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Islam in Kenya  
General Observations

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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The effect of Islam on the African is markedly different from that of Christianity. A few impressions in this regard are sketched out here.

Islam is the religion of surrender to the will of God. Observers here and in other countries always note that Muslims achieve a degree of contentment seldom seen in the western world. Suicide is rare among Muslims.

The Kenya African Muslim too is imbued with this attitude toward life. Among African Muslims there is little or none of the bitterness, political striving, nationalism and nativism---all products of a pathetic eagerness to imitate the white men---that one finds among Christian Africans.

Few if any Kikuyu Muslims have been involved in Mau Mau.

"We never promised the Africans anything," an Arab said to me once. "We never told them they could become just like us. We gave them religion only. We promised them Heaven and that was all. That was easy---we could never be found out."

The African Muslim, like all other Muslims, is taught to resign himself to Allah's will. One must put oneself in harmony with the universe. The corollary becomes: What do worldly things matter? Heaven is the only thing that counts.

Race consciousness does exist among Arabs and among Indian Muslims, but seemingly to a lesser degree than among white people. The African Muslim is welcomed to the mosque. He washes in the same pool as does his Arab or Indian co-religionist. He kneels next to them in prayer, hears with them the message of surrender. He has joined a brotherhood of colored men. They enjoy a secondary position in Kenya, but they seem to be more or less resigned to it.

A friend recently returned from the northern frontier of Kenya reported that the Somalis say they will never start a Mau Mau. They feel it is silly to fight the Europeans. Allah seems to be showing temporary favor to the white men. So, all well and good! The Somali attitude is that the Europeans ought to be allowed to enjoy themselves on earth. Being infidels, they will never join the Somalis in Heaven. So what difference does it make if they have privileges and riches while on earth?

The African Christian is up against a different situation than his Muslim brother. He is taught, directly or indirectly, to improve his material circumstances along with his spiritual status.

He must become educated, he must work hard, he must emulate the dominant white Christians, of whom his missionary is one. Christianity to him is inextricably linked with European culture and white men. If he becomes in the eyes of the Christian missionaries a "good mission boy," he has become in his own eyes something of a European. Nothing in Christianity tells him he cannot assume the white way of life. In fact it talks very specifically of the brotherhood of man.

But he finds that though the individual missionary might practice the ideal of the brotherhood, other Europeans do not. He is not welcomed to "white" churches. After all, who would want a black man, probably in tattered clothing and speaking broken English, standing around self-conscious at a gay church social?

The black Christian finds too that when it comes to a job or when it comes to a number of other matters, many Europeans still regard him as an undesirable inferior. His ingenuous eagerness to become just like the Europeans turns to bitterness. Independent African Christian churches or sects preaching a hodge-podge mixture of Christianity and old beliefs spring up. To these Africans, organized Christianity has become the Dini ya Wazungu---the Religion of the Whites.

I have come across no African splinter sects in Islam. They have never been brought to within sight of a forbidden fruit.

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#### Islamic Denominations in Kenya:

Thirteen hundred years ago the Prophet Muhammad declared: "O ye men! Harken unto my words and take ye them to heart! Know ye that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim and that ye are now one brotherhood."

But Islam has had no more success in establishing a universal brotherhood of believers than Christianity has had in preserving the one church. Like its monotheistic rival, Islam is rent by denominations. Both religions have one great teacher and one great book. But human nature being what it is, there are widely-varying interpretations of what the book really said and what the teacher really intended.

In Kenya as elsewhere, the fundamental split is between the Sunnis and the Shias. As a basic cleavage, it is something like the Protestant-Catholic rift in Christianity.

When Muhammad died, he was succeeded as Caliph, or secular and religious leader of the Muslims, by abu-Bakr, Omar and Othman in turn. Ali followed Othman to be the fourth Caliph. There was no question of anyone succeeding Muhammad as Prophet---rather as head of the theocratic state.

The split that gave rise to the Shia movement was caused by political and social issues, and possibly some economic ones.

Eventually major doctrinal differences emerged, with the Shias maintaining that Ali was the only rightful successor to Muhammad and that Ali should have been followed by his descendants. The Shias came to regard abu-Bakr, Omar and Othman as "usurpers" and still villify their memory today. An important part of Shia doctrine was that each generation would have its Imam---a descendant of Ali--- to function as its spiritual and secular leader. That is the theory; in practice real authority has rested with temporal rulers whose attitude toward the Imams has ranged from reverence to hostility.

The first Imam was Ali, the second his son, Hussein, and the third Hussein's son. Thus the Imamate would continue on a hereditary basis. These Imams were elevated to something of a divine status by the Shias.

Quarrels broke out among the Shias over who were the rightful successors to the Imamate. Some Shias maintain that the man they regard as the 12th Imam was the last and that he went into concealment to return some day to set things right in the world. Others stop at other places. The Ismailis say the Imamate will continue and they regard the present day Aga Khan as the 48th descendant of the revered Ali.

The Sunnis, by contrast, maintain that there were only four rightly-guided Caliphs---i.e., those directly inspired by Muhammad--- and that Ali was the last of them. The Caliphate continued for some centuries, but eventually the Caliphs lost all temporal power and became puppets in the hands of kings. The Ottoman sultans revived the title and ruled as Caliphs until just after World War I.

The dominant Arabs in the old Empire remained Sunnis. Although the Shia movement originated among Arabs, it had great successes among the conquered populations in Persia and elsewhere. This division is reflected in the denominational make-up of Kenya Muslims today.

The Kenya Arabs, descendants of the old Arabs, are mostly Sunnis. The Sunni movement as a whole is split into four major schools, but differences are minor and they intermarry and worship together in the same mosques. There is no priesthood and services can be led by any believer.

A minority of Kenya Arabs belong to an independent sect, the Ibadis. It too originated in the early days of Islam. Ali had been installed as Caliph and his authority was challenged. He agreed to submit the matter to arbitration. One group of his followers, called the Kharijites, maintained that arbitration was "an act of treason against God." The will of God could only be expressed through the free choice of the whole Muslim community, they said. Accordingly, they withdrew their support from Ali and at the same time continued to oppose his rivals. It was a Kharijite fanatic who later murdered Ali.

The Kharijites were suppressed by the Sunnis, but communities of them, known as Ibadis, continued to exist in Oman (on the Persian Gulf) and in North Africa. It was the Omani Ibadis who drove the

Portuguese from East Africa and settled here, thus establishing the Ibadī faith on these shores.

The early Kharijites were like some Christian sects---fanatical and fiercely democratic. They maintained "that anyone, even a Negro slave, could be elected as the head of the Muslim community if he possessed the necessary qualifications. Purity of life was the only test... They were stern, uncompromising and fanatical. They declared that those who refused to fight unjust rulers were infidels and they utterly rejected dissimulation (taqiya) in word and deed."\*

The puritannical outlook of the Ibadīs still exists, but seemingly to a much less degree, in Kenya. There appears to be little fanaticism---the Arabs here are too easy-going for that--- but the Ibadīs always take a sterner view toward morality than do their Sunni brothers.

The Ibadīs are perhaps stronger in Zanzibar, where the Sultan, who was born in Oman, is of that faith, than on the Kenya coast. There are no Ibadī sheikhs or religious teachers in Kenya. Kenya Ibadīs have to turn to Sunni sheikhs for guidance and, as a result, many Kenya Ibadīs are becoming Sunnis.

African and Somali Muslims are generally Sunnis. In Zanzibar during the 1920s, a dispute was going on between Sunni and Ibadī Arabs. A favorite Ibadī taunt was that the Sunnis "followed an African creed." Slavery was still a recent memory in Zanzibar at that time and accordingly this was a great insult. The Sunnis responded by declaring that the Ibadīs were "mbwa wa motoni"---"dogs of hell." Zanzibar torpor being what it is, these great theological disputations have long since subsided.

The full array of Islamic sects is seen among Kenya's Indian Muslims. One gets the impression that what fanaticism exists is found chiefly among the Indians. But still there is not a great degree of it. A number of Indians are Sunnis and worship with Arabs and Africans in the same mosques. Others are Shias, and they exist within caste-like communities. A few belong to another independent sect, the Ahmadiyya movement.

The largest Shia sect here is the Khoja Ismaili one, which was discussed in the last newsletter.

Another sect, the Khoja Ithna 'Ashariya, are similar to the Khoja Ismailis. They too had been Hindu traders converted to Islam. But they do not follow the Aga Khan. They part company with the Aga Khan's followers over a question of succession to the Imamate. They do not regard Ismaili as an Imam, but rather follow his brother, Musa Kazim. Their separate line of Imams ends at No. 12---Muhammad Madhi, who, they say, went into concealment in A. D. 873.

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\* Alfred Guillaume, Islam, Penguin, 1954.

The Ithna 'Ashariyas maintain that the Madhi, "the guided one," will reappear some day to restore righteousness in the world. "Through the centuries, Madhis have appeared in various Muslim countries from time to time. The British Army has gone into action against at least two of them in modern times, 'the Mad Mullah of Somaliland' and 'the Madhi of the Sudan.'" (#1)

The Ithna 'Ashariyas estimate that there are 2,000 of them in Kenya and 10,000 in all of East Africa.

Some Sunnis believe in a Madhi and maintain that Jesus Christ will reappear some day in that role. But the idea is strongest among the Shias. The idea of the coming of a Messiah who will right all wrongs would appeal to conquered peoples. Guillaume says, "Ali to them is the only true ruler of Islam's destinies, and as all their efforts to get this view accepted have failed, they have taken refuge in a Messianic restoration in an indefinite future." (#2) Hollister says: "In stables at Ispahan, two horses were always kept bridled and saddled that they might be ready for this day. One was intended for the use of the Madhi; the other for Jesus Christ." (#3)

The third Shia sect in Kenya is the Bohras (or Bohoras). They are Musteallian Shias. This sect flourished in the Yemen and then spread to India in the 1500s. A number of Yemenese are said to have emigrated to India, but along with this many Hindu traders and cultivators were converted to the new faith. They took on the name Bohra for their caste-community. It is thought to derive from the Gujerati word vohoru, "to trade." In the last hundred or so years, a number of these Bohras emigrated to Zanzibar and the East African coast, thus establishing their faith in Africa.

The Musteallian Shias, like the Ismailis, acknowledge Ismail and some of his successors as Imams. But they part company with the Ismailis further down the line and their line of Imams ends with No. 21---Tyeb, who, they say, went into concealment to return some day as a Madhi.

A number of splits have taken place in the Bohra community and some have embraced Sunnism and now are known as "Bohra Sunnis." Most if not all Kenya Bohras are Musteallian Shias of the "Daudi" sect.

They follow a hereditary Dai ("one who calls"---or chief missionary) who lives in Bombay. He lacks most of the power of the Aga Khan. However he does send out priests whom Kenya Bohras are bound to accept. There is a mullah in Nairobi and a bhaisahib, who is of higher rank, in Mombasa. The mullah here in Nairobi generally leads the services in the mosques, though any believer can fulfill that function as well. The mullah also conducts the wadressa, the part-time religious school

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{#1} Ibid.

{#2} Ibid.

{#3} Hollister, The Shi'a of India, London, 1953.

for Bohra children. They do not operate schools for academic subjects, but rather send their children to government schools.

The mullah is a full-time paid priest and on religious holidays, the Bohras salaam him and present him with cash gifts. In divorces, they present the case to the mullah or bhaisahib and a panel of leading Bohras, and an effort is made to hand down a decision acceptable to both parties. Appeals can be lodged with the Dai in Bombay. It is said that in practically all cases, both parties finally work out an agreement---bending again to the "will of the community." But no divorce is valid unless agreement has been reached.

The Bohras are far more orthodox in their approach to Islam than the Ismailis. They follow the Muslim law of inheritance, observe Ramadan and make the pilgrimage to Mecca if they can. Bohra sources estimate there are 4,000 of them in Kenya and 10,000 in all of East Africa.

While the Ithna 'Ashariyas and Bohras are waiting for their Madhi, another sect in Kenya, the Ahmadiyyas, say he has already appeared in the form of an Indian of Persian ancestry named Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in the Panjab in 1835 and died there in 1908. They regard him as a mortal man who was inspired by God. He was only a servant of Muhammad; Muhammad is still the greatest of the prophets. The Ahmadiyyas are expecting no other Madhis.

The Ahmadiyyas say that their mission is to reform Islam, which they say has grown lax and sinful in the centuries since the death of Muhammad. Sunnis and Shias alike sometimes say the Ahmadiyyas are not really Muslims at all. To this the Ahmadiyyas reply that they are the only true Muslims these days.

While the belief in a Madhi is more of a Shia doctrine, the Ahmadiyyas regard themselves as closest to the Sunnis. Like the Sunnis they regard abu-Bakr, Omar, Othman and Ali as the four rightly-guided Caliphs of Islam. The Ahmadiyyas have started a line of Imams to succeed Ghulam Ahmad. But these Imams are not regarded as possessing any divinity. They are like the Sunni idea of Caliphs---protectors of the faith. Moreover they are elected. The current Imam, the second to hold the post since the day of Ghulam Ahmad, lives in Pakistan.

The Ahmadiyyas estimate they have 2,000 followers in Kenya and 7,000 in East Africa. The majority are African converts. The rest are Asians with the exception of one young Englishman. The Ahmadiyyas seem to be imbued with the militant enthusiasm of a new movement and are busy trying to convert Africans and peoples of other races. There are branches of the Ahmadiyya movement in many cities of the world, including in Chicago, Washington and New York. The address of the Chicago headquarters is in the Negro district. The addresses of the Washington and New York headquarters are not familiar to me. Some Ahmadiyyas expect to convert the whole world to "the true Islam" in three centuries.

## The Expansion of Islam in Kenya:

Islam is a static force in Kenya today. The Ahmadiyyas are making an effort to proselytize, but this is slight in comparison with the total potential resources of Islam. In theory the Muslim faith needs no missionaries. Each Muslim is expected to spread the faith himself, mainly by setting an example that others will want to emulate. There is no doubt that converts, especially Africans, are being acquired in Kenya today as a result of efforts by individual Muslims. But the number so converted would seem to be small. Islam has had two big periods of expansion in Kenya and elsewhere in East Africa, but these now are over. It is static today, but its static limits embrace a considerable force.

The first period of expansion was when Islam established a beach-head on the Kenya coast. The coastal Arabs, who have been settled here for at least 2,000 years, had contact with southern Arabia during Muhammad's life-time and later adopted the faith he preached. They also converted the coastal Africans and the Swahilis, or Afro-Arabs. Today all of the Arabs and nearly all of the Swahilis are Muslims. Arab friends in Mombasa told me they know of only one Christian Arab, who was converted by missionaries and who has become an outcast from their community.

During Arab times, Islam never spread to any degree to the inland tribes. One reason seems to be the apathy of the hinterland tribes to any outside influences. A vast barrier of indifferent pagans kept Islam from spreading to the interior by purely African channels.

The Arabs themselves did venture into the East African interior, but their role was mainly that of slave raiding, mixed with some commerce. The slave raiding precluded any simultaneous missionary activity. At any rate, they made few incursions into upcountry Kenya. The war-like Masai either barred their entry or demanded heavy tribute for allowing the Arab caravans to pass unmolested. The Kikuyu had also attacked some caravans and also were feared.

A few permanent caravan stations were established in what became Nyanza Province, around Lake Victoria and bordering on Uganda, and some Africans there accepted Islam. Some Arabs settled in that area as well. But on the whole, the Arab influence on upcountry Kenya was negligible. The situation was different in Tanganyika and Uganda where numbers of Africans in tribes allied with the Arabs accepted Islam and were influenced in other ways by Arab culture.

At the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, a process began under which Islam was finally to sweep into the interior. Interestingly enough, Islam had Christianity partly to thank for making it possible.

Prompted by a number of motives, among which were desires to stamp out slavery and the slave trade and bring Christianity to the tribes of the interior, Britain declared a Protectorate over what became Kenya and Uganda in 1895. With the advent of European rule and all that it brought with it---a process that took some years to consolidate---the old beliefs and ways of

life of many of the interior tribes were shattered. These Africans had suddenly become aware of the barren limitations of their old tribal religions in explaining the world about them. They looked for something to replace them, something that could make sense out of the bewildering circumstances into which they had been plunged.

Christian missionaries had struggled for years, without great success, in trying to win converts in a tribal atmosphere. But as long as there were few Europeans around, as long as the tribe, its religion and all its customs remained intact, few Africans were interested in the new dini (religion). But when European administration was consolidated, tribal structures began disintegrating. There was a rush of intending converts to the Christian mission stations. The process was felt the most just after World War I when large numbers of Africans, who had been mobilized for service as porters, got a look at the outside world and made their final break with tribalism and tribal religions.

Christianity moved in rapidly to fill the void, but Islam was on the march as well. It had no missionaries as such, no funds and no organizations for propagating the faith. The Muslim faith was carried by Swahili policemen, soldiers, clerks, overseers and servants that the Europeans brought with them from the coast to help them administer the interior, and by Swahili traders and others who followed in the wake. Oliver writes:

"To the African villager, especially if he lived far from a missionary center, these black invaders must have appeared, both by weight of numbers and by racial propinquity, the most significant element of the new regime. They were often the visible instruments of the new authority which was shaking the foundations of his world.

"Frequently, it was they who brought for sale the wonderful wares of the West. If he sought employment on a European farm, or if he was conscripted for work on a road or a railway, it was they who stood in comfort and watched over his toil.

"They knew something of the wider world at the coast and beyond, which worshipped the one God and followed the precepts of the Prophet. Their understanding of the Koran might be imperfect, their observance of religious practices might be meaningless; but to the pagan African it would at once be apparent that membership of the great brotherhood of the faithful would confer at least that sense of sophistication, which, in his tribal parochialism, he so signally lacked."\*

The attractiveness of Islam, the religion of the "superior" black newcomers, to the African no doubt was enhanced by the

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\* Oliver, The Missionary Factor in East Africa, London, 1952.



fact that it permitted him to continue with polygamy. True, drinking was frowned upon, but Islam generally has no clergy to guard the morals of the flock. A more devout Muslim might disapprove of his errant brother, but outside some Indian sects, Islam knows no ex-communication. The doors of the mosque, of the "great brotherhood of the faithful," would always be open to sinner and righteous alike.

As a result, Islam picked up converts even among such predominantly Christian tribes as the Kikuyu. The process was reinforced when, as European administration expanded, other "superior" dark-skinned men who professed Islam poured into upcountry Kenya and came into contact with the Africans. These later invaders included Somalis, Sudanese and Comorans.

But this early prestige of Islam is waning now. Christianity is taking the lead. While an earlier generation of Africans saw only Swahili Muslims when it looked for educated and clever black men, today's generation can look to Christian Africans with college degrees who have far surpassed the attainments of those first Swahili visitors.

To the upcountry African, Christianity acquired a greater prestige because it was associated with the dominant Europeans. The ambitious African quickly saw who ruled the roost and it was the white Christian ruler after whom he wanted to pattern himself.

If he wanted a better job, he had to learn English. The place to learn it was in one of the Christian mission schools springing up throughout the reserves. Christianity and education were one in the minds of the Africans---a situation that still exists today. Literacy in English conferred material rewards on the African. But Islam, Koran studies and Arabic, taught in a poor, ramshackle bush school, had little to offer in this regard.

The Christian missionaries in addition were well-organized. They not only took the lead over the Muslims, but they often were in advance of the government as well. At a time when government still was engaged in the preliminary work of establishing colonial administration---keeping the peace, collecting taxes and opening up roads---Christian missionaries had already opened schools and hospitals for Africans. Islam's upcountry schools were few by comparison.

"We're realizing our mistake now," an Indian Muslim said. "We didn't proselytize for Islam. If we had spent one-tenth of what the Christians spent, all of East Africa would be for Islam now."

Whether that would have happened or not, there still is only one Muslim missionary organization in Kenya today. It is run by the industrious Ahmadiyyas. They estimate they have gained 1,500 African converts since they opened their campaign six years ago.

The Ahmadiyya organization is patterned after Christian missionary organizations. It is headed by a Chief Missionary, who came here from the Panjab in 1934. He has several full-time paid

missionaries working under him. Most are Africans who function as apprentices. Other Ahmadiyyas proselytize in their spare time.

A mission has been established at Kisumu and a school has been opened for African children in the Luo Reserve nearby. Luo and Kisii converts have been gained and some Swahilis have been converted along the coast. Plans are to open mission stations for other tribes.

Christian leaders are becoming concerned about the Ahmadiyyas. L. J. Beecher, Bishop of Mombasa, says they are proselytizing with "an effectiveness of measurable importance." Christian leaders say the Ahmadiyyas have been turning up at Christian meetings to distribute pamphlets espousing Ahmadiyyaism.

While the Ahmadiyyas are vigorous, the fact that it is identified as of Asian origin might operate to their disadvantage. Africans generally are disinterested in all things Asian.

Viewed as a whole, it seems unlikely that any considerable degree of expansion of Islam will take place in the foreseeable future. The Arabs are too indolent to become enthusiastic missionaries and the Indians seem preoccupied with business and their little caste/communities.

Christianity is outdistancing Islam, but among the followers it already has, Islam shows no signs of waning. There probably are 35,000 Indian Muslims in Kenya and all of the 29,000 Arabs follow the faith.

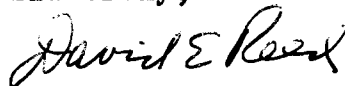
There are no authoritative figures on the number of African Muslims in Kenya, but the East African Statistical Department estimates it at 4 per cent of the African population---or nearly 230,000. Thus in all there would be nearly 300,000 Muslims in Kenya.

By contrast, the number of Christian Africans is estimated at 33 per cent---or about 1,900,000. With Europeans, Goans and others, Christians would total about 2 million. Christians thus would outnumber Muslims by almost 7 to 1.

A different situation exists in Tanganyika, the most Islamized of all the three territories. The department estimates that 25 per cent of its 7 million Africans are Muslims, while only 18 per cent are Christians.

The majority of Kenya Africans---an estimated 3,600,000---follow neither the teachings of Christ nor those of Muhammad. They remain pagans, worshipping, if anything, the old gods that East Africa's invaders have never been able to obliterate.

Sincerely,



David E. Reed