Kenyan Muslims' Minority Status: Theological Divisions, Ethno-Racial Competition and Ambiguous Relations with the State

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Abstract

On the surface, Islam in Kenya presents a continued competition between Sufi-oriented orders and the Salafi-minded Muslims. This article argues that the controversies between "traditional" and "modern" forms of Islam in the country is an indication of the plurality of ways in which Muslims, in a minority context, makes sense of their religious identities. Changing political circumstances in Kenya in the colonial and the post-colonial eras changed the conditions of Muslims in Kenya, thereby explaining their present attitude towards the state. Since the commencement of the war on terror in 2001, Kenyan Muslims have been confronted with rising radicalization amongst certain members of the community and increasing cases of kidnapping and extra judicial killing targeting members of the Muslim population. The result is a complex and problematic relationship with the state, characterised by Muslims' continuous demands for justice and equal treatment as citizens by the state.

Introduction

Islam has been found in Kenya for close to a millennium, and its history is largely linked with the coastal and northern regions and communities. Although it is not known when and how precisely Islam came to the country, its long existence in Kenya is beyond dispute.[1] Local chronicles reveal that Islam arrived on the East African coast as early as the 7th century AD.[2] The entire process of Islamization was long and complex as there was a multiplicity of factors that facilitated a corresponding variety of cases of conversion. These factors explain a lot about the nature of Islam in Kenya and its relations with the Kenyan state. The composition of Muslims in Kenya cut across geographical, ethnic and racial boundaries. Geographically, the regions predominantly inhabited by Muslims in Kenya are the northern region and the coastal strip, which extends from Vanga in the south to Kipini in the north. Generally, the coastal and northern regions constitute what can also be called the "home of Islam in Kenya" because of its profound foundation in the two areas. Despite the popular perception of the coast as a Muslim region, it actually has a "slight Christian majority."[3] The reason why "the coast" is linked to Islam is because Islam has had longer history there than Christianity and therefore "retains a degree of cultural pre-eminence."[4] It is from these regions that the state always sourced representatives of the community. In spite of Muslims' numerical strength in these areas, there are a few pockets of Muslim population found in the up-country (*bara*) side of the country.

During the colonial period, the British administration had varied policies towards different groups of the Muslim communities. While the Arab elites occupied an ambiguous status as privileged intermediaries, albeit stripped of their earlier political influence,[5] indigenous local Muslims were lumped together with other Africans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and received no benefits.[6] This colonial legacy has affected Muslims' attitude towards one another in the post-colonial era, manifested in the ethno-racial competition

1 Mohammad Bakari and Saad Yahya, eds. *Islam in Kenya: Proceedings of the Nairobi Seminar on Contemporary Islam in Kenya*, Nairobi, Mewa, 1995.

2 Mark Horton, "Primitive Islam and Architecture in East Africa," *Muqarnas* 8 (1991), p. 103–116.

3 Justin Willis and Hassan Mwakimako, "Islam, Politics and Violence on the Kenya Coast", *Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires*, 27 (2014), p. 8.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Justin Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

6 "Africa Muslim Representation", OP/1'497, Kenya National Archive; "Status of Arabs", PC/COAST/1/3/164, Kenya National Archive.

in their interaction with the state, a theme explored in this article. Following the country's independence in 1963, there have been efforts not only to unify Muslims' voices through the formation of umbrella bodies such the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM, 1973) and the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK, 1997), but also to incorporate the community in the various post-colonial governments.[7] Though the post-colonial period has been characterised by Muslims' demands for justice and equal treatment as citizens,[8] several divisions within the community, including ethnic and racial rivalries, have undermined these efforts.[9]

As a significant minority population, Muslims have been critical of the state on issues affecting the community. Muslims have always viewed their Christian compatriots who dominated the government with suspicion. There is a widely held opinion among Muslims that post-colonial governments in Kenya have politically excluded them, partly leading to the formation of the unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya in the early 1990s as a body for demanding justice for the community.[10] Further, since the commencement of the war on terror in 2001, Muslims in Kenya have found themselves in between the rising radicalization among certain members of the community and the government's militarized approach to countering radicalism, which has heightened tensions between the Muslims and the state.[11] This is the second theme examined in this article. Further, Muslims' feeling of marginalisation has increased due to numerous cases of kidnapping and extra judicial killings of Muslims blamed on the state.[12] Although it has not been proven that the state was responsible in instigating the series of kidnapping and extra judicial killings, the accusations succeeded in creating the perception of a community that is deliberately being

7   Hassan Juma Ndzovu, "The Politicization of Muslim Organizations and the Future of Islamic-Oriented Politics in Kenya", *Islamic Africa*, 3/1 (2012), p. 25–53.

8   Kai Kresse, *Philosophizing in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

9   Hassan J. Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan Politics: Political Involvement, Marginalization and Minority Status*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2014.

10   Arye Oded, *Islam and Politics in Kenya*, London, Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2000.

11   Kai Kresse, "Muslim Politics in the Postcolonial Kenya: Negotiating Knowledge on the Double Periphery", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15/1 (2009), p. 76–94; Rüdiger Seesemann, "Kenyan Muslims, the Aftermath of 9/11, and the 'War on Terror'", in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 157–176.

12   Human Rights Watch, "Submission to UN Human Rights Commission Review of Kenya", 25 July 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/25/submission-un-human-rights-commission-review-kenya; "Kenya Muslims 'targeted in extrajudicial killings'", *BBC News*, 7 December 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38239138.

targeted by the state. Therefore, while examining the Islamic reforming ideas of Salafi-oriented scholars and those of Sufi-oriented *ulama* in the country, the article also analyzes recent Kenyan Muslim activists' struggle against the state, often expressed in jihadi language. Whereas earlier individuals within the Sufi-oriented and the Salafi-oriented Islam in the country were willing to work with the state, actors of the Salafi-jihadi-minded ideology vehemently opposed cooperation with the secular state as shown in this article. Therefore, an analysis of the intra-Muslim debates and potential political stake presented by the jihadi-minded movement will reveal the experiences and minority status of Kenyan Muslims.

This article is driven by the argument that any claims to "Muslim community" (in the singular) and "commonality" by Muslims in Kenya needs to be understood as just that: claims and construction. Such a construction gives a political voice to a group that considers itself a minority in relation to their Christian compatriots. Therefore, apart from demonstrating intra-Muslim tensions to assert their diverse identities, I will also show how the Muslims in Kenya as a minority group have also related with the state as a "Muslim community." As a result, the article raises the following questions: (1) To what extent have theological and sectarian divisions reinforced the binary of "good" and "bad" Muslims from the perspective of the state? (2) How have ethnic and racial rivalries affected a united Muslim voices in demanding justice? (3) Why have some members of the Muslim community formulated their engagement with the state in Salafi-jihadi-minded ideology? This article relies on secondary data and personal observations of current emerging developments related to the Muslim community in Kenya. Rather than offering the results of original field research, this interpretive article seeks to explain Muslims' minority status in relation to the state, and how "Islamic factors" were shaped and pursued over the years. Significant to the study of Islam in Kenya is an enormous body of literature, which is situated at the intersection of numerous fields of study. Historiographic debates surrounding Islam in colonial and postcolonial Kenya are abundant. This article's contribution to the existing pool of knowledge is to offer an interpretive analysis of the religious, racial and ethnic identities; the social dynamics of Sufi-oriented and Salafi-oriented Islam; and the social role of Islam in Kenya's diverse communities in relation to the state. The analysis presents an Islamic history in Kenya that not only outlines the long-standing cultural, intellectual and political dynamism, but also highlights its ability to influence social mobilisation in the midst of numerous competing binaries within the community.

Therefore, by answering the above questions, I seek to demonstrate to what extent the controversies and antagonisms between the various Muslims groups

in Kenya are an indication of the plurality of ways in which individual Muslims in the country, in a minority context, practice their religion and their religious identity in ways that are meaningful to their daily lives. Before answering the above questions, I would like to briefly contextualize the development of Islam in Kenya.

Development of Islam and Competing Binaries of Muslims in Kenya

The development of Islam in Kenya was long confined to the coastal strip (*mwambao*) together with the northern region bordering Somalia, and Islam only spread into the up-country in the mid-nineteenth century. This explains why Muslims in the up-country remain a small minority scattered across the various urban centres inland of the country. Within the up-country context, Islam spread along the main trade routes, but not into the areas beyond them. Due to the country's diverse nature, Kenya's Muslim population is characterized by clear racial, ethnic, linguistic and sectarian fragmentation. Two immigrant communities, Arabs and Indians, were the pioneer Muslims who initially settled in the coastal region from around the fourteenth century. In addition to these Muslims immigrant communities, there are several indigenous Muslim groups, including not only the coastal communities like the Swahili, the Digo, the Duruma and other Mijikenda groups, but also the Pokomo of the Tana River delta area among others.[13] In the context of northern Kenya, the history of Islamic influence in the region is connected with the development of Islam in the Horn of Africa.[14] Among the communities of the northern region, the Somali-speaking communities were the earliest converts. Gradually, continued interactions with Somalis led many Boranas adopt Islam between 1920–1950.[15] This explains why the Boranas' form of Islam exhibits clear Somali characteristics.[16] However, the bulk of the Muslim population in the country is traced

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13   Robert L. Bunger Jr., "Islamization among the Upper Pokomo", PhD diss., Syracuse, Syracuse University, 1973; D.C. Sperling, "The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826–1933", PhD diss., London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1988; Janet McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2009.

14   Halkano Abdi Wario, "Networking the Nomads: A Study of Tablīghī Jamāʿat among the Borana of Northern Kenya", PhD diss., Bayreuth, University of Bayreuth, 2012.

15   Mario I. Aguilar, "African conversion from a world religion: religious diversification by the Waso Boorana in Kenya", *Africa*, 65/4 (1995), p. 525–544.

16   P.T.W. Baxter, "The Social Organization of the Galla of North Kenya", PhD diss., Oxford, Lincoln College, 1954.

not only from these communities but also from Muslim minorities among the up-country communities such as the Luo, the Kamba and the Kikuyu.[17]

Today, Muslims represent a numerical minority of Kenya's population with the majority residing in the lower Coast and the north-eastern regions. While the community's leadership maintains that up to 45% of the country's population are Muslims, official census data quote a very low figure of eleven per cent. The Islamic leadership rejects these estimations. However, because of the arrival of refugees from Somalia since the 1990s, a practical estimation would currently place the Muslim population at 20–25% of Kenya's population.[18] Thus, Kenya has witnessed a considerable increase in its Somali population due not only to natural population growth but also to the immigration of thousands of Somali refugees due to the long civil war in Somalia.[19] Undoubtedly, the issue of religious demography continues to be an emotionally charged matter in the country.

Generally speaking, Kenya's Muslims feel both politically and economically disadvantaged in comparison to the up-country Christian communities due to their supposed lack of Western education.[20] It is because of these feelings of marginalization that, a few years before independence, the two predominantly Muslim inhabited regions demanded to secede, with the coastal Muslims aspiring to autonomy or to be re-united with Zanzibar, while Muslims of the Northern Frontier District (NFD) demanded to be part of the larger Somalia project.[21] Consequently, in postcolonial Kenya, Muslims have been viewed as "foreigners" because of their notoriety for separatist desires along the coastal strip and in the predominantly Somali north-eastern region.[22] Despite the emergence of elaborate campaigns for secession among the country's Muslims, their agitations did not yield solid homogeneous movements in the respective regions but were divided into several ethnic and racial divisions

17   Bakari and Yahya, *Islam in Kenya*.

18   Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

19   Godwin R. Murunnga, "Refugees at Home? Coping with Somalia Conflict in Nairobi, Kenya", in *Études africaines de géographie par le bas - African Studies in Geography from Below*, ed. Michel Ben Arrous and Lazare Ki-Zerbo, Dakar, CODESRIA, 2009, p. 198–232.

20   Sebastian Elischer, "'Partisan Politics Was Making People Angry': The Rise and Fall of Political Salafism in Kenya", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 10/2 (2019), p. 121–136.

21   Justin Willis and George Gona, "*Pwani C Kenya*? Memory, documents and secessionist politics in coastal Kenya", *African Affairs*, 112/446 (2013), p. 48–71; Hannah Whittaker, "The Socio-Economic Dynamics of the *Shifta* Conflict in Kenya, c. 1963–8", *Journal of African History*, 53/3 (2012), p. 391–408.

22   Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan Politics*.

and competing interests. At the coast, certain Muslims groups, together with non-Muslim populations, rebuffed the Arab population's assertion to political dominance,[23] while, in the northern regions, the minority communities feared the Somali political ascendancy.[24]

With regard to sectarian affiliation, the Kenya Muslim population is mainly Sunni-Shafii with strong historical ties with the larger Muslim world through the Indian Ocean.[25] This is marked by the coexistence of a number of other Islamic orientations that include the Khoja (Ismaili), Daudi Bohra and Ithna'ashari (Twelvers) Shia groups.[26] Most of these are associated with small Asian communities that maintain a religious life distinct from the majority of local Muslims.[27] In addition, Kenya also has strong Sufi-oriented traditions linked especially with the Qadiriyya and the Alawiyya groups on the coast. In the northern region, the two main Sufi brotherhoods, the Salihiyya and the Qadiriyya, are credited with the development of Islam in the area.[28] By the twentieth century, the Riyadha Mosque of Habib Swaleh b. Alawi Jamal al-Layl (1853–1936) in Lamu had turned out to be a significant centre of Alawi teaching traditions in Kenya.[29] At the same time, there have been strong Salafi-oriented reforming ideas under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh al-Amin al-Mazrui (1891–1947). Sustaining his legacy was his son, Sheikh Muhammad b. Kasim al-Mazrui (1912–1982), as well as his student Sheikh Abdallah Swaleh al-Farsy (1912–1982), among others.[30] Their legacies and impact were strengthened by the arrival of young Islamic scholars from higher institutions of learning in the Muslim world where they had been introduced to Salafi-oriented ideas.[31] The development of both the Sufi- and the Salafi-oriented sectarian groups in Kenya was successfully capitalized by the government to avert the materialization of a united "Islamic" opposition, possibly inspired by a Salafi-jihadi-oriented Islamic awareness. Through political machination, this division has

23   *Ibid.*

24   Whittaker, "The Socio-Economic Dynamics".

25   Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, "Muslims in Eastern Africa: Their Past and Present", *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 31/1 (1994), p. 88–98.

26   Bakari and Yahya, *Islam in Kenya*.

27   Willis and Mwakimako, "Islam, Politics and Violence", p. 8.

28   Angel Rabasa, *Radical Islam in East Africa*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2009.

29   Kadara Swaleh, "Islamic proselytising between Lamu and Mozambique: the case of Kizingitini village", *Social Dynamics*, 38/3 (2012), p. 398–418.

30   Mohammed Suleiman Mraja, "Sheikh al-Amin Mazrui (1891–1947) and the Dilemma of Islamic Law in Kenyan Legal System in the 21st Century", *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 31 (2011), p. 60–74.

31   Lauren Van Metre, "Community Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kenya", *Peaceworks*, 122 (2016), p. 1–48.

made it difficult for Muslims to "achieve unity in the face of internal disputes that continue to enhance processes of social, ethnic and political fragmentation".[32] Thus, due to ethnic fragmentation, racial and sectarian divisions in the form of Sunni and Shia affiliations, and division between Salafi-oriented reformers and the Sufi brotherhoods, Muslims' fragmentation has informed their approach toward involvement in local and national politics, in addition to the internal dynamics of the community.

Religious Trends and the Categorization of a "Good Muslim" and "Bad Muslim" Axis

Generally speaking, along the East African coast, outstanding religious education was offered by renowned scholars like Sheikh Ali b. Abdallah al-Mazrui (1825–1894/6), Sayyid Ahmad bin Sumayt (d. 1925) and Sheikh Abdallah Bakathir (1860/1–1925). These individuals had travelled as far as Saudi Arabia to receive advanced religious training, which they taught to their students who came from various parts of the East African coast. However, perhaps driven by racial bias, many of the Islamic scholars of "Arab" descent "such as the Mazrui, Sumayt, and Mandhiry" families, among others, restricted advanced level lessons to specific "Arab" families, which they taught "in the privacy of their homes."[33] This was influenced by a learning tradition that favoured recruitment to the scholarly echelon through family networks, since "the best qualification for becoming a learned man was to be the son of another learned man."[34] However, this discriminative approach to learning was challenged by the end of the nineteenth century with the emergence of a fresh crop of Sufi-oriented religious scholars on the East Africa coast who came with a different mindset. This new type of Sufi-oriented Islamic scholar dedicated their teaching to the spiritual and educational needs of underprivileged Muslims and potential converts among the non-Muslims. In Kenya, the majority of this class of scholars were affiliated with the Qadiriyya and Shadhiliyya *tariqa* (brotherhood). They included Sayyid Abdur-Rahman b. Ahmad al-Saqqaf (1844–1922) of Siyu, and Habib Swaleh of Lamu. Significantly, through their efforts these *ulama* trained

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32   Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, p. 371.

33   Randall L. Pouwels, "The East African Coast, c. 780 to 1900 C.E.", in *The History of Islam in Africa*, eds. Nehemia, Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000, p. 251–271.

34   Anne K. Bang, "Islamic reform in East Africa, ca. 1870–1925: The Alawi case", paper presented to the workshop *Reasserting Connections, Commonalities, and Cosmopolitanism: The Western Indian Ocean since 1800*, Yale University, 2000, p. 5.

a new breed of Islamic scholars among the indigenous local Muslims who had previously been denied advanced religious education.[35] These religious scholars of *sharif* (descendants of Prophet Muhammad) descent established local networks where they left indelible intellectual marks through challenging the social hierarchy.

Significantly, Habib Swaleh, who had arrived in Lamu around 1870, founded the Ribat al-Riyadha in 1890, which gradually attracted students across the East Africa region. The new centre of learning opened its doors to people of all backgrounds, including those whom the society had condemned to the lower strata unworthy of advanced religious education. Through this initiative, Habib Swaleh challenged the Lamu religious elites in a way that subsequently had social implications.[36] The establishment of the Ribat al-Riyadha by Habib Swaleh was without doubt a response to the customary perception of an exclusive Islam of the local elites (Swahili patricians and merchants of Arab descent), which excluded Muslims from the the lower classes from advanced religious knowledge. In addition to his socio-religious reforms, he simultaneously introduced the popular al-Habshi's *maulidi* (celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday) from Hadramawt to Lamu society.[37] Incorporating drumming, this *maulidi* genre was more musical than the earlier type of *maulidi* that was common in the region. When Habib Swaleh performed the al-Habshi's *maulidi* for the first time in his Riyadha Mosque, it generated opposition from a group of conservative *ulama* in Lamu and the coastal Muslim community in general.[38]

Certain practises unify the Sufi-oriented networks, including the celebration of the *maulidi*, the performance of *dhikri* (ritual recitations glorifying God), a congregational salutation at the end of prayer, and a belief in the efficacy of prayers to local saints. These Sufi ritual practises drew criticism from Salafi-minded *ulama*, beginning with Sheikh al-Amin. His and subsequent Salafi religious scholars' criticism of the existing behaviour in society was

35   Pouwels, "The East African Coast"; Sara Normann Thordsen, "New Muslim Activism in Kenya", Institut for Statskundskab, 2009, https://www.asclibrary.nl/docs/353446882.pdf.

36   Rüdiger Seesemann, "African Islam or Islam in Africa? Evidence from Kenya?", in *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th-Century East Africa*, ed. Roman Loimeier and Rüdiger Seesemann, Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2006, p. 229–250.

37   Kai Kresse, "Debating Maulidi: Ambiguities and Transformations of Muslim Identity along the Kenyan Swahili Coast", in *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th-Century East Africa*, ed. Roman Loimeier and Rüdiger Seesemann, Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2006, p. 209–228.

38   COMPAS Communications, "Understanding a diaspora through Lamu Maulid", Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, 3 June 2012, https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2012/understanding-a-diaspora-through-lamu-maulid/; Bang, "Islamic reform".

framed in notions of piety.[39] To them, all these ritual practices were *bid'a,* innovations that were not practiced by the Prophet during his lifetime, thereby an adulteration of 'orthodox' Islam.[40] The general Kenyan Muslim public today refers to such views as representing a "Wahhabi" orientation. A substantial number of young Muslims educated at Islamic institutions of advanced learning, particularly the University of Madina, returned as reformers advocating a Salafi-oriented form of interpretation of texts that many local Muslims call "Wahhabi." Sarcastically referred to as the "Wahhabi *ulama*", this cluster of religious scholars has had a far-reaching influence on the way some local Muslims observe their faith and also how they relate to other Muslims and devotees of other religions.[41] Apart from travelling abroad for advanced studies, the 1970s and 1980s also witnessed an escalating sway of Salafi-oriented religious thought through the establishment of new madrassas that taught a Saudi-inspired religious syllabus. In addition, there were supportive Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), funded by philanthropic organizations from the Gulf and Middle East countries, that assisted with alleviating poverty among segments of the marginalized Muslim communities in the country. Most of these FBOs were linked to Salafi ideology, and subsequently, their provision of social services, whether health or education, was fundamentally connected to their understanding of Islam.[42] Consequently, the impact of these FBOs was not only confined to the private sphere of the Muslims but also extended to the public domain, where it was possible to notice public debates being loaded with Salafi-inspired arguments.

The different theological affiliation has been interpreted as an intellectual disagreement between "localized Sufi" and "globalized Islam" from outside, thereby informing the recent influential thinking on the war on terror, which considers the former as "moderate African Islam" and the later as "violent Arabo-Islam."[43] As a result, the Kenyan government, influenced by the US thinking, has shown willingness to work with Sufi religious scholars in their de-radicalization efforts because of the understanding that Salafi-oriented

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39 Randall L. Pouwels, "Sh. al-Amin B. Ali Mazrui and Islamic Modernism in East Africa, 1875–1947", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 13/3 (1981), p. 329–345.

40 Jeffrey Haynes, "Islam and democracy in East Africa", *Democratization*, 13/3 (2006), p. 490–507.

41 Mohamed Bakari, *The Sage of Moroni: The Intellectual Biography of Sayyid Omar Abdallah, a Forgotten Muslim Public Intellectual*, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 2019.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Rabasa, *Radical Islam*; Seesemann, "African Islam or Islam in Africa?"; David McCormack, "An African Vortex: Islamism in Sub-Saharan Africa", *The Centre for Security Policy*, Occasional Paper Series No. 4, 2005.

Islam is the foundation for religious radicalism and violence. This view has led to the erroneous conclusion that, since Sufi-oriented Islam is still widely practiced in Kenya, then the country is safe from the religious "radicalization" of "puritanical Salafists."[44] This categorization feeds into the common trope of "good Muslim"–"bad Muslim" dichotomy that is criticized by Mahmood Mamdani.[45] While it is true that the proponents of violent jihad may be affiliated to Salafi-minded Islam,[46] to generally equate it with violence and Sufi-oriented Islam with political moderation is simplistic. There is a segment of so-called Salafi-minded *ulama* who reject violence and instead show willingness to work with the state in Kenya.[47] Clearly, apart from the Salafi-minded *ulama* not being affiliated into a united monolithic body, they are also not all radical critics of the Kenyan government. Instead, it is only certain mosques in the country, i.e. Musa, Sakina and Swafaa mosques in Mombasa, and Pumwani mosque in Nairobi, that have the reputation of being Salafi-minded mosques that occasionally entertain preaching that espouses violence against non-Muslims and the secular State.[48] Similarly, there is no single leadership and organization representing Sufi-oriented Islam in the country. Evident in some places are loose alignments of "*tariqa* mosques", linked to a common intellectual genealogy (*silsila*). In recent times, some of these *tariqa* mosques have been incorporated by the state in de-radicalization programmes. However, this should not be misconstrued as meaning that *tariqa* mosques "are always forums that eschew political discussion in favour of quietist, devotional Islam … they too may be places for explicit discussion over the status of the Muslim community locally, and internationally."[49]

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44   Jodi Vittori, Kristin Bremer and Pasquale Vittori, "Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32/12 (2009), p. 1085.

45   Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, New York, Pantheon, 2004.

46   Nolan Quinn, "From Separatism to Salafism: Militancy on the Swahili Coast", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 January 2021, https://www.cfr.org/blog/separatism-salafism-militancy-swahili-coast; Giovanni Faleg and Katariina Mustasilta, "Salafi-Jihadism in Africa: A winning strategy." *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2 June 2021, https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/salafi-jihadism-africa; Margot Kiser, "Death Squads in Kenya's Shadow War on Shabaab Sympathizers", *Daily Beast*, 6 April 2014, https://www.thedailybeast.com/death-squads-in-kenyas-shadow-war-on-shabaab-sympathizers.

47   PSCU, "Muslim Leaders Vow To Rally Community Behind President Kenyatta", *Capital News*, 23 May 2017, https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/05/muslim-leaders-vow-rally-community-behind-president-kenyatta/.

48   Emmanuel Igunza, "Tackling the radical Muslim youth of Mombasa", *BBC News*, 19 November 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30118119; David Clarke, "Kenyan Muslim networks fund al Shabaab: UN report", *Reuters*, 28 July 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-kenya-shabaab-un-20110728-idAFJOE76R0C320110728.

49   Willis and Mwakimako, "Islam, Politics and Violence", p. 10.

The Elusive Religious and Political United Muslims' Voice Due to Ethnic and Racial Rivalries

Debates over religious innovation (*bid'a*) intersect to a certain extent with other fissures evident within the Muslim community. One of these is racial. For a long time, Islam in Kenya, particularly at the coast, has always been associated with Arabs because of its Indian Ocean world connection. This perception has fortified an extroversion that valued relations with the Gulf and the Middle East connections. Claims to Arab or Persian ancestry have been a marker of high status reminiscent of the rejection of native status during the colonial period.[50] In the process, African Muslims have consistently been viewed as not Islamic enough and thereby lower in status.[51] However, amongst those who ascribe themselves an Arab identity, other hierarchies are evident. For example, while the Omani families have always viewed themselves as a special elite class because of their connection to the former Zanzibari sultanate, other groups like the *sharif* families from Hadhramaut have also claimed a special status because of the conviction of having inherited the power to bestow blessings (*baraka*). A second fissure within the Muslim community is ethnic identities. Indigenous African Muslims are drawn from almost all the ethnic groups found in Kenya. While racial distinctions undermined Muslims' unity mostly in the colonial period, the ethnic factor has weakened Muslims' united voice in the post-colonial period. In certain instances, segments of Muslims have pursued ethnic aspirations rather than Islamic ones.[52] Thirdly, African Muslims can also be divided between coastal and up-country Muslims. Because they more recently joined Islam, the latter's Muslimness is called into question. These social fissures present an enormous challenge to the community, especially when seeking to present a united Muslim front to the state. Therefore, issues of race, ethnicity, and attitudes toward autochthonous people intersect in unique ways with how the Muslim community relates to the state.

A clear Islamic factor was initially expressed in Kenya in the years leading up to independence, when a contingent of coastal Muslims advocated for secession to form a separate state or to be re-united with Zanzibar under the leadership of the sultan. The Arabs, being the main players, ingeniously presented the

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50   Ahmed Idha Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast, 1895–1945*, Nairobi, East Africa Publishing House 1973.
51   McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam*.
52   Hassan J. Ndzovu, "Muslims Relations in the Politics of Nationalism and Secessionism in Kenya", *PAS Working Papers* No 18, Northwestern University, 2009.

agitation in Islamic terms rooted in the nineteenth century treaties that stipulated a ten-mile strip along the Kenya's coast as ostensibly being a protectorate and not part of the Kenya Colony.[53] The *mwambao* movement attracted minimal support from a wider coastal population, including indigenous African Muslims, many of whom interpreted the agitation as efforts by Arabs to retain their political and economic dominance. Due to competing factions within the Muslim community, the secession movement was completely unsuccessful since *pwani* (the coast) became part of Kenya. However, this political aspiration re-emerged in the 1990s through the efforts of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) with their rallying call *Pwani si Kenya* (the coast is not part of Kenya).[54] The MRC appearance revisited the politics of the early 1960s and the treaties of the late nineteenth century. Leaders associated with the movement argued that the former Coast Province had never been part of Kenya and had a legal right to a separate status. However, the MRC argument was flawed, in that the treaties in question referred to the vaguely demarcated "ten-mile strip" whose sovereignty – the Sultan of Zanzibar surrendered to Kenya in 1963 in exchange for compensation from Britain.[55] Unlike the *mwambao* (coastal strip) movement of the early 1960s, MRC was not a religious movement, and it deliberately avoided the use of religious language, thereby attracting supporters across the religious divide. The movement's desire was to rally all the coastal residents to the common cause of addressing post-colonial governments' many years of prejudice and their failure to address various historical injustices that left the locals marginalised.[56]

Similarly, from 1952 to late 1960s, Kenyan Somalis of the northeastern region wanted to secede and join the Republic of Somalia to form an independent pan-Somali nation state. Their political agenda was influenced by both ethnic and religious factors.[57] According to proponents of this movement, the Somali-speaking people constitute a distinct nation entitled to a separate

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53   James Brennan, "Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50/4 (2008), p. 831–861.

54   Killian Ngala Chome, "'The Grassroots Are Very Complicated': Marginalization and the Emergence of Alternative Authority in the Kenyan Coast 2013 Elections", *Afrique contemporaine*, 247/3 (2013), p. 87–105.

55   Willis and Gona, *"Pwani C Kenya"*.

56   The Mombasa Republican Council, Manifesto, "New Country New Life".

57   Joseph Makokha. 1995. "Islamic Factor in Somali Irredentism-Towards Rationalising the Kenya Government's Stand Against Islamic Political Association." In: *Islam in Kenya*. Bakari and Yahya (eds.), p.81–93; Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos. 2001. "Elections Among the Kenya Somali: A Conservative but Marginalised Vote." In: *Out for the Count: The 1997 General Elections and Prospects for Democracy in Kenya*. Marcel Rutten et al (editors), Kampala: Fountain Publishers, Ltd, p. 297–301.

existence. Accordingly, the Republic of Somalia claimed that the Northern Frontier District (NFD), predominantly inhabited by Somali speakers, should be part of its territory and not of Kenya. This claim was an integral part of the concept of 'Greater Somalia', which politicians in the Republic of Somali endeavoured to achieve.[58] Although the idea of Somali nationalism drove the Kenyan Somalis' agitation for secession, the Islamic factor also mobilised other NFD residents to the Somali cause. However, in a contradictory way, while the campaign for secession also gained support among non-Somali Muslims such as the Borana and the Rendille living in the NFD, segments of the minority communities in the region resisted Somali political domination. This explains why the *shifta*-armed insurgency during the earliest years of Jomo Kenyatta leadership (1963–78) was viewed as the continuation of the struggle to secede by the Somali community.[59]

Following the political liberalisation of the 1990s, a group of Muslims formed a political party called the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), an event that was viewed as a departure from Kenyan Muslims' more usual quietist approach.[60] Though the IPK presented itself as a party of all Kenyans irrespective of their religious affiliation, it was denied registration by the government. However, it is also because of the racial and ethnic divisions within the community that the government sponsored the United Muslim of Africa (UMA) to counter the influence of IPK.[61] Thus, partly attributed to wrangling over Muslim leadership, which has typically followed ethnic and racial divisions, Muslims' political strategies flopped. Nevertheless, the emergence of IPK established an outline for a new, assertive form of political involvement from the Muslim community.[62] With the demise of IPK, other Muslim civil society groups appeared and took up the role of advocacy for the community. This category includes the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) and the Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), both founded in 1997. While CIPK took a strong interest in religio-political activism, MUHURI sought to advocate for human rights and the equality of all Kenyans.[63] Due to fissures, there has been

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58   The authorities in Mogadishu supported this idea of the 'Greater Somalia' by extolling the five stars in their new flag. These stars represented the Italian Somalia, the British Somaliland, Djibouti on the French side, the NFD in Kenya and the Ogaden in Ethiopia.

59   "An Africa Watch Report, Kenya: Taking Liberties", *Human Rights Watch*, July 1991, p. 269–322.

60   Oded, *Islam and Politics*.

61   Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan Politics*.

62   Joseph Wandera, "Muslims, Christians and the State: The Contest for Public Space in Kenya", *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 10 (2008–2009), p. 17–22.

63   Thordsen, "New Muslim Activism".

a prolonged debate within the community over who has the right to speak for Muslims in Kenya. While in the colonial period the natural spokesperson for the community were Arab elites, in the contemporary context, though unacknowledged, the evident line of tension has surrounded competing claims to leadership between "coastal" and Somali elites.

The supposed competition between the "coastal" and the Somali religious elites has found expression in the sighting of the new moon to mark the beginning and ending of fasting during the month of Ramadan. In 2021, as in previous years, Muslims were divided as to when to begin fasting. Some Muslims began their fast a day before the majority, even though there was no official report of moon sighting in the country, maintaining that the new moon was seen in other countries, including Saudi Arabia. This contingent of Muslims subscribes to the idea that fasting should commence whenever the moon is sighted regardless of jurisdiction. In Chief Kadhi Sheikh Ahmed Muhdhar's assessment, fasting was to begin the following day for lack of credible information that the moon was sighted in the country. Some Muslim leaders accused the Chief Kadhi for ignoring reports that the moon was sighted in Garissa and Wajir among the Somalis.[64] Similarly, in 1994, the former Chief Kadhi, Sheikh Nassor al-Nahdi, was similarly accused of undermining the views of Somali Muslims in the north-eastern region who had reported sighting the new moon. As the conflict spiralled with no hope of resolving it, many Muslims, including a majority of Somalis, declined to acknowledge the *id al-fitr* date announced by the Chief Kadhi, and instead observed the festival on a different date.[65] While the controversy of the moon sighting seems to have provided an excuse for "coastal" and Somali religious elites' competition, which was reinforced by the rivalry between the Sufi and the Salafi-oriented Muslims, it has also been used to undermine the authority of the Chief Kadhi, a government official. But even among coastal Muslims, there are sentiments critical of the Chief Kadhi's office refusing to acknowledge the sighting of the new moon from communities considered to have embraced Islam more recently, for example, the Mijikenda and Pokomo. The supposed rejection and disillusionment has brought to the fore the issue of ethnic division that had characterised Kenyan Muslims for a long time. In search for a solution, in 1995, the SUPKEM invited a congregation of Islamic scholars with the objective of finding ways to resolve the unending dispute. The gathering established a *majlis ulama* (council of

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64   Sirajurahman Abdullahi, "Why Muslims are divided on when to start Ramadhan", *The Saturday Standard,* 14 April 2021, https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/ramadhan-special/article/2001409563/why-muslims-are-divided-on-when-to-start-ramadhan.

65   Oded, *Islam and Politics*.

Religious Scholars), comprising fifteen members tasked with the responsibility to resolve the recurring issue. Perhaps by design, the established *majlis ulama* had several religious scholars affiliated with Salafi-oriented Islam. The emergent Salafi-dominated *majlis ulama* was mandated to declare a *fatwa* and engage directly with the government on the question of moon sighting. However, some Muslims interpreted the ensuing development as a strategy being fronted to undermine the political relevance of the Chief Kadhi's office in any future engagement with the state affecting Muslims in the country.[66]

Preaching to the Marginalized, the War on Terror and Extra Judicial Killings of Muslim Suspects

Clearly, as illustrated above, Kenya has witnessed efforts of individual *ulama* espousing Salafi-oriented reforming thoughts that consider doctrinal purification of the faith, (*tazkiyat al-aqida*) and, subsequently, the education (*tarbiya*) of Muslims as vital in establishing a "true" Islamic society. Such *tarbiya*-focused *ulama* aspire to reform Muslims' ritual practises by enjoining them to what they consider to be right and forbid them against what they deem to be wrong.[67] Apart from the *tarbiya*-focused Salafi-oriented ideas of reform, Kenya has also witnessed the appearance of jihadi-minded groups that are not only interested with doctrinal purification, but also refuse to promote paths of accommodation with the state. Recent Muslim political activism against the state was advanced by some Salafi-oriented individuals who seemed to promote jihadi-oriented tendencies, in clear contradiction to the earlier traditions of Islamic reform that had always been willing to cooperate to a certain point with the state.[68] Thus, across the country, the Salafi-jihadi *ulama* promoted a different tactic to Muslim politics. The political liberalisation of the early 1990s enabled mosques as potential avenues of political debate and mobilisation. A growing population of unemployed Muslim youth was easily attracted to the sermons of the radical Salafi-jihadi preachers who explained their condition as confirmation of systematic discrimination of Muslims by the state. The dissatisfaction of many young Muslims stimulated an increase of the radical content of sermons in numerous mosques due to their "demand for fiery rhetoric."[69] As

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66   *Ibid.*
67   Loimeier, *Islamic Reform.*
68   Jeremy Lind and Jude Howell, *Aid, Civil Society and the State in Kenya since 9/11*, NGPA Working Paper Series (21), London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018.
69   Willis and Mwakimako, "Islam, Politics and Violence", p. 13.

this development intensified, organisations like the CIPK continued following a path of peaceful engagement with the state. Embracing an NGO culture, the CIPK has received funding from western bodies to help them exert a significant role and influence within the community, thereby assisting the organisation in sustaining Muslims' political involvement in the country's constitutional debates and process.[70] However, such external support has also exposed the CIPK to increasing criticism that the donors have compromised them and that they cannot be relied on to advocate Muslims' interests.[71] The Salafi-jihadi *ulama* have capitalised on this relationship to claim that it is pointless for Muslims to engage in the democratic processes since it will not advance the Islamic cause.[72]

The accusation against the government of systematically marginalising the Muslim community was successful in recruiting certain Muslims into the jihadi cause. A contingent of worshippers, mostly youth, who appeared captivated by the radical sermons was identified and encouraged to join the jihadi cause in Somalia. The conflict in Somalia was presented as a struggle for Islam, thereby propelling the Somali jihadi group al-Shabaab into the forefront as the main mobilising force in the region. In a kind of liberation theology, potential recruits were facilitated to undertake jihad in Somalia with the belief that similar efforts would be replicated in Kenya.[73] Over a period, there developed a scenario where some "migrated" to Somalia to receive training and fight in the country's civil war – coined as defensive jihad – while others returned to Kenya for various reasons. While some of the returnees were disillusioned by their experience in Somalia, others considered themselves as extending the jihadi cause into Kenya's territory. Consequently, the country has witnessed an escalation of attacks attributed to these individuals.[74] Through selective application of texts and concepts, these attacks were justified and directed against the "infidel" Kenyan state, non-Muslims, churches and "apostate" Muslim clerics.[75] Their rage against fellow Muslims was based on the notion that they were "too compromising, too accommodating and too 'superficial' in religious

70   Thordsen, "New Muslim Activism".

71   Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan Politics*.

72   Hassan Mwakimako and Justin Willis, "Islam and Democracy: Debating Electoral Involvement on the Kenya Coast", *Islamic Africa*, 7/1, p. 19–43.

73   Hassan Juma Ndzovu, "The Rise of Jihad, Killing of 'Apostate Imams' and Non-Combatant Christian Civilians in Kenya: Al-Shabaab's Re-Definition of the Enemy on Religious Line", *Journal for the Study of Religions of Africa and its Diaspora*, 3/1 (2017), p. 4–20.

74   Fredrick Nzes, "Terrorist Attacks in Kenya Reveal Domestic Radicalization", *CTC Sentinel*, 5/10 (2012), p. 13–15.

75   Hassan Juma Ndzovu, "Kenya's Jihadi Clerics: Formulation of a 'Liberation Theology' and the Challenge to Secular Power", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 38/3 (2018), p. 360–371.

matters," thereby not deserving to continue to be regarded as Muslims.[76] Such an approach has increased the fissures among the minority Muslim community in Kenya, making their possible united front a perpetual mirage.

In the previous attacks linked to jihadi-minded groups such as those at Westgate (2013), Mpeketoni (2014), Mandera (2014), and Garisaa University College (2015), non-Muslims were a special target singled out for murder. In all the attacks, jihadi-minded groups claimed to be a retaliation for the "continued suffering of Muslims" in Kenya.[77] For instance, Mpeketoni, a rural urban centre was targeted by al-Shabaab, together with its Kenyan sympathisers, because the area was founded by the Jomo Kenyatta's administration in the 1960s as part of the settlement schemes intended at resettling groups of landless Kikuyu from up-country in the supposedly less densely populated coastal areas. Through such resettlement programmes, more upcountry-Christians were able to settle and establish new homes in areas predominantly inhabited by Muslims in the coastal region.[78] It is this deliberate government effort that favoured a specific ethno-religious community that the jihadi-minded clerics are challenging by interpreting the initiative as an affront to the Muslim community. In their assessment, the application of force is necessary to remove oppression and enable the Islamic faith to predominate in the Muslim areas in the country. They maintained that Muslims in Kenya are presently in a state of misfortune because of their abandonment of jihad.

The response of the Kenyan government to the terrorism-related attacks and increased radicalisation among segments of the Muslim population has heightened feelings of marginalisation and discrimination. Allegedly, suspected Salafi-jihadi clerics were identified and ultimately assassinated by the security agents. According to Haki Africa, Kenya's anti-terror police has carried out no less than 81 extrajudicial killings targeting members of the Muslim community in the coastal region.[79] In 2016, Human Rights Watch documented 34 cases of enforced disappearance and 11 extrajudicial killings in Nairobi and north-eastern Kenya among the Muslim population. Though most of those killed were terror suspects, including self-declared proponents of jihadi cause, this should not be an excuse for the state to execute these individuals by ignoring the due process of the law. These cases are illustrative of the wider pattern of government mistreatment of the community. Even though the government

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76   Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, p. 463.
77   Ndzovu, "The Rise of Jihad".
78   Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*.
79   "Kenya Muslims 'targeted in extrajudicial killings'", *BBC News*, 7 December 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38239138.

has denied responsibility for these cruelties, it has curiously refused to take effective legislative, judicial and administrative measures to end the abuses.[80] In retaliation, police informers, undercover agents, and Muslim clerics working with the state in the de-radicalization scheme were targets of murder organised by supporters of the Salafi-jihadi ideology. This series of murders and retaliation killings created an environment of prevalent distrust and tension among Muslims in the country.[81]

Conclusion

Evident in this article is not only the dynamics of an internal dialectic within the sectarian ideology, together with ethnic and racial rivalries among Kenyan Muslims, but also moments of cooperation and confrontation with a secular state. Due to the continued antagonism between the Salafi-oriented and the Sufi-oriented religious leadership, or ethnic and racial rivalries to assume the leadership mantle to speak on behalf of the community, Muslims have been largely unable to coalesce into one united voice for both religious and political matters. The subsequent appearance of factions within the community is an indication that particularistic interests have always succeeded over larger yet abstract goals, such as that of Muslim unity in the country. As a result, the political leadership in Kenya has capitalised on the Muslims' numerous divisions to employ strategies that have been successful in preventing the emergence of a united "Islamic" opposition that could potentially be advanced by the Salafi-oriented individuals, especially those within the jihadi-minded movement. Arguably, the country's Muslims who persistently claimed of being marginalised since independence have continued to make this marginalisation a reality because of their failure "to achieve unity in the face of internal" doctrinal "disputes that continue to enhance processes of social, ethnic and political fragmentation."[82] Clearly, Kenyan Muslims are not united, a fact that is attributed to the issue of race and ethnicity, as well as religious differences that divide the community. Despite the formation of numerous Muslim bodies, all claiming to be advancing the community's interest, there is no single one of them that has succeeded in laying a credible claim to be the mouthpiece of the Muslim community in the country. Even among those individual Muslim clerics and groups championing the jihadi cause as a political strategy

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80   Human Rights Watch, "Submission to UN Human Rights".
81   Willis and Mwakimako, "Islam, Politics and Violence".
82   Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, p. 371.

to emancipate the community from their marginalized status, there is no prospect that they will be able to mobilise all the country's Muslims to a united block. However, without doubt, the Islamic factor becomes a source of unity when they appear to touch all Muslims regardless of their ethnic and racial affiliation.[83] Nonetheless, when the disquiet raised is considered not to affect all Muslims, even alleged cases of the extrajudicial killing of some Muslims has failed to mobilise the entire community. This reflects the substantial role of ethnicity among Kenyan Muslims.

83 Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan Politics.*