Islamic Mission in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Perspectives of Some 'Ulama’ Associated with the Al-Azhar University (1960-1970)

by

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Apart from a personal visit to Al-Azhar, this article is based primarily on a systematic reading of the 1960 to 1970 issues of the journal of the University, the Ma’qallat Al-Azhar. Some existing studies on Al-Azhar have also been consulted, though not exhaustively. The intention here is not to examine the role and influ-

1 The author undertook a research visit to Cairo in August 1999 to assess the significance of the presence of African students in the University today. The Working Group Modernity and Islam of the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin has kindly taken over the costs of this stay. - A different and extended version of this article has appeared in Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara, (2000) 14.

2 This is a general monthly journal edited by the Islamic Research Academy of Al-Azhar (Majma’ul-buhûth al-islâmîya bi-l-Azhar). It appears at the beginning of each month of the Hegiric calendar, but the issues also carry Gregorian dates. In this journal, the institutions of the University express their opinions, followed by the Egyptian ’ulamà’ and cadres of the University or from elsewhere, always with the consent of the University. The subjects treated are general in character and all relate to the field of Islam and society. One finds there, for example, fatûwà (sing. fatwà) and questions concerning the Muslim world in general. Judging from the different prices mentioned on the cover, the journal is sold both within and outside Egypt. As one might imagine, the principal readers of this review are the ’ulamà’ and other intellectuals interested in the expansion of Arabo-Muslim culture and of Egypt’s influence in the world. Though the readership increased after the 1952 rise to power of the “free officers” in Egypt, the journal already existed before that date. With regard to the paper’s goals, it can be compared to the monthly journals Abhâr Al-‘alâm Al-Islâmî (The News of the Muslim World), formerly published by the Islamic World League which resides in Saudi-Arabia, or to the Ma’qallat râbitat al-‘alâm al-Islâmî (Journal of the Islamic World League) also known simply by the name ar-Rûbahâ (The League), which is today published by the same organization. I have read the Ma’qallat Al-Azhar at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin. I wish to thank Dr. G. Höpp for placing the necessary issues at my disposal.

ence of this institution in Egyptian society, but rather to study the opinions held by Azharī and African ‘ulamā’ (and ‘ulamā’ apprentices) on the state and evolution of Islam in African societies in the 1960s and 1970s. The focus of attention will be their respective perspectives as transmitted through the Mağallät al-Azhar. Nearly every issue during this period included an article describing in detail an African country in which Muslims constitute a majority or minority. The journal was particularly interested in the evolution of the expansion of Islam and the Arabic language, on the one hand, and on the other the way they were taught. Similar descriptions of Asian countries were also included. Regardless of the region in which the country was located, the article appeared with a sub-heading in the section al-watán al-islāmī (Islamic nation or Islamic country). The topic of teaching Islam and the Arabic language was also frequently touched on within a series of articles entitled al-islām wa’l-lugāt al-arabīya fi mustaqbal Ifrīqiyah al-Čaḍīdā (Islam and the Arabic language in the future of the new Africa). Articles like these were more precisely mission reports, written by ‘ulamā’ and administrators of al-Azhar who had been sent to Africa by the Department of Islamic Missions (Idārat al-bu‘ūt al-islāmiyya) on various occasions.

In the following I shall examine the historical context of Egypt and al-Azhar within which these articles were written. Where did the new interest of al-Azhar and Egypt in Africa originate? What was the changing historical context in the African countries in question?

In July 1952, the political system in Egypt underwent a radical change: the monarchy was overthrown by a group of officers who called themselves the “free officers” (dubbāt al-aḥrār). Nasser, one