Assessing the role of Islam in 19th-century East African history

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Résumé: Islam in 19th century East African history played a major role, whether it is to define the "coastal" identity – the Swahili identity – as a legitimization to assert their culture over the interior population, or to promote a cultural and religious exchange in the hinterland by deeply transforming the social beliefs, relationships and practices.

Swahili have always seen themselves as distinct from interior population, which is why many Swahili population trace their ancestry to the Arabian Peninsula, from "Shirazi" (present-day Iran). The Swahili civilization widely spread along the Eastern coast of Africa, characterized by Islamic influences coming from the Indian Ocean World roughly since 1000 CE. In fact, the classic historical and historiographical narratives suggest a barrier between the Swahili coast on one hand, the dar al-Islam (the Muslim community) marked by a maritime and urban mercantile culture (from South Somalia to Northern Mozambique), and the East African interior on the other hand, the Dar al-Harb (the Pagan community) characterized by its rural subsistence economy (roughly around Buganda (present-day Uganda),

Lake Tanganyika down to Lake Malawi). There have been many historiographical debates concerning the concrete role of Islam in nineteenth-century East African history. Because of the lack of sources, some historians affirmed that Islam had little impact in this region or, when it has been acknowledged that Islam did have an impact, the interior region was often qualified as 'semi-Islamized'. Therefore, I will contest this statement and argue in this essay that Islam in the nineteenth century did in fact contribute to construct the "coastal" identity, distinct from the interior of East Africa, but the Islamization of the region also led to cultural changes and exchanges with the interior populations.

First, Islam contributed to construct the Swahili identity and distinguish it from East Africa interior. The arrival of the Omanis in the Swahili coast defined a significant part of the Swahili identity, even more when the Omani sultan moved his capital to Zanzibar in 1833. Subsequently, Omanis (mainly Ibadhis, a sub-branch of Kharijite Islam) and pre-existant Swahili population (mainly Shafi'is, branch of Sunnism) developed broadly cooperative relationships. Zanzibar became since then the historical, geographical and religious center of Eastern Africa. Moreover, Islam of the Zanzibar sultanate contributed to empower the Swahili coast as a major political center, Georges Gayet argues. Indeed, the Zanzibar sultan wanted

his place to be a center of Islamic learning with Somalia and Comores, so he developed Islamic education and gave more opportunities for its inhabitants to go on the Hajj (The Sunni Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, also one of the five pillars of Islam). Therefore, the Swahili were expressively influenced by Omani culture, which led to the emergence of the concept of Ustaarabu, 'to assimilate oneself to the Arabs, to become an Arab, to adopt the customs of the Arabs.' Hence, Arabic learning became important for the construction of Swahili identity and amongst the elite, this identity was oriented towards the maritime rather than the mainland. Abdul Sheriff emphasizes the role of Islam in the maritime aspect of East African history. In fact, the cultural dynamics of the Indian Ocean world has been shaped by the Muslim merchant communities – mainly the Swahili for East Africa – that transformed the ocean into the so-called "Islamic lake", a truly global world in which East Africa played a major stand.

This Islamic identity legitimized the domination of the Swahili over the interior population, known as Washenzi ("barbarians"). Knut Graw explains the multiple processes of negotiation and debate characterizing Muslim life along the East African coast. One of the most notable features is that Islamic identity legitimized the domination of the coastal over the interior population

with the widespread use of the Swahili language – associated with the language of Islam due to its Arabic influences. In a nutshell, what Graw wants to capture is the process of "how along the East African coast Islamic identities are negotiated through a constant dialogue with a larger Islamic world". Another relevant example of the Dar al-Islam domination over Dar al-Harb is the ivory and the slave trade with the interior. The Islamic legal norms were likewise informed by the family-commercial networks of Omani immigrant families who, as Muslim entrepreneurs, began with coastal Swahili to look for ivory and slaves in the country (since it is illegal for a Muslim to be enslaved). Coastal populations employed specific terms for the slaves they captured, referred as Watumwa, meaning "someone who is sent or used" (which scholars have translated to "slaves", even though there were various degree of servitude) in opposition to the Waungwana, the "freeborn" (the coastal population). In the meantime, they established their first Islamic sites of worship in Tabora (today's central Tanzania) and contributed to its spread in the hinterland until they really questioned new converts' ways of living (social relati-onships, ritual practices, etc.).

Consequently, Islam also contributed to a cultural change in the region: it created multiple zones of contacts within the whole East African region by spreading the religion

through trade and progressively assimilating interior populations to the dominant Swahili culture. These cultural changes, shaped by the interaction between Islam and pre-existing belief systems, led to an "Africanization of Islam". The first coastal traders arrived in the region of Lake Tanganyika around 1830, and in order to build trust between them and their followers, they tried to provide their slaves with prestigious goods and rights such as kanzus (expensive clothes), guns, etc. In this context, some of them gained some standing and started to conceive a Waungwana identity, the respected terms for coastal people (for instance, many Sufi priests appeared in Tabora and Ujiji). Furthermore, claiming to be Waungwana was synonym to a conversion to Islam, even though Swahili and Omani traders did not have any proselytizing intentions. Nonetheless, the adaptation of Islam in various interior contexts is crucial to understand the cultural change provoked by the coastal population. By converting, they necessary challenged their ways of life (mainly around Lake Tanganyika). Philip Gooding evokes many examples of cultural changes. Firstly, the main religious influence was on the pre-existing spiritual beliefs of these new converts: they adapted coastal beliefs in zimu ("spirits") to the belief of the spirits' existence around Lake Tanganyika (called "mizimu"), which was not antithetical to Islamic

faith, like older histories would suppose. Secondly, the ngwana interior became Muslim by practicing the circumcision, eating halal meat, praying and for most of them fasting during Ramadan. Thirdly, they adopted the Swahili language, considered as the language of Islam. Thus, coastal traders living in the interior recognized that coastal forms of Islamic beliefs were re-adapted to the interior context. In addition, J. Spencer Trimingham theorises the nature of Islam's interaction with Bantu religious beliefs: he argues that the chieftaincy systems rested upon supernatural authority, the "doctrinal and confessional simplicity", the tolerance of local beliefs, the absence of elaborate ritual and the element of mystery in worship are all contrary to the orthodox doctrine of Islam.

It is worth mentioning that interior populations in the nineteenth century have mostly been considered as 'nominal' Muslims rather than 'fully-fledged' ones, although there was a real process of integration to Islam. This is due to the fact that coastal culture was still dominant, and this adapting process caused a bit of eruption on the coast (Swahili and Omani still defined the interior population as Washenzi). Their conversion to Islam was seen as heterodox or blasphemous. Thus, the new converts contested their designation as 'nominal' Muslims. For the East African interior, the adoption of new material,

cultural and religious practices represented an integration to the coastal religion and, by extension, the coastal society. However, there were no mosque in the interior of Africa and a further distance to Mecca (where pilgrims usually go for the Hajj). With this absence of opportunities, the main inspiration of Islam for interior populations remained the coast, which can be one of the reasons why a new faith developed in interior East Africa and underlines the diversity of Islamic forms in the Indian Ocean World. According to Harvie Conn, we should remind, however, that conversion is a long process of social and cultural evolution. In other terms, the influence of Islam spread by the coastal merchants had an effect on the local culture and vice-versa: the local (interior) culture had an effect on traditional Islamic patterns.

To sum up, Islam in nineteenth-century East African history played a major role, whether it is to define the "coastal" identity – the Swahili identity – as a legitimization to assert their culture over the interior population, or to promote a cultural and religious exchange in the hinterland by deeply transforming the social beliefs, relationships and practices. This phenomenon asserts the fact that the interpretation of Islam in nineteenth-century Eastern Africa is a result of a constant dialogue between the coast and the interior. Furthermore, it is part of a larger dynamic in the whole Islamic world

where each region has its own practice of Islam incorporated in its local culture, stretching from the Middle East across the Indian ocean to Indonesia

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