

## *Editorial*

# African Islam and Islam in Africa: Between Exceptionalism and Marginality

Sub-Saharan Africa is often regarded as part of the periphery, rather than part of the center, of the Muslim world. In the Abrahamic world, Africa is often marginalized. But is there anything special about Islam's relationship with Africa? Are there unique aspects of African Islam? Islam has exerted an enormous influence upon Africa and its peoples; but has Africa had any impact upon Islam? While the impressive range of articles presented in this special issue do not directly address such questions, my short editorial attempts to put those articles within the context of Africa's uniqueness in the annals of Islam. One note: Although these articles concentrate on sub-Saharan Africa ("Black Africa"), our definition of Africa encompasses the continent as a whole – from South Africa to Egypt, Angola to Algeria, and Mozambique to Mauritania.

### **Divisive Arabic and Unifying Islam?**

A striking paradox emerges here. While Arabic is one of the main factors that seem to separate North Africa from the rest of the continent, Islam is one of the main factors that North Africans share with millions of Black people south of the Sahara. At least superficially, Arabic is a divisive factor that separates native Arabic-speakers north of the Sahara from speakers of other languages south of the great desert. On the other hand, Islam has created bonds of the faith and shared doctrine between Moroccans and Senegalese, Algerians and Nigerians, between a madrasah in Casablanca and a *masjid* in Cape Town.

At one level, Arabic is a divisive factor especially since the concept of Arab often means someone whose mother tongue is Arabic or is descended from native Arabic-speakers. For example, the conflict between "Arabs" and "Black Africans" in Darfur is, in reality, a conflict between native Arabic-speakers in Darfur and Darfurians who speak other languages. Members of

both sides cannot easily be distinguished by skin color and, at least within the American context, would both be regarded as “Black.”

On the other hand, efforts to end this conflict often appeal to the combatants’ shared religion to remind them of what they have in common. Although President Husni Mubarak of Egypt supports President Umar al-Bashir of Sudan as a fellow Arab, Mubarak has been trying to use the Islamic card in 2009 to unite Darfur’s different factions and promote peace between Khartoum and the region’s armed combatants. Unfortunately, language is often more powerful as a divisive factor in Darfur than religion is a unifier.

But in Africa as a whole Islam continues to be a resource for unification, while Arabic remains a marker of differentiation. Paradoxically, Islam has also transmitted Arabic words to enrich indigenous African languages and make them more effective linguistic unifiers. The most striking example is Kiswahili, Africa’s most widespread indigenous language. Arabic is to Kiswahili what Latin has been to English – both a source of loan words and a lender of the original alphabet. When Kiswahili became a written language in the fifteenth century it used the Arabic alphabet, which continued to be its main orthography until British colonial rule in Zanzibar, Tanganyika, and Kenya replaced it with the Latin alphabet in the twentieth century.

The language of polite society and good manners in Kiswahili has borrowed disproportionately from Arabic. Such politeness helps to facilitate social integration. Some of the relevant loan words are *ujamaa* (fellowship, familyhood), *uhuru* (freedom, independence), *imani* (faith), *mahaba* (love), *amani* (peace), *hisani* (favor), *salama* (safety), *salamu* (greeting), *tafadhali* (please), *shukura* (gratitude), *adabu* (manners), *heshima* (respect), *asante* (thank you), *shukurani* (grateful), *heri* (blessing), and *shari* (accursed).

Kiswahili belongs to the Bantu family of indigenous languages. The vocabulary of abuse and hostility is borrowed more from Bantu sources than from Arabic, which often provides euphemisms. For example, the basic words for sexual organs are indigenous, whereas Arabic equivalents are used in polite society as euphemisms: the indigenous word for the male organ is *mboro*, but in polite conversation, it is better to use the Arabic *dhakari*.

While Arabic as a total language in North Africa continues to create a gulf from sub-Saharan Africa, Arabic words and phrases borrowed by indigenous languages constitute cultural bridges of unification. But the credit for the distribution of Arabic words to other tongues belongs to Islam. Kiswahili evolved not as a result of contact between Arabic and Bantu languages, but as a result of contact between Islam and indigenous cultures. Once again it was Islam rather than Arabic that was a unifying force across the continent.

Hausa, Africa's second largest indigenous language, has been partly "Islamized" in terms of its vocabulary. Indeed, the great majority of native Hausa-speakers are still Muslim and concentrated in Nigeria, Niger, and neighboring countries. It is not always remembered that Nigeria has more Muslims than Egypt, and that more than half of them speak Hausa, a language saturated with Arabic expressions. While Kiswahili has spread to more countries and is spoken by more Africans than Hausa, only a minority of Swahili-speakers today are Muslims. In other words, Kiswahili has triumphed well beyond the borders of East Africa's Muslim communities. The language, which started as a product of cultural interaction between Islam and indigenous languages, has now become the mother tongue of millions of Christians as well as Muslims.

Unlike Kiswahili, Somali has been enriched directly by Arabic as well as Islam. But while Arabic words in Kiswahili are the result of proximity to Islam, Arabic words in Somali are the result of the Somalis' proximity to both Islam and the Arabic-speaking people of Yemen and the western shores of the Arabian Peninsula.

Both Kiswahili and Hausa have also transmitted Arabic words to smaller neighboring African languages. Ethnic or tribal languages in Uganda and Tanzania have Arabic loan words borrowed from Kiswahili, rather than directly from Arabic. For example, the word for religion in Luganda and Lunyoro-Lutoro is *dini* and the word for angel is *malaika*, both of which were transmitted from Arabic via Kiswahili. Once again, these are examples of cultural integration in Africa as a result of proximity to Islamized Africans rather than as a consequence of nearness to speakers of Arabic.

In Senegal, the Wolof language has also been "Islamized" rather than "Arabized," due to its heavy borrowing from Arabic, not as a result of interaction between languages but rather in response to religious conversion across generations. Today, the percentage of Muslims in Senegal is a little higher than that of Muslims in Egypt. Of course there are fewer Senegalese than Egyptians, but while Senegal is nearly 95% Muslim, Egypt is estimated as being over 90% Muslim – significantly below Senegal's percentage.

## **Demography and the Politics of Religion**

When the population of Africa's Muslims as a whole is added up, Africa emerges as the first continent in the world to have a Muslim plurality, if not an outright Muslim majority. Since census figures in Africa are either unreliable or non-existent, opinions differ as to whether Islam is the majority

religion or only the most numerous. The latter scenario concludes that its Muslims are more numerous than either practitioners of Christianity or of indigenous religion, but none of these religions add up to half of Africa's population. In either case, Africa emerges as the first continent to have attained so high a percentage of Muslims in its population.

In addition to being exceptional either as a demographic plurality or a demographic majority, Africa is also exceptional in the political relationship between Christians and Muslims. I mentioned earlier that Senegal is nearly 95% Muslim, and yet it accepted a Roman Catholic (Léopold Sédar Senghor) as its head of state for twenty years without any sectarian protest. And yet Senegal, ever since its independence, has been a relatively open society. In the course of those twenty years, Senghor was often denounced domestically either as a political stooge of the French or a cultural hypocrite who eulogized Afrocentricity while practicing Eurocentrism. But he was almost never denounced by his Muslim compatriots as a *kafir* (infidel).

He stepped down as president and retired voluntarily in 1980, to be succeeded by Abdou Diouf. In the succeeding twenty years, Senegal finally had a Muslim head of state; however, the first lady was a Roman Catholic. From 1960 to 1980 Senghor served as a black president with a white first lady; from 1980 to 2000 Diouf served as a Muslim president with a Christian first lady. Both the biracialism of Senghor's presidential palace and the ecumenicalism of Diouf's "first family" were powerful illustrations of Africa's potential exceptionalism.

Also unique has been Tanzania's rotating presidency. Its population is approximately half Muslim and half Christian. Without a constitutional requirement prescribing such a rotation, its informal ecumenical politics have nevertheless resulted in just such a rotation. Tanzania's first president, Julius K. Nyerere (a Roman Catholic) was succeeded by Ali Hassan Mwinyi (a Muslim) who completed his two terms relatively smoothly, Benjamin Mkapa (a Christian) who completed his ten years in office, and then Jakaya Kikwete (a Muslim), now in his first five-year term.

Nigeria has also experienced a *de facto* irregular but similar rotation. However, this has not always been by general elections and the ballot box: some Muslim presidents were elected and others led military coups. Most of its Christian presidents captured power militarily; Olusegun Obasanjo (a Christian) attained this office both through a military coup in the 1970s and, more recently, the ballot box.

Nigeria's political history has been less smooth than Tanzania's, and relations between its two religious communities have not always been peaceful. But such a rotation has no real equivalent anywhere else. Africa's

exceptionalism has included this basic ecumenical tendency, which has been above average when compared with other religions of the world.

## **Africa's Exceptionalism and Egypt's Uniqueness**

Another area of exceptionalism in the history of Islam is Egypt's special role. As the interplay between Egyptian history and Muslim history has already been covered by many experts, here I limit myself to its role as a special cradle and nursery of the three Abrahamic traditions, for it has played a protective role toward these religions from the earliest years. Subsequent Egyptian exceptionalism included its enormous role in the flowering of Islamic civilization and the expansion of Islamic knowledge. Cairo's al-Azhar University became a beacon of both sacred and secular scholarship. It was partly through Egypt that Africa became a major stimulus of the forces of globalization in history.

Where does Egypt fit into this saga of globalization? I mentioned elsewhere that the four engines of globalization in history have been religion, technology, economy, and empire. Let's focus on the engine of religion. Pharaoh Akhenaton is widely regarded by secular historians as the father of monotheism – and monotheism later became the most globalizing of all religious principles. Was he a *rasul* (messenger), a *nabi* (prophet), or neither? The Qur'an says that God sends a *rasul* to each *ummah* (10:47 and 16:36). Was Akhenaton a *rasul* to ancient Egypt? Given that Moses was born in Egypt, that land can be considered the cradle of Judaism even if one does not accept the thesis that Moses was an Egyptian – a thesis made famous by Sigmund Freud's theories about Jewish identity. Judaism became another monotheistic tradition born in Egypt.

If Egypt was the country from which Moses later fled, it subsequently became the country to which the infant Jesus and his family later fled while seeking asylum from Herod's deadly machinations. According to the Bible, "the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him"" (Matthew 2:13-23). The story's underlying logic is that without asylum in Egypt there would have been no Christianity – for the infant Jesus would have been "crucified" in the cradle. Was Egypt therefore the savior of Christianity?

If Egypt was the birthplace of historical monotheism, the birthplace of Moses, and the place of asylum for the infant Jesus, what is its historic destiny for Islam? Egypt was the site of the first grand clash between Christian

and Muslim power. The seventh-century Arab invasion tore Egypt away from the Byzantine Empire. Some would argue that this was the first blow of a process that culminated in the fall of Constantinople to Muslims in 1453. The triumphant Turks went on to inaugurate the Ottoman Empire.

The Arab conquest of Egypt also fertilized the flowering of an Islamic civilization on Egyptian soil, one of whose institutions is al-Azhar University, a center of learning that has lasted for a thousand years. Can we describe al-Azhar as the first global university – attracting, as it does, students from all corners of the Muslim world?

Earlier, I referred to technology as another engine of globalization across time. Were ancient Egyptians the first to use technology for grand constructions of eternal durability? Thousands of years before the Soviets built the Aswan dam, the great Pyramids were built to link the living with the dead. Ancient Egypt was arguably among the first grand civilizations. Technology and empire were linked in anticipation of new worlds to conquer. Much closer to our own day is the building of the Suez Canal. Hundreds of Egyptian workers died in this undertaking, making the canal a product not only of western expertise and capital, but also of Egyptian sweat and blood. The canal was a major contribution to globalization since it helped to connect Europe, Africa, and Asia in new ways. But it was also a monument to technology and economy as engines of globalization.

By the 1950s Gamal Abdul Nasser (r. 1953-70) saw Egypt as a center of three circles: Arab, Islamic, and African (a triad of cultures). Egypt has indeed become a bridge across three continents – Africa, Asia, and Europe (a triad of continents). In one way or another, Egypt has nursed four different traditions of monotheism (Akhenaton, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – a monotheistic quadrangle).

## **Africa's Exceptionalism and Ethiopia's Uniqueness**

I have dealt with Islam in the context of Afro-Arab relations and Afro-Christian relations. Let's now turn to Ethiopia in the context of Afro-Islamic relations.

Ethiopia emerges as both adversary and ally to Islam. The Qur'an refers to the *ashab al-fil* (People of the Elephant) who attacked Makkah before Islam. Were these people Ethiopians who had crossed the Red Sea with an army that included elephants? Allah wreaked havoc on the invaders and saved Makkah from them. Some Qur'anic scholars have suggested that

Allah visited pestilence on the invaders and scattered them in panic: “Have you not seen what your Lord did to the People of the Elephant?”

It looks as if Ethiopia was an adversary of pre-Islamic Arabia. However, when the early Muslims were persecuted, Prophet Muhammad encouraged some of them to seek asylum in Christian Ethiopia. One of these refugees, Uthman ibn Affan, would become the third caliph and be credited with ensuring that there was only one authorized and authenticated version of the Qur’an. Nascent Islam was partly saved by securing this asylum, and the Qur’an’s authenticity was saved by the man who was himself protected by Ethiopia. And yet today Ethiopia’s population is half Muslim and half Christian.

Over the centuries Ethiopians have believed that their emperors were descended from King Solomon, whom all Muslims consider the greatest of all ancient world rulers as well as a prophet of God. Ethiopians also claim that their emperors were descended from the Queen of Sheba, whom Solomon impregnated during her visit to his court. Islamic legends regard her as an Arab from Yemen. Ethiopians believe that Solomon entrusted the Ark of the Covenant to the Royal House of Ethiopia. Islamic legends credit Solomon with inventing the Arabic alphabet. As we see, Islamic and Ethiopian legends converge and diverge.

The greatest Muslim ruler of “Ethiopia” was Ahmad Gran, who controlled almost a third of Abyssinia in the sixteenth century. The earliest “Ethiopian” Muslim was Bilal, one of the Prophet’s closest disciples. Let’s examine this figure more closely. Bilal ibn Rabah, the earliest recorded Black African Muslim, joined Islam during the Prophet’s lifetime. Enslaved by non-Muslim Arabs, he nevertheless became fascinated with Islam. According to some accounts, Abu Bakr bought Bilal from his non-Muslim owner in order to emancipate him. Bilal eventually became one of the Prophet’s most trusted disciples. It is not clear whether he was captured in Ethiopia or was born a slave in Arabia.

When Muhammad and his ten thousand soldiers conquered Makkah without a “shot being fired” or a sword being drawn, he granted immediate amnesty to all Makkans who remained in their homes, under the roof of Abu Sufyan (Islam’s enemy just the day before), or sought asylum in the Ka’bah and its sacred territory, newly liberated for Islam as Muhammad was returning home.

The Black man Bilal became the first muezzin of the newly Islamized Ka’bah. With his powerful voice, he summoned believers back to the shrine that (according to Islam) Abraham had built centuries ago. With that simple

act, he became a link between the past, the present, and the future of Islam. Since Abraham was unanimously accepted by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as a joint founding father, Bilal's call to prayer echoed the monotheistic aspirations of all three Abrahamic religions across the centuries.

Bilal became deeply involved in Islam's unfolding history. In addition to serving as a muezzin, he also served as a preacher in peacetime and sometimes as a warrior when Islam was at war.

In his notorious *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie created a Bilal-like Black character as a disciple of the Prophet (derisively called "Mahound"). Rushdie claims that just as "Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn, likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener bearing the Devil's synonym: Mahound."<sup>1</sup> "That's him. Mahound the businessman, climbing his hot mountain in the Hijaz. The mirage of a city shines below him in the sun."<sup>2</sup>

Rushdie also turns his attention to Bilal – probably the first Black Muslim in history – informing us that the Prophet had seen him being punished for believing in one God. This was like Kunta Kinte being whipped to give up his African name ("Toby" vs. "Kunta Kinte"). Bilal was asked outside the pagan Temple of Lat to enumerate the Gods:

"One" he answered in that huge musical voice. *Blasphemy, Punishable by death.* They stretched him out in the fairground with a boulder on his chest. How many did you say? One, he repeated one. A second boulder was added to the first. One on one. Mahound paid his owner a large price and set him free.<sup>3</sup>

Bilal, the first great voice of Islam, represents the beginning of a black vocal tradition in world history – from Bilal to Paul Robeson and beyond. Black vocal power in world history began with the Ethiopian, Seyyidna Bilal.

Rushdie seems to give Bilal credit for his uncompromising monotheism – allegedly more uncompromising than even Prophet Mahound himself. After all, according to Rushdie, Mahound temporarily accepted a pagan trinity (three pre-Islamic goddesses) below the Supreme God. Bilal was dismayed and thus exclaimed: "God cannot be four."<sup>4</sup> Mahound later reneged on his compromise – regarding these verses as satanic. Rushdie does not give either Bilal or Islam explicit credit for being a multi-racial religion from so early a stage. Bilal set the grand precedent of Islamic multi-racialism – fourteen centuries before President Jimmy Carter tried to persuade his own church in Georgia to go multi-racial. Rushdie cannot resist hurling certain



epithets against Bilal. He makes another character think of his as “scum ... the slave Bilal, the one Mahound freed, an enormous black monster, this one with a voice to match his size.”<sup>5</sup>

In this novel, Baal is presented as a poet and a satirist. Probably Rushdie sees himself in the character Baal (not to be confused with Bilal!). And what does the poet Baal say to the Black man Bilal? “If Mahound’s ideas were worth anything, do you think they’d be popular with trash like you?”<sup>6</sup> Bilal reacts, but the Persian Salman restrains him. Salman says to the Black man: “We should be honoured that the mighty Baal has chosen to attack us,” he smiles, and Bilal relaxes, subsides.<sup>7</sup>

Rushdie gives Bilal a reincarnation from a historical Ethiopian to a Black American convert to Islam. This time Bilal is called Bilal X – like Malcolm X. Bilal X seems to follow the leadership of a Shi`i imam in rebellion against a reincarnation of the Prophet’s wife Ayesha – this time Empress Ayesha. Bilal X has the same old vocal power of the original Bilal. Under the influence of the imam, the Black American not only wants to rewrite history, but he has been taught to rebel against history – to regard it as “the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies – progress, science right. ...”

The Black American’s beautiful voice is mobilized against history. Bilal X declaims to the listening night (on the radio): “We will unmake history, and when it is unraveled, we will see Paradise standing there, in all its glory and light.”<sup>8</sup>

The imam has taught the Black American that “history is a deviation from the path, knowledge is a delusion. ...” Rushdie tells us:

The Imam chose Bilal for his [propaganda] task on account of the beauty of his voice, which in its previous incarnation succeeded in climbing Everest of the hit parade, not once but a dozen times, to the very top. The voice is rich and authoritative, a voice in the habit of being listened to; well nourished, highly trained, the voice of American confidence, a weapon of the West turned against its makers, whose might upholds the Empress and her tyranny.<sup>9</sup>

When Bilal X protested at such a description of his voice and insisted that it was unjust to equate him with Yankee imperialism, Rushdie puts the following words in the imam’s mouth:

Bilal, your suffering is ours as well. But to be raised in the house of power is to learn its ways, to soak them up, through that very skin that is the cause of your oppression. The habit of power, its timbre, its posture, its way of being with others. It is a disease, Bilal, infecting all who come too

near to it. If the powerful trample over you, you are infected by the soles of their feet.<sup>10</sup>

Is Rushdie making fun of African Americans generally, satirizing Afro-American Muslims, or ridiculing the significance of Malcolm X? Many Afro-American Muslims regard Islam as one route back toward re-Africanization and therefore a point of return to *Roots*. Rushdie chooses to disrespect this historical link between the emergence of Islam and the origins of the African diaspora. He misses the legendary relationship between the uniqueness of Ethiopia and the exceptionalism of African Islam. Bilal, a diaspora African, is buried in Damascus.

## Conclusion

When the Arabs conquered Egypt, they inaugurated two momentous historical processes in Africa: Islamization (the spread of Islam) and Arabization (the expansion of Arabic). Over the centuries North Africans became overwhelmingly Muslim and native Arabic-speakers.

Below the Sahara, Islam expanded much more widely than Arabic. In time Africa became differentiated between “Arab Africa” and “Black Africa.” What differentiated the two regions was less skin color than Arabic as a language and a culture. Quite inadvertently Arabic became continentally divisive, while Islam became a bond and shared culture between millions in North Africa and even more millions of Muslims south of the Sahara. At least superficially, Arabic became a divisive force while Islam became culturally integrative between Black and non-Black Africa.

In addition, Islam in sub-Saharan Africa helped spread Arabic words and phrases, not to mention the Arabic alphabet, without necessarily spreading the language itself. Languages like Kiswahili and Hausa borrowed Arabic loan words extensively and, historically, utilized the Arabic alphabet. These African languages, in turn, shared some of their Arabic loan words with neighboring languages in their subregions. Paradoxically, one of Islam’s unifying roles in sub-Saharan Africa has been the dissemination of Arabic expressions and sometimes the stimulation of whole new dialects of indigenous languages.<sup>11</sup> There is also the special case of Somali, which has been partially Arabized both by Islam and by proximity to the native Arabic-speakers in southern and western Arabia. While Kiswahili got its Arabic words because of Islamic influence, Somali was penetrated by Arabic both directly (language to language) and indirectly (Islamic culture).

We have mentioned Egypt's special role in the origins of Judaism and Christianity as well as its much larger role as a nursery of Islamic civilization – after all, al-Azhar University has celebrated a thousand years of history. Ethiopia is where nascent Islam first arrived in sub-Saharan Africa, in the form of Muslims seeking asylum. Ethiopia produced Bilal, the first great Black African Muslim, the most fascinating of all muezzins, and a person who continues to be a hero to diaspora Africans from Harlem to Basra. Bilal has also commanded the attention of Islamophobic writers like Rushdie.

Today, Africa may have a plurality of Muslims if not an outright majority. Is Africa becoming the first continent to have a Muslim-majority population? In terms of global political influence, African Muslims may be relegated to a marginal role. But in terms of numerical and historical impact, Africa has been both the genesis of all Muslims as human beings as well as the nursery of Islamic culture at crucial stages of its evolution. In other words, Africa and Islam have engaged in reciprocal fertilization across the centuries.

## Endnotes

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 93.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 104.
4. Ibid., 107.
5. Ibid., 101.
6. Ibid., 104.
7. Ibid., 104.
8. Ibid., 210.
9. Ibid., 211.
10. Ibid.
11. Alamin M. Mazrui, *Language, Identity and Translation in the Swahili Experience: Between the Bible and the Qur'an*, manuscript (2009).

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