Muslims, Christians and State: The Contest for Public Space in Kenya

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Introduction

Islam has a long history in East Africa in general and particularly in Kenya. The introduction of Islam predates that of Christianity. Christianity was introduced along the East African coast by the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th century[1]. By the 12th century, Islam is reported to have established a strong presence along the coast of East Africa[2]. Kenyan Muslims form a significant religious minority and may constitute between 10-15% of the total population of Kenya. In the last ten years, the public presence of Islam has become more noticeable. While this presence may be attributed to the global resurgence of Islam, it is also attributed to the August 1998 bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, which galvanised Muslims together against negative perceptions by the State. There is greater attention to religious observance (prayer, fasting, da'wa – especially preaching – dress, pilgrimage) and the creation of new institutions, including mosques, Islamic banks (e.g. the First Islamic Bank and Gulf Bank), Muslim radio stations such as Iqra FM and Star FM, Islamic schools and insurance companies. Muslims in Kenya are engaged not only in religious matters but also in confronting national issues such as the re-writing of the constitution, security, poverty and HIV/AIDS. There is significant media coverage of Muslim issues[3]. At the same time, there is considerable contestation among Muslims themselves on matters related to religious institutions and festivals, what one may refer to as the "control over religious and ideological space". This article examines Muslim contestation with the state in Kenya in the context of the street preaching of Sheikh Khalid Balala.

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Politics, Ethnicity and Religion in Post Colonial Kenya

In providing a theoretical framework that describes how conflicts, especially of a religious nature, occur, Sperling argues that:

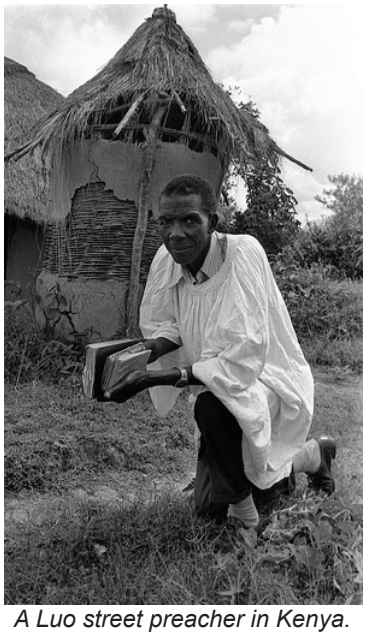
"Contestation [or conflict] expressed in religious terms is a reflection of other underlying factors which may be economic, political, ethnic, ideological and social in nature. In these contexts, religion is a strategic avenue for expressing disaffection against oppressive systems. [Further]... contestation comes up often as part of a broader cultural misunderstanding, involving an unwillingness or inability to understand and respect the aspirations, customs and values of "another" religion and culture. This kind of misunderstanding can occur between individuals, peoples, a government and a governed people. When a government is perceived by a people to be unsympathetic to their cultural traditions, it leads to antipathy against it. Religious conflict becomes more complex to attend to when it takes place along cultural (and ethnic) boundaries. These tend to exacerbate disagreement by enforcing a "we-they" attitude. Thus compre-

hensive resolution to conflict is only possible when the key to underlying causes are identified and addressed".[4]

Abdin Chande places Muslim perceptions of marginalization in a historical perspective:

"– [it is] the process of European colonisation moving from the coast to the interior that shifted the balance of power in favour of the hinterland ethnic groups. Consequently, it was among the followers of African ancestral/traditional religions that the European Christian missionaries, with the introduction of Christian mission school (far more numerous than government ones) became the basis for elite recruitment both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. By the 1960s, the decade when many African colonies obtained their independence, the Muslims were at a disadvantage as most high positions in government fell to non-Muslims educated in up-country mission schools"[5].

Historical memory of and nostalgia for the once powerful Sultanate of Zanzibar play a role in the present contest for space, representation and power. While ethnicity and regionalism became criteria for determining who benefits from the sharing of the country's resources, the attitude of the Christian-dominated government towards Muslims introduced a new dimension to ethnicity and religion.



A Luo street preacher in Kenya.

Three main factors may explain the renewed assertiveness of the Muslim community in East Africa in general and Kenya in particular in the last twenty years: The first is the rise of a new kind of religious scholars (ulamaa) and teachers (walimu) some of whom have been educated in Medina and Saudi Arabia. The second is the Islamic revolution in Iran. The third is the increase in Muslim graduates from Kenya's increasing number of state and private universities[6] leading to "greater access to religious education, one that is no longer under the control of the traditional *ulama*"[7]. Casanova corroborates these factors by suggesting a wider social-historical context for "contemporary pluralisation and fragmentation" associated with processes of global modernity, namely:

- The intrusive penetration and colonization of the traditional life-world by administrative states and markets, under colonial and post-colonial regimes;
- The mass migration to urban centres and distant lands, Muslim and non-Muslim;
- The expansion of mass education promoted by governments;
- The revolution of mass communications: print, electronic, and high-speed travel;
- The proliferation of global networks building upon already highly developed Muslim transnational networks.[8]

It can be postulated that Muslim re-awakening and agitation for inclusion in national processes is a result of the global democratic dispensation that swept across the world following the collapse of the Berlin wall. In Kenya this process began in earnest in 1992 with the agitation for opening up of democratic space. The repeal of Section 2 (A) of the constitution via the Constitution Amendment Act No. 12 of 1991 led to increased participation of Muslims in Politics. The formation of an Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) by young educated Muslims with Abdurrahman Wandati (a *madrasa* teacher) as Chairman, Taib Ali Taib (a lawyer) as secretary and Omar Mwinyi (a primary school teacher) as organising secretary, was part of the larger efforts by Kenyan Muslims to make in-roads into a Christian dominated political order. It was also a reaction against the preponderance of the traditional Muslim *Ulama* who, through bodies such as the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) were seen as conniving with the oppressive political class. Although IPK was denied registration by Moi's government on the grounds of its religious identification, its public role could not be entirely curtailed.

The assertiveness by Muslims in Kenya must

also be seen against a background of the "*sahwa*" (refers to awakening, recovery of consciousness; state of consciousness), the consequences of religious investments by Iran, Saudi Arabia etc, the effects of events in Somalia, 'War on Terror' and the Kenyan State's relationship with US and Israel.

It is within the context of this expanded space for religious and political participation that we will now discuss street preaching of Sheikh Khalid Balala.

Street Preaching as Protest

In 1992, a young University of Medina graduate propelled IPK into national limelight through his street sermons at Mwembe Tayari in Mombasa, Kenya. Born in 1958 in Mombasa to Salim ibn Ahmad (who operated a butchery) and Fatuma Sadik bin Salim, Khalid Balala attended Serani Primary School before proceeding to Allidina Visram High School[9]. In 1975 he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca and stayed in Saudi Arabia for the following ten years. While there, he studied Islamic subjects at Medina University and made a living by selling religious books. In 1985 he left Saudi Arabia, travelling first to Britain, then to India. While in Britain, Balala studied business management before returning to India where he studied Islam and comparative religion. With this background in business and religious sciences, Balala was ready to disseminate Islam through street preaching. Balala later became a member of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK).

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Arye Oded outlines Balala's themes during his street sermons:[10]

- He demanded that Muslims be strict in observing Islamic practices, especially daily prayers.
- He insisted on the importance of Islamic education and the setting up of Muslim schools.
- He warned that tourism corrupted the morals of Muslims, who had begun to imitate foreign practices such as wearing western attire and frequenting bars and discotheques.
- He demanded that women dress modestly and keep themselves "pure".
- He repeatedly argued that Islam does not differentiate between religion and state; that politics is part of religion; that the cancellation of the ban on political parties gave Muslims the opportunity to organise themselves and to raise their demands; and that the government should allow the IPK to operate just as it did other parties.
- To placate the Christians, who claimed that Balala believed that Sharia law should be imposed on the whole population, Balala made it clear that *Sharia* would be applied only to Muslims.
- Balala's strongest criticism was directed against those Muslims who were active in the government and in the ruling party but whom, he charged, tended only to their own private interests.

Balala's sermons polarised Muslim youth in Mombasa, with much of his support coming from those of Yemeni *Hadrami* extraction; whilst the *Swahili* youth tended to be against him. This was as a result of the racial divide that exists between Muslims of Asian descent and black Muslims, with the former perceived to be privileged and patronising.

The significance of Balala's street preaching lies partly in its orientation to a broad public rather than to strictly Islamic religious circles, and to its presentation of a political Islam which in form and content is closer to modern ideologies than to traditional content. Effectively Balala's sermons bridged the secular/sacred divide that had been predicted by social scientists with regard to the future of religion. This new form of Islam, while operating outside the traditional religious space, was more attractive especially to the young and marginalised, galvanising them into public protests. In August 1992, Balala and the IPK youth were involved in protests during

President Moi's visit to Mombasa. These protests were violently quelled by Kenyan security forces.

The reformist nature of Balala's sermons was evident in its call to Muslims not to forget daily prayer, not to be 'swallowed' by the secularist indulgences of dance and alcohol intake and for Muslim women to dress modestly in accordance with Islamic norms. Such calls, in a context where many were disillusioned with the decadence of the city, made Balala's message very appealing to the Muslim public.

Equally, his concern with the lowly place of Muslims in the Kenyan political order, and the failure of Muslim politicians to do anything about it was a theme which resonated with the feelings of many.

The performative aspects of Balala's preaching also contributed to its popularity. Oded reports that Balala's "... impressive eloquence, wide knowledge of Islam, and bold and fiery invective against the regime attracted large crowds, mainly young Muslims"[11]. This was a new kind of preaching in terms of place, content and performance. Robert Hefner has observed that "today populist preachers, neotraditionalist Sufi masters, and secularly educated 'new Muslim intellectuals' challenge the monopoly of religious power earlier enjoyed by classically trained religious scholars *(ulama)*[12]". Like Sheikh Balala, Mwinyi, Taib and Wandati, who were leaders of the Islamic Party of Kenya, represented new Muslim intellectuals who often originated from various professional backgrounds, such as engineering, medicine, law, and education, and who have had a significant impact on Islamist movements and the fragmentation of religious authority.

The street preaching of Balala is not an isolated case. The phenomenon of *mihadhara* (plural for public sermons) by Kenyan Muslims is a growing phenomenon. Such preaching apart from addressing theological issues (for example: Is Jesus the Son of God? Was Jesus Crucified? Muhammad in the Qur'an), also makes explicit comments on socio-political matters such as the treatment of Muslims at the hands of the State in Kenya and the need for Muslims to unite.

In the context of Tanzania, Chande describes a visit to Tanga by members of *Jumuiya ya Wahubiri wa Kiislamu* Tanzania (Society of Muslim Preachers Tanzania, (JUWAKITA), namely Sheikh Muhammad Ali Kawemba and Sheikh Musa Fundi Ngariba, from Kigoma, Western Tanzania. They preached at a series of meetings, organized by *Umoja wa Vijana wa Kiislamu* Tanzania (Tanzanian Muslim Youth League, UVIKITA) in March 1985[13]. Unlike the case of Tanzania, where former President Mkapa in 1998 condemned "people who go about distributing cassettes, booklets and convening meetings where they insulted and ridiculed other religions[14]", the government of Kenya has not clearly stated its position on public sermons by Muslims and Christians. O' Brien notes that "an effectively organised Muslim reaction to the predicament of marginality, their inheritance from the period of colonial rule, did not emerge until the mid-1970s. This reaction has not only em-

Muhadhara, Mumias 26th February 2010

phasised the need for local Muslims to come to terms with modern education, but also argued for the expansion of the Muslim community by means of an organised preaching *(da'wa)*, which borrows from the example of mission Christianity"[15].

The Nature of Muslim Public Sphere in Kenya

Muslims are effectively proposing a new approach to the secular/sacred divide. This reassertion of Islam challenges the presuppositions and expectations of modernization theory that was based on the belief that modernization would lead to progressive secularization and westernization of society[15]. In this process, Muslims are challenging what Nilufer Gole refers to as "the borders and meanings of the secular public sphere" by overtly engaging in politics and seeking to reform the Muslims' lifestyles.

The involvement of lay Muslim preachers, lawyers and teachers in calling for greater Muslim participation in the country's affairs has led to a pluralisation and fragmentation of religious authority, effectively democratising religious space.

Muslim public identity has emerged in Kenya based on a common experience of marginality. This identity is constantly being negotiated and contested with other players. Such contestation and negotiation has historical precedents but is also shaped by contemporary developments.

Conclusion

The objective of this contribution was to describe one way in which Muslim contestation is being played out in Kenya. Through an examination of the activities of a Muslim street preacher, the article has attempted to offer a snap shot of the nature of public Islam in Kenya.

While the article has focussed on the contested nature of the Muslim public sphere, Muslims in Kenya can be quite peaceable – faithfully going about their religious and civic duties without much conflict. One will witness, for example, many Muslims dancing through the streets of Mombasa, Lamu and even rural Mumias during *Maulid* celebrations, hurrying on Friday to prayer at the *Jamia* Mosque as part of their religious routine.

The involvement of lay Muslim preachers, lawyers and teachers in calling for greater Muslim participation in the country's affairs has led to a pluralisation and fragmentation of religious authority, effectively democratising the religious space.

Although the single case of Kenya has been the subject of their analysis, it has much wider implications as it is linked with questions of how Muslim identities elsewhere are (re)-negotiated in daily life.

Notes

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3. A quick random check on one of Kenya's leading daily, *The Standard*, reveals the following articles appearing in a span of less than six months: 15th March 2009, "Muslims Call for Sharia in Constitution", 21st July 2009, "Census won't affect Prayers", 23rd June 2009, "US envoy woos Kenya Muslims", 15th July 2009, "Muslim Students free to wear **hijab**", 23rd July 2009, "Kibaki to Change how Government handles Muslims" and 24th July 2009, "Muslims vow to Reject Truth Team".
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13. Chande, A.N., 1998. *Islam, Ulamaa and Community Development in Tanzania.* Bethesda: Austin & Winfield.
14. Aziz, "Submission to the Attorney General of Tanzania", p.2 (cited in: Chesworth, J. 2006. *Fundamentalism and Outreach Strategies in East Africa,* Leiden: Brill, p.169).
15. Donald B. Cruise O'Brien, 1995. "Coping with Christians", in: Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (eds.), *Religion & Politics in East Africa.* London: James Curry, pp. 200-219.
16. J.L. Esposito, 2000. *Modernizing Islam and Re-Islamization in Global Perspective,* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

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