



BRIEFINGS

RESTORING THE CULTURE OF PEACE IN ISLAMIC EAST AND NORTHEAST AFRICA

JESSE BENJAMIN

Introduction

The word 'Islam' is known to derive from the root word for 'submission' or 'peace'. In either case, the religion is correctly associated with the concept of peace. However, mainstream discourses in the West unfortunately and inappropriately often associate Islam with terrorism and violence.¹ This is now also frequently the case in East Africa, where unprecedented attacks by militants in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, and later on the coast of Kenya, have raised tensions in the region. Egypt has also experienced extremist Islamic violence in recent decades, some of it local and some part of global movements. Ethiopia and the United States have recently justified military incursions into Somalia with claims of fighting local factions backed by al-Qaeda in the 'global war on terror' declared by former president George W. Bush. This essay's purpose is to address this shift in perceptions of Islam, due to isolated but sensational acts of violence and changing global politics, specifically as they have economically, socially, and politically impacted East and northeast Africa. The goal is to discern the communal social forces at play in the region and the prospects for peace and reconciliation there. The diversity and complexity of Islam in this region need to be better understood.

The erasure of Islam's important and largely peaceful history in this region is central to the current recasting. This eclipse of memory allows for both local and global scapegoating of Islam and suppresses the social forces that have displaced and continue to displace Muslim communities in Africa (Mazrui & Shariff 1994, Mamdani 2004). By generally denying Islamic histories and especially by writing demonising histories, which associated Islam with chattel slavery for example, 19th and 20th century colonial powers found it easier to leave areas with large Muslim populations underdeveloped. Widespread landlessness, economic and political displacement, cultural neglect and defamation ensued – legacies that stretch to the present. Today, outside agitators – whether Western, Islamic or other – find their best prospects for co-option and manipulation to be among the most marginalised and oppressed peoples. It is in addressing these broader issues of misrepresentation and inequality that the best chances for cohesion, peace and stability in the region lie. As long as African societies remain full of impoverished and desperate people and elites remain willing to maintain power by fomenting social divisions, volatility will persist.

Connecting Tenuous Threads: Personal and Political

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in primarily Islamic communities, first in Israel's Negev and Egypt's coastal Sinai Bedouin communities and then in Mijikenda and Swahili communities along Kenya's coast. In the past decade, the Egyptian and Kenyan communities in which I lived and studied were subject to terrorist bombings linked directly or indirectly to al-Qaeda. While Israel and

even Egypt's convention centres at Sharm el-Sheik and Taba were the targets of repeated attacks reflecting the region's broader conflicts, the 1998 bombing of United States embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam did not seem to arise from local or regional conflicts. More surprising still were the attacks on Kikambala in 2002 and Dahab in 2006, both budget tourist destinations known for their tranquility. Dahab is a secluded village on the central east coast of Sinai's Gulf of Aqaba and Kikambala is a rural community on the Kenyan coast north of Mombasa. It was these later attacks that provoked intriguing questions.

What linked these distant and disparate communities? Both were small, somewhat isolated communities of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. Both had attracted tourists to their beautiful beaches, pristine coral reefs and serene environments. With little infrastructure and only small hotels and restaurants, both presented soft targets for would-be insurgents. But why had these calm beach communities been sucked into the 'war on terror'?

Both Dahab and Kikambala had local communities that had been victimised and subsequently displaced during 19th century colonialism at the hands of the British Empire. Both were largely Islamic communities whose roots purportedly trace to the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed. Both villages were in areas that had been neglected and underdeveloped during the colonial and post-colonial eras, when power and resources were centred in capital cities, Cairo and Nairobi, in the interior, but which had recently seen economic resurgence with the rise of global middle-class tourism.² Better-placed entrepreneurs from the national heartlands and international investors quickly arrived and displaced struggling local populations from this new source of income (Rabinowitz 1985; Lavie 1990; Mazrui & Shariff 1995). Both were frequented by 'hippie' or back-packing adventure tourists, mostly youthful low-budget travellers willing to sleep in huts, eat

local food and interact with local people. Both villages hosted large numbers of Israelis, who were at once sufficiently affluent and culturally disposed to travel, ironically in many cases to recuperate from the emotional rigours of mandatory military service. Finally, this combination of marginalised local people, Israeli and Western tourists and minimal infrastructure created an opening for global al-Qaeda networks to recruit neighbourhood people into their operations.³ But how had this come to be?

Islam in East and Northeast African History

Arabs, and Muslims in particular, are commonly held responsible in East Africa for the horrors of the local slave trade, and this is the basis for much of the xenophobic reaction to these communities.⁴ Most of this stems from the colonial rewriting of history (Kusimba 1999), and its perpetuation in colonial school texts, modern popular culture and media (Mazrui & Shariff 1994). However, the facts of history do not support this distorted view. Africa as a whole and East Africa in particular had the most ancient of cultural and economic ties to Asia, spanning at least 10 millennia. Borderland peoples such as Phoenicians or Arabs often played central roles in this commerce. Jews once facilitated these early culture contacts, as would Coptic Christians and Muslims in later times. From its earliest origins in the seventh century, Islam spread quickly along existing trade routes across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, solidifying connections between the Middle East and Africa (Kusimba 1999). Egypt's Sinai Bedouin and a few of coastal Kenya's Swahili were among the earliest converts to the new religion. In Egypt, and even more so in East Africa, Islam reached the region as a faith practised by a minority of the local peoples, with conversion taking place gradually. Rather than colonising, Islam blended into the complex local fabric of coastal African societies and participated in their flourishing cultures and economies (Kusimba 1999).

When Europeans started writing global histories of this region in the 18th and 19th centuries, they found it necessary to deny African history in order to bolster their assumed superiority and therefore their right to colonise (Eze 1997). The undeniable evidence of history and civilisation, especially in monumental architecture such as the Great Pyramids of Giza and the stone mosques and houses of the Swahili, led to a grudging acceptance of Islam's historical presence in the area, but Africa's cultural history was still denied. Encoded as an inferior Oriental culture (Said 1978), Islam was seen as colonising and civilising African peoples, preparing the way for European rule. Europe achieved power in East Africa through military conquest and the institution of Atlantic-style plantation chattel slavery in the early 19th century (Cooper 1977, 1980). But Europe presented itself as abolitionist, claiming it needed to colonise Africa in order to stop the Arab slave trade, which it naturalised back in time to antiquity.

While a small trade in people pre-dated Europe's arrival, this was largely in the form of temporary, non-chattel debt-bondage. Europe introduced Atlantic-style chattel slavery with the co-opted assistance of regional Islamic elites such as the Mazrui and the Omani (Cooper 1977, 1980). Slavery and colonialism were therefore easily blamed on Arabs and Muslims, even as this was used as a pretext for European colonisation. Archaeology and history have only in recent decades overturned this perspective and shown Islam to have been a minor, non-dominant participant in East Africa's multicultural and cosmopolitan social fabric (Allen 1993; Kusimba 1999). For more than 2 000 years, Arabs have participated peacefully in East African societies, and for Islam the same is generally true over most of its history. However, during the past two centuries of colonial social reorganisation, racial and ethnic hierarchies have come to dominate the landscape, and they still shape conflicts and divisions of resources in the present.

Under British hegemony, a racial hierarchy was instituted, with white Europeans at the apex and 'black' Africans at the bottom. Arabs and Muslims, along with south Asians and in some cases Jews, occupied strategic middle positions and were given privileges where they often wielded power over the masses of people at the bottom (Benjamin 2006). In East Africa, the Muslim population included the coastal Swahili peoples, many of whom managed to find their way into the elite and sub-elite strata. Whole communities were divided by designation either as Africans forced into restrictive 'native reserves' or as Arabs allowed to engage in commercial activity in urban centres. Emerging class hierarchies closely mirrored, and still do, these socially constructed racial categories. Kenya's experience in this regard was closely reflected throughout East and northeast Africa. Tanzania saw almost the same process play out. Many Somalis and Ethiopians started to choose genealogies that stressed their Semitic or Arab rather than African roots. Egyptians, too, began to express feelings of superiority to their nation's geographically and economically marginal peoples, the Bedouin and Nubians, both regarded as more 'primitive' and/or more 'African' or 'black'. Today, as mainland Egyptians displace Bedouin from the growing tourist economy, their perceived right to do so is usually expressed in overtly racial and evolutionist tones.⁵ Similarly, in Kenya, the displacement of coastal Muslim and non-Muslim Mijikenda and Swahili from the expanding commercial sector by upcountry Kenyans and global entrepreneurs is frequently justified in openly xenophobic terminology.

Inequality in the Post-colonial Present

Since most countries in the two regions achieved national independence between the 1920s and 1960s, much has remained the same. The primary characteristic of regional social inequality is its continuity

from the colonial era. This is true globally, and especially so in East Africa. Even after direct European rule came to an end, Western businesses and financial institutions have remained in the ascendant. The mass of African people throughout the region continue to earn less than \$200 a year, while small numbers of local elites have joined in the resource extraction and tourism that are primarily responsible for wealth creation. In Kenya, independence has seen the rise of new ethnic hegemonies associated with dictatorial national governments. Some Kikuyu and other privileged ethnic communities are now able to join the economically privileged in displacing coastal peoples, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In Egypt, the long-ignored Bedouin at the margins of the national territory now face competition from both the Nile Valley and beyond for control of the new tourist market. Both coastal communities were neglected during the colonial era of plantation export agriculture, but have returned to economic centrality as global middle-class tourism was made possible by affordable air travel (Cohen 2004). What is new is that the capitalist classes now include slightly more local nationals. What has not changed is the fabric of the social hierarchies and the ways in which they are deployed to benefit those at or near the pinnacle.

What is the current situation? Bedouin in the Sinai Peninsula today are among the most impoverished citizens of Egypt, and are frequently subjected to xenophobic attacks by their countrymen.⁶ With less political power and fewer schools and hospitals than everyone else in their country, Bedouin are easily displaced from their communally owned coastal lands, and from the nascent economies of tourism and its adjuncts, such as camel safaris, snorkelling and diving, transportation and even informal sector economies like the drug trade. The traditional economy of the Bedouin centred on dates, animal husbandry and Haj transport, and trade was transformed during the post-1967

Israeli occupation of Sinai. Israeli tourists flocked to the nearby coral reefs, and many Bedouin learned Hebrew in an economy that was mostly left to Bedouin to develop. After the Camp David Accords and the return of Sinai to Egypt, this remote area had increased strategic significance for Egypt as well as a new and growing economy in sync with Egypt's larger tourism arena. Outsiders to the Sinai, especially Egyptians from the Nile Valley regions, but also Israelis and Western entrepreneurs, have largely displaced the local Bedouin from much of the profitable tourism industries, but this has not stopped a reorientation of many Bedouin from their hinterland activities toward seeking their fortunes at the Sinai coast. The state has begun destroying the burgeoning sprawl of unregistered buildings in an effort to push the swelling Bedouin population and its ramshackle, spontaneous settlements back into the central desert, or at least to make them conform to modern building practices.

It is little wonder, in this climate of upheaval, that several Bedouin youth were recruited into the series of bombings along the coast, which was largely the work of Nile Valley Islamic militants bent on disrupting the tourism economy and bringing down the pro-American and pro-Israeli government of Hosni Mubarak. This in turn has justified further state repression of Bedouin *en masse*, intensifying communal divisions.

Along Kenya's coast, matters are not much better. While high-ranking government officials in Nairobi get caught in corruption scandals involving lucrative coastal resort hotels and illegal land grabs remain the norm, coastal tourism and its adjunct economies fall further into outsiders' hands. Here, as in Egypt, the economy has shifted from primacy of colonialism and export agriculture to tourism, and with this has come a sort of gold rush of economic opportunity drawing in upcountry Kenyans and Western and Middle Eastern investors. As the original Swahili-speakers

of the coastal urban centres are increasingly displaced, the other native peoples of the coast – the more numerous but less powerful Mijikenda, Pokomo, Bajuni, Taita and Sanye – are even more marginalised (Faulkner 2006). Few of the latter communities have representatives in academia or parliament to advocate their communal perspectives as Swahili and Arab citizens do. Swahili scholars thus understandably lament the loss of their former glory (Mazrui & Shariff 1994; Mazrui & Mazrui 1998), but the voices of other coastal peoples remain, with few exceptions, less identifiable (Mkangi 1995; Benjamin 2007). Furthermore, the role of Swahilis and Arabs in marginalising and disempowering other coastal peoples in both economic and ethno-racial or religious terms remains unacknowledged in Swahili writings. Many of the non-Swahili peoples of coastal Kenya are also Muslims, but there is a racial divide within the Islamic community characterised by an enduring priority of status given to Arab descent and custom (Mkangi 1995; Kusimba 1999; Benjamin 2006; Faulkner 2006), even though this reflects only the past 150 years or so of history – the period during which British colonial identity divisions were gradually but institutionally imposed. As multiparty electoral advocates struggled in the 1990s to undo three decades of dictatorship, and at the beginning of 2008 as electoral fraud descended into post-electoral violence, class and race fault lines at the coast and throughout the nation were mobilised by elites hoping to escalate the state of unrest.

Somalis and Ethiopians also frequently emphasise their non-African genealogical origins, while colonial racial constructions govern many current social and political conflicts. This is particularly pressing as these nations recover from the militarisation and devastation of Cold War divide-and-conquer politics. Recently, the now stateless Somalia has seen proxy wars with U.S.-funded Ethiopians driving suspected militants and many refugees across the border into Kenya, where their

displaced status makes them instantly suspect and even subject to extraordinary 'rendition' (HRW 2007). Similar social cleavages lie beneath the conflicts in Sudan – in Darfur and between the north and south – both reaching genocidal proportions and both shaped by religious and ethnic formulations in the wake of colonial history (De Waal 2007). In each of these societies, a complex picture of degrees and layers of marginalisation and disaffection emerges.

Conclusion: Social Justice as the Basis for Peace

The best hope for peace and coexistence in East and northeast Africa's multicultural societies lies in increased historical understanding. Decolonising history and reformulating the received race and class coordinates of intercultural communication are a priority. A better understanding of Islam's long and positive history and its more recent implication in European colonial machinations – perhaps achieved through an overhaul of educational materials and epistemologies – will assist non-Muslims to overcome xenophobic and reductionist stereotypes while helping Muslims become more introspective about their inter-communal tensions. With increased local, regional and Western understanding of and sympathy for Islamic communities' recent and historical grievances, greater room for internal self-criticism may be opened among Islamic communities. Without internal dialogue and social, economic and political healing, the most oppressed communities at the outskirts of African and Asian societies will remain susceptible to manipulation by extremist global movements, both Western and Islamic.

Mahmood Mamdani has documented the ways in which Western extremists and intelligence operatives were at least as active in this regard as Islamic movements, some of which they had actually created (2004). Without dispossession and

desperation, and with social harmony and greater economic opportunity, the chance of a just peace increases greatly. The process must start with rethinking history and culminate in social movements that campaign for equality and redress in contemporary society.

It remains to be seen to what extent the Obama Administration's stated goal of reformulating the image and role of the United States in the world, and especially the Islamic world, succeeds. Will the U.S. stay committed to the Rumsfeldian establishment of AFRICOM and its historic support for regional strongmen and their dictatorial regimes,⁷ or will it open a new era in which the principles of humanitarianism, development and human rights are respected? At the local and regional levels, will historical social processes be acknowledged, studied and transformed, or will they continue to be swept under the rug in order to allow current elites their best chances at self-preservation? From this perspective, can colonial categories of 'invented' and artificially separated identities be reformulated and renegotiated, or will a free-market of communal power struggles remain the order of the day? In short, can critical and historically informed multiculturalism become a foundation for policy in the 21st century? If it can, we can look forward to a flourishing of culture and politics in East Africa and the Middle East, and the re-establishment of historically positive ties between these most ancient of cultural regions.

JESSE BENJAMIN is Associate Professor in Sociology and Criminal Justice and is affiliated with the African and African Diaspora Studies and the American Studies programmes at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, Georgia. His research focuses on ethnicity, historiography and identity in East Africa and the Middle East, and critical race theory globally.

Endnotes

¹ In addition to its geographic connotations stemming from the rise of Western Europe and its colonial settler societies, by 'the West' I refer to what Said (1978) and Mudimbe (1988) describe as a relational discursive and epistemological construction.

² Tourism became the largest economic sector in both nations in the 1980s, and in both cases centred primarily on previously remote coastal beach locations preferred by Western tourists.

³ These towns seem to reflect broader patterns, with the exception of Israeli tourists, now manifest in places as disparate as Jordan, Algeria and Somalia, and for this reason are of even greater concern.

⁴ This is documented in East Africa at the levels of popular culture, mass education and the very writing of history itself (Mazrui & Shariff 1994). The authors relate the instructive case of James Mbotela, who claimed to have been enslaved by brutal Arab slave traders and survived to tell his disturbing tale, but the tale was in fact a fabrication of the colonial education system that nonetheless remained central in primary school texts throughout Kenya until recent years. Blaming Arabs and Muslims for the slave trade in East Africa was consciously used by the British to justify their encroaching colonial administration, displacing Swahili and Omani suzerainty in the late 19th century, when in fact the chattel trade system was intense but brief, a product of British, Omani and Banyan Indian collaboration (Cooper 1977, 1980).

⁵ Lavie (1990) and my own field notes (1991) reveal a generalised ethno-racial derision expressed toward remotely located Bedouin and Nubian Egyptians, as well as Sudanese migrants.

⁶ With a pastoralist economy and different ethno-cultural traditions, Bedouin are easily seen as the 'Other,' usually following primitivist tropes, by many Egyptians and Westerners. Many Egyptian informants spoke to me of the Bedouin's 'improper' practice of Islam, while Bedouin countered that they were among the first converts during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammed. Israelis tend more toward a romanticised view of Bedouin as Abrahamic forebears living in the past and mostly appropriate to museums.

⁷ The controversial unifying of the African continent into a single Pentagon military command for greater U.S. focus, supposedly for humanitarian missions, but in the eyes of African critics a possible new front in the 'war on terror' and the West's quest to control oil and other strategic resources (Volman & Benjamin 2007). Only one African nation, the former U.S. colony Liberia, has signed up to AFRICOM.

References

- Allen, J.** 1993, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon*, London: James Curry.
- Benjamin, J.** 2006, 'Legacies of Race and Racism at the Coast of East Africa: Historiography and the Suppression of Subaltern Epistemology' in *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin* 72, Spring; 2007, 'Representation in Kenya, its Diaspora and Academia: Colonial Legacies in Constructions of Knowledge about Kenya's Coast' in *Journal of Global Initiatives* 2:2.
- Cohen, E.** 2004, *Contemporary Tourism: Diversity and Change*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Cooper, F.** 1977, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, New Haven: Yale University Press; 1980, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890 - 1925*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.
- De Waal, A.** 2007 ed., *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, Cambridge: Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University.
- Eze, E.** 1997, *Race and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Faulkner, M.** 2006, *Overtly Muslim, Covertly Boni: Competing Calls of Religious Allegiance on the Kenya Coast*, Leiden: Brill.
- HRW (Human Rights Watch)** 2007, 'Letter to U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert M. Gates on Somalia,' Human Rights Watch; available at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/12/12/usint17552.htm>, accessed December 12.
- Kusimba, C.** 1999, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*, New Delhi: AltaMira Press.
- Lavie, S.** 1990, *The Poetics of Military Occupation*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mamdani, M.** 2004, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Mazrui, A. & Shariff, I.** 1994, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People*, Trenton: New Jersey.
- Mazrui, A. A. & Mazrui, A. M.** 1998, *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mkangi, K.** 1995, 'The Perception of Islam by the Mijikenda of Kenya Coast' in Bakari, M. & Yahya, S. eds, *Islam in Kenya: Proceedings of the National Seminar on Contemporary Islam in Kenya*, Nairobi: Mewa Publications.
- Mudimbe, V.** 1988, *The Invention of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rabinowitz, D.** 1985, 'Themes in the Economy of the Bedouin of South Sinai in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries' in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 17:211-228.
- Said, E.** 1978, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Volman, D. & Benjamin, J.** 2007 eds, 'AFRICOM Special Issue: Analysis and Activism' in *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin* 78, Winter.