Islam in post-colonial Zambia

Felix J. Phiri

Introduction

The revival of a more fervent practice of Islam among already existing Muslims and the ever-increasing number of indigenous converts to Islam in Zambia can be better understood against the background of local Muslim associations. The current efflorescence in Islam has not been solely enhanced by the da’wa activities (diffusion of Islamic literature, classes for Islamic religious instructions both for children and adults, i.e. the madrasas, invitation of non-Muslims to enter the fold of Islam, etc.) of the Muslims themselves. If the efforts that the Muslims have so far deployed to bring about religious change in favour of Islam seem to yield some fruits, it is also because of several other factors within the history of Zambia that have facilitated the organization of the Muslims into socially and politically viable entities. The organization of the Muslim community into government-recognized and socially engaged local associations has helped Islam to find a voice in the public sphere and encouraged an ever-growing number of Zambians, most of whom come from a Christian background, to overcome their prejudices and to see in Islam a possible religious alternative to both Christianity and Traditional Religions. The main objective of this paper is to offer an analysis of some of the salient socio-political elements of Zambia’s post-colonial history that have favoured the resurgence and the propagation of Islam, chiefly through local Muslim associations.

Long considered to be a religion exclusively for the Indians, charichi wa ci Mwenye (the Indian church)¹ and the Yao, the initial physiognomy of the Mus-

The Muslim community has changed remarkably over the past three and a half decades and has come to include an ever-increasing number of autochthonous converts and migrant communities from other countries, especially from West Africa and Somalia. Apart from unpublished statistics of the National Census, giving any estimate of the Muslim population, and indeed of any other religion in Zambia, is bold speculation. As Mahdi desperately pointed out: ‘Any study of religious affiliation in Zambia must necessarily start with a blank as far as the number and composition of particular adherents are concerned’. Nonetheless, it is possible to establish reasonably satisfactory estimates either with the help of surveys conducted by the Central Statistics Office or through reliable informants.

Already in the 1960s, Mahmud was advancing the figure of ‘no less’ than 50,000 Muslims in Zambia. According to the National Census of 1980, there were 15,000 Sunni Muslims, out of a total population of 5,679,808 in Zambia. At about the same time, Mahdi’s unnamed informal sources pegged their estimates at no more than 30,000, still twice the official findings. The National Census of 2000 pegged the Muslim population in Zambia at 41,932 out of a total population of 9.4 million inhabitants. Mr Gool Muhammad Gool, an Indian Muslim and a resident of Lusaka since 1938, estimates the number of Muslims in Zambia to be around 300,000, a figure equally suggested by Mr Gulham Hussein Patel, founder of the Islamic Education Trust of Zambia (IETZ), who has also been in Zambia for nearly sixty years. My own observations during fieldwork would seem to lend credit to the figures advanced by Mr Gool and Mr Patel.

The question of Islam in Zambia has been scantly documented. Nonetheless, the meagre material that exists does provide an idea of some aspects of the

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2 A.A. Mahdi, ‘Secular education of Muslim children in Zambia’, Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs, 3 (1981), 86. Exceptionally, the Jehovah’s witnesses seem to provide reliable and verifiable statistics revised every ten years. The Catholic baptism records, by their nature, do not account for post-baptismal changes in religious affiliation.


4 The Shia community was deemed negligible and no mention of the Ahmadiyya was made.


6 The results of the National Census have the merit of relying on a systematic and methodological exercise. The results of the 2000 National Census concerning the question of religious affiliation were left out of the official document published two years later but can still be accessed through the census database at the Central Statistics Office.

7 Unlike the Seventh Day Adventists or the Jehovah’s Witnesses, both of which have their Headquarters in Lusaka, Zambian Muslims are not administratively centralized. This accounts for the fact that the Muslim community has been unable to come up with reliable estimates of their numbers.