

## **African response to and today's role of Islam in the continent**

As history shows, when Islam was introduced on African ground, it was often penetrated by violence. Either there were open wars or alternatively, there were contracts that enforced people to submit. Anyways, not always came the religion with a political conquering power, as I have mentioned before. Despite coming by trading and migration, it also happened that they came into areas where there was a climate of political fragmentation, in which some people were willing to collaborate with them. This was the case, for example, with the Copts in Egypt: They welcomed the Muslim conquerors and helped them, because their Byzantine rulers suppressed all Egyptians and especially them as Christians who had adopted monophysitism.<sup>1</sup> In all cases, Islam was introduced in Africa quite early and throughout the centuries; people adopted it more or less into their cultures.

As it is known, after a series of wars and plagues in the 16th and 17th cent., Europeans started to conquer Africa in search for natural resources. The following colonization process reached its negative climax in the 1880ies, when several European powers shared the continent among themselves as if they were dividing a cake. Their interference changed the face of Africa very drastically, and its effects reach deep into our modern times. However, what impact had these developments on the relation of Islam in Africa? In some regions, Muslims interfered in anti-colonial resistance and this way, the religion increased in attractiveness. In others, they were able to keep their political influence, because it had been established for so long time.

In the 20th cent., the decolonization process rapidly brought national independence of most African countries, and this, too, brought a sense of African internationalism demonstrated in the formation of the "Organization of African Unity" in 1963. Their aim was a peaceful coexistence among the different religious and ethnic communities within their young African nations. So the presidents thought about a philosophy that would fit into the "African personality". They took elements out of the traditional social systems, moral values out of Western Christianity and Islam, and they created a so-called "African Socialism". Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Modibo Keita of Mali, and Sékou Touré of Guinea, became the main architects of this.<sup>2</sup> The problem was that expectations were high and people wanted quick results. In a process that would have needed decades of time. The outcome were

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Georg Maier, „Die Verwandlung der Mittelmeerwelt“ in *Fischer Weltgeschichte* Bd. 9 (Frankfurt a. M./ Hamburg: Fischer Bücherei Vlg, 1968), 161ff.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Friedland and Carl Rosberg Jr. eds., *African Socialism* (California: Stanford Univers. Press, 1964), 3-5.

military coups and dictatorships. Those were supported from outside by ruthless communism, Islamic oppression as well as neo- colonialism.

Today, countries like Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Somalia have over 90% of Muslims. Other nations like Gambia, Senegal, Sudan and Guinea have about 51- 90%; and again others like Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania have about 10- 50% of them. The complexity of the religion in the continent can be seen in various schools of thought and traditions, which are not static but constantly being reshaped. Especially in the countries where Islam has become a state religion, there are strong political influences also from outside which concern the economies and the people's social life. In large parts, this influence comes from the Arab League, which up to date meets with European leaders to discuss the situation of the African refugees. In some of the countries, Islamic fundamentalism combines religion and politics into one entity that demands total obedience. Elsewhere, Islam dominates the culture while the state tries to be "secular" or neutral. As example, Tunisia during the reign of its first president Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba (1903-2000) from 1957 to 1987, became one of the Arab countries that was farthest from Islam. In the statutes and laws of the nation, Friday became a working day and polygamy was forbidden. Moreover, the women's rights movement made progress, and the Ramadan fast was officially discouraged.<sup>3</sup>

In Ghana, Islam is one of the major practiced religions, and Muslims and Christians mostly have balanced relationships. This came when after achieving its independence, the government granted free education to the North where the majority of the population were Muslims. In addition, we hold common celebrations and allow interreligious marriages. For example in my family, most people are Christians, but I also have many relatives who are Muslims.

Otherwise, in the North Africa since the mid- 1970ies, there have been tensions between Muslims and Christians, and also in the last years in North Nigeria, the Muslim "Boko Haram" terrorist attacks have brought bombings, violence and destruction among the civil people, mostly Christians.

Another road is that of syncretism, which means the synthesis between Islam and other worldviews. While being established in Africa, the religion has adopted and assimilated some of the philosophies, traditions, and customs that already existed for long among various peoples. Modern African societies are very diverse, with varying practices of Islam.

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<sup>3</sup> Habib Bourguiba, "La trace et l'héritage" in *Science politique comparative*, eds. Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser (Paris: Karthala Publ., 2004), 54-56.