

BAYREUTH

RÜDIGER SEESEMANN

EAST AFRICAN MUSLIMS AFTER 9/11

BAYREUTH AFRICAN STUDIES WORKING PAPERS
(JULY 2005)

No. 3

Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers

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Herausgeber:

IAS: Herbert Popp (Geschäftsführender Direktor)

SFB/FK 560: Dieter Neubert (1. Sprecher)

SFB/FK 560: Brigitte Bühler-Probst (Wissenschaftliche Koordination)

Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers

No. 3, July 2005

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Abstract

Much has been said about 9/11, but little research has been done on the impact the events had on Africa. This paper explores how Muslims in East Africa view the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Particular attention will be given to the case of Kenya. What were the effects and consequences of 9/11 for Muslim communities there? How do they perceive the “war on terrorism”, how did the changing configuration of geopolitics in the aftermath of 9/11 affect their lives and attitudes? What are the future prospects of Christian-Muslim understanding in East Africa? The paper argues that the initial sentiment of sympathy with the victims has been replaced by the rise of anti-American attitudes among the East African Muslim population. Although this tendency will probably continue as long as policy makers think of anti-Americanism in terms of an “image problem”, the impact of 9/11 on East Africa will in the long run not depend on global issues, but on the course of political and religious developments on the national and local levels.

East African Muslims after 9/11
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East African Muslims after 9/11

Introduction

Much has been said about 9/11, but little research has been done on the impact the events had on Africa.¹ In several respects, the post-9/11 era has dramatically brought to a head earlier trends connected with the “age of neoliberalism”. Democracy and capitalist market economy, the two basic ingredients of “Western civilization” which seemed to be gaining ground all over the world, suddenly appeared to be under a serious threat. To some observers, the events of 9/11 suggested that the deprived may no longer be willing to accept the gap between the rich and the poor as a matter of destiny. Moreover, the events made it clear that there was a group of radicals who were ready to fight “the West” with all available means – up to and including weapons mass destruction. In short, the world seemed to be on the edge of the often quoted “clash of civilizations”.²

In this paper, I propose to explore the myths and realities of the “clash of civilizations” by looking at the impact of 9/11 on Muslim communities in East Africa. Needless to say, as a religious setting East Africa is too complex to be covered in a short working paper. I therefore focus my attention on the case of Kenya, where I have conducted research on Islamic education over the last three years. I will also refer to Tanzania, Kenya’s southern neighbor. The questions I would like to address include how Muslims perceive the “war on terrorism”, and how the changing configuration of geopolitics in the aftermath of 9/11 has affected their lives and attitudes. I also intend to look at the future prospects of inter-religious dialogue and Christian-Muslim understanding in East Africa. As I will argue, the impact of 9/11 on East Africa will in the long run not depend on global issues, but on the course of political and religious developments on the national and local levels.

¹ Among the few studies that do address 9/11 in the African context are Nielinger 2002 and Souley 2002.

² The phrase “clash of civilizations” is usually attributed to Samuel Huntington (1993). However, the first author to popularize the idea with reference to the Muslim world was Bernard Lewis (Lewis).

9/11 and its significance from a Muslim perspective

Before addressing the East African context, I would like to make a few general remarks about the significance of 9/11 from a Muslim perspective. Many Muslims feel that 9/11 has served as a pretext to justify all kinds of suppressive measures against Muslims. Sometimes this attitude finds its expression in conspiracy theories, such as “it is impossible that the perpetrators were Muslims, as Muslims have suffered most after 9/11, while the Jews are the ones who benefited most.” Such a reading certainly stands on a weak basis. However, in a sense it reflects some of the developments that occurred in many countries all over the world in the aftermath of 9/11.

Immediately after 9/11, many observers unanimously stated that “the world has changed profoundly and will never be as it has used to be.” Supposedly, the attack on America has ushered in a new era, an era characterized by a completely different kind of warfare, pitting the free and civilized world against an invisible enemy. The obvious problem with fighting invisible enemies is how to identify them. Of course, Osama Bin Laden emerged as the face of evil and terrorism, and the photos and biographies of the 19 attackers were widely publicized. But who else belongs into the category of the new Muslim terrorists? Many Western politicians – in America as well as in Europe – were quick in pointing out that Islam as such does not condone violence and that the real enemies are those who make use of religion to justify their terrorist agenda. Thus, they proceeded to putting the blame on the so-called Muslim fundamentalists, but one important question remained unanswered: Where can we draw the border between a “good Muslim” and an “evil fundamentalist”? What are the criteria on which the distinction can be based? The ambiguity is not just a reflection of the difficulty to distinguish a “good”, peaceful Muslim from a “bad”, violent fundamentalist – it also points to the fact that 9/11 can indeed be used by interested parties – governments, political or religious organizations etc. – as a political tool against their rivals.

Another important effect of 9/11 relevant to the present discussion is the rise of anti-American attitudes among Muslims. In December 2002, the renowned Washington-based *Pew Research Center* published the first part of its *Global Attitudes Project*, entitled *What the world thinks in 2002*.³ Between July and October 2002, the project's collaborators had conducted interviews with more than 38,000 respondents in 44 countries, gathering data on how people viewed their lives, their home countries, the global development, and the United States.

Among the African countries covered in the report were Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Angola and South Africa. According to the Report, anti-American attitudes in these countries are much less widespread than in Asia, Europe, and Latin America and, as expected, in the Middle East. However, a comparison with earlier data that exists in some of the countries mentioned shows that anti-Americanism is clearly on the rise. In 1999, 94 % of the Kenyan population had a favorable opinion of the United States. By 2002, the percentage had decreased to 80 %. This is still a high percentage – yet, as the authors of the *Pew Report* emphasize, there is a clear connection between the increase in anti-American attitudes and the religious identity of the respondents: Significantly more Muslims than non-Muslims are critical of the “war against terror”, more Muslims than non-Muslims view the expansion of American culture as a threat to their religious and cultural identity. In Africa, the interviewers of the *Global Attitudes Project* selected some questions that they only directed at Muslim respondents. For example, the Muslims were asked whether they deemed suicide attacks as legitimate means to defend Islam. In Ivory Coast, 56% responded with “yes,” in Nigeria about half said “yes.” Meanwhile, in Mali, Senegal, Ghana, and Uganda the share of those agreeing was between one fourth and one third. At 18%, agreement was lowest among Muslims in Tanzania.⁴ This assessment is in line with country-specific differences in the responses to questions regarding the “war on terror” or the acceptance of American values. In countries with a large Muslim population, such as Mali or Senegal, the responses were much more negative than in countries with Muslim minorities. For example, about three fourths of all African respondents said they agreed with the “war on terror.” In Senegal, in contrast, 64% of respondents rejected the measure, and in Mali and among Nigeria's Muslims the support was significantly lower than in other

³ Pew Research Center 2002.

⁴ A summary and comments are available at <http://www.people-press.org/reports/display/php3?PageID=655> (December 3, 2002). Thus, the African results do not differ significantly from other Islamic countries covered by the survey (e.g., Indonesia, Pakistan, Jordan).

countries surveyed (within and outside Africa).⁵ On questions examining perceptions of how far American culture had spread in Africa, there was a tendency among African Muslims to show greater concern than among non-Muslims. More than 60 % of respondents in Mali, Senegal, and Tanzania, respectively, viewed the expansion of American culture as negative.⁶

Thus, the question arises of whether 9/11 has indeed to be seen as the prelude to the clash of civilizations: Will Muslims unite against the West? Will the “war against terror”-policy of West – with America leading the “coalition of the willing” – push more and more Muslims into the radical corner? Let us try to answer these questions by looking at the case of Kenya, a country where Muslims are a minority of about 25 to 30 % of the population.

Reactions to 9/11 in Kenya and beyond

In late September 2001, several European TV stations aired a documentary film focusing on the global Islamic terrorist network. One longer portion of the film examined the attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi on August 7, 1998, which claimed 256 lives, including 12 American casualties, and injured more than 5,000 people.⁷ At almost the same time, a bomb was detonated in front of the U.S. embassy in Dar es-Salaam, killing 13 people. Statements by Osama bin Laden, released later, led to the conclusion that *al-Qa'ida* was responsible for the strikes. The documentary's authors very thoroughly gathered information on the history leading up to the Nairobi attack, information that was based on CIA research. With the exception of one Palestinian, who was married to a Kenyan and lived in the African country for an extended period of time, all men involved in the planning and execution of the attack hailed from Arab countries and none had personal ties in Kenya.⁸

⁵ Pew Research Center 2002: 60-61. In Muslim countries outside Africa, the “war on terror” was, according to the *Pew Report*, also rejected by the vast majority of the population.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 63-64. These results were even higher in Germany, France, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and, of course, in the Middle East.

⁷ The figures on the number of casualties of the Nairobi bomb attack vary between 213 and 291. The number of people injured is probably higher than 5,000, though, as many of the slightly injured victims were not even treated medically (the enormous detonation caused many windows in surrounding skyscrapers and stores to burst).

⁸ In October 2001, four defendants (one Jordanian, one Saudi citizen, one American born in Lebanon, and a Tanzanian) were sentenced to life-long sentences for their participation in the attacks in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam (<http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2001-10/19/article5.shtml>, December 3, 2002).

Toward the end, the documentary featured a short interview with Ali Shee, an Islamic preacher from Mombasa. When asked what Kenyan Muslims thought of Osama bin Laden, Shee responded: "He is a hero." In the interview, Ali Shee, since the 1980s established as one of the most vocal critics of the Kenyan regime and an outspoken advocate of a radical interpretation of Islam⁹, came across as the personification of an anti-American propaganda campaign, literally drawing African Muslims into this stream. When also taking into account that pictures of Osama bin Laden in form of T-shirts, posters, or bumper stickers have been highly popular in East Africa as well as in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, and Nigeria since September 11, 2001, one is tempted to conclude that bin Laden is viewed as the leader in a global Islamic fight for liberty for African Muslims, a man the people enthusiastically want to follow. If this assessment is, indeed, accurate, then the attacks in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam could be seen as the tip of an Islamist, militant, and anti-American iceberg, and the 9/11 attacks would have triggered a feeling of satisfaction among Muslims in East Africa.

However, that impression is misleading.¹⁰ Bin Laden may have garnered admiration in Tanzania and Kenya, but he has not won the sympathy of Muslims. Similar to former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who is hardly a man with Islamist ambitions, bin Laden symbolizes for East African Muslims the resistance against the global political and economic hegemony of the United States. Bin Laden is known as someone who has dared to stand up on his own against the world's No. 1 superpower. The people praise his courage, but not his actions. They admire him as a pop icon, but not as a "holy warrior." How strongly Bin Laden's Islamic legitimization for terror is rejected in the East African region is reflected in the fact that Kenyan and Tanzanian Muslims continue to argue that the true perpetrators of the World Trade Center attack could never be Muslims, as Islam prohibits such violence.

In fact, the reactions of Kenyan Muslims to 9/11 were similar to those that followed the earlier attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi. On August 7, 1999, the first anniversary of the devastating strike, the *Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims* (SUPKEM) had a statement read in all mosques around the country, saying:

⁹ On Shee, see Bakari 1995.

¹⁰ The following paragraph is based on numerous interviews and informal discussions which the author conducted with Imams, religious scholars, and Muslim activists during field trips to Nairobi, Mombasa, Malindi and Zanzibar in August 2002 and February 2003.

What would be the reason for planting bombs in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam if not to disrupt the spread of Islam in East Africa, which has been enhanced by the existing peaceful atmosphere?¹¹

In the Nairobi-based *Jamia Mosque*, Kenya's largest, SUPKEM chairman Abdulghafur Busaidy gave a speech summarizing the painful experiences of Kenyan Muslims since the attack: sweeping suspicions of Muslims as terrorists, public defamation of Islam through the media, politicians, and church representatives, a ban of six Islamic non-governmental organizations which allegedly threatened domestic security, as well as confiscation of files and computer drives from offices of Islamic organizations.¹²

Such statements reveal two basic features of how Muslims view the present situation: First, they reflect an interpretation of the events as part of a global fight of the United States or "the West" as a whole against Islam. On the other hand, they show that Muslims in Kenya and Tanzania are, based on their own experiences, fully aware of the negative impact that such terrorist attacks have when they are carried out in the name of Islam. For many, this is a sufficient reason to condemn and reject such violent action. Therefore, 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror" did not have a mobilizing effect among East African Muslims. Instead, it revived memories of the August 7, 1998 attack, which was much more traumatic for Kenyans than the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.¹³

Therefore, from a Kenyan perspective, it can hardly be claimed that "the world has changed on 9/11". Rather, the crucial date, as far as Kenya is concerned, was indeed 8/7. In several respects, the developments after 9/11 were a repetition of what Kenyans had experienced three years earlier: More NGOs were banned (for instance the Saudi-financed *al-Haramayn*), public statements against Islam surfaced again, and, perhaps more than before, Muslims became the object of the attention of security and intelligence. Posing as a loyal US ally in the "war against terror", the Kenyan government allowed the CIA and the FBI to conduct their activities in Kenya, and Mombasa's harbor served as a base for European and United States' navies to monitor the shipping traffic on the Horn of Africa.

¹¹ *The Daily Nation* (Nairobi, August 7, 1999).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ For Muslim and non-Muslim Kenyans alike, the period following 9/11 confirmed the impression already gained since August 1998—that American lives are worth more than African ones: According to accounts widespread among Kenyans, the Israeli rescue troops, which were quickly rushed to the site, recovered the American casualties and injured first on the day of the attack, leaving the Kenyan victims behind. September 11, 2001 showed that the bomb explosion in Nairobi, despite its grave impact, did not even receive a fraction of the international public attention that the spectacular attacks against the United States got.

The prospects of “Islamic terrorism” in Kenya

Still, the question remains whether the aftermath of 9/11 could, in the long term, lead to the emergence of Islamic terrorism in East Africa. Stefan Mair, a German political analyst working for the government-sponsored “Science and Politics Foundation” (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), has recently argued that the anti-American attitudes of African Muslims might develop into an „indigenous African terrorism“ if there were leaders able to incite the Muslim public.¹⁴ This opinion is matched by the assessment in American intelligence circles that Muslim hatred of the US could lead to organized violence against American citizens and institutions.

However, a look at cases where Kenyan and Tanzanian Muslims became involved in violent confrontations over the last few years shows that violence only occurred when Muslims were the victims of repressive government measures. One example is the *Islamic Party of Kenya* (IPK) which was banned in the early 1990s and excluded from participating in the parliamentary and presidential election.¹⁵ At the time, the massive and occasionally violent police action against IPK followers triggered an extraordinary – and unrepeated – mobilization effect and solidarity among Kenyan Muslims. Similarly, the so-called Mwembechai killings, where Tanzanian security forces entered a mosque in a suburb of Dar es-Salaam and killed several Muslims on February 12, 1998, had local reasons.¹⁶

In recent years, the U.S. Middle East policy repeatedly caused irritation among Muslims in Kenya and Tanzania. Still, that never fueled escalations on a similar scale as during the IPK ban in Mombasa or during the violent confrontations between Tanzanian Muslims and security forces in Dar es-Salaam or Zanzibar. Especially since the second Intifada, there have been frequent anti-Israeli and anti-American demonstrations in Nairobi and Mombasa.¹⁷ However, apart from occasional clashes with police forces, the demonstrations did not turn into widespread violence. In mid-2002, a call for boycotting U.S. goods in Kenya was largely ignored. Lists were distributed in many mosques, urging the Muslims not to buy specific goods. But the issue was merely a temporary source of discussion.

¹⁴ Mair 2002.

¹⁵ For a thorough background on this issue, see Oded 2000.

¹⁶ Ndjozi 2000. This book is banned in Tanzania.

¹⁷ Hamadouche 2002.

On November 28, 2002, terrorists carried out two more attacks, this time near Mombasa. On the property of the *Paradise Hotel*, which is primarily visited by Israelis and located north of this coastal metropolis, explosives hidden inside a car went off, claiming 16 lives, including the three perpetrators (to this day, nothing has been revealed about their identity), and three Israeli tourists. At almost the same time at the airport in Mombasa, an Israeli charter plane with 261 passengers was shot at with two SAM-7 missiles right after take-off, with that attack just narrowly missing its target. While a report came in from Beirut, saying the previously unknown *Army of Palestine* had claimed responsibility for that attack in a letter, a government spokesman in Washington suggested that the Somali organization *al-Ittihad al-Islami*, which is linked to *al-Qa'ida*, could be responsible for the two attacks.¹⁸ As in August 1998, Kenyan Muslim officials again spoke up, condemning terrorist attacks. An official SUPKEM statement read:

Whoever planned and executed the bombing is definitely the number one enemy of Islam and Muslims of Kenya (...) We would like to assure (...) that the Muslims of Kenya will continue to co-exist with Kenyans of other faiths as they have always done.¹⁹

According to the general opinion among East African Muslims, terrorism in Kenya and Tanzania is not a problem of Islam. Instead, it is a problem of security for the state, which is responsible for protecting its borders against external attackers. For that precise reason, the population of Zanzibar – more than 90% of which is Muslim – reacted with disgruntlement when the *US State Department* issued a terror warning for Zanzibar in January 2003, with many European governments following suit. The Zanzibaris simply ruled out the possibility of an attack carried out on “their” island, and the locals working in the tourism industry suggested that the warning was a conspiracy instigated by interested parties attempting to ruin Zanzibar’s booming business with foreign visitors. Considering the widespread rejection of terrorist violence among East African Muslims, the concern in U.S. intelligence circles – that the Muslim rage could turn into organized anti-American violence – is just as far-fetched as Mair’s thesis of an “indigenous African terrorism.”

¹⁸ <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2002-11/30/article53.shtml> (December 3, 2002). Another report deals with the relatively strong Israeli presence in Kenya: Khaled Hanafi, *Mombasa a strong message to Mossad in Africa*, November 29, 2002

(<http://www.islamonline.org/english/news/2002-11/29/article33.shtml>, December 3, 2002).
¹⁹ Quoted from <http://www.islamonline.org/english/news/2002-11/29/article40.shtml> (December 3, 2002). *Al-Ittihad al-Islami* is on the list that was created by the U.S. government after 9/11. Listed here are all terrorist organizations that are viewed as potential targets in the “war on terrorism.” See also Hamadouche 2002.

In order to tackle the problem of mounting anti-Americanism, the US government has pursued a two-dimensional strategy in Africa since September 11, 2001. On the one hand, it has intensified its intelligence efforts in many sub-Saharan states.²⁰ On the other hand, it has sought ways to counter the negative image that Muslims have of America. This strategy was based on the assumption that the tensions merely had to do with an “image problem” which could be solved with a public relations campaign.

The US embassy in Nairobi assumed a leading role in these efforts. Members of the *Public Affairs Section* developed an Internet site providing regular updates on the “war on terror.” At the same time, the content clearly stresses that these measures do not target Islam but terrorist groups which unjustly use and cite Islam for their purposes. The peaceful coexistence of confessions in the United States is also described thoroughly on the site, and it is attributed to the Islam-friendly position of the government.²¹ At the same time, the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) tried to establish contacts with Muslim charity organizations, in order to explore the possibility of cooperation to provide support for needy Muslims.²²

However, it remains doubtful that the U.S. measures described here will be crowned with success. It is unlikely that the causes of anti-Americanism can be addressed by launching an image campaign, especially in view of the fact that the activities of the secret services continue to stir the mistrust among African Muslims. The anti-American mood among Kenyan Muslims notwithstanding, the decisive developments are not those which occur on the global or international level. Rather, it is the national and local level that will be crucial for the future of the Muslim minority in Kenya, as well as the prospects of Christian-Muslim understanding in the area.

²⁰ In Kenya, the CIA worked closely with the national intelligence services (Hamadouche 2002). Numerous U.S. diplomatic institutions also started gathering information on Islam in the respective countries.

²¹ <http://usembassy.state.gov/nairobi/wwwhtoc.html> (December 3, 2002).

²² Hamadouche 2002. The *Public Affairs Section* of the U.S. embassy also tried to initiate a cooperation with the Nairobi-based Islamic radio station *Iqra FM* (*ibid.*).

Local vs. global matters

As we have seen, one of the major effects of 9/11 has been the growing sense among Muslims in East Africa of belonging to the *umma*, i.e. the worldwide community of Muslims. They closely follow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the course of events in Iraq and Afghanistan. The “solidarity with our Muslims brothers and sisters” has occupied an important place in the religious discourse, both formal (such as sermons, *Muslim* newspapers) and informal. Nevertheless, local and national matters are (still) more pressing than global issues. The representatives of organizations such as the Kenyan Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) or the Council of Imams and Preachers (CIP) regularly lament the discrimination of Muslims in the education system, as well as the Christian missionary conversion campaigns, which, at times, are aggressive and usually tolerated by the government.²³ Other issues that are at stake in debates among Muslims relate to the position of women, the correct religious practice, matters of ritual, and the question of whether certain beliefs and practices of Kenyan Muslims have to be considered as “innovations” (Arabic, *bida'*, sg. *bid'a*), one of the major themes in reformist discourse.

Two recent topics that have dominated the religious-political field in Kenya are the position of the so-called *Kadhi* courts in the new Kenyan constitution and the Anti-Terrorism Bill. Both matters can be said to be of crucial importance for the future development of the Muslim minority in the country. The row over the *Kadhi* courts basically evolves around the question of whether Muslims should be allowed to continue to decide matters of family law (basically marriage, divorce, inheritance) according to the *shari'a*, as they have used to do since the time of the British Protectorate (1895). Even though the Anti Terrorism Bill is directly linked to global developments in the aftermath of 9/11, the Kenyan debate clearly evolves around the local implications of the new legislation which many Muslims see as targeting their community more than any other religious and political group in the country.

²³ In this regard, the situation, as it was described in 1993 by Ali Mazrui (one of the country's most well-known Muslim intellectuals), has not changed much (Mazrui 1993).

In the present political situation, Kenya is at the crossroads: Either the mounting tensions will be contained with Muslims being granted the status of a respected religious minority, or Muslims are likely to show an increasing tendency to withdraw from national politics. What is at stake here is not the “clash of civilizations”, but rather a process of negotiation of questions of inclusion and exclusion, religious tolerance and political participation.

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