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SOME REFLECTIONS ON 3rd INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ISLAMIC CIVILISATION AND CULTURE BUJUMBURA, BURUNDI, 9-12 December 2014

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On the 9-12 December 2014 an international conference was held in Bujumbura, the capital of the Republic of Burundi. It was the Third International Conference on Islamic Civilisation and Culture and the Omani Role in the Countries of the African Great Lakes. The previous two conferences on the theme Islamic civilisation and culture in East Africa were held in the Sultanate of Oman and the island of Zanzibar.

Since the 1960s when not only African history in general but also the history of Islam and Christianity in Africa were recognised as academic disciplines in their own right, an impressive corpus of literature has been produced on both religions. It was a founding age for African studies. The new research agenda moved from past European perceptions of Christianity and Islam in Africa and by posing new questions attempted to present a meaningful history of the two religions and portray the religious experience of African Christians and Muslims over time and space. The interest in the religious factor in African societies which has often played an important role in the development of the African peoples led to the study of the patterns of change in African traditional religions, in new African religions with a partly Christian basis, independent churches that split off from the European missions and of religious reform in Islam. New African journals were started and continued to multiply. A milestone in the study of African religions was the inauguration in 1967 of the *Journal of Religion in Africa* and the publication of a great number of well-researched articles and books trying to study and describe the religious experience of African Christians and Muslims by placing emphasis on African Christian and Muslim identity and African initiatives and experiences. The scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s was enriched by a series of important conferences devoted to new themes and new approaches to the study of religion in Africa, including attempts “to instill a stronger and more

critically exacting historical dimension into the whole subject of African religious studies".¹ African religious studies have flourished ever since by embracing a multitude of major themes. Current interests and concerns have been reflected in the pages of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. A rich and varied literature on African Christian history and the anthropology of Christianity in Africa has been written by historians, scholars of religion, anthropologists and social scientists.

Since the 1960s the study of African Islam has also flourished and an impressive and influential corpus of literature has been produced by historians on Islam in Africa as well as on the anthropology of Islam in Africa.² There has been a debate for quite some time over the nature of African Islam. Africa has been often viewed as passive, simply receiving Islam, not as a contributing source or as an active ingredient in the construction of Islam.³ The persistent tendency in authoritative literature is to perceive Africa as being outside normative Islam and marginal to the Islamic world this perspective has been criticised by many students of Islam in Africa.⁴ Scholars in Africa and outside the continent have attempted to study the processes of conversion to Islam and outline some patterns that can be found in the expansion of Islam across vast regions of sub-Saharan Africa, to reconstruct the dynamics of religious conversion and examine the diverse social, political and economic effects of conversion to Islam upon the peoples. The spread of Islam in Africa has been a long-drawn out process revealing over the centuries a plurality of manifestations of Islamisation. Islam in sub-Saharan Africa can be described as a history of several phases

- 1 The historical study of African religion was initiated and pioneered by Terence Ranger. For a survey of the evolution of African Christian studies, of major themes, conferences, institutions and personalities, see HASTINGS, Adrian "African Christian Studies, 1967-1999: Reflections of an Editor". In: LUDWIG, Frieder – ADOGAME, Afe, ed. *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag 2004, pp. 265-274.
- 2 John Spencer Trimmingham has greatly contributed to the study of Islam in Africa with his extensive surveys of Islam in different parts of the continent, e.g. TRIMMINGHAM J.S., *Islam in West Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959 or TRIMMINGHAM J.S., *Islam in East Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, TRIMMINGHAM J.S., *The Influence of Islam upon Africa*, London: Longman, 1968. For a summary and an assessment see TAYOB, Abdulkader, "John Spencer Trimmingham (*1904) on Islam in Africa: Integrative or Isolationist?" In: LUDWIG, Frieder – ADOGAME, Afe, ed. *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag 2004, pp. 237-244. See also SOARES Benjamin S. "Notes on the Anthropological Study of Islam and Muslim Societies in Africa." *Culture & Religion*, vol. 1, No.2, 2000, pp. 277-285.

and types of Islam. To a long stream of many important and stimulating case studies and articles, local and national histories of Islam on the African continent produced in past decades, some generalising studies could be added. However, contrary to Northern and Western parts of Africa that have been well researched and documented, the history of Islam in Eastern and Southern Africa has lagged behind and it has not been until recently well studied. The production of a comprehensive one-volume survey edited by Nehemiah Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, which treated the history of Islam in Africa on a continent-wide scale, attempted to redress the balance between West and East and South Africa.³

African studies, African history, African Christian studies as well as the study of Islam in Africa, have been to a great extent dominated and even defined by non-African scholars.⁴

To shift the focus and create ample space for Africa-based scholars to present results of their researches the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) based in Istanbul has in the past years managed to organise, in collaboration with the scholarly institutions in different parts of the African continent, several large-scale academic events and international conferences devoted to the history and the socio-cultural impact of Islam in Africa. The main objective was to contribute to the existing reservoir of knowledge on the history and socio-cultural heritage of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara Desert and of the religious and cultural impact of Islam on the region. The main objective was to contribute to the existing reservoir of knowledge on the history and socio-cultural heritage of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara Desert and of the religious and cultural impact of Islam on the region.

The first of the series of large-scale international symposia that brought together a number of well-known scholars and distinguished researchers affiliated with universities, international organizations and cultural and educational institutions from around the world was organised by IRCICA in Dakar, Senegal between 27 and 30 Decem-

3 LEVTZION, Nehemia & POWELS, Randall L. (Eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000. 591pp.

4 This is not to claim that the research is not carried out in Africa and there are Departments for the Study of Religions at most African Universities. Many universities and research institutions in Africa, however, suffer from the lack of funding.

ber 1996, on the theme “Islamic Civilisation in West Africa”⁵ It was followed by an International symposium on “Islamic Civilisation in Eastern Africa” which was organised jointly by IRCICA and the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) and held in Kampala, Uganda between 15 and 17 December 2003. The third symposium aimed to build upon and expand the legacy of the two previous academic events was on “Islamic Civilisation in Southern Africa” and was held in Johannesburg, South Africa between 1–3 September 2006.⁶ In the years that followed the Sultanate of Oman and its National Records and Archives Authority joined in and started to organise regular international conferences on Islam and Islamic civilisation and the Omani role in Eastern Africa.

The conference held in December 2014 in Bujumbura, Burundi, was organised by the Sultanate of Oman in collaboration with two Universities, Université de Burundi, and l`Université de la paix et de la reconciliation alebo Peace and Reconciliation University. The conference was attended by experts from Asia, Africa and Europe, and one delegate from the USA, the Adelphi University in the New York State. The participants arrived from several Egyptian universities, including Al-Azhar, from both Burundian universities, from Algeria, Tunisia, the Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, both mainland and the island of Zanzibar, Yemen, Iraq, Great Britain, Germany and Slovakia.

The most numerous delegation came from the Sultanate of Oman. Apart from active participants, Oman was represented by several scientific and cultural state and religious institutions, members of the organising committee and some Omanis having historical relations with Burundi and some neighbouring countries, who were born in Burundi, they themselves or their relatives lived there or are still liv-

5 The academic event was organized under the patronage of His Excellency President of Senegal, Abdou Diouf.

6 Proceedings of the International Symposia were published by IRCICA as *La civilisation islamique en Afrique de l`ouest*. Communications du Symposium International tenu les 27-30 Décembre 1996 Dakar, Sénégal, ed. par Samba DIENG. Istanbul, IRCICA 1999; Proceedings of the International Symposium on *ISLAMIC CIVILISATION IN EASTERN AFRICA*, Kampala, Uganda 15-17 December 2003. Istanbul, IRCICA 2006. Proceedings of the international symposium Islamic Civilisation in Southern Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa [1-3 September 2006]. Editors: Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana) and Suleiman Essop Dangor (University of KwaZulu Natal). Istanbul: IRCICA 2009. The last International Symposium on *ISLAMIC CIVILISATION IN EASTERN AFRICA* was held in Zanzibar in September 2013.

ing in the country. The history of the relationship of East Africa with Yemen, Oman and Hadramaut is very long, leading to the spread of Islam, Kiswahili, Arabic language and script and the rise of literacy and literature. The study of Islam in Eastern Africa reveals a great deal of complexity as well as the pluralistic character of Islamic development within this region. A complexity in the conversion patterns and the processes of conversion can be distinguished everywhere in Africa or in sub-Saharan Africa leading to a variety of religious and cultural syntheses.

The processes of Islamic conversion were incorporated within the historical process of the development of African societies. Like Christianity, Islam entered the African continent during the earliest days of its existence, spread, and has in the course of time been adapted in many different ways to suit many different contexts. There were different conversion patterns or models of the process of Islamisation, a gradual blending took place between African and Islamic elements making a new configuration which assumed different forms in different areas. Islam meshed with pre-existing religions in East Africa in many different ways rather than necessarily confronting them. The introduction of Islam meant both the religious change and the accompanying cultural change, Islamisation in the African context brought about changes in the material sphere, economy, society and politics.

Many of these problems and issues were raised and discussed at the conference. The conference was dominated by males, apart from the present author who presented a paper entitled *Encountering Islam in the Kingdoms of Buganda and Bunyoro: From Orality to Literacy and the Rise of Historical Writing*, there was only one other lady presenter from Oman (the Ministry of Education) who in her paper analysed *The Political Role of Women in East Africa*. The vast majority of participants were Muslims, the only two non-Muslims and by chance both Roman Catholics, were archaeologist Prof. Timothy Insoll from Manchester University, who in his contribution outlined *Archaeological Perspectives on Contacts between the East African Coast and the African Great Lakes/East African Interior, 1200-1900 CE*, and the present author. Dr. Abdin Chande, originally from Uganda, now Ass. Professor of African and Islamic Studies at the Adelphi University in the US, who in his paper tried to analyse *Contributions of Omanis in Tanga (Coastal Tanzania) and in the Interior Communities of the East*

African Great Lakes, is a Muslim. The same is Dr. Ridder H.Samsom, from the Netherlands, now based at the University of Hamburg, who converted to Islam to be able to marry his colleague Sauda Barwani Sheikh from Zanzibar. His paper touched on The Influence of Hamed bin Muhammed Al Marjabi (+1840-1905 AD) on Spreading Language and Islamic Cultures in East and Central Africa.

Burundi is a Christian country, out of the roughly 10 million inhabitants 65% were Roman Catholics, from 10 to 15% were Protestants, mostly Anglicans, and only 3 to 5% of the population were Muslims. But in the audience sat representatives of all religions, Churches and denominations present in Burundi and the neighbouring countries. Pierre Nkurunziza, the President of Burundi, and some members of his Government and the Parliament attended the conference, and despite the topic of the conference – Islam and Islamic civilisation and culture in the Great Lakes region, all state and religious representatives who took an active part in the conference, including the Archbishop of Bujumbura or Ombudsman of Burundi Dr. Mohammad Rukara Khalfan, a Muslim, talked of religious tolerance, peaceful co-existence and inter-religious dialogue, condemning religious extremism, terrorism and violence.

The post-independence history of Burundi was full of hatred, violence and armed conflicts. The conference no doubt contributed to the better understanding of the role of Islam in East and Central Africa, the spirit of religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence and ecumenism prevailing at the conference enhanced its impact and value.