The European attitude towards the Muslims in East and Central Africa can be seen in two different, almost antithetic phases. The first one covers the exploration and the conquest periods, when Muslim traders helped Europeans to reach the most remote areas and Muslim soldiers were enlisted as indigeneous soldiers. The second phase covers the settling period, when Muslims were almost rejected from society. Both were closely related to the Europeans’ perception of the African and Arab cultures.

Since the very beginning of their arrival in Central Africa, the Europeans were in contact with ‘Arabs’ (in European sources, ‘Arab’ often refers to Muslims as a whole, including Asians, Swahilis, and ‘half-cast’ Arab-Eyfricans). Every explorer’s diary mentions the presence of these ‘ivory- and slave-traders, even in the most remote areas like Manya (East Congo). The presence of Arab (and Persian) traders on the East African Coast goes back to the 10th century, and the contact with the Swahili population gave birth to the well-known Swahili culture. In 1840, the Omanis Sultan even decided to transfer his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. They were in contact with the Nyamwezi and Yao African traders, who seem to have penetrated the inland since the 18th century. Using these people as guides, Arab traders followed the same path in the first half of the 19th century and went deeper and deeper into the Dark Continent in order to find ivory and slaves. This created a Muslim society composed of different communities. Some of them were of Omani descent, having settled on Zanzibar and the East African coast since generations, but it included also Persians, Indians, and Baluchis as well as Swahilis and other ‘mixed’ Arab-African. Finally, the so-called Wanga, literally ‘freemen’, constituted local Muslim African tribes.

Arab blood, African blood
When the first Europeans decided to explore the shores of Central Africa, the scene was already well known to Muslim traders. That is why most of the European expeditions had a strong ‘Arab’ amoyo, where they could find carriers and soldiers but above all guides that knew the roads, the habits, the material needs, and the languages of the local population. On the road, they could also benefit from the information given by the ivory- and slave-traders. That is why ‘Arab’ and Muslims were quite well considered by the European explorers; yet that was not the only reason. The European mentality of the last century firmly considered that the world’s population was divided in different cultural levels. Westerners were of course the most civilized nations and the Africans were nothing but savages. The Arabs stood obviously in between: Arab-Islamic contribution to civilization and the trading relations between Europe and Muslims have not always been easy. This conception influenced the way they were considering the Arabs in Africa.

It is interesting to notice that the Arabs described by the explorers are almost systematically compared to the Africans: the latter are depicted as nude or half nude, lazy, stupid, cowardly, and ugly. Arabs, on the other hand, are well-dressed, proud, noble, but also cruel and cunning. Descriptions of mulattos are even more interesting: they inherited their good characteristics – whether moral or intellectual – from their Arab ascent and the negative ones – often limited to their physical features – come from their African blood.

The information gathered by the European explorers about Africa reached Europe, and some European governments – Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain – decided to colonize these new territories. At the beginning, Europeans continued to see Muslims as potential allies in a totally new world.

Military, politics, and religion

Germany – which ruled Tanganyika (Tanzania), Burundi, and Rwanda until 1918 – seems to have been the more open-minded toward the Muslim communities. They adopted Kiwahili – which was then closely associated with Muslim culture – as an official language in their territories, which attracted a lot of Muslims to work in the administration as well as the local army and police. The fact that the Germans founded a city like Bujumbura also attracted many Muslim merchants. In the beginning of the 20th century, Johanniassen, a missionaries, considered that it was the German colonial administration itself that opened Rwanda to the Muslim communities. Yet, when Germany had to leave the administration of both Rwanda and Burundi to Belgium, the majority of the inhabitants of Bujumbura, Burundi’s capital, were Muslims. Most of them were not Burundians, but Swahilis, Arabs, Indians, and Congolese.

In the last decades of the 19th century, the British chose Muslim ‘tribes’ to help them conquer or rule East Africa: Zanzibari, Swahili, Somalis, and later even Indian and even Indo-Europeans. Yet, the Swahis seemed to have been the more open-minded among the Muslims. Yet, the Swahis were enlisted ‘Nubi’ soldiers from Southern Sudan, who seem to have penetrated the inland of Kenya as ‘natives’, even though the British in Uganda.

In the beginning, the Belgians also recruited many Muslims to the army. Between 1874 and 1900, many mercenaries were enrolled to help King Leopold III’s ‘conquer’ the Congo Free State (Etat Indépendant du Congo). At first, they mainly came from Zanzibar. Later, Somalis, Ethiopians, Hausa, West Africans, and even Sudanese were enlisted. In 1984, some of these Muslims left Congo and were recruited by the British in Uganda.

Due to the political influence of the Swahili merchants in Eastern Congo, the colonial administration even gave them some administrative tasks, which some Muslim appointed Tippy-Tip, a famous Zanzibari slave-trader, as governor of Stanley Falls (now Kisangani). So, the British and Swahili merchants quickly understood that the Belgians did not aim to share anything and that they had to fight if they wanted to keep their power in the region. In 1892 and 1895, several battles opposed Europeans and ‘Arabs’. A couple of years later, the colonial administration even wanted to deport the Muslim merchants.

This was the start of a radical change in the nature of the relations between both communities, the former allies becoming enemies.

But the major element explaining the change of attitude towards Muslims is the role played by the Church, whether Catholic or Protestant. The missionaries had been active since the exploration phase, yet their impact grew considerably during the settling period due to the monopoly on the education system. Missionaries were afraid of Islam, seen as a serious rival in the area, and they had to fight to keep their influence. In the 1880s, the Church organized a campaign in Europe against the slave trade in Africa. This campaign had a strong impact on the way Muslims were seen, although it was not always – was a political tool more than a real humanistic feeling in the colonial administration. Between 1890 and 1900, the Belgian authorities were very suspicious towards the Muslims and the Indigenes. In the Indigenes, the British considered them as potential influences, especially the Muslim merchants. Indeed, the British considered them as the best warriors.

So, the relationship between Muslim communities and colonial powers was an ambivalent one. Muslims were seen as materially and culturally more developed than the other Africans, and thus as more valuable interlocutors. But this meant, too, that they could potentially have a kind of influence on the local populations, whether in religion or in politics. The colonial powers quickly understood that the most efficient way to diminish this potential influence was to make Muslims and Islam into an alien culture, not only different but even opposed to African values.

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