

Factors Influencing the Spread of Islam in the Eastern Region of Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

The Islam religion has been steadily growing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) especially in the Eastern region of the country which has for a long period been known to be a Christian dominated region. With the increasing Muslim populations, it therefore becomes a crucial subject for research given the allegation that the spread of Islam in DRC has been ignored by scholars, due to the low population of Muslims in the country. This paper looks into the factors that influence growth of Islam in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A descriptive research design was adopted for the study making use of questionnaire guide and interview schedule for data collection. Collected data was descriptively analyzed and presented using frequency tables. The study found out that people who do not earn much money (poor) are targeted by Islam through employment offers. The study also established that migrant Muslims deliberately reached out to convert the non-Muslims to Islam by giving aid and support through sponsoring projects such as construction of mosques. The study therefore concludes that the spread of Islam is slowly growing in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is because Muslims have well-calculated strategies of growth, individual Muslims are zealous and empowered to spread Islam and that Islam has financially integrated its faith such that their operations are well funded.

Keywords: Islam, Religion, Growth, Eastern DRC, Islamic spread, Mosque.

1. Introduction

The spread of Islam in DRC is high in the Eastern region, which includes towns like Bukavu, Goma, Butembo, and Beni. Traditionally, this region has been known as a Christian dominated area with very few Muslims. This is changing and Goma town is especially manifesting a strong Islamic movement to the extent that the number of mosques has significantly increased more rapidly than any period before. This trend has however not been studied by scholars to establish the reasons for the quick spread. One of the reasons for which Christian scholars in the region have not been so much interested in Islam is the assumption that DRC is an overwhelmingly Christian country with only less than 10% of Muslims countrywide. If that was the attitude of the Christians for the Northern Africa, the cradle of the Christendom but now the breeding ground for Islam, then there is need for research on Islam in the region.

Muslims largely believe in the practise of brotherhood; Islam teaches the principle of community, the *Umma*. The Qur'an (Sura, 49 *Ayah*, 10) elaborates on this brotherhood. Those who embrace Islam therefore, are regarded as brothers and sisters in their uniting faith in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad as well. According to Mvumbi, "*The Umma*, resonates with the African traditional community life" (Mvumbi, 2008, p. 7). Mvumbi says that Islamic community forms permeate, surround and exalt the Muslims from all over the world (p. 8). To this end, Muslims profess a common creed and share common pillars of faith as they are keenly aware that they belong together.

According to the Pew's Forum Report, the fertility rate for Muslim in sub-Saharan Africa is the highest in the world for both countries with the majority being Muslim and non-Muslim-dominated countries (Pew Forum Report, 2010, pp.10-11). The study reiterates that women in countries which the majority of citizens are Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are estimated to have more than twice as many children as compared to women in other countries in the rest of the world (Pew Forum's Report 2010, p. 11). According to Pew Research report, during the 1990s the non-Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa grew faster than Muslims (Pew Forum's Report, 2013, p. 11). However, the trend has changed over recent years where the growth of Muslims has steadily been increasing than that of non-Muslims in the region. The study attributed this growth to high fertility rate among the Muslim

community. Pew Research report asserts further that, “If this trend is not checked and with the campaign on family planning and small family size, the Muslim population will finally overshadow the non-Muslim in the region by 2030” (Pew Forum Report, 2010, p. 8).

Migration is another activity that has accelerated the spread of Muslims in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo from the 1990s. This migration coincided with the collapse of Somalia state (Pew Forum Report 2010, p. 22). Muslim migration was mainly for religious work related and economic reasons (Alpers, 1975; Brode, 1969). Pew reports also record that the age structure of Muslims favours Muslims over non-Muslims. The median age in Muslim-dominated countries in sub-Saharan Africa in 2010 was just 17 years while in non-Muslim-dominant countries in the region, it was 19 years. The median age in all countries in which majority are Muslim, worldwide is 24 years, while the median age in less-developed countries where non-Muslim are majority is 27 years, and in more-developed countries, it is 40 years among the Muslim-majority countries in the region. Niger had the youngest median age of 15 years in 2010. From the foregoing arguments, the author thought of conducting a study to establish the factors in favour of the Muslim religion growth in the Eastern parts of DRC.

2. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey method. A descriptive research design determines and reports the way things are and uses a pre-planned design for analysis (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003, p. 197). Orodho observes that a descriptive research design is used when data is collected to describe persons, organisations, settings, or phenomena (Orodho, 2004, p.32). This design was considered appropriate for this study as it sought to investigate the influential factors into the spread of Islamic in DRC Congo. As defined by Mugenda and Mugenda, “population refers to an entire group of individuals having a common observable characteristic” (Mugenda and Mugenda (2003, p.9) thus the target population for this study comprised people living in Goma in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to statistics released by World Bank in 2012, Goma had a population of over 1 million. The study then employed probability and non-probability sampling procedures to obtain the respondents and through the Slovin’s formula, a sample size of 400 respondents was obtained thus:

$$n = N / (1 + N * e^2)$$

Where N: population size, n: sample size, e: desired margin of error, for e.g. (0.05)

$$n = \frac{1000000}{1 + (1000000 * 0.05^2)}$$

$$= 399.84$$

$$n = 400.$$

Data collection was done by use of open-ended questionnaires and interviews which were administered to the 400 people in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, mainly Goma town. The categories considered for responses included Christians, Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), and Muslims. Data analysis was then done by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and presented using frequency tables and bar graphs.

3. Results

It is imperative to mention that as noted by Esposito (2002, p. 1) Islam has become the second largest and the fastest growing religion in the world and there are various factors responsible for the increasing populace of the Islamic religion. In order to investigate the factors favouring the spread of Islam in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, respondents were asked to respond to questions that sought to establish the number of children they have, the desire to have other children, their time of stay in DRC, reason for migration and staying in DRC and the level of their freedom to practice their religion. These formed the major factors as presented in this section.

3.1 Respondents' Desire for another Child

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they have a desire for another child. The result of the findings is presented in Figure 1.

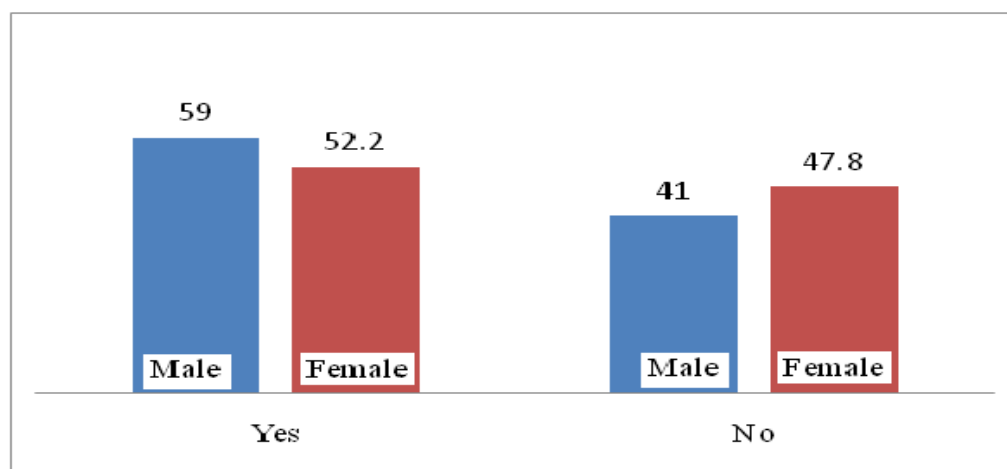


Figure 1. Respondents’ Desire for another Child

The findings, as can be seen in Figure 1 on the respondents’ desire for another child found out that men are most likely to desire more children than women. These findings were such that of all the men interviewed, 59% desired more children and of all the women interviewed, about 52.2% desired more children. This finding suggests that there is likelihood to experience an increase in population. Since the study included people from various religious backgrounds (Christians, Islam, African Traditional Religion and others), an increase in population would favour the growth of a particular faith that cherishes more children. This means it will favour the growth and spread of Islam in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

On a closer look on the agenda of bearing many children, it has to be remembered that Islam promotes polygamy. Muslims are deliberate in spreading their faith through procreation and family setting. As such, it is possible that the large percentage of men compared to that of women, that’s 59% versus 52.2% wanting more children, is because of Islamic influence. Further, it is possible that some of these men who want children are married to wives who do not want more children. But since men are the head of families, they will possibly force their wives into giving birth to more children. This will definitely be extrapolated by Islamic pressure for more children born to the *Umma*.

3.2 Length of stay in DRC

The respondents were asked to state the duration that they have lived in DRC. The result of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Duration of time Respondents lived in Congo

Attribute	No of Years	Frequency	Percentage
Duration of stay in DRC	0-5 years	33	8.3 %
	6-10 years	17	4.3%
	Born in DRC	350	87.5%
	Total	400	100.0%

The study found that 87.5% of the respondents were born in DRC Congo with the remaining proportion constituting immigrants from foreign countries. The immigrants reported having been in the country for the time that did not exceed ten years before the study period. Of these, those who had been in DRC for the period between 0-5 years had come for various reasons. Duration of stay in the country was considered an important factor to the spread of Islam because the more one stays in an area for long; the chances are high for establishment of religion. In an interview, one respondent asserted that, “I have grown up in DRC since I was

born and I am in a Christian family, and we have been going to church since I was young. However, with my interaction with UN workers and foreigners I have come to appreciate it and joined Islam”.

It is clear, therefore, that the coming of foreigners have contributed a great deal to the establishment, growth and spread of Islam. Continuous influx of these foreigners to the DRC means that there will be more strength towards the Islamic growth. This coming of foreigners has increased since 1996 which is the time when war broke out in Eastern Congo. The war brought to the country foreign aid officers brought by various non-governmental organizations (NGOS) and inter-governmental organizations. These foreign officers increased the numbers, the strength and rate of growth of Muslim communities in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Other than foreigners coming and interacting with locals in rural areas, there are Congolese people who work with them at the UN or other offices of foreigners. This has become one of the key points of contact that locals have with foreigners.

3.3 Respondents' Country of Origin

The respondents were asked to mention their country of origin to identify whether they were from a foreign country or were natives. The study found out that 87% of the respondents were natives of DRC while 13% of the respondents were from foreign countries. From the findings, it is hard to consent to how the minority group of 13% can influence the 87% who were majority and double up to have the strength of being the natives. Yet that is the reality, the minority influences the majority. This phenomenon can partly be explained in terms of power and money.

The foreigners come with both the power of their sponsorship programs, whether it is a foreign nation like the United States or the inter-governmental organisation like the United Nations or the Africa Union. If it is Non-Governmental organizations, they are still covered and empowered by foreign policies. Secondly, these organizations and personnel are well funded and remunerated. Further, when they employ locals, they remunerate them very well. Because of this, the locals subject themselves to them in various ways, including on matters related to religion. Islam capitalizes on this. The 13% minority has therefore influenced the 87% majority so much that the 87% natives have started joining Islam. We can therefore comfortably assert that as is investigated in this study, foreigners were and are a factor for the spread of Islam in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

3.4 Respondents' Reason for Migration

The 52 respondents, who had reported to be foreigners, were asked to mention the reasons for their migration. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondent's reason for migration to DRC

Attribute	Reason for Migration	Frequency	Percentage
Reason for migration to DRC	To spread religious belief	20	38
	Work	30	58
	Sought hiding place from religiously cultivated unrest	2	4
	Total	52	100

The study reveals that 52 respondents who had migrated to DRC had various reasons for migration. The majority of the foreigners 30 (58%) reported that they had moved to DRC Congo for work related reasons while 20 (38%) had moved for religious purposes. The remaining 2 (4%) had moved to DRC to find a hiding place from a religious-related unrest. The finding reveals that while majority of the people migrated to DRC for work, there was a significant number who migrated to spread their religious beliefs. In addition, the Islamic practice of infusing everything they are and do with their faith makes the work related migration part of Islamic expansion. This is a factor that would also have contributed to the spread of Islam in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It is important to learn more about the particular group of foreigners who come specifically to spread their religious belief. As the author interacted with those respondents, all of them were Muslims who are sent by their various foreign Muslim communities. We can regard them as Muslim missionaries who are experienced in that they were serving in high positions in their countries of origin. Therefore, they come to give leadership capacity to the local leaders and strengthen the new converts. While they are well supported by their sending communities, they also gain a lot from other foreigners working in international organizations.

3.5 Respondents' Reason for stay in DRC

The respondents who had migrated were also asked the reasons for their stay in DRC. The study findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Respondents' reason for staying in DRC

Attribute	Reason for Migration	Frequency	Percentage
Reason for stay in DRC	UNICEF Support	12	23
	Community Based Organization	24	46
	Anti-Children-Militia Campaigners	10	19
	Others	6	12
	Total	52	100

The study found out that the 52 respondents who had migrated had various reasons to stay in DRC. Twelve (23%) of respondents stayed because they were involved in United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) support thus were there for work. Twenty-four of them (46%) stayed because they were engaged in Community Based Organizations while ten (19%) of the respondents were working as anti-Children-Militia campaigners. The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) works a lot in schools, helping to sustain the educational system, especially in primary level. They build schools and champion children's human rights.

The work of the foreigners who work as anti-Children-Militia campaigners need to be explained. The work in essence is that there are foreigners who have come, working with NGOs and Para-church organizations which focus on sensitizing children to avoid joining the militia groups in the forests. They also campaign for the children who have already joined the militia groups and once those children leave, they rehabilitate and orient them to go back to school. This work is however thought to be sensitive and dangerous. The campaigners do their sensitization and campaign mainly through the media.

3.6 Respondents' Freedom of Worship

The respondents were asked to rate their freedom to practice religion. This freedom to practice religion precisely refers to two situations: First, it refers to the inner peace or freedom of heart for anybody joining any religion. Secondly, it refers to the freedom of worship granted by the government. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Rating on Respondents' Freedom of worship

Attribute	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Freedom to practice religion	Free to practice	321	82.1
	Somewhat free	69	17.6
	Not at all free	1	0.3
	Total	391	100.0

The results show that 321 (82.1%) of the respondents felt free to practice their religion. Most of these people have grown up as Christians. A few are Muslims who have equally embraced Islam and they are comfortable. The other 69 (17.9%) of the respondents who are somewhat free to practice their religion, represents people, especially students who have been supported by a religion that is not their primary choice. For example, a Christian sponsored by Muslims ends up acting as Muslim and going to the mosque for worship. Such a person is not convinced in his heart to be a Muslim. The one respondent (0.3%) who was not free to practice Islam reported the situation.

This finding suggests that the majority of the people in Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo have the right to practice their religion, which reflects the State's law or bill of rights of freedom to worship. The explanation on this is that DRC as a state exercises freedom of worship. That means anybody anywhere in Congo DRC is free to choose and belong to any religion. As such, anybody can shift from being a Christian to being a Muslim or vice-versa without any hindrances. This has become a basis for natives trying out an "alternative religion" which is Islam. The other aspect is that there is peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims without awareness that there can easily be serious conflicts as have been experienced in other countries like Nigeria.

4. Discussion

According to the living expenses in Goma index, only people who have an income above \$ 300 could be said to be within a good standard of living. If one gives a chance to the ones who earn over \$ 200, one is still left with about 71% of people who could be described to be living in poverty. This means that their income does not exceed \$ 200 per month. Poverty has been a major weakness that has been capitalized by most people in changing one's perception about life. Muslims equally capitalize on it. Muslims come with a sense of generosity and hospitality. As such they manage to attract many people who eventually embrace Islamic teachings and convert to Islam. Considering, therefore, this 71% of the population in Goma and the few participants contacted in other cities like Maniema in the south and Kisangani in the north, it can therefore be concluded that the eastern region of DRC is vulnerable to mass conversion to Islam.

Lack makes one vulnerable, reducing his power to make a choice of not only life to live but also what to believe in. Swahili Arabs being businessmen capitalised on poverty and needs of Africans. They provided conditional employment and opportunities that led to slow but gradual assimilation of Africans into Islamic beliefs.

Of those who had entered the country on work mission, some came to work with UN agencies while others worked with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). This data is important because it directly and indirectly contributes to the spread of Islam. This happens in various ways. Some migrants and Muslims themselves deliberately reach out to people to convert them to Islam. Some give aid and support, some sponsor projects and some sponsor construction of mosques. One big indicator as observed by the author who lives in Goma is that in 1990, there were only two mosques in Goma, but currently there are over 25 mosques. We may conclude that migration for work significantly contributes towards the spread of Islam. So, while the percentage of foreigners is small (13%), their contribution towards the spread and growth of Islam in Eastern Congo is remarkable. According Assammaniy (2014), the migration of Arab Muslims prompted thousands of people having to migrate from one place to another in-order-to propagate Islam. He mentioned that the thousands of Arabs and Bar-Bar Muslims who had flown into West Africa and settled therein with the intention of propagating Islam.

On the question of freedom of worship, the study found that majority (82.1%) indicated the slightly high degree of confidence in freedom of worship. 17.6% felt that they had no control over the choice of worship. Freedom of worship is highly exercised in DRC Congo so much so that intermarriage between Muslims and other faiths is common. Once these couples are married both are free to continue holding on to and worshipping according to their faith. This freedom among the married Christians to Muslims is not very common in other communities.

5. Conclusion

Muslims come to the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo with a sense of generosity and hospitality. As such they manage to attract many people who eventually embrace Islamic teachings and convert to Islam. Migrant Muslims deliberately reached out to people to convert them to Islam by giving aid and support, sponsor projects and sponsor construction of mosques.

This study established that Muslims have confidence in the freedom of worship. Freedom of worship is highly exercised in DRC so much that intermarriage between Muslims and other faiths is common. This on return has led to the spread of Islam in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

6. Recommendation

There is a need for inclusion of Islamic studies in Christian colleges and faculties of theology, on one hand, because this will help pastors and church leaders gain understanding of Islamic matters as well as equip them to develop appropriate church responses to the Islamic movement. On the other, the church should include the teachings about Islam in the Sunday school curriculum to enable the Christian children to face their fellow Muslim children whose awareness of Islam is high. The point is to help strengthen in faith the Christian children so that they can be ambassadors of Christ among the Muslim children. The youth, furthermore, would be addressed frequently on issues like interfaith marriage, gaining wealth or losing soul, etc.

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