



Research Centre for Islamic  
History, Art and Culture



National Awqaf Foundation  
of South Africa



University of Johannesburg

*Proceedings of the International Symposium on*

# **ISLAMIC CIVILISATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Johannesburg, South Africa

1-3 September 2006

Istanbul  
2009

## **Similarities and Differences in the Spread of Islam: East and South Africa Compared**

*Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova\**

### **1. Situating the Problems and Issues of the Study of Islam in Africa**

The study of Islam in Southern Africa reveals a great deal of complexity and a plural character of Islamic development within this region. Complexity in conversion patterns and processes can be distinguished everywhere in Africa or in sub-Saharan Africa leading to a variety of religious and cultural syntheses. Like Christianity, Islam in Africa can be seen as an African religion that had originated outside the continent but entered the African continent during the earliest days of its existence, spread and has then in the course of time been adapted in many different ways to suit many different contexts. The processes of Islamic conversion were incorporated within the historical process of the development of African societies. Conversion models or patterns can be likened to a mosaic of elements of different religious faiths, traditional African religions, Islam and Christianity, all possibly at some time or other co-existing and sometimes intermixing, Islam meshing with pre-existing religions in sub-Saharan Africa in many different ways rather than necessarily confronting them. As Ray put it, "it would be misleading to speak of the process of Islamisation as a process of "conversion" from African belief to orthodox Islamic religion. A gradual blending took place between African and Islamic elements, making a

---

\* [viera.vilhanova@savba.sk](mailto:viera.vilhanova@savba.sk), [vilhanova@stonline.sk](mailto:vilhanova@stonline.sk)

new configuration which assumed different forms in different areas.”<sup>1</sup> Conversion to Islam on the African continent can be viewed as a phased process involving different stages of religious change and assimilation of older religious elements within the process. Different authors have identified and proposed different conversion models or patterns allowing for gradual religious change and assimilation of older religious elements within the process.<sup>2</sup>

In the African context, Islamisation refers to both religious change and accompanying cultural change, allowing, once the core requirements of the faith were fulfilled, numerous local interpretations of Islam. The introduction of Islam carried many changes within religious belief and concomitant changes in the material sphere, economy, society and politics. For quite some time a debate has been around over the nature of African Islam. Africa has been often viewed as passive, simply receiving Islam, not as a contributing source, as an active ingredient in the construction of Islam.<sup>3</sup> The persistent tendency in the

---

<sup>1</sup> B.C. Ray, *African Religions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), p.184. Quoted also by Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Dominant models that have been proposed to explain conversion to Islam (and/or Christianity) are those by J.S. Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (London: Longman, 1968), p.43, who used the terms *germination*, *crisis* and *reorientation*. H. J. Fisher also proposed three stages of conversion to Islam in Africa, *quarantine* (Islam is confined to a specific group, usually traders), *mixing*, and *a phase of reform*. See H. J. Fisher, “Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa”, *Africa*, 43, 1973, pp.27-40, also his “The Juggernaut’s Apologia: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa,” *Africa*, vol. 55, no. 2, 1985, pp.153-173. Well-known and often used and quoted is Robin Horton’s model, dealing, however, with the spread of Christianity in Africa, see Robin Horton, “African Conversion,” *Africa*, vol. 41, 171, pp. 85 –108, and “*On the Rationality of Conversion*,” *Africa*, vol. 45, 1975, pp.219-235. According to Timothy Insoll, the model of conversion to Islam in an area of the Indian subcontinent, Bengal, proposed by Eaton, *inclusion*, *identification*, *displacement*, “is best suited to some of the African data”, Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, pp. 29-30. Cf. with R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Sundkler also suggests a three-phased model, albeit for the spread of Christianity in Africa, *attraction*, *reaction* and *response*.

<sup>3</sup> Some authors, e.g. J. S. Trimingham in his numerous works on Islam, perceived Africa as marginal to the Islamic world. See e.g. his *Islam in West Africa*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); *A History of Islam in West Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, *Islam in East Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, or *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (London: Longman, 1968). In the latter work he commented, “the adoption of Islam brought little change in the capacity of

authoritative literature to perceive Africa as being outside of normative Islam and marginal to the Islamic world has been criticized by many students of Islam in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to other parts of Africa that have been well researched and documented, the history of Islam in South Africa has not been until recently well studied. The racial preoccupation formerly evident in South African historiography and society was reflected in much of the historical research and writing on Islam in South Africa and the South African Muslim community. It largely focused on the Cape Muslim community, on people earlier offensively called Cape Coloureds or Cape Malays, and did not pay much attention to other Muslims in South Africa, e.g. Indians or African converts, who have been until now largely neglected.

The spread of Islam in East and South Africa has been a long drawn process appearing at first sight to deny the existence of any element of similarity. Islam in East and South Africa can be described as a history of several phases and types of Islam, revealing over the centuries plurality of manifestations of Islamization. Complexity is again evident both in the reasons that can be suggested to explain why some people converted to Islam and in the models that can be advanced to explain this phenomenon. The aim of this contribution is not to survey in a detail the course of Islam across Southern Africa, from Uganda and the East African coast down to the Cape, which would be like peering into a kaleidoscope, but rather to study the processes of conversion to Islam and attempt to outline some patterns in the process of the expansion of Islam across this vast region, to reconstruct the dynamics of religious conversion, the diverse social, political and economic effects of conversion to Islam upon the peoples of the southern part of the African continent, and assess some, if any, similarities and differences in the spread of Islam.

---

Africans to control the conditions of their existence for they were in touch but in a peripheral way with the developed civilizations of other Islamic peoples." See J. S. Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa*, pp. 1-2. Quoted also by Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, pp. 7-12, also E.S. Ross, "Africa in Islam: What the Afrocentric Perspective Can Contribute to the Study of Islam," *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies*, 2003.

## 2. The Course of Islam in East and Central Africa

Islam came to the East African coast quite early in the Islamic era through trade and economic migration on dhows with the ocean monsoons around which the Indian ocean trade had been organised as far back as historical knowledge goes. The agents of Islam were traders who settled on the East African coast where they mingled with local people and helped to build up coastal cities and the unique Swahili language and civilisation.<sup>5</sup> The anciently established Swahili Islamic culture remained dominant only along a narrow coastal strip. Though trade contacts seem to have existed between some areas of southern and east-central Africa and the coast from at least the end of the first millenium, as attested by archaeological evidence, this trade was not accompanied by religious influence.<sup>6</sup> One reason may have been that the traders themselves did not travel into the interior until much later. In inland regions there is no archeological evidence of Muslim physical presence<sup>7</sup> and thus the required personal contact, seen to be of such importance in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, was lacking. The Swahili-speaking Muslim traders made little attempt to settle permanently inland, except in the area along the Zambezi river where they had settled in Tete, Sena, and Sofala on the coast, and penetrated as far inland as Great Zimbabwe to have direct access to the gold-producing areas of the Zambezi.<sup>8</sup> In the course of time Islam may have spread slowly as a by-product of trade and market contacts around scattered inland settlements established for commercial reasons. However, despite the existence of trade between the lower reaches of the East African Swahili coast and the interior of southern Africa, the spread of Islam in the region was slow and conversion to Islam restricted. Local conversions to Islam remained scarce and the presence of traders was not accompanied by a significant spread of Islam.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Middleton, *The World of Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization*, (London, 1992); Gervase Mathew, "The East African Coast until the Coming of the Portuguese," in *History of East Africa*, ed.s, Ronald Oliver and Gervase Mathew, vol. I., (Oxford, 1963), pp. 94-128, J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in East Africa*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* p.395.

<sup>7</sup> Insoll, p. 374.

<sup>8</sup> Edmond A. Alpers, "East Central Africa," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels. (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000), pp. 303-305.

In the northern part of the region Islam seems to have made no headway into the interior in spite of the economic ties of some African peoples with the Kilwa and Mozambique coasts since perhaps the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and the process of Islamic expansion up-country, away from the long Islamized towns of the East African coast, only began in the nineteenth-century.<sup>9</sup>

Under the stimulus of the nineteenth-century demand for ivory, the Arabs and Swahili penetrated the interior of East and Central Africa along a network of caravan routes pioneered by some African peoples, such as the Yao and the Nyamwezi, who had been for generations acting as middlemen and traders, and manning caravans from the coast deep into the interior. As on the coast in the past, Islam in the interior of East and Central Africa advanced slowly and gradually through trading contacts with some African peoples and was spread by ordinary adherents, Swahili-speaking merchants, who penetrated the interior in search of ivory and slaves. Through its commercial expansion in the nineteenth century Islam had soon its representatives scattered everywhere in East and Central Africa. We should not, however, overestimate the extent of Islamic penetration. Outside certain areas, in this early period Islam in East and Central Africa made relatively little advance. In the interior of East and Central Africa, proselytisation was to a large extent incidental, a by-product of trade. The primary interest of Muslim traders was mercantile, not proselytisation. The Arabs and Swahili entered the East African interior in search of ivory and slaves and rather than new converts to their religion or political power they sought wealth and prosperity. For this reason conversion to Islam was restricted. Along the trade routes, way stations turned into flourishing settlements where the Arab and Swahili traders could and did live comfortably. It seems that the

---

<sup>9</sup> Edward A. Alpers, "Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: the Matrilineal Peoples of the Southern Interior", in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, ed. T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); H. Alan and C. Cairns, *Prelude to Imperialism. British Reactions to Central African Society, 1840-1890* (London: Routledge&Kegan Paul, 1965), pp.132-139; Norman R.Bennett, "The Arab Impact," in *Zamani, a Survey of East African History*, ed. B. A. Ogot (Nairobi: E. A. P. H., Longman Kenya, 1973), pp. 210-228; Edward A. Alpers, "The Nineteenth Century: Prelude to Colonialism," in *Zamani, A Survey of East African History*, ed. B. A. Ogot (Nairobi: E.A.P.H., Longman Kenya, 1973), pp. 229-248.

prosperity of Arab and Swahili traders based on the closely integrated trade in ivory and slaves muted their religious zeal.<sup>10</sup>

Many peoples in East and Central Africa became exposed to Islam both through extensive contacts with the coast and the presence of small numbers of Muslim merchants. In some areas individuals or whole groups converted to Islam, in other areas conversions were limited or non-existent and the effects of Islam and the numbers of conversions were negligible. Some East African peoples benefited from the trade, adopted the customs of the coast and Kiswahili, but they did not convert to Islam in any substantial numbers. It is possible to talk of Swahilisation without Islamisation. A case in point is the Nyamwezi.<sup>11</sup> The coastal influence was most visible in the use of cloth which was rapidly replacing barkcloth, the adoption of the gown or garments and many other goods, including firearms, in cultivating some vegetables, fruits and crops, wheat and rice, in building square houses and in introducing new skills and crafts. Islam was initially gaining new adherents by a combination of religious ideas and attractions of Islamic culture and civilisation, Islamic way of life and dress, and the introduction of new languages Kiswahili and Arabic, and of the Arabic script. Reading and writing was no doubt one of the most important skills introduced by the Arab and Swahili traders. The Arab and Swahili traders propagated their religion especially in the cases when through proselytisation and by conversion of an influential chief or ruler they could increase their trade. Many of the processes of Islamisation in East and Central Africa were similar to those described for other areas of the African continent much earlier. The types of the process of Islamisation that have been repeatedly seen and described across sub-Saharan Africa can be exemplified by the initial appeal of Islam seen in the power of Arabic literacy,<sup>12</sup> the prestige and honour associated with Islam in terms of increasing power and position of converts in the social hierarchy and

---

<sup>10</sup> There was a basic contradiction between converting Africans and selling them as slaves. Islam forbids Muslims to enslave co-religionists, to convert too many Africans to Islam would have diminished the number of those they were permitted to enslave.

<sup>11</sup> Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 384.

<sup>12</sup> Later on literacy in some African languages written in the Arabic script adapted to suit them, so-called Ajami.

the top-down process of conversion. The first agents of conversion were traders, later on missionaries and holy men.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most significant areas of Islamic penetration in East and Central Africa was the southern interior, including southern Tanzania, northern Mozambique and southern Malawi and most of what we know about the process of Islamisation in this region pertains to the Yao, who through their trading contacts with the Swahili coast became strong adherents of Islam. The trade between the Yao and the coast in commodities such as tobacco and skins, which were exchanged for salt, cloth and beads, was established by the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> Kilwa was an important trade partner. A major incentive for Yao trade with the coast was prestige and honour, prestige in terms of political importance and honour obtained from owning rare goods sourced from the coast. Trade contacts led to an enlargement of scale and the creation of the territorial chiefdoms based on trade links and military strength. Conversion to Islam did not take place on any scale for nearly two hundred years after Yao contacts with the coast had been established. It was not until the 1870s that the first conversions began. Prior to this, the Yao chiefs made use of Muslim scribes and advisers and these chiefs were the first to convert to Islam. In about 1870 the Yao chief Makanjila III had adopted Islam, being the first chiefly convert, and by the close of the nineteenth century Yaos went over to Islam in substantial numbers.<sup>15</sup> In Unyanyembe some members of the ruling aristocracy were reported to have adopted Islam and to be observing the Ramadan fast by the 1880s. According to various sources, Muslim traders made some efforts to convert some of the principal Wanyamwezi chiefs in anticipation of establishing better trade connections and these chiefs observed some but not all of the Islamic rituals, but on the whole at that time in Unyamwezi Islam secured little following. However, some powerful African chiefs and rulers, such as the above-mentioned Yao chief Makanjila III Banali, the Chagga chief Madara or kabaka

---

<sup>13</sup> Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p.395, Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, (ed.s), *The History of Islam in Africa*, (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Edward A. Alpers, "Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: the Matrilineal Peoples of the Southern Interior," op. cit., pp.172-201. Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, op. cit, p. 393.

<sup>15</sup> Alpers, op. cit.; Insoll, op. cit., p. 394.

Mutesa of Buganda, were initiated into Islam, learned Arabic and Kiswahili, mastered Arabic script and became capable writers of these two languages.<sup>16</sup>

A three-phase model has been proposed to explain Yao conversion to Islam. A phase of visibility – in dress, food regulations and prayers, a second phase of mixing and a third phase of consolidation.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most significant areas of Islamic penetration in East and Central Africa was the lacustrine area, namely the kingdom of Buganda, where Islam secured a strong foothold. At the time of the visit of the famous traveller and explorer Henry Morton Stanley in the country in 1875, the initial process of Islamisation in Buganda reached a climax; Islam's position was strong and after the arrival of Christianity into the country became its formidable rival. The kingdom of Buganda and Uganda no doubt belongs to the best documented African countries, apart from official and missionary archival sources, there is also a very rich corpus of historical writings written by Baganda Muslim and Christian converts, many of them eyewitnesses and active participants in the events.<sup>18</sup> According to all available sources, Islam came to be known in Buganda

---

<sup>16</sup> Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova, "Crescent or Cross? Islam and Christian Missions in Nineteenth-Century East and Central Africa," in *Mission und Gewalt, Der Umgang christlicher Missionen mit Gewalt und die Ausbreitung des Christentums in Afrika und Asien in der Zeit von 1792 bis 1918/19*, ed. Ulrich Van der Heyden and Holger Becher (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), pp. 79-95.

<sup>17</sup> Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 394.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Apolo Kagwa, *Ekitabo Kya Basekabaka be Buganda* (The Kings of Buganda), (London and Kampala, 1901). Sir Apolo Kagwa, *The Kings of Buganda*, (Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Kampala: East African Publishing House, 1971), translated and edited by M. S. M. Kiwanuka and published as the first volume in a new series of historical texts of Eastern and Central Africa. The part of *Basekabaka* covering the colonial period was, however, skipped from this publication.

J. K. Miti, *Ebyafayo bya Buganda (A Short History of Buganda)*, Bunyoro, Busoga, Ankole and Toro, unpublished typescript, 1938. Both in Luganda and English, available in Makerere University Library.

Hamu Mukasa, *Simudda Nyuma* (Go Forward). 3 vols., vol. I. subtitled "Ebiro by Mutesa" (*The Reign of Mutesa*), London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938; vol. II.: *Ebya Mwanga (That of Mwanga)*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1942; vol. III., 1964; the manuscript of the third volume had been allegedly sent to Bishop Willis in England, who was to have seen it through publication, was lost. A carbon copy was discovered by Dr. John

under kabaka Mutesa`s father Suna (1825-1856) several decades before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>19</sup> Although there were indirect commercial contacts between the kingdom of Buganda and the East African coast long before Kabaka Suna`s reign, there are no indications of Islamic influence at that period.<sup>20</sup> Some direct contacts with Muslim merchants trading in ivory and slaves were initially established and maintained in the 1840s. Arab and Swahili traders who brought Islam into the kingdom of Buganda had arrived in the kingdom of Karagwe in the second quarter of the nineteenth century via the southern, i.e. Bagamoyo - Tabora - Karagwe route, then went north around the western shore of Lake Victoria and during the reign of Kabaka Suna also visited Buganda. From the available sources it is impossible to ascertain the exact date of the arrival of the first Arab and Swahili traders into the kingdom or their number.<sup>21</sup> However, most of the sources consulted testify that the pre-existing commerce with the south, dating from the end of the eighteenth century, by roughly 1840s stimulated Zanzibari traders to open up their sphere of interests as far as

---

Rowe in the house of the late Hamu Mukasa. Hamu Mukasa, "Some Notes on the Reign of Mutesa," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1934, pp. 60-70 (both in Luganda and English).

Shaykh Haji A.M.Sekimwanya, *Ebyafayo Ebitonotono Kudini Ye Kiyisiramu Okuyingira mu Buganda* (A Short History of Islam), Kampala: Baganda C. S. Press, 1947. Rev. B. M. Zimbe, *Buganda ne Kabaka* (Buganda and Kabaka), (Mengo: Gambuze Press, 1939).

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed bin Ibrahim is said to have taught Suna about Islam and Suna is said to have learned several chapters of the Qu`ran by heart. See David C.Sperling, *The Coastal Hinterland and Interior of East Africa*, p. 21. According to Oded, manuscript pages from the Qu`ran were discovered in Suna`s house after his death, see Arye Oded, *Islam in Uganda: Islamisation through a Centralized State in Pre-Colonial Africa*, (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 49-51.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Apolo Kaggwa in his well-known book (Basekabaka be Buganda, p.88) claims that some trade goods from the coast such as cotton cloth, copper wires, cowrie shells, reached Buganda and were used during the reign of kabaka Ssemakokiro which died 1794. See also Abdu B. Kasozi, *The Spread of Islam in Uganda*, (Nairobi, Oxford University Press in Association with the Islamic African Centre, Khartoum, 1986); *The Penetration of Islam into Buganda, 1844 to 1875*, pp.13-32, also Abdu B.Kasozi, *The Spread of Islam in Uganda*, polyc. 1970, 45 pp., map.

<sup>21</sup> Most Luganda sources like Ham Mukasa, Apolo Kaggwa, Ggomotoka, Ssekimwanyi or Ali Kkulumba put the date in or shortly after 1850. Sir John Gray preferred an earlier date, 1844. According to him, the first Arab to reach Buganda was a Shaykh Ahmed bin Ibrahim, a Wahhabi. See Sir John M.Gray, "Shaykh Ahmed bin Ibrahim, the first Arab to reach Buganda", *The Uganda Journal*, vol. XI, no.1, 1947, pp. 80-97. According to Oded, Gray`s claim that Ahmed bin Ibrahim reached Buganda in 1844 is not supported by substantial evidence.

Buganda. Kabaka of Buganda Suna, who ruled at that time, attempted to cultivate his commercial relations with the Arab and Swahili traders coming from Tabora. The neighbouring kingdom of Bunyoro that enjoyed the major share of the iron trade around the shores of the Lake Kyoga, experienced a notable revival under Omukama Kamurasi and was trading not just with the Zanzibaris to the south, but unlike Buganda with the Khartoumers as well. Ivory and slaves were the main items of export, and among the imports there was a steadily rising hunger for guns, eagerly demanded not only by ivory hunters but also by the two rulers and their chiefs.

The northern part of the present day Uganda, Bunyoro and Acholi-Lango area, had contact with Islam from the north since perhaps as early as 1850, but Islamic impact on Buganda from Sudan and Egypt was limited. Zanzibar and the East coast were the main centres of Islamic influence. As on the coast in the past, Islam in the interior of East and Central Africa tended to spread slowly and gradually. The process of Islamisation of the kingdom of Buganda cannot be seen as a straightforward process of a "conversion" from one religion to another, from the ancient Kiganda religion to orthodox Islamic religion, or an abrupt rejection of the old religion and the adoption of the new one. Kabaka Suna's son and successor Mutesa (1856-1884) converted to Islam, yet continued to practise traditional Kiganda religion as well, or returned to it at the time of greatest afflictions and crises. In Buganda it is possible to see what has been defined as an "inclusion" phase, "inclusion" of the older traditional beliefs, practices and rituals with the new, Islam.<sup>22</sup> As in other regions of East and Central Africa, in Buganda Islam was initially gaining new adherents mainly by the attractions of Islamic culture and civilisation. During the reign of kabaka Mutesa, adherence to Islam was mainly expressed by the adoption of new skills and innovations and by imitating the traders' ceremonials.

An important aspect in the process of Islamisation during this early period was the attitude of toleration and the spirit of compromise and flexibility assumed by Muslim traders who placed modest demands on new adherents to Islam. Islam was propagated by ordinary adherents, Arab and Swahili traders present in Buganda, not Muslim scholars, and allowed gradations in knowledge and

---

<sup>22</sup> Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 389.

practice. In Buganda the relationship between Baganda and Muslim traders was negotiated on Baganda terms, and was beneficial, primarily to the kabaka and his court, as a source of trade goods, new ideas and technologies. In this early period, conversion to Islam was expressed mainly by adopting some external symbols and outer forms of worship, observing some basic rituals, and by imitating Muslim traders' manners and customs. Among basic outward forms of worship and exterior manifestations of the cult were daily prayers, the fast of Ramadan and the consumption of lawful meat, which had to be observed.<sup>23</sup> A combination of spiritual and secular factors expressed in the introduction of many innovations and new skills played a vital role in the spread of Islamic faith in Buganda and incidentally prepared the ground for later missionary activities and the advance of Christianity. Islam reached Buganda from two different corners, an accommodating version of Islam was first introduced into Buganda by Swahili-speaking merchants from the East African coast, and later on, in the 1870s, a stricter version of Islam was brought by Sudanese teachers from Khartoum.<sup>24</sup> The alterations of life habits demanded by the first version of Islam were not radical.<sup>25</sup> The first crisis erupted after the arrival of Muslim teachers from the North, who criticised the Baganda way of building mosques and some others practices.<sup>26</sup> Islam was very accommodating to local African traditions and culture, but the advantages acquired by Muslim converts were considerable. These features, coupled with Islam's permission of polygamy, have been often claimed in explaining the expansion and diffusion of Islam in Africa. It would also be possible to draw an inspiration from the well known scholar and expert

---

<sup>23</sup> A. B. K. Kasozi, "The Impact of Islam on Ganda Culture 1844-1894," *Journal of Religion in Africa, Religion en Afrique*, vol. XII, no. 2 (1981), 127-135.

<sup>24</sup> Hamu Mukasa, *Simudda Nyuma*, pp.18-19; Ssekimwany, *Ebyafayo*, pp. 1-5; Abdu Kasozi, Abdu, *The Spread of Islam in Uganda*, pp. 34-36, 53.

<sup>25</sup> The only exception being circumcision. The Baganda abhor the mutilation of their bodies.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Twaddle wrote: "This brought division among Ganda Muslims, when one northern *shaykh* sharply criticized mosques which were built facing westwards. When this stricter type of Islamic teaching also took root among palace pages, it brought the first known persecution of Muslim personnel for following their religion in Buganda". See Michael Twaddle, *Kakungulu & the Creation of Uganda 1868-1928* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1993), p. 24. Cf. with A. Katumba and F.B.Welbourn, "Muslim Martyrs in Buganda," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 28 (1964), 151-163; Hamu Mukasa, *Simudda Nyuma* (London, 1938), vol. I, pp. 18-23.

on the religious history of Africa, Bengt Sundkler, and discern in the transition to the new religion and its adoption three components: attraction, reaction and response.<sup>27</sup> In the transition to Islam, it would be possible to discern attraction by Islamic culture and civilisation, reaction by the adoption of external symbols and outer forms of worship, and finally response by the adhesion and conversion to the new faith.

The effects of contacts with Muslim traders in Buganda were most visible in the introduction of new skills and crafts, in the cultivation of new crops, fruits and vegetables, such as wheat, rice, tomatoes, pomegranates, guava, onions, tomatoes and pawpaws, of spices, sugar, coffee, tobacco, soap, perfumes and woven grass-mat manufacture, in the use of cloth which was under the reign of kabaka Mutesa rapidly replacing barkcloth, the adoption of the gown or garments and many other goods, in the introduction of reading and writing in Arabic and Kiswahili, and changes in some royal rituals, namely in royal burial customs.<sup>28</sup>

The process of Islamisation of Buganda gained momentum during the reign of kabaka Suna's son Mutesa (1856-1884) who encouraged trade with Zanzibaris, especially after 1866. At about the same time he decided to adopt Islam, even though he refused to be circumcised, and continued to observe Ramadan for over ten years.<sup>29</sup> A by-product of the presence of Kiswahili-speaking coastal

---

<sup>27</sup> Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 575-576. Some authors claim that Islam in Buganda in this early period did not proceed beyond the first phase, whatever we would call it.

<sup>28</sup> The Kabaka's jawbone had to be removed during the mourning period, decorated, and placed separately in a jawbone shrine for worship. Arye Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, pp. 72 - 96, I. Z. Soghayroun, *The Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor in East Africa: The Role of the Zanzibari and Swahili Traders in the Spread of Islam in Uganda*, (Riyadh : Dar al-`Ulum, 1984), pp.145-9. Under the impact of Islam the practice was forbidden by kabaka Mutesa, Michael Twaddle, *Kakungulu & the Creation of Uganda 1868-1928*, p.25; Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, pp.389-390.

<sup>29</sup> Apolo Kagawa in his *Basekabaka* states that kabaka Mutesa began to fast during Ramadhan *sawm* for the first time at Nnakawa in 1867 and continued to observe Ramadhan for ten consecutive years. See Apolo Kagawa, *Basekabaka be Buganda*, pp. 124, 130. On the spread of Islam also see Hamu Mukasa, "Some Notes on the Reign of Mutesa," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1934), 60-70 (both in Luganda and English), Hamu Mukasa, "Simudda Byuma", op. cit., J. K. Miti, *Ebyafayo bya Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga*, 1938, unpublished typescript both in Luganda and English; Sir John Gray, "Mutesa of Buganda," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1934), 22-49.

merchants in Buganda was the diffusion of Kiswahili and literacy. Literacy attracted local people and enhanced the popularity of Islam. Though Muslim religious ideas made impact on the kabaka and the people of Buganda, reading and writing was no doubt one of the most important skills introduced by the Arabs and Swahili traders. Mutesa himself learnt to read and write Arabic and Kiswahili, adopted Arab dress and manners, started to read the Qu`ran and maintained diplomatic relations with the Sultan of Zanzibar. He was especially fond of Arabic poetry and could converse fluently in Arabic with European visitors, Charles Chaillé-Long in 1874, Emin Pasha in 1876 or the C.M.S. missionaries Felkin and O`Flaherty. Some of the pages, chiefs and dignitaries at court also became interested in the teachings of Islam and learnt to read and write. During the 1870s the knowledge of the Arabic script and of the Arabic and Swahili languages spread among the court elite. Literacy was inextricably connected with Islam and Christianity, both religions of the Book, because it enabled converts to read their Holy Books, the Qu`ran and the Bible. The concept of reading *okusoma* became a synonym for the adoption of a new religion Islam and later Christianity. The converts were called "readers." The court became islamised, mosques were built by chiefs and a number of future Christian converts who were young pages at this time, adopted Islam. Between 1867 and 1875, the impact of Islamisation began to be felt not only at the court but in the countryside as well and for a time Islam was proclaimed the state religion of Buganda and Islamic observance made compulsory throughout the kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

In the nineteenth-century East and Central Africa, Africans had a real choice between two world religions, Christianity and Islam. The arrival of Islam in the kingdom of Buganda had preceded the coming of Christianity and colonisation by several decades and for some time it looked that the religion of the Crescent might become the national religion of Buganda. The last decades of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Apart from the already quoted sources, such as Abdu B. Kasozi, *The Spread of Islam in Uganda, The Penetration of Islam into Buganda*, 1986, pp.13-32; Arye Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, 1974, Part One, pp. 1-142. White Fathers Archives (WFA), P 200/14, Noel, King, Abdu Kasozi, Arye Oded, *Islam and the Confluence of Religions in Uganda, 1840-1966* (Tallahassee, Florida, 1973), François Constantin, "L`islam en Ouganda," in *L`Ouganda Contemporain*, ed. Gérard Prunier and Bernard Calas, (Paris, 1994), pp. 209-220.

nineteenth century in the present-day Uganda were a very dramatic period, full of wars and atrocities. Buganda was won to Christianity amidst much turmoil and bitter struggle between the adherents of the two forms of Christianity, Protestant and Roman Catholic, and Islam for the dominant position in the kingdom. The process of Islamisation was slowed and even regressed after the arrival of missionaries and the position of the Muslim faction was seriously shattered by the victory of the Christian Baganda in the religio-political wars of 1888 and 1892 and by the introduction of the British administration. Historical research has covered the events in the greatest detail.

The first years of missionary presence in Buganda was a rather troubled and insecure period. The first party of missionaries of the Anglican Church Missionary Society arrived in Buganda on 30 June 1877, but due to many difficulties and misfortunes they did not start the work of evangelisation until the arrival in February 1879 of another group of the C.M.S missionaries, who were joined in only one week by Father Simeon Lourdel and Brother Damas of the Roman Catholic Society of Missionaries of Africa or White Fathers.<sup>31</sup> The twists and turns of the first four years of the rule of the new kabaka, Mutesa's son Mwanga, who succeeded to the throne after his father's death in 1884, led in 1885 and 1886 to the persecution of Christian "readers" and catechumens during which about a hundred of them were murdered<sup>32</sup> and culminated in 1888 in the open confrontation between the kabaka and the adherents of the two Christian denominations and Islam. Muslims with their numerical preponderance over

---

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Church Missionary Intelligencer for the respective years, 1877-1884, J.M. Mercui, *Les Origines de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs)*, (Algiers: Maison Carrée, 1929); J. Bouniol, ed., *The White Fathers and their Missions*, (London: Sands, 1929). On the relationship of the two Christian missions and the spread of Christianity, see respective entries in the Church Missionary Society Archives, G3/A6, for the opinion of the White Fathers there are many letters in WFA, C13 e.g. C13-9, C13-15, C13-1, C13-22, C13-27, see also *Chronique de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique*, no. 84, I. De 1879-1885.

<sup>32</sup> There is a very rich literature on the subject of Christian martyrs, e.g. J. F. Faupel, *African Holocaust*, (London, 1962), John A. Rowe, "The Purge of Christians at Mwanga's Court," *The Journal of African History*, vol. V, no. 1, 1964. There are many references on Uganda martyrs in the WFA in Rome, e.g. Lourdel to Superieur, 25.6.1886, C14-63/1, also Cassier C 15 Troubles de l'Ouganda 1886, C 15-4-10 Correspondance du Cardinal Lavigerie sur la situation en Ouganda en 1886. Martyrs de l'Ouganda. Lettres - Enquette. Canonical Inquiry of 29.6.1887, msc., 61 pages in Luganda and French, C15-8.

Christians during the coup of 1888 played a decisive role in the religio-political wars of 1888-1890. The overthrow and expulsion of Mwanga by the allied Christian and Muslim forces was a quick business, but within a month the alliance between Christian and Muslim chiefs was broken and the Christian converts with the missionaries were driven from the country. Muslims became the sole masters of Buganda, and a Muslim kabaka Kalema was placed on the throne. The ascendancy of Islam was shortlived. In February 1890 the joint forces of Christian refugees crushed the Muslim faction, Kalema with remnants of his army fled to Bunyoro and Mwanga re-entered his capital in triumph. The Christian triumph over the Muslims had been made possible by a combination of factors, the untimely death of the Muslim Kabaka Kalema who died of smallpox, and the timely intervention of Henry Stokes who provided weapons to Baganda Christians.<sup>33</sup> After the successful campaign to reconquer Buganda from the Muslims, the victorious Christian chiefs placed Mwanga on his throne and painstakingly divided all the offices of state evenly between Protestants and Catholics. Despite their victory over the Muslims, the situation in the country remained tricky for the two victorious Christian factions. Each of them was striving to gain the sole control of the political system and the Muslim faction, though temporarily beaten, was still dangerously hovering on the Buganda-Bunyoro border. December 1890 saw the arrival in Buganda of the representative of the Imperial British East Africa Company, Captain (later Lord) Lugard, charged with the task to establish the Company's administration in Buganda, conclude a treaty with its ruler and thus prepares the ground for the British Government one day to take over. Lugard managed to conclude a treaty with the most reluctant kabaka Mwanga and as soon as his position in the country was strengthened on the 31st of January 1891 by the arrival of reinforcements,<sup>34</sup> he felt confident to set out on an expedition to punish Baganda Muslims who were constantly raiding the northern border of Buganda as well as their ally omukama Kabarega without even considering the possibility of negotiating with them first. The expedition proved to be a great

---

<sup>33</sup> Sir John Gray, "The Year of the Three Kings of Buganda – Mwanga, Kiwewa, Kalema, 1888-1889," *The Uganda Journal*, vol. XIV, no. 1, pp.15-53; M. S. M. Semakula Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda, From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*, (London, 1971), pp.192-219, 263.

<sup>34</sup> Captain Williams as his 2nd in command with 75 Sudanese, 100 Swahilis and a second Maxim gun.

success. Lugard waged war against the Muslims and defeated them in May 1891. Later on, however, he used the Muslim faction as an important political card in his negotiations with two rival Christian factions to the extent that he even threatened to put a Muslim kabaka on the throne. In 1892 he signed an agreement with the Muslims and Prince Nuhu Mbogo, a son of Suna and Mutesa's brother, was recognised as their leader.<sup>35</sup> The intervention of Captain Lugard in the war of Mengo of 1892 on behalf of the Protestant faction ensured its victory and the British policy of bolstering Protestant Baganda heightened in the years to come the incipient divisions between the two Christian factions and secured numerically fewer Protestant Baganda the chief place in the administration of the kingdom.<sup>36</sup> In these years society in Buganda came to be classified, in descending order of importance, into Protestant, Catholic and Muslim groups. In 1893 Muslim Baganda were once again defeated and severely punished.<sup>37</sup> It is significant that during the civil war of 1892 and in the anti-British rebellion of 1897-1899, substantial support for kabaka Mwanga's cause came from both Catholic and Muslim Baganda. Muslims formed the backbone of the resistance movement. Rumours about kabaka Mwanga's conversion to Islam encouraged many Muslims to join him. It is likely that at this particular moment the resistance movement derived part of its inspiration from Islam.<sup>38</sup> There is evidence that soon after the outbreak of the mutiny of the Sudanese troops in Uganda, one of the ringleaders Gaburieli Kintu attempted to get in touch with the mutineers and link up with them. According to Kagwa, some sixty Muslims in Kampala

---

<sup>35</sup> For the Muslim view and description of the events, see Shaykh Haji A.M. Sekimwanyi, *Ebyafayo Ebitonotono Kudini Ye Kiyisiramu Okuyingira mu Buganda (A Short History of Islam)*, (Kampala, 1947).

<sup>36</sup> Documentation on the events of 1892 in Buganda in the WFA is very rich, C 15 16-84, C 15 85-167 Troubles de l'Ouganda, also Cassiers E 11 - F 15, E-20 Guerre de l'Ouganda: copies et travaux, also Père J.M.(Mercui), *L'Ouganda. La Mission Catholique et les Agents de la Compagnie Anglaise*, (Paris: A la Procure des Missions d'Afrique, 1893), and no name, probably Père Mesnage, *L'Ouganda et les Agissements de la Compagnie Anglaise "East Africa,"* (Paris: A la Procure des Missions d'Afrique, 1892). Cf. with Viera Pawlikova, "Kabaka Mwanga and Early Anti-Colonial Protest in Buganda," *Asian and African Studies*, vol. IV (1978), 89-118.

<sup>37</sup> They lost two of the three counties allotted to them by Lugard and their leaders were exiled.

<sup>38</sup> Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova, *History of Anti-Colonial Resistance and Protest in the Kingdoms of Buganda and Bunyoro, 1862-1899*, (Prague: Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1988), pp. 95-176, 222-291.

joined with Mwanga, and many others with the Sudanese. Other Muslims wished to fight, but were warned against it and wavered.<sup>39</sup>

After the defeat of the Muslim faction in the civil wars, the crush of the anti-British rebellion in 1899 and especially after 1900 and signing of the Uganda Agreement, the religion of the cross triumphed over the religion of the crescent and Muslims fell into third place behind the two Christian groupings, Protestant and Catholic. Since then any conversion to Islam was on an individual basis. Nevertheless, Islam managed to survive the severe defeats suffered in Buganda in the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s, recovered and not only continued its existence as a minority religion in Buganda but also started to expand outside the boundaries of the kingdom. Islam was taken to many parts of the present day Uganda by refugees of the religious wars in Buganda. The process of expansion of Islam continued under the colonial rule. Some of the Baganda agents responsible for bringing outlying areas of the present-day Uganda under the British colonial government control were Muslims. A very big group of Baganda Muslims attached itself to Semei Kakungulu. In Bukedi, where a number of Baganda agents were working, Islam made significant gains. Baganda Muslims went to different places as traders and minor officials — interpreters, police, storekeepers or watchmen— and they lived among the local people, had direct contact with them and spread Islam while travelling, by the wayside, in the market, in the village.<sup>40</sup>

After 1900, Islam survived as a minority religion tolerated by the colonial administration. As Sir Harry Johnston put it:

“In Uganda itself we are obliged to put up with the existence of people of this faith because they were here before we came; but I can see that it is decidedly not in the interests of the British government that we should actually assist the spread of this religion...It is particularly necessary at the present time that we should have no Mohammedan nonsense.”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Pawlikova-Vilhanova, *History of Anti-Colonial Resistance*, p. 257.

<sup>40</sup> Abdu Kasozi, *The Spread of Islam in Uganda*, pp.54-76. Noel King, Abdu Kasozi, Arye Oded, *Islam and the Confluence of Religions in Uganda*, pp.14-30.

<sup>41</sup> Sir Harry Johnston to Sub-Commissioner in Busoga, 3.12.1900, Entebbe Secretariat Archives, Busoga Outward, A11/1/53.

### 3. Islam in South Africa

Further south, in the present-day South Africa, the course of Islam was a different phenomenon from Islam which flourished along the East African littoral and in the course of the nineteenth century started to spread slowly into the coastal hinterland and the East African interior. South of Maputo there were no medieval Arabic and Persian settlements along the coast. However, some people living in the regions situated on the edge of the Swahili Islam, could have been partly converted. Recent studies testify to some degree of Islamic penetration from the north to the territory of modern South Africa. A characteristic feature of some inland areas is the partially Islamised culture of some ethnic groups. According to Ebrahim Moosa, Islamic penetration from the north into regions beyond the Soutpansberg may have occurred some time between the fifteenth century and possibly the late eighteenth century. It is also claimed that Swahili-speaking traders may have reached as far south as the St. John's river on the Pondoland coast in the Transkei and accounts of "Islamised" Africans, members of different ethnic groups living among the Shona in southern Zimbabwe and the Venda, Sotho and Thonga peoples in the Transvaal, called by various names, Lemba, Varembe or Balemba seem to confirm it.<sup>42</sup> But apart from these faintly Islamised groups that drifted in from Mozambique, in South Africa the spread of Islam was much later, dating from the mid-seventeenth century in the Cape, where Islam was the consequence of the importation of Muslim slaves, convicts and political exiles by the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) and European settlers, but elsewhere in the interior dating largely from the nineteenth century.

Economic and trading interests and activities and the trade in slaves also played a role in the spread of Islam at the southernmost tip of the African continent. It was colonisation that brought Islam to the Cape and later to other parts of South Africa. The period from 1652 to 1795, which was the first phase in the white settlement of South Africa when the policies and actions of the Dutch East India

---

<sup>42</sup> Some of their religious practices resemble Islamic rituals, and there are traces of Arabic in their language. See Ebrahim Moosa, *Islam in South Africa*, pp. 129-130. Other authors have suggested some impact of a different monotheistic Abrahamic religion, Judaism. The religious beliefs of these groups resemble those of the Falashas of Ethiopia. See also Ephraim Mandivenga, *The History and Re-Conversion of the Varembe of Zimbabwe*, pp.98-124.

Company shaped the history of the Cape Colony, was also the first period in the spread of Islam in South Africa.

The arrival of Islam in South Africa and colonialism were interconnected. It is not known if there were any Muslim slaves with Jan van Riebeeck, when he landed at the Cape on 6 April 1652, but some sources state that the first Muslim shipped to the Cape by the Dutch Vereenighde Oostindische g'octrooijeerde Compagnie in the second half of the seventeenth century was a slave by the name Ibrahim van Batavia<sup>43</sup> Jan van Riebeeck was sent by the Dutch Vereenighde Oostindische g'octrooijeerde Compagnie -VOC to establish a refreshing station at the southernmost tip of Africa to supply ships rounding the Cape of Good Hope on their long journeys to or from the East Indies with fresh food and water. It was the beginning of permanent, white occupation of South Africa, an important turning point and an event of vital importance for the history of the southern tip of Africa. The local Khoi and San peoples at first cooperated with the settlers selling them cattle, but attempts of the settlers to expand the settlement and encroach on their land led to a conflict and resistance. In 1658, six years after the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, free Muslims from Amboya in the Moluccan islands were brought to the Cape as mercenaries to protect the Dutch settlement against the San and Khoi and to be employed as servants of European colonists. The Mardijckers as they were called were not allowed to practise their religion in the public and our knowledge of their religious practices is very limited.<sup>44</sup> The religious intolerance and inter-religious hostilities of seventeenth-century Europe were imported to South Africa. The colony was ostensibly Christian, but the only religion tolerated in the Cape Colony was Christian faith in its Calvinist

---

<sup>43</sup> Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000), p. 327.

<sup>44</sup> "The Portuguese word *meredika* was derived from the Sanskrit *maharddhika*, meaning 'great man'." Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Levtzion, Nehemia & Pouwels, Randall L., (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000), p. 332. *Mardijcker* was derived from Ambon, where there is a hamlet called *Campon -Meredhika* (Kamung = village; lit., village of Mardijckers) inhabited by strangers who first arrived with the Portuguese from the Mollucas proper and were employed to help in strenhening the latter against the Amboinese.' Thus, in the archipelago, the new Malayo-Portuguese word *merdeka* came to have a meaning quite different from its Sanskrit roots: it now meant slaves who had been freed for defensive purposes.

variety, Dutch Reformed Christianity. The restrictions on non-Calvinists at the Cape were severe. Modern notions of freedom of religious belief and worship were unknown at that time and did not apply in the Cape colony to other Christian denominations, Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Anglican, not to mention religions such as Judaism or Islam. The public practice of non-Christian religions was prohibited by law.<sup>45</sup>

The position of Mardykckers in the colonial society serving the interests of the Dutch company and European free burghers to suppress resistance by local San and Khoi peoples was very ambiguous and has become an enigma. Some historians therefore prefer to date the origins of Islam in South Africa to the arrival there of slaves, political exiles and convicts, even though not all of them were Muslims. From very early in the period of Dutch presence at the Cape, the very existence of the white settlement depended on forced labour. The colony was desperately in need of labour. Since the DEIC was forbidden from slaving along the coast of West Africa, and the local San and Khoi peoples were very hard to be enslaved, although some attempts had been made, the Company and Dutch settlers had to turn to the Indian Ocean for slaves. The beginnings of Islam in South Africa involved the forcible settlement of slaves from different parts of Africa and Asia.

Although the white community had some slaves from the very beginnings of the Dutch control of the Cape, the year 1658 could be regarded as the beginning of the large scale settlement of slaves at the Cape. On 28 March 1658 a large Company vessel *Amersfoort* brought the first group of more than 170 Angolan slaves on board.<sup>46</sup> Since then the Company ships regularly brought slaves to the Cape. During the period 1652 to 1795 the Dutch East India Company sent out

---

<sup>45</sup> Ebrahim Moosa states that the Dutch policy towards Islam was also applied at the Cape, and a proclamation issued by the Dutch governor Van Diemen which prohibited the public practice of Islam in the Cape on pain of death was reinforced in 1657. See Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa," p.130.

<sup>46</sup> The slaves initially numbering 250 were captured from a Portuguese ship which was on its way from Angola to Brazil. Almost 80 slaves died during the voyage to Table Bay. Jan van Riebeeck sent 40 of the remaining slaves to Batavia, the rest stayed at the Cape to provide labourers. See H. J. van Aswegen, *History of South Africa to 1854*, Pretoria: J.L.van Schaik Publishers 1990, second impression 1993, pp.118- 121.

more than forty slave expeditions. Slaves brought to the Cape Colony on the Company and foreign ships, among others British, French, Portuguese and Danish ships, largely hailed from Madagascar (66%.) as well as from Mozambique, the coast of East Africa, including the island of Zanzibar and a single shipload came from Dahomey. A considerable number of slaves who were shipped to the Cape came from the East, from Bengal, Malabar, Ceylon, and Indonesia and were settled in and around Cape Town.<sup>47</sup> Some sixty-three thousand slaves were shipped to the Cape between 1652 and 1807, when Great Britain adopted the law abolishing the trade in slaves.<sup>48</sup> Many slaves who were brought by the Dutch East India Company from different parts of Africa and Asia with high concentration of Muslim population to provide labour for the nascent Dutch colony at the Cape were Muslims; they brought their faith with them and formed the nucleus of the Muslim community. They came to be known as Cape Malays.

While Islam in the kingdom of Buganda and many other places in East Africa was initially spread by ordinary adherents, spiritual fathers and founders of Islam at the Cape were educated Muslim scholars who were brought there as political exiles or convicts from the East Indies. The newly established Cape Colony served the DEIC not only as a refreshment station for fleets plying the Far East trade but also functioned as a place of exile for captured political opponents and leaders of resistance shown to the Dutch in places like the Moluccas, Amboyna or Batavia. These prominent Muslim exiles were accompanied by a retinue of co-religionists, wives, children, and servants. Between 1652 and 1795 some two hundred political exiles spent time in the Dutch colony at the Cape.

Among the early political exiles brought to the Cape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was 'Abidin Tadia Tjoessoep, better known as Shaykh Yusuf of Macassar (1626-99). Widely respected as an Islamic Sufi saint and regarded as a spiritual father of

---

<sup>47</sup> H. J. van Aswegen, p.119.

<sup>48</sup> Robert C. and H. Shell give a little different percentage of slaves, "The Indian subcontinent supplied more than a quarter of early South Africa's formal slaves and the Indonesian archipelago supplied another quarter, or slightly less. A little more than half of the slaves came from Madagascar, the Mascarene islands of the Indian Ocean, and the east coast of Africa." Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," p. 330.

Islam at the Cape, the founder of the first Muslim community in South Africa, he became a key symbol of Muslim presence in South Africa, a charismatic figure attracting runaway slaves to convert to Islam and representing Islamic resistance to European colonialism at the Cape. Born at Macassar on Sulawesi in modern Indonesia in 1626, Shaykh Yusuf was a relative of the king of Goa, the ruling dynasty of Sulawesi. He performed the pilgrimage at eighteen, visited several centres of Islamic learning, Mecca, Medina, Damascus<sup>49</sup> and Istanbul, and studied several years at Mecca and became a pupil of some distinguished Islamic teachers, but their names are not known. After his return home, he settled at the court of Sultan Ageng of Bantam in western Java, teaching the sultan and his court about Islam. In 1646 he married a princess, a Sultan's relative, and became highly respected as a religious authority, a person of great knowledge, piety and culture. Shaykh Yusuf was *'ālim* (Islamic scholar), *mujāhid* (freedom fighter) and a *shaykh* (chief) of the Khalwatiyyah Sufi Order. In a conflict between Sultan Ageng and his son 'Abd al-Qahhar, in which Dutch and British colonial ambitions in the region were involved and the members of the royal dynasty supported opposing sides, Shaykh Yusuf sided with Sultan Ageng. After a long military resistance, Shaykh Yusuf was captured by the Dutch, sentenced at first to death and in 1684 eventually exiled first to Ceylon and then to the Cape. He arrived at the Cape in 1694 at the age of sixty-eight years as a political prisoner aboard the DEIC ship *De Voetboog* with a retinue of forty-nine Muslims, his two wives, children, twelve disciples, friends, slaves and attendants. The Dutch policy was to isolate influential Muslim political exiles from the slave population. To reduce Shaykh Yusuf's influence, they were settled away from Cape Town, at an isolated spot on the False Bay coast, some twenty miles from the roadstead in Table Bay, on the farm Zandvliet of a Dutch Reformed minister, the Reverend Petrus Kalden, at Faure. In this isolated place of confinement, near the mouth of the Eerste River, Yusuf and his entourage lived until his death.<sup>50</sup> According to some sources, Shaykh Yusuf's small

---

<sup>49</sup> In Damascus, Shaykh Yusuf became a disciple of the Khalwatiyyah Sufi order, see Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa," in Martin Prozesky, ed., *Living Faiths in South Africa*, and John de Gruchy, *Cape Town and Johannesburg*, David Philip Publishers Ltd., 1995, p.131, also Robert C. - H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," p. 328-329.

<sup>50</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa," in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky

settlement near the Macassar Downs became a sanctuary for fugitive slaves, attracting many adherents, and a centre of the first Muslim community. Shaykh Yusuf was also the author of several *kitab*s or religious writings, now housed in Leiden University and used by Cape Muslims.<sup>51</sup> Shaykh Yusuf died in May 1699 and was interred at Faure. Six years after his death, Shaykh Yusuf's remains were repatriated to his home country.<sup>52</sup>

Shaykh Yusuf's graveside became a place of veneration among the Cape Muslims in the first half of the nineteenth century and this continued until an elaborate tomb was built around his grave in 1909.<sup>53</sup> Even though his tomb is empty, it became a *karamat* or holy place, imbued with sanctity and exuding *baraka* or blessings, one among five *karamats* encircling Cape Town in an Islamic sacred geography.<sup>54</sup> Veneration of the shaykh has continued to grow "so that even today, Cape Muslims would not go to Mecca without first visiting the shrine of Shaykh Yusuf."<sup>55</sup> To quote Tayob, "Shaykh Yusuf has become a key symbol of Muslim presence in South Africa. Ignoring the Mardycers, a Tri-Centenary Committee used the arrival of Shaykh Yusuf as the foundation of the first Muslim community. On the eve of the first democratic elections in the country, Muslims in Cape Town turned out in their thousands to celebrate three hundred years in South Africa. The high point of the celebration was a mass encampment around Shaykh Yusuf's tomb. It was a significant indication of how Shaykh Yusuf had been adopted as a symbol of Muslim presence in the country and Islamic resistance to colonialism and apartheid."<sup>56</sup>

---

and John de Gruchy (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers Ltd., 1995), 129-154; Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," p. 328-329.

<sup>51</sup> Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," p. 329.

<sup>52</sup> The surviving members of Shaykh Yusuf's retinue were after his death repatriated to Macassar. At the request of his relative, the Sultan of Goa, Shaykh Yusuf's remains were taken to Macassar and reburied at Lakiung on 23 May 1703. Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa", in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip Publishers Ltd., 1995), 129-154.

<sup>53</sup> Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>54</sup> Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, pp. 374-375.

<sup>55</sup> Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

In spite of Shaykh Yusuf's importance for contemporary South African Muslim religious consciousness, identity and perceptions of the history of Islam in the country, his impact was perhaps more symbolic than real, and the foundations of Islamic institutions for the early Islamic community were set up later and were connected with the arrival during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century of another group of Muslims. Sent to the Cape as *Bandieten* or convicts who had conspired against the Dutch, they were forced to work in gangs on the fortification and harbour works of Cape Town. The convicts, who were brought to the Cape to serve out their sentences in the employ of the Dutch authorities and settlers, augmented the slave labour. They suffered very high mortality but were free if they survived their sentences. Almost three thousand convicts were brought to the Cape colony, most of them from India and Indonesia, the bulk of convicts from Java were of Chinese descent, and a few came from the Near and Middle East, from Gamron in Iran and Mokka on the Red Sea coast where the DEIC had trading stations. Many of them were Muslims.<sup>57</sup> Among the Muslim convicts were many Islamic scholars and some exiled imams, listed in the *bandietrollen* or convict censuses as "Mahometaanse priesters." Unlike the political exiles who were forced to live isolated and scattered in the country, the Muslim convicts and imams lived among the free black people and slaves. These *bandieten* imams were responsible for the institutionalisation of Islam in South Africa and they also "provided the core of the Cape's early *ulemā* Muslim clergy."<sup>58</sup> Two important Muslim scholars, who helped to establish Islam at the Cape by providing religious instruction to their fellow prisoners and slaves, were Shaykh Madura (d. 1754) and Tuan Sayyid (d. 1760). But the foundations of Islamic educational institutions known as *madrassa* and of the Awwal Mosque are connected with the name of Imam `Abd Allah ibn Qādī `Abd al-Salām (1712-1807), better known under the name Tuan Guru, who was brought to the Cape Colony on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1780 and was imprisoned on Robben Island for thirteen years. While on Robben Island, Tuan Guru wrote several copies of the Qur'an from memory as well as a book on Islamic jurisprudence *Ma`rifatu'l Islam wa`l Imān* dealing also with theology which he completed in 1781. His

---

<sup>57</sup> Robert C. and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," *op. cit.*, p.329.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 330. Robert C. and H. Shell provide a list of *imams*.

hand-written copy of the Qu`rān has been preserved and is in the possession of his descendants living in Cape Town.

Tuan Guru's first concern upon his release from Robben Island in 1793 was to establish a religious school, a *madrasa*. The *madrasa* he established was situated in a warehouse in Dorp Street and came to play an important role in the spread of Islamic education and Islam among slaves and convicts. Many prominent imams, Abdol Bazier, Achmat van Bengalen or Imaam Hadjie received their education at this *madrasa*.<sup>59</sup>

Islam struck root at the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under extremely difficult circumstances. Freedom of religion was not tolerated, the regulations governing the situation were very strict, the practice of Islam was severely restricted and Muslims were forbidden to hold private and public meetings. Converted houses and quarries were used as places of prayer by the Cape Muslim community. Tuan Guru is also credited with founding the first mosque *masjid* in South Africa, called Awwal Mosque, in Dorp Street in about 1804, or perhaps as early as 1798.<sup>60</sup>

The growth of Islam in South Africa can be attributed to several causes. Slaves who were brought by the Dutch East India Company from different parts of Africa and Asia with high concentration of Muslim population to provide labour for the nascent Dutch colony at the Cape formed the nucleus of the Muslim community. Convicts shipped to the Cape to serve out their sentences in the employ of the Dutch authorities and settlers, augmented the slave labour.

The slaves and convicts became a source of Muslims at the Cape, the institution of slavery offered pathways to Islamic conversion. The colony was ostensibly Christian. The DEIC's policy was to baptise its own slaves born at the Cape. However, the overwhelming majority of slaves in the Cape colony were owned by white settlers. By the mid-eighteenth century the sale of Christian slaves was proclaimed illegal in Europe and by 1799 most slave owners in South Africa

---

<sup>59</sup> The *madrasa* was in Dorp Street in a warehouse attached to the home of Coridon of Ceylon. Tuan Guru himself also lived in Dorp Street with his wife's family. Upon his release from the prison he married a free lady, Kaija van der Kaap, and they had two sons, Abdol Rakiep and Abdol Rauf. See "A Chronology of Muslim History in South Africa," *Awqaf Insights*, 1, 2006, pp.14-15.

<sup>60</sup> Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, op. cit., p. 24.

believed their rights to sell their slaves would be threatened if their slaves were baptised. Neither Church nor settlers engaged in teaching the Gospel to the slave population. Both religions, Christianity and Islam, acknowledged the institution of slavery, but according to similar precepts from their Holy Books, the Bible and the Qu`ran, neither Christians nor Muslims should enslave or keep a fellow religionist in slavery. Since according to the principles of the Islamic faith, the slaves who embrace Islam must not be sold and they and their children should be manumitted at the death of their owner, a practice in Islamic law of *mukātabah*, or a contract of manumission whereby slaves could purchase their freedom, became prevalent at the Cape.<sup>61</sup> Slaves, who were manumitted by their owners or were allowed to buy their freedom, did not then turn to Christian missionaries or Christianity, but to Islam. To quote, "...it was a frequent answer of a slave, when asked his motive for turning to Islam, that *'some religion he must have, and he is not allowed to turn Christian.'*"<sup>62</sup>

Manumitted slaves and convicts who had completed their sentences came to be known as *Vryezwarten* or Free Blacks. They provided imams and teachers for the mosques and the first Islamic schools or *madrasa*. They also used their position in the society and relative prosperity to manumit their slaves, including Christian slaves. John Philip of the London Missionary Society, who came to South Africa in 1819, noticed that many slaves owned by Muslims had been freed and commented, "I do not know whether there is a law among the Malays binding them to make their slaves free, but it is known that they seldom retain in slavery those that embrace their religion, and to the honour of the Malays it must be stated many instances have occurred in which, at public sales, they have purchased aged and wretched creatures, irrespective of their religion, to make them free."<sup>63</sup> Other missionaries also noticed the growth of Islam in the colony.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, "Islam in South Africa," op. cit., p.133. To quote, "*Mukatabah* literally means 'mutual writing,' but technically it is a written agreement between a master and slave whereby the latter paid the former a sum in return for his or her liberty. The contract itself partially manumits the slave to enable him or her to be free to earn income."

<sup>62</sup> C. Robert and H. Shell, "Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998," op. cit., p.331.

<sup>63</sup> Philip to the Directors, 14 January 1831, London Missionary Society Archives, Council for World Mission Archives, LMS Series, South African Correspondence, Box 12, Folder 4, Jacket B. Now deposited at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London.

Islam spread quickly among slaves and former slaves through conversion, intermarriage, adoption and the purchase of slaves by free Muslims. Compared with the obstructions and strictures of the dominant white Christian culture, denying to Christian slaves equal religious identity and rights, including the right to marry in the Christian Church and to be present at the mass, easy assimilation into Islamic culture and egalitarian spirit of Islam paved the way for Islamic conversion.

At the Cape, Islam was an attractive option offering literacy and empowerment through education. As stated above, Tuan Guru founded a *masjid* –*madrasah* complex, similar to educational institutes developed all over the Muslim world, and wrote textbooks on different topics in the Arabic script in the lingua franca of the slaves, a Dutch-based dialect which contained also words and elements from mother-tongues of the slaves, such as Javanese and Bouganese. Many of these words have found their way into the Afrikaans lexicon. The first printed *kitab* in Arabic-Afrikaans appeared in 1856 *Al-Qawl al-Matin Fi Bayān Umūr Din* or The Book of the Firm Declaration regarding the Explanation of the Matters of Religion, and preceded the first Afrikaans book in the Latin script by almost six years. Despite their historically disadvantageous social and political status, the Cape Muslims who included in their ranks all shades of race, colour and status, but were erroneously called Cape Malays or Cape Coloureds, have made a significant contribution to Afrikaans culture. They have also influenced South African food habits. Up to their emancipation in 1834, the large scale settlement of slaves at the Cape played an extremely important role in the economic and social life of the Cape Colony and in the spread of Islam.

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British started to patrol the seas to intercept ships with human cargo. The British Admiralty decided that liberated slaves who came to be called Prize Negroes should not be returned to their homeland where they would face the risk of being re-captured and re-enslaved, and opened two depots for them, one at Sierra Leone and another at Cape Town.<sup>64</sup> “Approximately five thousand such slaves were landed at the Cape between 1808 and 1856, a population (not counting offspring) equivalent to all

---

<sup>64</sup> Simonstown was Cape Town’s winter port and became the South Atlantic base for the Royal Navy.

the 1820 British settlers.”<sup>65</sup> The philanthropic project soon created a problem: what to do with this new addition to the population of the Cape colony? Since the army and navy could not employ all of them, it was decided to give them out to individual white settlers as labourers; the conditions of service stipulated: fourteen years of apprenticeship before they could be free.<sup>66</sup> The irony of the whole Prize Negroes scheme was that some Prize Negroes` children, aged from five to eighteen, were assimilated into the Cape slave population. Even though it was suggested that the whole cargo of imported liberated slaves should be baptised as they landed at the Cape, the Church declined the proposal. Under such circumstances, Islam spread quickly among the Prize Negroes, who desperately needed to find a new identity. The local administrative and Church officials noticed a rapid spread of Islam among the liberated Africans. “The imported slaves are mostly from Mozambique, arriving here in total ignorance, and being permitted to remain in that state, they, for the most part, embrace the Mahomedan faith,” wrote the first civilian governor of the colony, the Earl of Caledon, on 4 February 1808, to the British secretary for war, Viscount Castlereagh.<sup>67</sup>

The numbers of converts among slaves and former slaves swelled, by the first quarter of the nineteenth century there were some 3000 Muslims in Cape Town, but by the middle of the nineteenth century there were 8000.<sup>68</sup> According to some other sources, by 1840 Islam had 6,435 adherents at Cape Town, one third of the total population of the Colony constituting an increase of 4, 268 Muslims within a period of twelve years.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In East and Central Africa, Islam had advanced largely through trade, but kept spreading through a certain civilising mission, carrying with the new mono-

---

<sup>65</sup> Robert C.- H. Shell, “Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998,” op. cit., p.333.

<sup>66</sup> Public Record Office, 12 February 1822, CO 414/6 12285, “A Return of the Negroes Imported into the Colony Since 1808,” folio 45, p.500.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in C. Robert and H. Shell, “Islam in Southern Africa, 1652-1998,” op. cit., p. 333.

<sup>68</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, “Islam in South Africa,” op. cit., p.134.

<sup>69</sup> “A Chronology of Muslim History in South Africa,” *Awqaf Insights*, 1 (September 2006), p.19.

theist religion also literacy and a sense of belonging to a world civilisation. A combination of spiritual and secular factors, including the introduction of many innovations and new skills, played a vital role in the spread of Islamic faith in the kingdom of Buganda and incidentally prepared the ground for later missionary activities and the advance of Christianity.

Economic and trading interests and activities also played a role in the spread of Islam at the southernmost tip of the African continent. It was colonisation and trade in slaves that brought Islam to the Cape and later to other parts of South Africa. While the British colonisation curbed and slowed down the spread of Islam in the kingdom of Buganda and in other parts of the present-day Uganda, in South Africa the impact of the British colonisation was different. When the control of the Cape passed in 1806 from the Dutch to the British hands, the turn towards a greater religious tolerance which followed the Commissioner J.A.de Mist's proclamation of religious tolerance of 1804, had a positive effect on the proliferation of Muslim institutions and the expansion of Islam. Can any similarities be seen in the processes of the spread of Islam in different regions of the southern part of the African continent and among different socio-economic groups? The course of Islam in East and South Africa appear at first sight to be very different, ruling out the existence of any similarities. In both regions trade played an instrumental role in spreading of Islam, but while in East and Central Africa the agents of Islamic conversion were ordinary adherents (Muslim traders), in South Africa Islam was spread by Islamic scholars and imams. In Uganda and in many other places of East and Central Africa Islam in the early period spread among members of the local elites, chiefs and rulers, while in South Africa the first Muslims were brought to the Cape as slaves, convicts or political prisoners, and conversion took place among slaves and underclasses, among marginalised and dispossessed people, and among free blacks. In East and Central Africa Christianity rather than Islam started as a slaves' religion. In South Africa Islam became a means for the social advancement of slaves and other marginalized people. In East and Central Africa, the means of social advancement and empowerment of slaves through education and literacy accompanying the new religion was Christianity. A phenomenon of nineteenth-century East and Central Africa were Christian villages that grew up around mission stations and in which early missionaries cared for redeemed slaves and

harboured refugees and marginalised people. Even in the kingdom of Buganda the first people to receive religious instruction were former slaves, mostly children, who had been presented to missionaries or who had been bought free by them simply to get personal or house servants, retainers, catechumens and converts. The first Christian adherents and converts thus were slaves "redeemed" by missionaries regarded by local people as *abagule* or "those bought." Common to both regions in the early period of its expansion was Islam's contribution to literacy, knowledge, education and intellectual development through Arabic alphabetisation and literacy - in Arabic and Kiswahili in East and Central Africa, and Arabic-Afrikaans in South Africa. Empowerment through knowledge and literacy introduced by Islam became for the Cape slaves a gateway to social advancement and freedom. In East and Central Africa the expansion of Islam was accompanied by the widespread knowledge of Kiswahili and Arabic, and literacy in the Arabic script, which paved the way for Christian missions and their work.

Under colonialism Islam as a minority religion in both regions had to face similar challenges. It was barely tolerated by the colonial administration. Christian missions saw the dangers of Islamic expansion and viewed this religion as their major antagonist for the spiritual control of Africans. The struggle between Islam and Christianity became a prominent feature of missionary thought. The Muslim influence in both regions was seen in the light of the latent fear of Islam and the "Muslim threat" and many activities and official policies of the British administrators and missionaries were formulated to counteract the influence and expansion of Islam. The struggle between Islam and Christianity became a prominent feature of missionary thought. Secular Europeans might idly debate the suitability of Islam for the Africans, but Christian missionaries of all denominations viewed Islam as their major antagonist for the spiritual control of Africans.

An anonymous writer commented on the expansion of Islam in South Africa and expressed his opinion that Islam has the immense capacity to cause "mischief" among the "simple and credulous negroes still halting between Christ and Islam."<sup>70</sup> It has been often claimed that the spread of Islam in eastern and

---

<sup>70</sup> "The Cape Malays," *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 10 July 1861, p. 358. Quoted by Ebrahim Moosa,

southern Africa was effectively arrested by the consequences of European colonization. The situation was much more complex. The spread of Christianity, the invasion of Western civilisation and the colonial expansion had an indirect effect upon the spread of Islam. The diffusion of Islam in the early period of colonial expansion in the German East Africa was actually facilitated by European occupation and due to the use of many Muslims as interpreters and officials in the lower levels of administration, Islam and the knowledge of Swahili were able to expand there, if not at the expense of Christianity, at least side by side with it. While in some places of Southern Africa the process of Islamisation was slowed and even regressed after the arrival of Christian missionaries and the introduction of the European administration. Islam in this region not only survived under the colonial rule and continued its existence as a minority religion, but also started to expand and make significant gains.

Islam became an expression of an alternative culture in a colonial society dominated by European or Western Christian culture and civilisation. Islamic identity differentiated Muslims culturally from their colonial masters. Adoption of Islam by new converts could symbolise a search for a new identity owing no intellectual inspiration to European presence, Islamic conversion could also become an expression of an anti-colonial stance and resistance to European dominance and oppressive colonial regime.

Some time later, the South African Muslim community of mixed origin was enriched by the arrival of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent brought by the British on board of the SS Truro in 1860 to cultivate sugar cane in their newly acquired colony on the coast of Natal, and by Indian Muslim traders, the so-called passenger Indians, seeking their fortunes in South Africa.<sup>71</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1873, another cargo of 113 freed slaves from the Swahili coast of Africa arrived in Port Natal. Their origin was Zanzibar, Comoros, mainland Tanzania, northern Mozambique, Malawi, and possibly Somalia. The transfer of ex-slaves, who came to be known as Zanzibaris, continued until

---

"Islam in South Africa," op. cit., p.135.

<sup>71</sup> Only some 7-10 per cent were Muslims. See Ebrahim Moosa, "*Islam in South Africa*," op. cit., p.138.

1880.<sup>72</sup> Waves of Muslims from India entered also East and Central Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi, to fight for the British in colonial wars, to work for them or trade. New Muslim immigrants helped to spread Islam in the interior of East, Central and South Africa, and changed the pattern of the Muslim community and added a new dimension to Islam, but this is another story.

---

<sup>72</sup> "A Chronology of Muslim History in South Africa," *Awqaf Insights*, no. 1 (September 2006), p. 22.