Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethnographie Reality or Ideology.

Monsieur William Arens

Résumé

W. Arens — Islam et christianisme en Afrique sub-saharienne: réalité ethnologique ou idéologie? L'article commence par une étude critique de la littérature sur ce sujet, de quelque discipline (sociologie, histoire, anthropologie, science des religions) qu'elle relève, et spécialement du thème fréquent comme quoi « l'islam a mieux réussi que le christianisme », ainsi que du leitmotiv concernant le prétendu syncrétisme de l'islam dit noir. L'implication sous-jacente à ces thèmes apparaît quelque peu péjorative. Au surplus, les auteurs ont généralement négligé l'étude systématique des conversions au christianisme. La deuxième partie est une étude de terrain dans une région de la Tanzanie du Nord où les deux confessions se partagent 90 % de la population (islam 60 %, christianisme 32 %). Bien que l'antagonisme réel — plus sérieux que le tribalisme — entre les deux religions ne soit jamais reconnu officiellement, l'appartenance religieuse est un facteur important d'identification sociale, avec des conséquences politiques, marquées surtout par une prédominance musulmane. Ceci s'explique, entre autres, par le mécanisme des conversions à l'islam qui crée, au bénéfice des convertis, une utilité relation de clientèle qui facilite l'intégration des migrants dans la communauté locale.

Citer ce document / Cite this document:


Document généré le 02/06/2016
Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa:
Ethnographic Reality or Ideology*

I

This essay was initially intended as a restricted discussion of the significance of Islam and, to a lesser extent, Christianity as an aspect of social organization in a poly-ethnic village in rural Tanzania. However, background reading suggested that some general remarks were called for in light of the ideological flavor of much of what is accepted as authoritative material on this topic. Consequently, the article is divided into two related parts. The first section examines the literature on Islam and Christianity in Africa, and the second comments on their expression in a single community where together these world religions claim the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the residents. The intention of both sections is to propose a more objective assessment of the character of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa than now prevails.

II

The contrasting role of Islam and Christianity is among the most often discussed topics by Africanists. It is not surprising therefore that at this juncture we have few, if any, generally acceptable conclusions on the subject. There are many assumptions, suggestions and tentative hypotheses, but too often these fail to stand up to the test of comparative or interdisciplinary research. Undoubtedly part of the problem stems from the fact that a variety of academic disciplines have expressed an interest in this matter and have contributed to our knowledge of it. As a result, it is not rare that the synchronic musings of social anthropologists are invalidated by historians who are less constrained by the duration of field research in their deliberations. On the other hand, the sweeping generalizations of students of comparative religion based on the analysis of idealized doctrines are regularly shown to be inoperative by social anthropologists at the local level of human expression. Consequently, the present state of affairs is more the result of differing orientations and a mass of contradictory information, rather than a scarcity of it.

* An abbreviated version of this article was presented at the 1973 Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Insightful comments on a later draft by Professor William Watson, Professor E. H. Winter, Dr. David Hicks and Diana Arens are appreciated.

Nevertheless, a number of 'facts' and premises of an implicit nature have set in among the commentators. Judging from the tone of the literature, among these is the impression that Islam has been more successful than Christianity in attracting converts to its standard from the ranks of traditional African religion. However, even here the problem is not a simple one since Islamic penetration into many parts of sub-Saharan Africa preceded Christianity by centuries so that the relative performances of the two religions should be judged within a controlled time frame which corresponds with the onset of the colonial period to the present. As elementary as this may seem, it is rarely clear whether or not this is taken into consideration in the discussions and such an oversight may result in spurious reasoning. In assessing the relative performance of the two creeds any argument which does not take into explicit account this historical dimension must be suspect until it is shown that there is a comparative problem to be solved.

Leaving this question aside and merely assuming that Islam has been successful, there are a number of popular themes which try to account for the situation. The first assumes that Islam is more compatible with traditional African custom, cosmology and morality. This does make initial sense, since Islam allows for polygyny, bridewealth, divorce, circumcision, and emphasizes patrilineality which are factors often characteristic of African social systems. This position has a long and distinguished career having been wholeheartedly adopted by the anthropologically oriented missionary (Schildknecht 1969) and later more cautiously by other social scientists (Lewis 1966: 45-75). For example, a nineteenth-century missionary wrote: 'No doubt it is easier for the African to govern himself by the few rules set forth by Mohammedanism [. . .] than to govern himself by the all-embracing stringent laws of Christianity' (Pruen, n.d.: 298). Over fifty years later, another commentator could still write that: 'For the majority of tribal Africans, Islam has appeared as a support, and not as a challenge, to their traditional way of life [. . .] In a true sense, no conversion is expected of the tribal African of East Africa in becoming a Muslim, for conversion means a turning away from those aspects of belief which are not acceptable in the converting religion' (Harris 1954: 33). Unfortunately the literature is still rife with such ethnocentric statements.

It is true though that social anthropologists with a more sophisticated awareness of the variety of traditional patterns of social organization refrain from such naive oversimplifications. However, in their discussions of the acceptance of Islam among a specific group of people they

---

1. Reliable figures on the number of Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists are difficult to come by and existing figures vary widely. **BRETHAM** (1967: 164) estimates that in 1966 assuming a total African population of 230 million there were 115 million 'Animists', between 50 to 55 million Muslims and approximately 60 million Christians, which includes 10 million Ethiopian Christians. **PARRINDER** (1969) in contrast estimates 83 million Muslims and 68 million Christians.
tend to look for structural correlates which may have facilitated the process of Islamization (Schwab 1952 and Alpers 1972). Unfortunately, the acceptance of Islam by groups with centralized and uncentralized polities, matrilineal as well as patrilineal descent systems, and a wide variety of other contrasting features, allows for only the most facile type of generalization (Rigby 1966: 274). Instead we are left with ex post facto rationalizations which may describe but do not explain as is often the case with a structural-functional analysis which fails to adequately distinguish between causes and consequences.

The attempt to account for Islamic acceptance on the basis of compatibility between Muslim and traditional African cosmologies also runs into serious difficulties. Even such an astute observer as J. S. Trimingham often makes the most outrageous statements on the nature of an assumed typical African system of thought which he implies allows for an easily implanted Muslim theology. He writes in one instance that: 'Africans believe in a Supreme Being who created the whole cosmos [. . .] but in contrast to the created world of spirits it is impersonal, unknowable and communion with it is impossible' (Trimingham 1959: 6).

In a similar vein he later comments on a scarcity of ritual in African religions related to communion with 'the sky-god' and 'If God has Its being in some realm of the spirit distinct from and external to the processes and relationships of men then, like God in the Western world, It is non-existent and scarcely worthy of consideration as a vital aspect of African religion' (Trimingham 1968: 129). If this were the case such an argument would be helpful in explaining how the concept of Islamic monotheism could be easily grafted into traditional foundation. However, on the contrary, readily available classical studies of African religious by Evans-Pritchard (1956) and Lienhardt (1961) have demonstrated a well developed concept of a Supreme Being among the people in question who is often communed with through prayer and ritual. As before, it is not possible to glibly refer to a single traditional African religion and then generalize about the acceptance of Islam on this basis. In any event, by itself such a situation would not provide Islam with any special advantage over Christianity. Indeed Gray (1965) and Laroche (1968) have commented on the compatibility of some traditional African systems of thought with Christian cosmology.

Two other arguments which appear with great frequency often refer to Islam's ability to ingrain itself among a local population through a process of syncretization or parallelism. In the first instance certain features of Muslim creed envelop traditional aspects of thought, such as the belief in witches, ancestors, and a variety of other spirits which Islam allows for in the realm of the supernatural (Lewis 1966: 58-67). Islam admits too, but does not sanction, these evil forces, so that the local cleric can function to restore the moral order through his intercession with Allah. In short, a Muslim convert does not have to abandon entirely a traditional view of the mystical world as long as the forces
involved are combated within the framework of broadly interpreted Islamic doctrine and practice. In the event that customary patterns cannot be incorporated, then it is often argued that traditional and Islamic doctrines co-exist side by side among the local population without apparent contradiction (Trimingham 1964: 59 and Lienhardt 1966: 374).

This argument, as one observer put it in the extreme, means that in Islamic Africa there is no such distinction as in Christianity between a good or bad, or an orthodox or unorthodox practitioner. Only the categories of believer and non-believer are significant (Harris 1954: 37). Robin Horton who is surely one of the most perceptive observers of traditional religious systems in Africa in a rare excursion into this arena adds his support to the prevailing opinion by remarking on the adaptability of Islam while Christianity, he argues, 'has been rigid in its insistence on the individual's total acceptance of official doctrines' (Horton 1971: 105). Again the implication is that Christianity has been less successful on these grounds.

To recapitulate, it has been assumed by many that Islam's relative success in Africa can be accounted for on the basis of its structural correlates in the realm of practice or cosmology, and its ability to integrate existing traditional patterns within its framework or tolerate them when syncretism is not possible. It is rare that one encounters a dissenting opinion even though Fisher's recent rejoinder (1973) to Horton (1971) clearly shows that much of what has been said on this matter displays a certain lack of knowledge on the history of Islamic penetration in West Africa. He points out that 'The reformed Islam which was imposed, alike upon the newly converted, the reconverted and the recalcitrant [...] involved, sometimes, a sharp and even cruel insistence upon proper standards, and an equally sharp break with local traditions' (Fisher 1973: 37). Ottenberg's detailed examination (1971) of the conversion of an Igbo village to Islam also substantiates that such a change may often entail a radical departure from traditional ways. If this is so, how is it possible to account for the prevailing notion so often expressed which portrays: 'The ease with which Islam can be adopted. . .' (Trimingham 1964: 59)?

Considering that this is the continuation of a theme sometimes incautiously and other times more cautiously expressed since the inception of the European period in Africa, it may be appropriate at this time to consider some of its unstated assumptions and implications. In retrospect, it is not difficult to detect an unintended but definite disparaging attitude toward Islam. Commentators maintain a position even though it is clearly based on a lack of adequate information or in the face of contradictory evidence. The literature posits that Islam is willing to compromise, to condone contradictions, and to overlook violations of its basic tenets for the sake of spreading its influence. These arguments phrased in the objective terminology of syncretism, synthesis and parallelism, nonetheless convey a negative tone. This position also
implies that Christianity, on the other hand, has been more insistent on the acceptance of undiluted dogma and practice. As a result the argument concludes that Christianity has been less successful in the competition for converts or has lost existing ones to break-away African churches within which a diluted expression of European Christianity makes its appearance. It is impossible not to be aware of the negative evaluation of Islam, whether intentional or not.

It is also necessary to consider why the literature abounds with explanations for the acceptance and spread of Islam while scant attention is paid to the process of conversion to Christianity. One need only to compare the introductory statements by the editors of recent volumes on Christianity and Islam (Lewis 1966 and Baëta 1968) to be convinced of this fact.² It is as if Islamic conversion has to be explained sociologically while the acceptance of Christianity involves the recognition of divine truth and therefore such sociological analysis is uncalled for. However, if we are to approach this problem as social scientists and not as disguised theologians, then the spread of Christianity must also be explained on the same grounds rather than accepted without question or analysis. I would suggest that this situation is another indication of the rather ethnocentric bias of anthropologists who find themselves embarrassingly close to the missionary position in their approach to Islam and Christianity in Africa.

The foregoing observations are not meant to imply that the prevailing opinions are entirely unfounded, but rather favorably disposed in their judgement of Christianity. It might well be asked if there is anything which has been attributed to Islam in Africa which has been beyond the pale of Christianity in other times or places. For example, it is known that ‘in great wisdom’ Pope Gregory advised St. Augustine during the early 7th century in England ‘not to suppress the pagan feasts but to turn them into Christian festivals, to make the pagan temples into Christian churches, and not to bother about the correct liturgy to use but to take the best part out of all the liturgies he knew’ (Sayles 1961: 45). The existence of numerous local saints with quite nebulous histories (George and George 1966) is further indication of Christianity’s willingness in the past to take a flexible position in the process of proselytizing Europe.³

This unrelenting stance of Christianity in Africa, as opposed to its history in other parts of the globe, demands an explanation. However, this would require much more information on the process of conversion

². I. M. Lewis’s perceptive introduction to the collection of essays on Islam (1966) runs for almost one hundred pages pursuing a variety of topics while Baëta’s comments on Christianity (1968) cover a scant seventeen pages, detailing its history on the continent.

³. Information by historians on the conversion and later reconversion of Europe conveys a quite different impression of Christianity in another era (Bede 1968, Heer 1968, and Hillgarth 1969). I am indebted to Lawrence Taylor for bringing some of the sources cited on this topic to my attention.
which, as indicated above, is sorely lacking. The sociological analysis of missions and missionaries would be of particular importance, but as Beidelman (1974) has recently pointed out, this has been a studiously avoided issue (cf. also Winter and Beidelman 1967). The historical material that does exist (Oliver 1952, Baëta 1938 and Wright 1972) is primarily of a chronological nature and has little bearing on the question discussed here. In contrast, the role of the minimally trained African proselytizer is frequently analyzed as an aspect of conversion to Islam (Horton 1971, Trimingham 1968 and Schwab 1952).

In a very perceptive study of Islam in two different nations, Geertz argues in the introduction that:

‘The aim of the systematic study of religion is, or anyway ought to be, not just to describe ideas, acts and institutions, but to determine just how and in what way particular ideas, acts and institutions sustain, fail to sustain, or even inhibit religious faith—that is to say, steadfast attachment to some transtemporal conception of reality.’ (1971: 2.)

It appears that this suggestion has been taken to heart by social anthropologists only in the study of Islam in Africa.

At this point it is reasonable to assume that the typical European missionary saw little in African custom and cosmology worthy of incorporation into Christianity beyond the occasional use of the local term for God. Their perception of little other value in traditional Africa led them in their work to insist upon the unqualified acceptance of a European variety of Christianity as an aspect of conversion. In a very real sense a convert could not be both an African and a Christian since to the European missionary these were contradictory categories. This possibility and not further discussions of syncretism and allied topics deserve the consideration of those social anthropologists concerned with Islam and Christianity in Africa.

III

Fieldwork in Mto wa Mbu, a poly-ethnic rural community in Northern Tanzania, presented an ideal situation for a discussion of the character of Islam and Christianity since over 90 percent of the inhabitants expressed a preference for one of the two religions.4

The community was founded in the early 1920’s by a small group of Africans who had seen service in the previous German colonial regime and were encouraged by the then new British administration to settle

4. Initial fieldwork for a sixteen month period in 1968-69 was carried out as a Research Associate of the University of Dar es-Salaam and supported by an NIMH Fellowship and Research Award (Grant No. M111414-01). A return visit to the community was made possible by a State University of New York Faculty Research Award during the summer of 1973. The assistance of these agencies is gratefully acknowledged.
in a virgin area of the district which was particularly well suited for agriculture. Over the years new settlers arrived from all over the colony drawn by the potential fertility of the area which was supported by an irrigation system. By 1969, the settlement had a population of 3,500 which included representatives of approximately seventy different ethnic backgrounds.

Although the necessary conditions would appear to have existed for what Cohen (1969) has called 'retribalization', the re-emergence of ethnic groups in a new social setting, this did not occur in Mto wa Mbu for reasons I have described elsewhere. I have argued that this retribalization process is stimulated by certain socio-economic variables operating in urban-industrial areas which are inapplicable in rural agricultural ones (Arens 1973). Instead of retaining traditional tribal labels, the residents employed the broad term Waswahili to refer to the ethnic composition of the community. The use of the general term Waswahili signified a desire to play down potential intra-community ethnic differences since it has always involved and allowed for a fair degree of cultural variations by those who have adopted it (Arens 1975). At the same time, it was narrow enough to allow the residents of the community to distinguish themselves from the more traditional Masai and Iraqw who occupied the surrounding countryside. The villagers referred to these groups in Swahili as 'tribesmen' (watu wa kabila) and held them in low esteem because of their conservativism.

Mto wa Mbu, like other communities of this type in Tanzania, is predominantly Islamic with a Muslim-Christian ratio of almost two to one (Muslim 60 percent, Christian 32 percent). Less than 10 percent of the population failed to profess either of the two world religions, and these were normally part-time residents who were for the most part Iraqw who maintained a household in the village in addition to another in their nearby traditional homeland. Although ethnic differences and loyalties were relatively ignored by the residents and ethnicity was an unimportant aspect of social organization, the same could not be said for the religious factor. Religious persuasion was an important feature of personal identity and a guide for social behavior as evinced by patterns of marriage, friendship, and trading relationships among the residents. For example, although 53 percent of all the marriages between male heads of households were inter-ethnic, only 1 percent were inter-religious (traditionalists omitted). It should be noted that the Muslim population showed a more marked tendency to marry inter-ethnically than the Christians (44 percent to 31 percent), a trend which is of some concern to this paper. In addition, there was often covert hostility between the two groups expressed privately in terms of disparaging attitudes and remarks on the religious practices and customs by

5. Both Schildknecht (1969) and Trimmingham (1964) estimate that the Muslim population is a distinct minority on mainland Tanzania which stands in contrast to their strength in rural and urban centers.
one segment of the community toward the other. Ceremonies such as marriage and death rituals of one group were studiously avoided by members of the other, even if they took place in full public view of neighbors.\(^6\) It was also obvious that religion had an important effect on politics, since all of the elected party chairmen were Muslims, reflecting the religious bias of the voters in choosing an important public official. Although 'tribalism' and its dangers were often discussed at political meetings, the subject of religion was never mentioned. The real potential for community schism on these lines and the inherent tension were obviously apparent to the astute political leadership and, therefore, never referred to even in disapproving terms as opposed to tribalism which as a 'non-issue' was safe to denounce.

Why religion assumes such an importance, as opposed to ethnicity, is a basic question which will not be addressed at this time except to reiterate that the latter was not a viable organizational principle. Instead, I would prefer to examine the question of the primacy of Islam in such communities, and why it assumes such an importance in the lives of its adherents as opposed to Christianity. Historical precedents provide a partial answer to the first question since Islam was the first world religion to penetrate East Africa. Establishing itself on the littoral by the twelfth century at the latest (Trimingham 1968), it became the dominant religion of coastal trading centers centuries before any serious attempt to Christianize the area by Europeans. Prior to the colonial era, Islam had also spread to some lesser extent along the interior trade routes of East Africa and became the predominant religion of the few inland trading centers (Brown 1971). Consequently, by the advent of the European period, Islam for centuries had been adapting itself to town life in East Africa with its characteristic ethnic and racial amalgamations. The creation of Tanganyika colony in the late nineteenth century provided further stimulation to the spread of Islam since the German system of administration relied heavily on the use of African personnel from the coast who were invariably Muslim by this time. In the process of establishing a colonial administrative structure, these individuals accompanied the Europeans into the interior where they took up residence in the administrative centers as minor functionaries. The result was the spread of Islam to areas which previously had been untouched by Muslim influence (Trimingham 1968) and the further extension of a town-based Muslim network throughout the colony. As a consequence by the early twentieth century, Islam, along with

---

6. This was made quite clear to me by a close Christian informant on an occasion when we were paying our respects to the family of a respected member of the Muslim community who had died during the evening. After sitting in the courtyard for a few moments with other mourners, my companion informed me that it was time to leave since, as Christians, 'this was not our place.' I should also mention that as a European I was classified immediately as a Christian which at times undoubtedly affected my relationship with some Muslim residents who perceived of me in terms of the community's religious dichotomy.
other cultural items of the coast such as a particular style of dress and the Swahili language, had become a characteristic feature of town and village life in Tanzania far from the maritime belt.

This community, as well as others of its type in Tanzania, therefore had a Muslim character from its early days and it was not uncommon for new arrivals to accept the faith after settling in the community for a period of time. It was not until the 1950’s that there was a significant emigration of Christians to the village as a result of population pressures in their traditional homelands. Almost all of these later arrivals came as practicing Christians of a variety of denominations. Considering the number already committed to a world religion, at the time of fieldwork I did not encounter any serious proselytizing.

As mentioned, religious persuasion was a significant factor of identity, and contrary to much of what has been written the manner in which an individual adhered to an idealized form of Islam was of significance to the way in which he was evaluated by others. Attendance at the mosque, recitation of daily prayers, keeping of the fast during Ramadan, and the abstinence from alcohol were factors often considered as an aspect of an individual’s esteem within the Islamic segment of the community. As an expression of this, the more learned Muslim men were sought after by fathers as potential grooms for their daughters. In turn, these young women had to have reputations for high moral character in order to be considered by the men in question. With marriages of this type, the bridewealth (mahari) was lower than would be expected in recognition of the status of the male. Of course, there were many ‘nominal’ Muslims and Christians as well but this was not an unappreciated aspect of a resident’s social worth.

Although there are no available figures for every instance, it is clear to any observer that in Tanzania and in other parts of East Africa poly-ethnic centers have a strong Islamic character. The historical element referred to earlier partially accounts for this, but there are other factors to be considered as well since in Mto wa Mbu conversion to Islam from traditional world view was common in the early years of the community’s existence. In accounting for this phenomenon, it is tempting to conclude, as has Watt (1968), that Islam has an intrinsic quality which overcomes ethnic differences in culturally heterogeneous communities. However, such a judgement assumes the implementation of Islamic ideals and this particular one is little different from the Christian concept of a universal ‘brotherhood’ of believers. Neither has been totally successful in practice and various studies of urban communities in Africa and elsewhere have demonstrated that the common Islamic ideology alone has not been sufficient to overcome ethnic differences. Planhol (1959: 14) writes that the Muslim community with its ethnic quarters ‘is an assembly of disparate elements set alongside one another without any real bonds of unity’. Proudfoot (1959), Banton (1957), and more recently Cohen (1969) have demonstrated that
mosques and attendance at them function as symbols of ethnic unity and exclusiveness in West African cities rather than acting as unifying forces among common believers. It would not be realistic therefore to conclude that the concept of brotherhood has resulted in unifying the settlement of Mto wa Mbu, so that other factors must be sought out in accounting for the strength of Islam. The argument which assumes the adaptability of Islam is also of little assistance since the residents reflect a variety of traditional socio-cultural backgrounds.

Initially, I would suggest that in this type of community the arrival of a new settler espousing no other religion than the traditional one of his ancestors is morally an unknown quality, and as such is in a disadvantageous position in attempting to establish a social presence. As Weber (1958) pointed out in his discussion of religion on the American frontier, in this instance Protestantism, sect membership immediately implied to co-religionists a standard of expected behavior. At the same time, this factor was the basis for the stranger's expectation of acceptance, aid and support. Seen from this perspective, especially in the case of conversion, the benefits of accepting Islam by a recent emigrant to Mto wa Mbu were apparent. This does not mean that this was a primary or even recognized factor in conversion. However, Ishige (1969), who has conducted research in a similar community in Tanzania, reports that such considerations were actually expressed by some Muslims in explaining the reasons for their conversion.

In addition to indicating an interest in adhering to community moral standards, the conversion process results in some immediate practical advantages. In Mto wa Mbu and in other poly-ethnic Tanzanian villages (Guillotte 1970 and Ishige 1969) the new member is introduced into the Muslim congregation by a system of sponsorship by a practicing Muslim. A similar contractual arrangement has frequently been discussed for Catholic Latin-American and Mediterranean societies (Mintz and Wolf 1950) and Islamic Turkey (Magnarella and Türkdoğan 1973) where it often involves a patron-client relationship. In these instances, though, a father will seek out a god-parent for his infant child establishing an initial primary relationship among these individuals. In Mto wa Mbu the relationship involves the potential convert seeking out a sponsor for his own ritual entrance into the Islamic faith.7

The ceremony creates a relationship between the two individuals similar to that of father and son, and they henceforth address each other in these terms. Many of the obligations attached to this bond are similar to the biological one. The 'father' is able to call upon his 'son' for small services, and his permission is sought before his son will marry.

7. Nadel (1954: 235) reported on a similar arrangement among the 17th century Nupe where the noble class had accepted Islam prior to the vast majority of the population. At that time the conversion of a commoner involved the creation of a patron-client relationship with a member of the local ruling class and thereby insured his protection.
However, in many instances, the father will actually arrange the marriage for his client to the daughter of another Muslim. It is also expected that the father-patron will contribute toward the bridewealth if not provide the entire sum when necessary. The patron is also expected to support his client in various other social and economic matters, especially in establishing a household and clearing land for cultivation. The son in turn should respond to the requests of his sponsor when demanded.

The importance of this arrangement is highlighted by the fact that although it is initially contracted between two individuals, the relationship incorporates the client into the kinship network of his sponsors, and ideally they should treat each other as if a true kinship tie existed. In the event that the sponsor had been sought out by more than one convert to assume this role, which was often the case since he tended to be an important individual in the community, the set of clients formed a further fictive kin group based on their relationship to the same ‘father’.

The advantages of this custom to the individuals involved and its role as an agent of community integration are obvious since it creates rather special and close ties between a number of people often of different ethnic backgrounds where none previously existed. For the new arrival, conversion was often his visa into the social life of the community, and to the established resident it added to his prestige and power through the creation of dependents. This was a fairly common pattern in the early days of the village when more migrants than today arrived as both strangers and traditionalists. The result was a further elaboration of social ties throughout the community through the medium of Islam.

The existence of this particular arrangement along with other Islamic features, such as the Mosque school and court, provided a basis for community-wide organization and a common ideological basis for the expression of social relationships in a poly-ethnic setting. As a consequence those residents not committed to Islam found themselves unable to fully participate in the social life of the community. In the early years of the settlement’s existence to be a member of the community was to be a Muslim.

IV

It is hoped that this discussion will not be interpreted only as a further sociological explanation to account for Islamic success in Africa. It has been largely restricted to comments on Islam because of the somewhat biased accounts on the topic in the existing literature. Islam in Mto wa Mbu has been discussed since it is the dominant religion and often attracted converts among the present inhabitants at some point after settling in the community. I have tried to make it clear that Islam’s attraction could not be explained in this setting in terms of its organizational or cosmological congruence with traditional patterns.
The basis for such a process was simply not available in this instance. Further, conversion implied much more than lip-service since this new faith was often taken seriously by its adherents in ordering their daily lives. Islam's success is best attributed to the fact that it provided a standard of community morality and in this regard is no different from any other world religion.

The Christians, on the other hand, arrived as practitioners, and therefore it was not possible to evaluate the conversion process within the framework of community organization. Such events occurred in their respective homelands within which the proper context for a similar understanding would be feasible. Unfortunately, this is often lacking in the accounts of traditional societies where Christianity has had a major impact on the population. As unromantic as it may be, we clearly require more information on the social context of orthodox Christianity in Africa rather than additional studies of Islam and separatist churches.

### Bibliography

**Alpers, E. A.**

**Arens, W.**

**Baëta, C. G.**

**Banton, M.**
1957 *West African City* (London).

**Bede, V.**

**Beidelman, T. O.**

**Beetham, T. A.**
1967 *Christianity and the New Africa* (New York).

**Brown, B.**

**Cohen, A.**

**Evans-Pritchard, E. E.**

**Fisher, H. J.**
Geertz, C.
1971 Islam Observed (Chicago).

George, K. and George, C.

Gray, R. F.

Guillote, J. V.
1970 Personal communication.

Harris, L. P.

Heer, F.
1968 The Intellectual History of Europe (Garden City): I.

Horton, R.

Hillgarth, J. N.

Ishige, N.

Larocke, R.

Lewis, I. M.

Lienhardt, L.
1961 Divinity and Experience (London).

Lienhardt, P.

Magnarella, P. and Türkdogan, O.

Mintz, S. W. and Wolf, E. R.

Nadel, S. F.

Oliver, R.
1952 The Missionary Factor in East Africa (London).

Ottenberg, S.

Parrinder, G.

Planhol, X. de
1959 The World of Islam (Ithaca).

Proudfoot, L.

Pruen, S. T.


1964 Islam in East Africa (London).


W. ARENS — Islam et christianisme en Afrique sub-saharienne : réalité ethnologique ou idéologie ? L’article commence par une étude critique de la littérature sur ce sujet, de quelque discipline (sociologie, histoire, anthropologie, science des religions) qu’elle relève, et spécialement du thème fréquent comme quoi « l’islam a mieux réussi que le christianisme », ainsi que du leitmotiv concernant le prétendu syncrétisme de l’islam dit noir. L’impli- cation sous-jacente à ces thèmes apparaît quelque peu péjorative. Au surplus, les auteurs ont généralement négligé l’étude systématique des conversions au christianisme. La deuxième partie est une étude de terrain dans une région de la Tanzanie du Nord où les deux confessions se partagent 90 % de la population (islam 60 %, christianisme 32 %). Bien que l’antagonisme réel — plus sérieux que le tribalisme — entre les deux religions ne soit jamais reconnu officiellement, l’appartenance religieuse est un facteur important d’identification sociale, avec des conséquences politiques, marquées surtout par une prédominance musulmane. Ceci s’explique, entre autres, par le mécanisme des conversions à l’islam qui crée, au bénéfice des convertis, une utile relation de clientèle qui facilite l’intégration des migrants dans la communauté locale.