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OSAMA BIN LADEN'S AFRICAN PROGRESS

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Recent Muslim attacks on Christians in Nigeria and terrorist attacks on Israeli targets in Kenya stand in sharp contrast to the prevailing view of Islam as a moderate force in sub-Saharan Africa. Rising zealotry and the growing appeal of Osama Bin Laden among African Muslims need to be understood in historical context.

In contrast to the North African case, where Islam arrived as part of the first wave of the Islamic conquests of the Seventh Century and was accompanied by a process of Arabization, the arrival of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa was more gradual and peaceful. The message of the new religion was spread by individual agents -- merchants, travelers and missionaries. Islam was adopted mainly by the ruling elites and did not gain a strong hold on the majority of the African masses. Moreover, Islamization was accompanied by a process of Africanization, that is, the absorption of elements of African religions and traditions.

However, this process was not uniform across all of sub-Saharan Africa. In some cases, Islam came to be adopted as a loose form of identity for tribal societies. In other cases, it was the common denominator for subjects of large empires, such as the Empires of Ghana and Mali, and it created the basis for social order and political authority there. This was the case

with what came to be known, during the colonial era, as Northern Nigeria and the coastal areas of Kenya.

Beginning in the Fourteenth Century, Islam was the basic form of identity in northern Nigerian sovereignties such as Kano, Zaria, Sokoto and Katsina. Great mosques were built in those sovereignties and they became known as centers of Islamic knowledge and learning. Still, Islam was closely identified with class and it was mainly the legacy of the political and scholastic elites. That began to change only at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, with the appearance of the *jihad* movement of Uthman dan-Fodio. This was a militant movement to spread Islam beyond its traditional boundaries, but it also carried a message of social reform that appealed to alienated masses by stressing education and social welfare. In many ways, the resurgence of Islamic militancy in Northern Nigeria is grounded in Uthman dan-Fodio's heritage. Many Islamic revivalists make reference to it, and some even consider Bin Laden to be the contemporary standard-bearer of his legacy.

While Northern Nigeria was remote from the cradle of Islam, the proximity of the eastern coast of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula produced a different sort of Islamization there. Swahili culture combined elements of Arab and African languages, cultures and religious

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beliefs, and it blossomed from the Twelfth Century onward. Since then, Islam has flourished in coastal towns like Mombassa, Melindi, and Mogadishu. But as was the case in Northern Nigeria, it was identified mostly with the political and scholastic elites. Moreover, Islam did not normally expand beyond the boundaries of the coastal towns and penetrate into the hinterland.

During the colonial period, from the late Nineteenth Century to the beginning of the 1960s, Islam did not sustain an anti-colonial movement. In both the Nigerian and Kenyan colonies, British authorities preferred to collaborate with local Islamic leaders -- the Emirs of Northern Nigeria and the Swahili elite on the Kenyan coast. They accepted the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of Muslim communities, and the Muslim leaders, in turn, refrained from challenging the colonial regimes.

One of the major consequences of colonial policy in Africa was a widening socio-economic gap between Muslims and Christians. Christian segments of society were more exposed to processes of social change, including the expansion of western education, urbanization, and communication. As a result, growing feelings of frustration and relative deprivation among Muslims in the post-colonial period found expression in the radicalization of African Islam.

World-wide trends of Islamic radicalization, which can be traced back to the consequences of the 1973 October War and the diplomatic break between Israel and the African states, the oil crisis and the Iranian revolution, have had a tremendous impact on the development of African Islam. This new convergence between the Arab world and African Islam was translated into financial aid, mostly from Saudi Arabia, that was applied to the spread of Arabic language and culture, the building of new mosques, and the establishment of educational and communications networks and welfare societies.

In the case of Nigeria, the post-colonial scene stimulated a growing sense of grievance on the part of Muslims. More than thirty years of corruption, mismanagement and other abuses by civil as well as military regimes, the tight cooperation of the West with those regimes, and the widening social and economic gaps in Nigerian society -- all contributed to produce a rapid process of Islamization. Since 1999, 12 Nigerian states (out of 36) have declared their intention to adopt the *shari'a* as their legal systems. The transformation of the legal systems violated the *status quo* between Christians and Muslims in those states and the consequence was the outbreak of a protracted wave of violence. It also resulted in the revival of traditional Islamic forms of adjudication and punishment. For example, the cases of women like Safia Husaini and Amina Lawal, who were sentenced to death on the charge of adultery by *shari'a* courts, have attracted world-wide attention.

In Mombassa and elsewhere in Kenya, local Muslim communities also felt neglected and deprived by the central Government. And proximity to the Arabian Peninsula translated into ideological influence and access to material resources. Nevertheless, Islam did not appear to be undergoing the same process of radicalization evident in northern Nigeria. But the recent terrorist attacks in Mombassa point to the possibility of a different reality. In the words of Fahudi Nahdi, a reporter for *The Guardian* who grew up in Mombassa, "Then, it was only us young people who admired the Islamic revolution and the Ayatollah Khomeini; today, young and old, men and women, they all adore Osama bin Laden"

Osama Bin Laden's appeal, with its anti-western message, is gaining in popularity among African Muslims, not only because of its religious content, but also, and perhaps mostly, because it expresses the grievances of so many about the general condition of Muslims in Africa.