

The Beginnings and Development of Islam and Quranic Schools in East Africa

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Abstract

The establishment of Islam and Quranic schools in East Africa and Africa at large had a long history. This is because different historians and Islamic philosophers have different views towards the establishment of Islam and Islamic education or Quranic schools in East Africa. This paper is aimed to inform the East African population about the establishment and development of Islam and Quranic schools in East Africa. The paper discusses the period when the Islam as a religion was introduced in East Africa, reasons for its establishment and the reasons for its spread and its expansion in East Africa. Furthermore, the paper provides the structure of Islamic education through Quranic schools, the main features of Quranic schools as well as the contributions of Islamic education or Quranic schools towards socio-economic development of the people along the Coast of East Africa.

Keywords:Islam, Quran, Quranic schools, Education

Islamic Religion in East Africa

Islam is a religion that originated through the agency of Prophet Muhammad in about the 7th C A.D. It was founded in what today is Saudi Arabia in 610 A.D. Believers of this religion are called Muslims or Moslems and they are guided by a holy revealed book called QURAN and the traditions of the Holy prophet known as Sunnah (Berkey, 2004). It is one of the major religions in the world together with Christianity and Judaism. It teaches monotheism which is the doctrine that there is only one God in all existence, it is not a new religion but the final culmination and fulfilment of the same basic truth that ALLAH (God) reveal through his prophet all peoples to every people (Oxford Dictionary, 1994).

Literally, Islam means “surrender” or “submission” was founded on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as an expression of surrender to the ALLAH, the creator and sustainer of the world. According to Islamic tradition, Gabriel an angel was sent by Allah to Prophet Muhammad and revealed to him that Islamic teaching is a last of revelation to human beings. According to the Muslims, Quran is the source of knowledge and all matters related to worship, action, policies, economics and legal life (Leurs, 2011).

The East Africa Coast has had links with various cultures and civilizations over the centuries. In the valley of the Queens in Upper Egypt, the tomb of the famous Egyptian queen Hatshepsut reveals relief from 2,000 BC, showing the Egyptians trading with the land of Punt, which at that time included Eritrea, Somalia and Yemen, and acknowledged its high degree of civilization. The Romans called it Azania (Nasr, 1984).

According to Nasr (1984), the Islamic period on the East African Coast (EAC) was started from the first hijrah to Ethiopia (Habasha) where An-Najashi (the Negus) was ruling. The pagan Quraysh followed the Muslims in their tracks and wanted An-Najashi to exile them, but once the king heard the Muslims recite Surat Maryam, he cried and allowed the Muslims to stay. When An-Najashi died, the Prophet made the funeral prayer for him in Madinah, which indicates that he must have entered Islam and had a gathering of followers locally that more than likely went on to propagate in Eritrea and north-western Somalia (Nasr, 1984).

In the 18th C, the Arabs had started a system of city states in Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Dar as Salaam and Kilwa. The intermarriage between the Arabs and indigenous coastal people resulted into Swahili people who had their own language and culture (Mushi, 2009). According to Muslims historians, Islam appeared in Africa for the first time during the 7th C especially North Africa and the earlier Muslims to enter the African continent were Arabs and Persians. Islam appeared in East Africa and Tanzania in particular centuries prior to the establishment of Christianity religion in East Africa. According to Leurs (2011) Islam was the first foreign religion to arrive in East Africa, although there is a possibility that Arabs came to East Africa coast even before the birth of Islam. The expansion of long distance trade in Africa during the 19th C motivated the spread of Islam in Africa and East Africa in particular. Currently, it is estimated that over one billion people around the world believe in this religion. Most of them are found in Middle East, Asia and North Africa (Mushi, 2009; Leurs, 2011).

Reasons for the Spread of Islamic Religion in East Africa

The spread of Islam in East Africa began in the early 7th C during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and

continued after his death in 632 A.D. There is no simple explanation for its expansion in East Africa, but some historians suggest that Muslim conquest and forced conversion are the major reasons for its success. Others argue that Islam spread rapidly across Asia, Europe, America and Africa because it offered a welcome alternative to polytheism and encouraged development in trade and the arts (Mushi, 2009).

According to Thungu *et al*, (2008) early military conquests were an important factor in the initial spread of Islamic culture (religion) in Africa and the world at large. Immediately after Muhammad's death, Muslims established the first caliphates or communities ruled by Islamic leaders. Between 632 and 740 A.D. the Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphates expanded both east and west from the Arabian Peninsula, eventually encompassing Spain, the North Coast of Africa, East Africa and the present day Middle East, as far as Afghanistan.

Another reason for the spread of Islamic culture is the religion itself. The religion offered a vibrant spiritual alternative to the pagan polytheism common to inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. Islam allowed the nomadic herdsmen of North and East Africa to envision a more stable and cohesive society, which in turn made them more prosperous (Ali, 1987; Berkey, 2004). Art was also an important factor in the spread of Islamic culture. Recent controversies about representations of the Prophet Muhammad tend to obscure the importance visual art has played in the history of Islam. Islamic artists produced innovative painting, calligraphic works, pottery and carpets, just to name the few. Art historians also credit Muslims architects with many architectural innovations especially with the use of domes and arabesques (Ali, 1987).

According to ADEA (2012) Islamic advances in education help a lot to the spread of Islamic culture. Muslims established the first madrasa or Islamic schools, during the Umayyad Caliphate of 661-750 A.D. Students in the madrasa learned to read and write Arabic and received instructions in Islamic theology. Early Modern Europeans owed their knowledge of Aristotle to Muslim philosophers who preserved his texts. Islamic thinkers in Persia contributed to the development of mathematics, especially algebra. In addition, Muslim scientists pioneered various advances in astronomy and geography (ADEA, 2012; Ali, 1987). The final reason for the spread and expansion of Islamic culture is trade. Trade flourished immediately upon the establishment of the first caliphates, and continued to flourish for hundreds of years. As Muslim land holdings expanded, the people from disparate regions gained the ability to exchange goods using the dinar coin. Muslims also pioneered various banking practices, including bills of exchange, promissory notes and partnerships (Thungu *et al*, 2008; ADEA, 2012).

The Establishment of Quranic Schools in East Africa

Historically, Islamic education or Quranic School in Africa and East Africa in particular was started in centres such as Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Zanzibar etc. Islam encouraged literacy to enable the use of Quran which is the Muslim book for revelation and Hadithi which refers to the traditions of Prophet Muhammad in written form (Thungu, *et al*, 2008).

By definition, Quranic schools are the schools in which Muslims learn their religion and normally found out of the mosque, private houses or premises set for that purpose. Quranic schools were established by Arabs to offer religious instructions to Muslim children and promote the Islamic religious culture in general. The Islamic education was/is provided through Quranic schools for individuals to master the basic tenets of Islam and it was done by sheer memorization and mastering the Arabic script (Mattson, 2008).

These Quranic School sometimes known as Madrasa children are taught the subjects like Quran (the holy book), Hadithi (sayings) of the prophet Muhammad and faith (jurisprudence), but other subjects like geography, science and Mathematics may be taught if the teacher is sufficiently well versed in these subjects. According to Mattson (2008), the Quranic schools attempted to produce the Islamic education which had significances in the Muslims societies.

According to Mushi (2009), in Tanzania Islamic education through Quranic schools has been part and parcel of our education system since the 8th c. The Quranic teacher is known as MAALIMU normally is a man who is born and bred in the village; he is regarded as the religious man and is respected by all members of his society. During his teaching the Maalim sits in the verandah surrounded by Quranic and other religious books nearby a can (stick).

According to Ozigi *et al* (1995) one of the goals of Quranic Schools or Islamic education is to spread Islamic religion and to find frontiers of Islam. Islamic education was also aimed at providing a firm foundation of Islamic religious education by developing the spiritual well-being of its students through the Islamic teachings

and imparting Islamic knowledge and culture (ADEA, 2012). Muslims saw the Quranic schools as a source of holistic inspiration. The teachers cited the need for total commitment and motivation on their part in achieving the objectives of Quranic traditional schools.

Instilling appreciation of secular issues in life is also among the goals of establishing Quranic schools in East Africa. This means that, the Islamic education is also concerned with material aspect of life. Muslim philosophers study sciences, literatures and arts which are seen as important both in the acquisition of livelihood and in strengthening moral character (Bujra, 2002; Thungu, 2008). Promoting of vocational and industrial education was also one of the objectives of Quranic schools or Islamic education in East Africa. In the schools, children study and practice of various professions, art and trades helps one to earn the livelihood. It is expected that after the completion of their studies in these schools, learners or graduates should seek a trade or profession. This is the vocational preparation, which a learner pursues until they are able to lead an honourable life, preserving the moral and spiritual aspects of the life (Bujra, 2002).

Types of Knowledge

According to Thungu *et al* (2008) Islamic education or Quranic schools differentiate two main types of knowledge in the process of providing it to the learners. The two types of knowledge provided to the students are revealed and acquired knowledge. Revealed knowledge refers to the knowledge revealed to prophets by Allah (God) and passed on to human beings while acquired knowledge refers to the knowledge acquired by human beings through their own efforts.

Although the main purpose of knowledge is to facilitate the worship of God, the two categories of knowledge are considered to be important. The acquisition of knowledge is the religious duty and is obligatory among the Muslims regardless of gender, race or social classes. Muslims are encouraged to seek both revealed and acquired knowledge through out their lives that's from cradle to the grave, which is the lifelong education. This means that, Muslims recognize both religious and secular sources of knowledge. Muslims are therefore, encouraged to acquire both kinds of knowledge from cradle to grave regardless of their gender, race or social status.

Levels of education in Quranic Schools

In East Africa and the world at large, Islamic education through Quranic schools can be categorized into three categories namely; Elementary, Secondary and Higher level education.

a) Elementary education

This is the lowest level of education in the structure of quranic schools. At this level of education, children aged five to fifteen (5 – 15) years are admitted in the Quranic schools. They are taught to recite the Quran by heart. The pupils learn short parts of the Quran through reciting and writing. The Maalim recites the verse to be learnt and the pupils repeat after him. He does this thoroughly until the child is able to memorize it (Mushi, 2009; ADEA, 2012).

From this step of reciting, the children move to another step where they are taught alphabets which are 26 consonants. After mastering the consonants, they are introduced to vowels. After mastering vowels and consonants, a child used his/her skill to read the Quran. This is usually the final stage of reading skill. Then the learners are introduced to the writing skill. The elementary education is a crucial part in which every Muslim must pass through if he/she is able to play other religious functions like marriage, death, birth (Mushi, 2009).

b) Secondary level education

At this level of Islamic education, the curriculum is much broader compared to the elementary level. It embraces a wide range of Islamic literacy, theology and legal subjects (Brown et al, 1999). The curriculum at this level comprises the TAFSIRI which refers to the interpretation of the Quran and the study of literature, much of which is derived from Quran commentaries; HADITH which covers subjects like marriage, divorce, inheritance and personal conducts and SHARIA which refers to the system of religious laws that Muslims follow (ADEA, 2012). It prescribes parts of the people's status, duties and rights as well as their prospects of external rewards or punishment. Sharia contains the central position of the Islamic society apart from Tafsiri, Hadithi and Sharia, at this level of Islamic education students also learn about Arabic literature (Bujra, 2002).

c) The higher level education

They learn about Arabic drama and the method used is called a linguistic or dream method. Linguistic method capitalizes very briefly on mathematical and rote learning of grammatical rules. Students decide on their area of specialization. After choosing the subjects, then a student proceeds to the University. In Africa there were

Sankore and Timbuktu universities. At the end of the study a student receives a license which empowers him to act as a teacher (Maalim) or Imam depending on his area of specialization (Brown *et al*, 1999; Spielvogel, 1999; Bujra, 2002).

Features of Islamic Education

According to Thungu *et al* (2008) the structure of Islamic education or Quranic education is not pegged to age as an individual Muslim has an access to education at any time in his or her life. Muslims are able to join with Quranic schools at any time regardless their age. This allow them to get Islamic education at any age, children, youth, adults or some times even old man can join with Quranic schools to get religious knowledge. Another feature of Islamic education or Quranic education is that, it is not competitive in nature. The idea of entrance examination which an aspiring student must pass before he enters a given level of education and final examination which confers qualification in western education system is not important to Islamic tradition (Mushi, 2009). This means that, all Muslims who want to join with Islamic education or Quranic education can join it, no entrance examination is given to those who want to join it.

Access to Islamic education does not depend upon ability of an individual to pay fees. This means that, unlike mission schools or other privately owned schools where students are asked to pay a specified or fixed tuition fees, in Quranic schools there is no fixed tuition fees, the nature of fee to be paid by the students depends on the students' economic background. The amount or nature of tuition fees to be paid to Maalim (teacher) per course is subject to negation between the teacher and the students or parents of the respective student(s). This means that, the nature of the tuition fees differs from one student to the next depending on the agreement reached during the negation between the teacher and the learner. i.e. The economic abilities (status) of the parents vary from one another therefore, parents pay accordingly or sometimes a student had to pay fees through working on the teachers' farms or collecting for him fire wood (Furley, et al 1978; Mushi, 2009; ADEA, 2012).

According to Brown et al (1999) the attendance of the class in Quranic schools or Islamic education is flexible. The time that the Islamic school begins varies according to the interest of the teacher. A teacher decides the time to start and end the program. The teacher of the Quranic schools are the one who decide whether to start the session in the morning, afternoon or in the evening depending on his timetable.

The Impacts of Islam and Quranic Schools to the People of East Africa

Islam and Quranic schools had some impacts to the people along the coast of east Africa. These impacts are controversial, some are positive and some are negative impacts as follows;-

Emergence of Islamic religion along the coastal areas such as Pemba, Unguja, Mombasa, Lamu and Malindi is the foremost impact of Islam and Quranic schools in east Africa. Prior to the coming of Arabs in East Africa, there was no Islamic religion hence people were worshipping to gods. But when those Arabs arrived, people from east Africa started to worship in one God who is the Allah where they believe each and everything from the holy Quran. This means that, the native system of worshipping was changed due to the emergence of Islam and Islamic religion in east Africa (Craig *et al*, 2006).

Development of new culture is one of the impacts of Islam and Quranic schools in east Africa. The new culture was developed as the result of the integration between the Arabs and Indigenous Africans and their traditional culture. Among other things, the Islam and Quranic schools brought about new style of dressing i.e. new wearing styles were introduced in east Africa where by men were encouraged to wear long gowns commonly known as Kanzu and females were encouraged to wear clothes covering their whole body which is commonly known as Baibui in East Africa. Also Islam and Quranic schools facilitated the development of Kiswahili language in east Africa. Kiswahili as a language was developed results of mixture of Arabic language and several other African languages. Today Kiswahili language is widely used through out the east African countries and even outside the East African region (Leurs, 2011).

According to Ozigi *et al* (1995), Islam and Quranic schools facilitated the development of education sector in Africa and east Africa in particular. Islamic education or Quranic schools introduced several new subjects or disciplines such as religion, science, humanities, philosophy and mathematics. Also Islam and Quranic schools opened several schools along the east African coast to provide education to the people who lived along such areas. In those schools, students were taught how to read Arabic scripts from the holy Quran and how to write those Arabic scripts. This means that, Quranic schools had led to the introduction and development of writing skills and reading skills to the African population in East Africa and Africa at large.

Promotion of discipline to the people of East Africa is one of the contributions or impacts of Quranic schools in East Africa. Islamic education trains learners to be good citizens through the instructions to the Muslims children by observing the Islamic laws and rules. These Islamic laws and rules prepare the youth and children to be good citizens and people who behave positively before other people in the given society (Spielvogel, 1999; Thungu *et al*, 2008). Quranic schools greatly contributed to the understanding and reconstruction of African history and civilization in east Africa. Before the establishment of Quranic schools, indigenous people used to store information in their heads, but due to the changes brought by Quranic schools especially after receiving the knowledge on how to write and read, African people started to preserve their key information in a written form. This situation preserving records and information facilitated the development of technology than it was before where the information were being stored in the head and caused even some of the information to be forgotten (Craig *et al*, 2006; Thungu *et al*, 2008).

In addition, Islam and Islamic education through Quranic schools had greatly contributed to art and architecture as reflected in the construction of mosques, palaces, tombs and cities. This caused the indigenous people from the coastal areas to gain the new knowledge of construction of houses and different art making for example ornaments of houses. This means that, East African people especially along the coast adapted the new system of building houses from Arabs (Spielvogel, 1999, Leurs, 2011). Apart from the positive contribution of Islamic education or Quranic schools to the people of east Africa, Quranic schools also brought about negative effects to the people of east Africa. The following are some of the negative impacts of Islamic education in east Africa.

Firstly, the establishment of Islam and Quranic schools in east Africa facilitated the development of disunity among and between the people of east Africa. Before the establishment of Islam and Quranic schools, the people of east African coastal were united and worked as one team, but following the establishment of the new religion and schools, they started to develop a state of disunity between those who believed in new religion and those who were against the new religion. This means that, those who do not believe in Islamic religion were treated badly and segregated in provision of education since they targeted to grow their children under well grounded Islamic faith (Ngaroga, 2011).

Quranic schools were not associated with upward social mobility or economic gains unlike western education which as seen as way out of poverty. Islamic education taught only the tenets of Quran and Hadithi of Prophet Muhammad not associate the economic activities that created the laziness of people in live in the coastal areas up to now. Example Islamic woman emphasised to remain inside their houses to wait for their husbands and fulfil their needs and not to participate in various socio-economic activities so that to bring about development of their family and the society at large. This means that, Islam and Islamic education changed the culture of coastal women from participating in socio-economic activities to became house ornaments and even men changed their traditional culture of working hard to the culture of wanting to play “bao” rather than participating in economic activities (Ngaroga, 2011).

Islam and Quranic schools brought about curricula confusion in east Africa specifically in Mombasa Kenya during the early 1980s. At that time, two different curricula existed in Mombasa, one was based on Christianity which offered western Christianity education and another was based on Islam which offered Islamic education based on religious instructions only. The existence of two different curricula caused confusion on education progress as a result the education provided to Muslim learners failed to prepare learners for future employment opportunities since the curriculum (content in this case) based only on religious matter at the expense of other contents which would allow them to be employed in various government and non government institutions or to get self employment (Brown *et al*, 1999).

Another weakness of Islamic education or Quranic schools is that, most of the students who received education from those schools could be able to read and write precisely in Arabic scripts or language, but many of them may failed to understand or translate those Arabic words or verses in their own respective languages. This means that, a learner can know how to read and write Arabic scripts, but he or she can not translate those Arabic words into his or her traditional languages so that to make them understand more what they have covered in those schools (Abdullah, 1982).

Another challenge of Islamic education or Quranic schools is that, the education provided was mostly dominated by men at the expense of women or leaving the women uneducated (Mushi, 2009). Quranic schools and Muslims in general encourage males to attend classes while women or girls are encouraged to remain at home to perform various family or home activities. This is because women are required to remain at home doing indoor activities waiting for her husband to entertain him (Ali, 1987). According to Mushi (2009), Islamic education or quranic

schools were or are religiously biased. It could not be accessed by individuals from different religions and its curriculum focused mainly on memorization of the 60 parts of the Quran ignoring important aspects like Arabic drama. Also the teachers teaching in those schools were harsh in punishing students with the claim of civilizing them.

Conclusion

From the above historical development of Islam and Quranic schools in east Africa, it can be concluded that, Islam and Islamic education through Quranic schools for long time contributed to socio-economic development in East Africa. It contributed much on the development of formal education system in East African countries because it laid the foundations for the modern education system in the region. Despite all the positive impacts of Islam and Quranic schools in East Africa, Islam and Quranic schools destroyed the culture of East African societies by propagating Islamic culture along the coast of East Africa by introducing new eating style (new types of foods) wearing styles like Kanzu for men and Baibui for girls or females which in turn led to the development of Swahili culture which is the mixture of Arabic and indigenous traditional culture in East Africa..

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