Uganda. In "Submissions to the Delegates of the 9th Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers at Dakar, April 1978" the Motamar-al-Alam Al-Islami (World Moslem Congress) claimed that Africa is indeed the Moslem continent.

Islamic stagnation in Africa

We have spoken of a united front of Islam in Africa. When we take a closer look at Islam in Africa it will, however, become clear that the face of Islam in Africa is by no means uniform, Mediterranean Africa was Islamized at an early date and an integrated Islamic culture with Arabic as language was formed, so much so that it is at least as much part of the Arab world as it is of Africa. In fact, eight of the twenty-one members of the Arab League are part of the African continent and numerically they represent more than sixty percent of all Arabs. North Africa, therefore, is fully within the Islamic world, whereas the rest of Africa beyond the vast Sahara desert remained more on the periphery. Arabic did not replace the local languages as in North Africa, and Africans did not accept Islamic culture in toto. Islam remained in a "missionary situation". Islam made its impact primarily as a legal culture; as J. Spencer Trimingham pointed out, its theological, philosophical, literary and artistic values did not penetrate because they were simply never presented to them: both being Islamized from the less developed parts of the Arab world.

Naturally, the penetration of Islam in Africa also met with difficulties. The Islamic calendar follows the moon year which is out of gear with the African agricultural calendar following the sun. The Islamic society is paternal, whereas many African societies are matrilineal. A very serious problem is that men often accepted Islam completely but that the women continued the pagan religion because the position of women in Islam normally lent itself to only marginal involvement of females. Above all, ancestor worship had to be dropped. Many Africans still remember the black slave trading of Arab Moslems and some accuse them of continuing a racist attitude to this day. In Africa south of the Sahara, Moslems have to share their countries with non-Muslim communities. These Moslems are often minority groups who are confronted with a secularization brought in by the West which is undermining and narrowing the domain of religion. All they can do is to maintain the essentialities of their religion, viz. the fule of the sharia over the individual and family law and their own education. Since their education was religious, it was felt to be inadequate and even backward in comparison with the education in secular schools which was developed by Christian missions. In view of the universality of Islam, such a situation can become unbearable. It is then small surprise that in countries with substantial Muslim and Christian population groups the tension reached breaking point and usually resulted in armed conflict. This is one of the reasons for conflict in a country like Chad (more that fifty percent Moslem) with advanced Christians in the south. In other countries, a modus vivendi had to be found.

Twelve years ago, Trimingham judged that the power of Islam to influence both society and the individual has been steadily waning in the post-colonial era in Africa. Secularization was steadily but surely curtailing the profound effect Islam formerly exercised over vast ranges of people. This dark outlook is made even worse when one considers the violent disputes between Moslem

countries on the African continent, e.g. Libya and Egypt; Algeria and Morocco. It is very true that Islam is faced with a crisis not only on this continent but in the world, as is the case with Christianity and Judaism. In particular, conservative Islam will have to come to a searching encounter with the modern world especially if it wants to preserve the loyalty and capture the imagination of the younger generation. But then the history of Islam has shown that it has extraordinary powers of adaptation. It has succeeded in absorbing apparently incompatible philosophies and there are indications that the widespread Islamic stagnation has come to an end with the approach of the seventies.

Christians and Moslems in conflict

In almost every country where Moslems and Christians meet, there is, or has recently been, killing along religious lines. The Nigerian war pitted a Christian south against a Moslem north and similarly in Sudan; in Ethiopia where Somali Imams of the Ogaden desert declared a dжихād, holy war, against the ancient Christian empire, in which Eritrean secessionists joined. To this can be added Chad whereas in Uganda forceful mass conversions to Islam have been reported. Outside Africa, Moslems and Christians clash in the Lebanon and in Cyprus.

Various reasons have been given for the hostilities; the local combatants attributing them to atrocities committed by the other side. The fighting is often dismissed as simply political and economic, with the Christians characterised generally as right wing and rich and the Moslems as left wing and poor (the opposite is the case in the Sudan). Whatever the reason is, it does not seem deliberately planned by either side. Another explanation offered is the renaissance of Islam, in part caused by the wealth and influence of the devout Saudis. In view of the universality of Islam, religious revival leads to confrontation.

In fact, the 1970s have witnessed a miraculous return of Mohammed's people right to the very centre of world attention. For the second time in the history of mankind, God has given to his people out of the nothingness of the desert sands influence, yes, power, over the future of mankind. They possess oil, money and influence. The robed desert kings are visited by an incessant train of dignitaries from East and West for consultation. Where it was stated twelve years ago that common allegiance to Islam plays little part in political relationships of Africans with the Arab world, and that they did not show special sympathy with Arab issues, the Afro-Arab relations are today probably better than ever before. Afro-Arab solidarity was exemplified in their concerted action against Israel. Saudi Arabia is now the second biggest aid donor in the world after the United States, with the focus on Islamic countries, but including on the continent of Africa the Congo and Kenya amongst the non-Islamic recipients of Saudi aid. There are widespread signs of revival in the Islamic world. Such revival is often in reaction to severe pressure, e.g. the Communist challenge.

Arab frustration of Communist objectives

The anti-colonial struggle for freedom from the imperialist rule of the Western powers presented Russian Communism with unique opportunities in Arab and African countries. The first major breakthrough was an arms deal between Egypt and the Soviet Union in September 1955, not long after the United Kingdom agreed to withdraw all her military from Egypt. Since then Soviet investments, influence and involvement in the Middle East have increased and broadened, despite friction and setbacks.

Egypt was to become the showcase of the Soviet Union's achievements in the Third World. Spectacular long-term projects like the building of the Aswan Dam were undertaken. Foreign trade was linked as closely as possible to the Soviet Union and Comecon countries. At the end of 1971 there were an estimated twenty thousand Soviet military personnel in Egypt. There were operational units of the Soviet army, Soviet airfields, and a naval base near Alexandria. Egypt became a major operational base for Soviet air and naval units as well as a stepping stone for operations in other regions. At the beginning of the seventies, the Communist future in the Middle East and in Africa seemed to be better than ever before.

Then suddenly and unexpectedly the works of the Communists went astray. In July 1972, after almost seventeen years of strenuous exertion and huge investments, the Soviet Union suffered a massive expulsion of its personnel and advisers from Egypt. The Soviet Union lost its naval base, its airfields, its exit through the Suez Canal, in spite of the fact that Egypt was almost totally dependent on Soviet military supplies and political backing. This was the beginning of a dramatic curtailment of Russian expansion of power in Africa on a scale unequalled in modern history; not through the influence of America or Western Europe, but by a new source of world power: the Arabic countries. With the wholehearted support of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Arab-Israeli conflict was desensitized from a potential collision between the superpowers into a local affair.

After an attempted coup in 1971 Sudanese Communists were suppressed. The Sudanese Government expelled all Soviet military advisers and both sides withdrew their ambassadors. President Numeiri charged the Soviet Union and Cuba with embarking on a "new form of colonialism" in Africa. In November 1977 Moslem Somalia expelled the Russians and broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba. Russia suffered the painful loss of its primary naval base in the Indian Ocean, the Somali port of Berbera.

In Eritrea the Moslem guerilla movements co-ordinated their struggle against Marxist Ethiopia. In Morocco, situated at the strategic entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, Russia recently made one of its largest single investments ever for the development of an enormous phosphate mine at Southern Meskala. Nevertheless, King Hassan II is an outspoken opponent of Communist expansion in Africa; to such an extent that he sent fifteen hundred troops to help Mobutu of Zaire to overcome the Communist-inspired Shaba invasion in March 1977. Egypt sent pilots, while Sudan and Saudi Arabia pledged support. Zaire is neither an Arab nor a Muslim country, but served to demonstrate to what lengths Arab countries will go to stem Communist advance in Africa. Moreover, this investment may be used by Morocco as a countermeasure against the Soviet Union for its support of Algeria and in particular the anti-Western Polisario front rebels harboured by Algeria.

This anti-Russian trend is certainly not due to lack of military support. Egypt received massive arms supplies, instructors, technicians, advisers and even Soviet crews, for most sophisticated weapons. Sudan had to rely on Moscow for military and economic aid. The Soviets helped Somalia to become one of the best-armed nations in Africa. Economic considerations do not account for the expulsion of the Soviets. In view of its extensive economic interaction with the USSR, the already strained economy of Egypt could only suffer.

There are clear indications that the real failure of Soviet influence is

ideological. In this connection the position of Communist parties in Arab countries is enlightening. Communist party membership as a percentage of the population was in 1976 practically non-existent. The Communist parties were *not* able to penetrate the society and to muster a national following. The Soviet Government realised this when it chose to continue support for anti-imperialist governments even when these governments suppressed Communists. In Syria and Iraq the Communist parties under Soviet pressure had to join rather than oppose the Government so as not to jeopardize Russian aims. In Egypt, Moscow rebuked the Communist party for its behaviour against Nasser's policies. Communism could never grasp the imagination of the man in the street; it is reported that the local population was overjoyed to see the Russians depart from Mogadishu. Arabic Socialism as preached by al-Afghani, al-Qadhdhafi, and practised in Algeria and elsewhere, became viable only through its connection with Islamic thought. On the whole, therefore, the Soviet Union has been rather unsuccessful in the exchange of cultural material, too. Russian films and books are unpopular; the study and usage of the Russian language could in no way even begin to compete with English and French. There is a marked disinterest in Soviet culture because it is completely foreign to the culture of the Arab.

The culture of the Arab is inseparably interwoven with Islam. The late President Nasser already saw Islam as being one of the basic differences between his brand of Socialism and Communism. Islam is central even in Arab countries with whom Russia maintains friendly relations; in Algeria, Syria and Iraq. The Constitutional Declaration of Libya commences with the explicit statement that Islam is the religion of the State. Colonel Qadhdhafi is a fanatic Moslem and the atheism of the Soviet Union is a horror to him. To him the Soviet is merely a means to an end and that end is to re-establish the great Arab empire from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf, and essentially to revolutionize the whole world. Even radical South Yemen, with close links to Communist countries, speaks, be it only in Article 31 of its Constitution, of the preservation of its Islamic cultural inheritance and Article 46 declares Islam as the religion of the State.

Because of the strength of Islam, Russia can never be sure of any Arab or Moslem country; not of Algeria, not of Libya, not of South Yemen, not of Afghanistan - not even of non-Moslem countries in Africa.

Of all known groups, it is most difficult to influence Moslems or change their basic loyalties. They have been called by Christian missionaries *le bloc inconvertible*. From the vantage point of South Africa it seems as yet insufficiently realised and rarely appreciated that Islam is a potential ally in forestalling Communism in Africa. King Hassan II of Morocco, in fact, referred to the necessity of an unbroken front of anti-Communist states from the Nile Delta to the Cape of Good Hope. One can imagine the grave consequences for the Republic of South Africa, were it not for Islam in Africa. At present three of the strategically most important corners of Africa are in the hands of Moslems: the Straits of Gibraltar on the Moroccan coastline, the Suez Canal region and the Horn of Africa. It is certainly no coincidence that the countries in these regions are war-torn, with Russian intermingling always in the background.

Nearer to our borders, the chief resistance to Frelimo is said to stem from the biggest of the ethnic groups in Mozambique, the Macuas. They live mainly in the northern provinces of the country and constitute nearly forty percent of the total population. The Macuas are chiefly Moslem and therefore opposed to Frelimo doctrine. Moslems in Mozambique are today extremely upset

by the indoctrination of their children in the new educational system.

It is clear that we have many common interests with Moslems in Africa. Unfortunately up to now we have had little vision for the importance of Islam in this country. This was lamented almost twenty-two years ago by Mia Brandel Syrier when she said that this lack of interest and knowledge is in no small measure related to the absence of Islamic-Arabic departments at our universities. Since then little has changed except that South Africa has become more isolated from Moslem countries, who suspect her of religious discrimination against Moslems, and isolated from Arab and African countries, not least because of her ties with Israel.

In South Africa, Islam is mainly represented by the Coloured, Malay and Indian people, with a small number of white and black Moslems. Recently, prominent members of the Black Moslem Movement in America were brought to South Africa to establish contacts with local black people. It is interesting that one of them called on the audience at a Chaka day function to accept Islam as the natural religion of the black people, proclaiming further that it is in God's scheme of things that they have been brought to this country to live, and it is their duty to reproduce Moslems on the soil of South Africa. The Koran has been translated into Zulu, together with other measures to introduce Islam to Zulus. There are, moreover, indications that Christian penetration of the Zulu people has become stagnant.

Islam has remained particularly attractive to the black man in his search for an individual identity, and stimulated by the surge of black nationalism in Africa. He admires the elevated ethical code of Islam, which stresses the equality and unity of all Moslems. It makes him the brother of the incomparable champion boxer Mohammed Ali and it connects him with the fabulous wealth and power of the Arab countries. Polygamy, circumcision and an aversion to pork, fit in with his traditional way of life. Islam gives the African a feeling of power and national pride; it makes him part of the big society of the future: independent, rich and self-reliant. Islam gives the Moslem a feeling of moral superiority over the decadent West with its adultery, gambling, abuse of alcohol and its pitiful indecisiveness. Moreover, the demands of Islam are not inaccessible. The basic requirement is the recital of the shahâda-formula: "There is no god except God and Mohammed is his messenger", the rest can come gradually even over more than one generation.

There are not many ideological options in Africa and I consider the chances for Islamic expansion in Africa to be as good as, if not better than, ever before. I have tried to present a brief sketch of the spread of Islam in Africa, its diversity and some of its problems; but also its unity and immense power when put under pressure by an enemy, as most recently by the threat of Communist military and ideological takeover. We in South Africa are irrevocably involved in the future of Africa, therefore Islam concerns every one of us in a most personal way.