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Sub-Saharan Africa

CAROLINE ANGENENT
& ANNEKE BREEDVELD

Power and the Study of Islam South of the Sahara

On Friday 7 August 1998, the world was horrified by two bomb attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam. Although 250 Kenyan citizens and about ten Tanzanians were killed in these attacks, the attention of the world focused mainly on the distress caused by the deaths of twelve Americans. The perpetrators were immediately sought among Muslims in the Middle East. The past of Osama Bin Laden – the suspected mastermind behind the attacks – was dredged up and a possible Dutch connection with international terrorism was explored in depth. Africa seems to have been no more than an accidental setting for these attacks, possibly selected because airport security leaves so much to be desired.

None of the journalists seemed to be even slightly aware that the coastal regions of these countries in particular have been part of the Islamic world for centuries, with trade contacts dating from pre-Islamic times and a multitude of slave expeditions that made Zanzibar notorious as a transit port. This is why it is remarkable that no one in the media asked whether 'the army for the liberation of Islamic holy places' might not possibly be a local organization – all the more so since at the beginning of this year there were demonstrations in Dar Es Salaam 'against Christianity' organized by groups of radical Muslims. The Tanzanian government reproached the radical groups for their lack of religious tolerance and gave the police permission to use violence to put an end to the demonstrations (Marc de Meij, personal communication). Yet there are two reasons why even radical East African Muslim organizations are an improbable source from which to expect anti-American terrorism. These Muslim organizations are financially supported by countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which are pro-American in inclination. Generally speaking, religious tolerance does indeed appear to be an important aspect of religious life in Africa to the south of the Sahara.

In this article, we shall restrict ourselves to Dutch studies of Islam south of the Sahara since for years scientists have treated this desert as a dividing line. However, this geographical boundary is of doubtful value – after all, no one knows where 'North Africa' stops and 'south of the Sahara' begins. Certainly, as far as Islam is concerned, the Sahara cannot be called an absolute boundary. However, because of this self-imposed division, differences in the choice of subject matter in science can be observed between the two areas. Generally, in North Africa, Islam is the primary study theme and 'unorthodox' local forms of expressing Islam (trance dancing, worship of saints, festivals, sufi brotherhoods) are often described. On the other hand, studies of Islam south of the Sahara are often linked to describing an ethnic group. A researcher will only focus attention on Islam if this religion is important to the group studied. In the Netherlands, the religion itself is seldom the primary study theme and here the religious tolerance mentioned above is probably to blame. South of the Sahara it is not uncommon to find followers of a traditional religion, Islam and Christianity within one family. Religious sectarianism seems to be absent, or still in its infancy, and religious organizations also succeed in recruiting large numbers of followers by peaceful means.

With reference to this religious tolerance, Mazrui (1998) has stated that in this part of the world, religious observance only leads to conflict if it coincides with ethnic dividing lines. Within some 'mono-religious' Islamic communities, conflicts also take place along ethnic lines. The violence in Algeria, for example, has partly to do with an enforced process of Arabization aimed against the language and culture of the Berbers. The same process of Arabization in Mauritania has led to the resistance (and an exodus) of non-Arabic-speaking population groups from the south of the country. As early as 1990, Buijtenhuis observed that this Arabic imperialism was a major cause of the hotbeds in the Sahel area and in the Horn of Africa. Arab imperialism from Libya led to problems in Chad; in the Sudan, the Muslim/Arabic cultural domination comes from the north of the country.

Yet it would still be unjust to associate the spread of Islam in Africa only with violence. It is true that a number of jihads took place in the 19th century – particularly in West Africa – but in the vast majority of cases the spread of Islam, which had already crossed the Sahara in the 9th century, took place in a peaceful manner via wandering clerics and trading contacts. Even today, large numbers of people convert to Islam of their own free will. One of the reasons for this conversion put forward in Dutch studies is that, in some areas, trade is entirely in the hands of Muslims. Conversion to Islam makes access to this commercial network easier or is possibly even a precondition (Schilder 1994).

But economic power often goes hand in hand with political power. For example, the Touareg, who have played an important part in the dissemination of Islam in the Sahel, succeeded in monopolizing particular trans-Saharan trading routes at one time. The colonial powers were only too willing to make use of such local Islamic power-brokers. In Senegal, where the marabouts (spiritual leaders) had a great deal of influence on the local population, they were appointed by the French as intermediaries south of the Sahara in their consultations with the traditional leaders. The marabouts then urged the population to go over to cultivating groundnuts, an important export product for the French. The relationship of mutual interdependence between the political leaders and the marabouts to which this gave rise also established the relationship between State and politics in present-day Senegal (Angenent & de Bruijn 1990:8). These religious-political balances of power have been dealt with exhaustively in Dutch studies of Islam south of the Sahara (see also Van der Drift 1986, Hesseling 1985).

The balance of power between man and woman is also dealt with regularly in Dutch studies of Islam. Nowadays, the active role of the woman outside the house in Africa seems to be at odds with her protective, domestic position, as propagated by certain movements within Islam. In many agricultural communities in Africa, the woman is the primary worker of the land and the income derived from the sale of her crops plays an important role in keeping the household going economically. Within nomadic Muslim groups that live from animal husbandry, the grandmothers of today still recall how they used to trek with their animals and go to the villages to trade their milk surplus.

However, particularly in sedentary urban Muslim communities, the Muslim woman's place has become increasingly domestic. Women and men have thus been allocated a different role in the household, in which the position of the woman seems to have changed most and has thus received the more attention in literature. Bartels (1993) associates the introduction of female circumcision among the Balante in Senegal and infibulation in Sudan with a change in the balance of power between the sexes. However, that the precepts of Islam always work out to the disadvantage of the woman is too one-sided. Van Santen (1998) shows that Mafa women certainly become better off when they convert to Islam because this religion assigns a better position to women with regard to rights of inheritance than does the Mafa religion. In the north of Cameroon, town-dwelling Fulbe women, who saw themselves being confined to their home, applied themselves to singing the praises of the Prophet and composing religious poetry (Haafkens 1983). They not only composed, but also learned old texts by heart – by such writers as Usman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto kingdom – and thus ensured the tradition of their (Islamic) history.

So the literary world of Islam in Africa is not restricted to the reciting of verses from the Arabic Koran. In many Muslim communities, there is a great wealth of spoken and written texts in African languages. These texts often have a religious content but not always. A poem may deal with the building of a dhow – the sailing boat that plays such an important part in the trade-links between East Africa and the south coast of Asia (Miehe & Schadeberg 1979). These texts are not only studied for their literary value; anthropology also draws on texts of a religious nature. Mommersteeg (1996) exhaustively analyses the (secret) techniques of marabouts who, for example, write texts from the Koran on wooden writing boards, after which the text is washed off and the water used to invoke certain blessings – a cure, for instance. This process has also found its way into (anthropological) films (Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1974). Another important literary genre is the so-called 'taariki' – the history of the conversion of one's own community. It so happens that many Muslim communities derive status from the fact that they became Muslims before other surrounding groups (Breedveld & Angenent 1997). So people in Africa are often not just nominally Muslim – this religion clearly plays a role in their daily social lives. Various anthropologists have studied how local customs have, or have not, endured the confrontation with comparable Muslim institutionalized social habits, such as the zakat (De Bruijn 1994, Van Hoven 1996).

Perhaps it was the result of coincidence or was due to the extreme tenacity of some passionate researchers that in the Netherlands so much attention has been devoted to the Islamic architecture in Mali, particularly in the city of Djenne (Bedaux & Van der Waals 1994, Maas & Mommersteeg 1992). This study, carried out at various scientific institutes in the Netherlands and abroad, by archaeological, anthropological and architectural researchers, has led to the renowned exhibition about Djenne at the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden, which was later exhibited in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Actually, this is a classic example of how science can be spectacular in a small country, namely by not stopping at disciplinary boundaries or at North-South boundaries. Cooperation with researchers from Mali itself has also made a great contribution to the success of this study. Future Dutch research into Islam in Africa will be helped considerably if it endeavours to have the same unbounded, multidisciplinary and global character. ✦

Drs Caroline Angenent is a PhD researcher at the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religion, Leiden University.

Dr Anneke Breedveld is a researcher at the African Studies Centre and at African Linguistics, Leiden University.

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