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### Networks of Islamic NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa: Bilal Muslim Mission, African Muslim Agency (Direct Aid), and al-Haramayn

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## Networks of Islamic NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa: Bilal Muslim Mission, African Muslim Agency (Direct Aid), and *al-Haramayn*

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This article considers the activities of three Islamic NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa. The African Muslim Agency (Direct Aid) is a Sunni Muslim NGO involved in charity, relief, development and *da'wa* (missionary effort), created in 1981 by a group of Muslim Brothers (Ikhwân al-Muslimûn) from Kuwait. The Bilal Muslim Mission is a Shī'ī Muslim NGO founded in Tanzania in 1963 by the Indian Shī'ites of East Africa. Its aim is to spread Twelver Shī'ism in East Africa and beyond, and to assist Shī'ites living in poverty worldwide. Until its dissolution, al-Haramayn was engaged in very much the same work as the African Muslim Agency, the main difference being that al-Haramayn emphasized the propagation of Salafī Islam rather than charity work. Like any modern Islamic NGO, these institutions pursue two aims: while giving support to those in need, they simultaneously try to spread their particular version of Islam. This article has four aims: to analyse the network structures that link these NGOs to other parts of the world; to discover the socio-political and cultural implications behind their activities; to investigate the education and formation of the actors involved in Islamic charity by tracing the biographical itineraries of two representatives of Islamic NGOs in Africa; and to analyse the state of affairs for these NGOs after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA.

**Keywords:** Non-governmental organizations; Islam; Muslim charity; sub-Saharan Africa

Research on Islam in East Africa has generally focused on the Muslims of the coastal regions – the *waswahili* – and neglected Muslims living up-country. Furthermore, few studies deal with new conversions to Islam. This article focuses on the activities of three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that concentrate their activities in up-country East Africa, rather than on the coast.<sup>1</sup> It is their goal to improve the education of young Muslims in the region. They also pursue political projects and are engaged in proselytizing activities (*da'wa*),<sup>2</sup> and are thus agencies with a hybrid character. Among East African Muslims there is a widespread feeling of discontent over the apparent marginalization of Islam by the mainly Christian political leaders of their countries. Resentment at this marginalization has fomented numerous conspiracy theories among East African Muslims, in which they are projected as victims of a deliberate attempt by both the churches and the state to deny them access to modern education and thus exclude them from the political decision-making process; in short, to deprive them of their active citizenship. This idea of a regional intrigue against Muslim advancement is linked to a wider conspiracy theory among Muslims in which Western relief agencies, especially the Red Cross, are portrayed as

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deploying humanitarian assistance as a means to convert Muslims to Christianity and to exercise political control over them.

However, the 'Red Cross complex' and a feeling of marginalization are not the only reasons for the hybrid nature of Islamic NGOs in the region. Their hybridity is shaped by the Islamic notion of *da'wa* (i.e., proselytism), which differs greatly from Christian concepts of proselytizing. In Islam, missionary work is not reserved for specialists; hence there are no specifically trained missionaries as in Christianity. In turn, every Muslim is asked to engage in *da'wa* (literally: a call, or invitation to Islam), which can take many different forms. *Da'wa* can involve returning a Muslim neglectful of his religious duties to the straight way as much as convincing a Muslim to embrace a particular version of Islam. It can also be the effort made to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Accordingly, any Muslim is a potential *da'i* (missionary).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if a Muslim working for an NGO is active in *da'wa* this is considered meritorious. However, the increasing influence of political Islam and the rise of Islamic militancy in the 1980s have caused much confusion. After the Afghan war against Soviet and Afghan communists, the wars in Kosovo and Bosnia and most importantly, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and its aftermath, organized *da'wa* activities have come to be regarded with general suspicion.

Concerning the organizations examined in this paper, it is important first to define what makes them *Islamic*. Second, one has to ask how far they are active in converting people to their respective version of Islam. Undoubtedly, all three organizations, the African Muslim Agency, the Bilal Muslim Mission and *al-Haramayn al-Khayriyya*, are Islamic in character. Yet, the names of these NGOs bear a strong religious connotation and indicate that they are much more than simply faith-based organizations. These organizations follow two goals; first, to help and support Muslims in need, and second, to propagate the version of Islam the organization adheres to, i.e., to engage in *da'wa* (*al-'amal ad-da'wi*) or call for Islam. Some observers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, believe the charitable dimension of the work of these agencies to be a mere cover for the second and much more important goal of *da'wa*. The Islamic charitable associations described here are strongly influenced by the Muslim brotherhood and similar Islamist groups. They differ from governmental and other non-governmental charitable organizations "in that to them the charitable work is a form of *da'wa*, missionary effort, and part of a broader struggle to achieve a more Islamic (and therefore more just) society".<sup>4</sup> As Abdurrahman Habib noted in an *al-Hayat* article published on 5 November 2004, when accused of supporting terrorism, the representatives of these organizations defend themselves by saying that they are being demonized and persecuted simply for supporting the spirit of *sahwa* (awakening of Islam).<sup>5</sup> The analysis in this paper will portray the missionary work these translocal Islamic NGOs are involved in regionally, investigating the underlying socio-political implications of these activities, especially in relation to a particular form of an Islamic ideology that does not accept religious plurality.

### The African Muslim Agency

The African Muslim Agency is an Islamic non-governmental foundation for charity and development (*khayriyya; tanmawiyya; ghayr hukumiyya*), created in 1981 by the Kuwaiti physician Dr 'Abdurrahman Hammud Sumayt. He has repeatedly declared that the central aim of his organization is to provide religious (i.e., *da'wa*), medical, social and education services to as many people as possible.<sup>6</sup> Much like similar organizations, the African Muslim Agency puts the focus on religion. Its explicit aim is to propagate a particular version of Islam. According to leaflets the agency produces,<sup>7</sup> the foundation was

established after a visit to Malawi. During ‘Abdurrahman Hammud Sumayt’s trip he noticed that Malawi Muslims were living in poverty, and despite their great numbers were not represented in decision-making posts. He thereupon decided to set up this institution with some friends. His visit to Malawi, he writes, had woken them from a slumber of indulgence and comfort and driven them to become active in some way.

The character of the organization can be seen from the Arabic website, Direct Aid, which publishes information on the African Muslim Agency. The site is run by a group of sympathizers close to the organization. The website’s name is *Labbayka Ifriqiya* (Here I am, Africa, at your service). *Labbayka* (Here I am) is a term employed for answering emphatically when one is called for. It is the first word of the *Talbiya* (lit. answering of a call), the invocation made in regular intervals by the pilgrim (hajj) to Mecca until he catches sight of the Ka’aba. The entire *Talbiya* is “Labbayka Allâhumma! Labbayka! Lâ sharîk laka labbayka. Inna al-hamda wa al-nîmata laka wa al-mulk lâ sharîk laka” (“Here I am, O Lord, here I am. Glory, riches and power are yours alone”). Thus, with the emphatic invocation of *Labbayka Ifriqiya*, as it were, the African Muslim Agency answers Africa’s call and starts its mission.

In almost all of the more than 40 countries where the agency is active, it is directed by Moroccan and Sudanese officials, who join after internships spent in Burkina Faso. Given that Moroccans and Sudanese have strong historical links to sub-Saharan Africa, this choice is quite natural. Each country office is staffed by at least five representatives: the administrative director (*mudîr*), and four commissioners: for social affairs (*Rî’âya ijtimâ’iyya*); for medical affairs (*Rî’âya sihhiyya*); for *da’wa* (*Rî’âya da’wiyya*), and for education (*Rî’âya ‘ilmiyya*). In countries where the agency is very active, the staff numbers are as high as 30 people.

‘Abdurrahman Hammud Sumayt studied in Kuwait, Baghdad, England, and Canada. He worked as a physician before taking up the role as president of the foundation’s administrative board (*Ra’is majlis al-idâra*). In an interview (recorded at [www.labaik-africa.org](http://www.labaik-africa.org)) he talks about his cultural affiliations:

I have belonged to different Islamic groups: the Jamâ’at al-Tabligh, the Muslim brothers (*al-Ikhwân al-muslimîn*), the Salafis and many others. I owe a lot to all of them. Each has had great influence on my way of thinking. After having experienced the pleasure of helping others, particularly the most marginalized societies of Africa who often cannot supply the most basic wants I decided to choose charity work.

Thanks to his philanthropic activities in Africa, Abdurrahman H. Sumayt is famous and cherished both in Africa and in his native Kuwait. In his home country, people still consider him if not a member of the Muslim Brothers at least to be part of the general Islamist current (*al-tayyâr al-islâmî*), although he affirms to have abandoned politics for good to devote himself solely to charity work.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, Abdurrahman H. Sumayt received the prestigious Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid al-Maktoum Award for Medical Sciences. The prize was donated by the ministry for finance and industry of the United Arab Emirates and is usually awarded to a person, a research centre or a university for an outstanding contribution in the field of medical research, in particular genetic research. However, in 2008, it was awarded to a person working in charity.<sup>9</sup>

Strictly speaking, the African Muslim Agency may not be a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organization. Yet, it clearly belongs to the general Islamist current (*al-tayyâr al-islâmî*). This ideological orientation became obvious in conversations with the administrators of the foundation’s East African branches. In Comoros, for instance, the institution’s local representative kindly gave me a box containing books on *da’wa* and

stickers bearing the words “The ten recommendations of the martyr imam Hasan al-Banna” (*al-Wasâya al-'ashar li-l-Imâm al-shahîd Hasan al-Banna*), the founder of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. However, despite a small number of *salafî* members, neither the organization’s founder nor the majority of its members are radical or fundamentalist Islamists.<sup>10</sup>

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 the foundation moved its headquarters to Dammam in Saudi Arabia. When Saddam Hussein was forced to withdraw from Kuwait, the headquarters were moved back to Kuwait. But the Dammam office continued to function as a Saudi branch of the foundation. This Saudi branch takes charge of the activities in East Africa. Following the establishment of the first African branch in Malawi, the institution established offices in West Africa, including Mauritania, Guinea, Niger, Chad, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Benin, Ghana and Gabon. Both Guinea and Sierra Leone have been by far the most active West African branches of the institution. In Sierra Leone the local branch ran its own radio station, broadcasting in 17 local languages. However, the institution has been forced to reduce the range of activities due to long-lasting civil wars over certain periods, for example in Liberia (1990–97) as well as in Sierra Leone (1997–98). To illustrate the wide scale of their work, the foundation’s representatives frequently mentioned key projects they have realized in West Africa. In Niger, the foundation built an eye clinic at a cost of US\$2,640; in Sierra Leone a hospital specializing in surgery; in Ghana an Anglo-Arabic secondary school; and in Gabon a Franco-Arabic secondary school.

As for education in East Africa, the agency has opened a faculty of Islamic law in Thika (near Nairobi) in Kenya, and a college of education in Zanzibar. Education and vocational training constitute the agency’s main thrust toward building stronger foundations for the participation of Muslims in politics and civic life in these countries. The education provided for by the agency’s institutions differs from the standard curricula offered elsewhere in the region only in so far as it provides, apart from secular teaching, an education in Islamic religious knowledge. In up-country districts the agency has been particularly active in constructing mosques and primary schools, as well as in digging wells and providing medical care for local communities.

The agency’s work in Madagascar offers a further example. Since 1994, Abdurrahman H. Sumayt has given much attention to the re-Islamization of the Antemoro, a group of south-east Madagascar with a population of 500,000 who are descendants of Arab sailors and traders who came to the region from the fifteenth century. They have kept old manuscripts, most of which are dealing with magical-religious subjects, written in Arabic characters, which are called *Sorabe*.<sup>11</sup> The Antemoro, having been cut off from the Muslim world, were from the nineteenth century Christianized by Protestant missionaries. So far, the African Muslim Agency has built several mosques, Islamic schools, orphanages, wells and a Muslim cemetery in the region. Abdurrahman H. Sumayt hopes that, by 2009, 51% of the Antemoro will have converted back to Islam thanks to the organization’s missionary efforts.<sup>12</sup>

Let us now trace the educational itinerary and ideological orientation of a young African *‘âlim*, who works as a representative for the African Muslim Agency in Korogwe, a town in up-country Tanzania. In Korogwe the agency has constructed four mosques (in 1987), a primary school (in 2000), and two water cisterns. Khamis Abubakar works as an imam in one of the mosques, and is responsible for the primary school and the cistern built on the same grounds. He lives in a house next to the school, which belongs to the agency. (There is another mosque built by *al-Haramayn*, a Saudi Islamic Foundation, in the Mombo district close to Korogwe). Khamis was born in 1964 in the city of Dodoma, where he attended a public school up to seventh Grade. He told me:

Like many other Muslims I was unable to continue my studies because of discrimination against Muslims under the Nyerere government. It is not possible that most Muslim students should fail 7th grade and therefore cannot continue their education; there must be a Christian conspiracy behind it.

I heard the same story from many Muslims in Tanzania whenever they complained about Muslim backwardness in comparison with Christians in the field of education and professional training. 'It was at this moment that I decided to devote my life to Islamic education,' he explained. After pursuing primary Islamic education in Dodoma, he went to preparatory school (*i' dâdi*) in the Egyptian centre (*al-Markaz al-Misrî*) of Dar as-Salaam, which is directed by a branch of the Islamic al-Azhar University of Cairo. He then studied at the Kisauni Islamic Institute (*Ma'had Kisauni al-Islamî*) in Mombasa, an institution founded by the Kenyan branch of the Islamic Foundation. In 2000, this Institute became the Kisauni Islamic University. Khamis Abubakar stayed there for four years. In 1990 he left for Karachi, Pakistan, to continue his studies at the Abubakr Islamic University (*Jami'at Abibakr al-Islamiyya*) in the faculty of Hadiths (*Kuliyat al-Hadith*). After four years of study he returned to Tanzania. In 1996, he began teaching Islamic sciences (*al-'Ulûm al-Islâmiyya*) at the Tanga *Ma'had Imam ash-Shafî'î*, an institution for secondary education founded by *al-Haramayn Foundation*. A year later, he was recommended by someone from Korogwe for the post of imam and primary school teacher, his current occupation. Better wages may have played a part in his leaving Tanga and taking up work in Korogwe. However, Khamis Abubakar claims it was the good climate and the great need for *da'wa* in Korogwe that accounts for his decision.

Khamis is the type of religious scholar (*'âlim*) who embraces all the forms of discourse and ideological tendencies of today's militant Islam in East Africa. He is very active in the Tanzanian Muslim movement for greater Muslim participation within the state and stronger promotion of Muslims in the fields of modern education and professional training. Furthermore, he completed his higher education in a *Salafî* university in Pakistan. Not only has he worked as a teacher in a Tanga-based *Salafî* school founded by *al-Haramayn*, but he is also currently working as an official for the *African Muslim Agency*. Concerning the *da'wa* in Korogwe he acts in cooperation with the local branch of AL-MALLID (the so-called Muslim Bible scholars). He told me that he personally sympathizes with the Tanzanian *Salafî Ansar al-Sunna* movement, which has its headquarters in the city of Tanga.

Khamis Abubakar was kind enough to let me see the notebook containing his Friday sermons. The fact that he writes down his sermons in a book is in itself a practice that attests to the systematic spirit of this *'âlim*. There are two ways to deliver the Friday sermon in East Africa. The traditional manner consists of reading the sermons of Ibn Nubata in Arabic from the pulpit in the mosque (*minbar*). The imam can also give the Kiswahili translation of the sermon before or after reciting it from the *minbar*. There is a local edition of these sermon texts in Arabic that also gives the Kiswahili translation. It was published in the Tanzanian town of Moshi in 1988 as *Khutuba za Ijuma kwa Lugha ya Kiswahili* by Alhaj Yusuf H. Lassenga, an *'âlim* working for the governmental organization supposedly representing the Muslims of Tanzania, the BAKWATA (*Baraza Kuu la Waislamu wa Tanzania*, or the National Muslim Council of Tanzania).

The new missionaries of Islam conduct a second form of Friday preaching. Here the sermon is given in two languages (Arabic and Kiswahili). In practice, this means that Qur'anic verses, *hadiths* and other formulas are recited in Arabic followed by explanations and commentaries in Kiswahili. Most of the preachers improvise without written notes at hand. Others make notes beforehand and occasionally take a look at them during their sermon. At any rate, most of the preaching is done in an improvised manner. Khamis

Abubakar, on the other hand, writes down his sermons almost entirely in notebooks, which he keeps in his archives, using them again from time to time. The notebooks reveal that he first writes the text in Arabic, and then adds an explanation and a commentary in Kiswahili (this written in Latin characters). The table of contents of the notebook he presented to me contains eight sermons with the following titles:

- (1) Qualities and attitudes required of the *dā'iya* (Islamic missionary).
- (2) Greatness of Muhammad's community.
- (3) Prohibition of committing sin and the explanation of its evil.
- (4) Greatness of the *Ka'aba* and celebration of the end of the Hijra year.
- (5) Religious obligation of the Hijra and its different forms.
- (6) Blessings of the Hijra month Muharram.
- (7) Islam is a social necessity for human life.
- (8) The responsibility of man.

All these titles could no doubt be found in any book written by an '*ālim*, regardless of his version of Islam. Only through careful reading and the conversations I had with him was I able to detect his *Salafī* orientation.

### The African branch of *al-Haramayn*

*Al-Haramayn* is a charitable foundation for *da'wa* ('*Mu'assasat da'wiyya*') and support for the poor ('*wa ighāthiyya*') all over the world. It was founded in 1412/1991 in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia by a group of Saudi '*ulamā*'. The foundation's general meeting is presided over by Sh. Dr Salih b. 'Abdul'aziz Al ash-Shaykh, minister for Islamic affairs *Awqāf, da'wa* and moral instruction (*wazīr ash-Shu'ūn al-islāmiyya wa al-da'wa wa-l-irshād*). This shows clearly that the Saudi state was involved in some way in the politics of the *al-Haramayn* Foundation, but, lacking more tangible evidence, one can only speculate as to the extent of Saudi involvement.

*Al-Haramayn* was in fact initially established by the Saudi 'Aqil A. al-'Aqil in Quita near Karachi in 1988.<sup>13</sup> Al-'Aqil had originally planned to inaugurate the organization officially on his return to Riyadh in 1991. His four years in Pakistan had been dedicated to *da'wa*, and the support of the Afghan 'jihad' against the Soviet Union at the time when the jihadist ideology and subsequent movements that today threaten global security emerged. From the moment of its creation until January 2004, Sh. 'Aqil al-'Aqil held the post of *al-Haramayn*'s general secretary. He had to resign after the organization was accused of giving financial support to the Islamic terrorist movement al-Qa'ida. The minister of Islamic affairs and president of the foundation therefore appointed by decree Sh. Dabbas b. Muhammad ad-Dabbas, former vice-secretary and representative of the foundation's European branch, to the vacant post of general secretary. Ad-Dabbas in turn left *al-Haramayn* in July 2004, in protest against the repression of the organization, in particular the freezing of its financial assets, a measure that presented a great obstacle to the continuation of its missionary activities. *Al-Haramayn* was then closely scrutinized by the Americans, until the Saudi government finally decided on its official dissolution on 5 October 2004.

The foundation was structured into different committees (*lijān*) including different regional missionary committees (for Africa, Europe, Asia and North America). In East Africa, especially in Tanzania and Kenya, *al-Haramayn* introduced institutions for secondary Islamic studies (*ma'ahid islāmiyya*) – at Dar as-Salaam, Tanga and Moshi (in Tanzania), and at Nairobi and Mombasa (in Kenya). While all of *al-Haramayn*'s

administrative offices in the region have been closed pending further notice, the educational establishments set up by the foundation continue their work even though they face considerable financial problems due to the freezing of the institution's bank assets.

*Al-Haramayn* and the African Muslim Agency fulfil almost the same tasks (digging wells, construction of schools, medical care centres and hospitals, as well as medical projects, and so forth), however there are decisive differences between the two organizations. The *African Muslim Agency* easily adapts to the legal system of the host country, in particular with regard to the national education programme. Their only request in this matter is that education should be bilingual (Anglo-Arabic or Franco-Arabic), and that Islamic studies be included as a subject. The tuition fees that education requires – albeit considerably less than in private schools – are granted without objection. The main concern of both the African Muslim Agency and *al-Haramayn* is without doubt to pursue *da'wa* through education and the transmission of knowledge, and thus to compete with Christian missionary institutions. Yet while *al-Haramayn's* educational institutions merely transmit religious knowledge in the *Salafi-Wahhâbi* version, the African Muslim Agency seeks to offer both religious and secular instruction. The main goal of the African Muslim Agency is to improve the living conditions of Muslims and enable them to rival their Christian compatriots, with priority given to education and professional training. It is worth again noting here the hybrid nature of these organizations, each fulfilling a wide range of multiple tasks in quite different fields. In fact, these institutions are at once both NGOs (for development aid and the combat of poverty, especially in times of civil war or natural disasters) and institutions for *da'wa* (Islamic mission).

### The Bilal Muslim Mission<sup>14</sup>

The Bilal Muslim Mission was created in 1964 at the tri-annual Conference of the Federation of the Khoja Shia Ithna-ashari Jamaats of Africa, held in the Tanzanian city of Tanga. But the organization was not officially registered until 1968. Its headquarters are in Dar as-Salaam, Tanzania. In Kenya, the organization's headquarters used to be in Mombasa but have since been moved to Nakuru, where I conducted field research in 2004. The office of the organization in the capital Nairobi was at that time closed because of security reasons. In both countries, the Bilal Muslim Mission also runs offices in other towns, including in Tanzania the northern city of Arusha (headquarters of the Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Supreme Council of Africa) and Lindi in the south of the country.

The organization is intended to improve standards of education in general, and religious education in particular, among *Ithna 'ashari* youth, but also includes other Muslims, especially African Sunnis. It is an institution dedicated to conversion, charity and *tabligh* (a word used by the Shi'i Muslims of the Bilal Muslim Mission in the same sense as Sunni Muslims use *da'wa*). Its creation goes back to 'Allama Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, an '*alim khoja Shi'a Ithna 'ashari*'.<sup>15</sup> He was born in 1927 in Bihar in India. In 1959 he was sent to Tanzania (Tanganyika) as *da'i* by the Khoja Shia Itna Asheri Supreme Council, before becoming resident '*alim* of the community. It should also be mentioned that prior to Rizvi's conversion activities there were no Shi'i Muslims in East Africa, apart from those of Indo-Pakistani origin.

Allama Rizvi built several *Hawza-e-'ilmiyya* (a sort of Shi'i *madrassa* whose main function is the training of preachers) in Tanzania and Kenya. In Dar-as-Salaam for instance, the Bilal Muslim Mission runs a *Hawza-e-'ilmiyya*, a kindergarten, an elementary school, a secondary school, a school for the training of teachers and a Qur'an school.

These educational establishments teach Indian, African and Arab children, and admit Shī'ī as well as Sunni.

Today, the Bilal Muslim Mission is active in Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, Madagascar, Burundi, Rwanda and Congo. Beyond Africa, it has gained a foothold on the Caribbean Islands, in Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and in Europe and the United States. Inspired by the activities of the Bilal Muslim Mission in East Africa, several other Shī'ī organizations have now been created in Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Sweden and North America. In 1996, Allama Rizvi created the Bilal Charitable Trust of India in Gopalpur, India. Thus the Bilal Muslim Mission and its founder work simultaneously in Africa, India, Europe and North America. The Bilal Muslim Mission and the Bilal Charitable Trust of India have both become translocal Shi'i organizations, operating in and through networks.

The Bilal Muslim Mission uses different means of conversion: the secular and religious education in the *Hawzi-e-'ilmiyya*, conferences recorded on audio- and videotapes and sold on the local markets, and the diffusion of religious writings in Kiswahili and English, most famous among which are the bimensal periodicals *Sauti ya Bilal*, published in Kiswahili since 1964, and *The Light*, published in English since the 1980s. Among the religious publications one also has to include the 125 books (of various lengths) written by Rizvi in Kiswahili, Arabic and English.

The majority of Indian Muslims in East Africa are *Khoja*. The word *khoja* is derived from the Persian *khwaja*, which means master or honourable, and was used to describe Indian converts to Ismaili Shī'ī Islam. In Islamic tradition, Bilal is the name of a freed slave of Ethiopian origin who converted to Islam in Mecca at a very early stage of the Prophet Muhammad's mission. His master, being an adversary of Muhammad, tortured him severely, inflicting the most excruciating pain in the hope he would abjure Islam, but to no avail. Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's closest companions bought Bilal and set him free straight away. Thanks to his stentorian voice, Bilal was made muezzin of the small Muslim community of Mecca. He then followed the Prophet Muhammad to Medina where he later served as his muezzin. According to Muhammad, Bilal would later be muezzin in Paradise. The strong mythical and semantic charge is obvious: an institution bearing the name of Bilal whose very goal is the conversion of Africans to Islam.

Other than a brief mention in a 1988 article by Penrad,<sup>16</sup> drawing upon the important work of Amiji<sup>17</sup> but concentrating on the *Khoja Ithna 'ashari* split from the Ismaili Shi'i, the Bilal Muslim Mission has received no scholarly attention. Its history is nonetheless extremely interesting and significant. In addition to proselytizing activities, the founder of the Bilal Muslim Mission began in 1964 to send young people from East Africa to Qum (Iran), Najaf (Iraq) and Lebanon to study and be trained as missionary preachers of Islam in East Africa. Among them was Sheikh Idi Abdallah, whom I met in the Kenyan town of Nakuru during my field research in 2004. To illustrate the significance of this let us now consider Sheikh Idi's career more closely.

Sheikh Idi was born in 1947 in the region of the Tana River in the Kenyan coast in a small village named Masalani. He went to state school until the age of nine. Although he managed to pass fourth grade he could not continue in school; his mother was too poor to pay the tuition. Therefore he decided to follow an Islamic education. From 1964 to 1968 he went to the *Madrasa an-Nur al-Islamiyya* in Mambui. After completing secondary education (*thanawi*) at this school, he started teaching in the Madrasa Munganyo al-Islamiyya in Nairobi, where he stayed until 1975. At the end of the 1970s he left Nairobi and settled down in Mombasa. The reason for his departure was that he had converted to *Ithna ashari* Shi'i Islam and saw his life endangered in Nairobi, where in 1975 the

Wahhabiyya and other Sunni groups seriously threatened new Shi'i converts. Between 1975 and 1980 he worked as a teacher in the Madrasa of the Bilal Muslim Mission, and also trained teachers for preparatory (*i' dâdi*) level. In 1981, he received a scholarship permitting him to continue his studies in Teheran, at a branch of the Theology Faculty of Qum. He stayed in Teheran for three years before returning to Kenya, where he continued teaching and at the same time opened a shop in Mombasa. As his business started to expand and prosper he had less and less time for teaching. At this point he left the school completely and dedicated himself to commerce.

Then, in 1994, the Bilal Muslim Mission asked him to go to Nakuru to inaugurate the *Markaz Quran Hakim*, in the building that today houses the office of the Madrasa of the Bilal Muslim Mission. In Nakuru, Sheikh Idi managed to create a network of Africans whom he had converted to Shi'i Islam. However, Sheikh Idi and his group were soon confronted with the open hostility of the Salafiyya-Wahhabiyya of Nakuru, who went so far as to exclude them from praying at the Jamia Mosque, the city's main mosque. The conflict lasted until reconciliation was effected in 2004. Yet even then the situation did not really improve. Most of the *Ithna'ashari* Shi'i Muslims had stopped going to the Sunni mosque, but Sheikh Idi and some others continued to do so. During my field research in Nakuru, I observed that people in the town would occasionally greet him hastily but otherwise refused to talk to him.

Finally in relation to the Bilal Muslim Mission, we should also consider the impact of Khomeini's Iranian revolution. Although the Bilal Muslim Mission existed before Khomeini (1902–89) came to power in 1979, it is undeniable that the Islamic Republic of Iran, through its embassies and cultural services, managed to gain strong influence within the Bilal Muslim Mission and the *Ithna'ashari khoja* community and the Muslims of the east African region in general. Indeed, many of the young Sunni Muslims in the region sympathized with the Islamic revolution. The Iranian embassies and cultural services established their own propaganda networks in the region, and at the same time gave support to the Bilal Muslim Mission and any activity of Allama Rizvi – who they thought to be the most competent *Ithna'ashari dâ'i* (missionary) the region had ever seen. However, propaganda for conversion of Africans to *Ithna'ashari* Shi'i Islam in East Africa had started before the propaganda of the Iranian revolution set in. One gets the impression that Allama Rizvi had started to propagate Khomeini's Islamic vision long before the Ayatollah's actual rise to power in Iran. Indeed, when Khomeini ordered the publication of the Swahili Islamic journal *Sauti ya Umma* (the voice of the people) he did nothing but imitate Rizvi's Islamic Swahili journal *Sauti ya Bilal* (the voice of Bilal), which had been published since 1964.

Allama Rizvi died in Dar-as-Salaam on Thursday, 20 June 2002, and was buried on the following Saturday. Through his son, Sayyid Rizvi, the Bilal Muslim Mission has since continued his work.

## Conclusion

These cases offer good examples of the new Islamic propaganda in sub-Saharan Africa, both in its Sunni and its *Ithna'Ashari* Shiite versions. These institutions operate through networks and focus on educational and charitable activities as a means of conversion. These institutions (in common with many other similar organizations) are influenced by their perceptions of Christian missionary activities. While the Bilal Muslim Mission has a network extending from Africa to South Asia and, to a lesser extent, Europe, the African Muslim Agency's network links Africa and the Arab world – the Gulf States serving as the

principle financial investor, while Sudan and Morocco supply the personnel working in the Agency's African offices. In both cases, the people who are working in these institutions are linked through common ideas and beliefs (mental networks), rather than through hierarchical administrative structures (material networks). It is, then, *ideas* that make two different institutions like the African Muslim Agency and *al-Haramayn* cooperate on a local level, as much as it is a community of ideas that allows persons working in different Islamic NGOs to share the same goals regardless of the different projects set up by their respective NGOs.

Yet, contrary to what the members of Bilal Muslim Mission and African Muslim Agency believe, working in an Islamic NGO not only requires a vast knowledge of religious Islamic sciences (textual authority), which they can undoubtedly claim for themselves, but, more importantly, social skills (contextual authority). However, most of the personnel in both NGOs lack precisely these latter skills. Hence, they often find themselves in conflict with the local populations whom they are in fact supposed to help.

In this article I have described the activities these three institutions have developed in the fields of education, development and conversion to Islam. It would be of similar interest to study the political implication of these activities in the long run. Will the work of these institutions, backed by financial and ideological support from different foreign states, help to promote the integration of African Muslims within their respective nation-states, or rather alienate them even further? Will these institutions with their Islamic proselytizing activities stir up religious conflict in contemporary Africa, or not? Concerning the political implications of Islamic NGOs in Africa, M. A. Mohamed Salih, one of the few scholars to write in depth on this topic, asserts that "some of these NGOs have been used as a vehicle for spreading political Islam at an accelerated rate, combining propagating the faith with providing material rewards among the disenfranchised Muslim poor".<sup>18</sup> Yet, to my knowledge, nothing proves that either the African Muslim Agency, the Bilal Muslim Mission or *al-Haramayn* have an explicit political agenda or are direct agents of political Islam. As much as organizations based on Christian or humanitarian values, Islamic NGOs have every right to help people in need.

However, the hybrid nature of their activities does present problems for these Islamic NGOs. They declare themselves to be NGOs based solely on religious values, yet they are active in proselytizing. Proselytism is, of course, perfectly legitimate. However, if these NGOs are first and foremost proselytes, then they should declare themselves as such and not conceal that their main focus is on missionary work. It is worth mentioning that this hybridism is not exclusive to NGOs based on Islamic values. Almost any NGO pursues certain political goals next to its humanitarian work without explicitly stating this. Hence it is the scholar's task to question the official rhetoric of these NGOs and look at what is left unsaid, as well as what has been covered up.

## Notes

1. This article is part of a research project on new conversions to Islam in Africa, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Fund). Field research was conducted in May–June 2004 and April–May 2005.
2. See Ahmed, *Les conversions à l'Islam*; Bruinhorst, "Raise Your Voices and Kill Your Animals"; Morier-Genoud, "L'Islam au Mozambique après l'indépendance."
3. For an in-depth explanation of the *da'wa* concept see Ahmed, *Les conversions à l'Islam*, especially chapter 1 ("Les Missions de conversion à l'Islam ou da'wa (appel, invitation à l'Islam): les sens d'un concept"), pp. 25–31.
4. Bruinessen, "Development and Islamic Charities," 5; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent*, especially chapters 4–7.

5. Ever since the 1970s, the term *sahwa* (awakening) has been very much *en vogue* to designate the activities of different Islamist movements. The term is widely used because of its positive connotation.
6. See his article “Hakadha bada’na [Thus we started]” in the pamphlet-calender published by the organization in 2001, freely distributed.
7. See, among others, the interviews with Abdurrahman H. Sumayt in the journal *al-Nun* and the newspaper *al-Haraka* with Abdurrahman H. Sumayt, both published December 12, 2006, at <http://www.labaik-africa.org> (accessed October 27, 2007). See also the interview Sumayt “Muslims Have their Mother Teresa too.”
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. The term “salafi” is derived from *al-salaf al-sâlih* (pious ancestors). The *salafiyya* advocates a strictly literal interpretation of the fundamental Islamic texts, i.e., Qur’an and Hadiths. In doing so, they believe to follow the example of the first generation of Muslims (or the first three generations of Muslims), the *Salaf al-Sâlih*.
11. On the Antemoro, see especially Beaujard, “Islamisés et systèmes royaux”; Rajaonarimanana, *Savoir arabico-malgache*.
12. See the interview with Sumayt, “Message from Madagascar.”
13. On the creation of *al-Haramayn* Foundation see, among others, al-Ansari, “Mu’assasat al-Haramayn al-khayriyya,” 1, 6 and 15.
14. Penrad, “Sauti ya Bilal,” 17–33.
15. Amiji, “The Asian Communities,” 141–81; Amiji, “Some Notes on Religious Dissent,” 603–16; Rizvi and King, “Some East African Ithna-asheri Jamaat,” 12–22.
16. Penrad, “Sauti ya Bilal.”
17. Amiji, “The Asian Communities”; Amiji, “Some Notes on Religious Dissent.”
18. Salih, “Islamic NGOs in Africa,” 146–81.

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