

# CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN MALAWI, AFRICA 1860s-2007

By Kelly Dehnert

In the 1860s David Livingstone, a Scottish medical doctor, explorer, and Christian missionary, traveled through Malawi in south-central Africa. As an opponent of the slave trade he came up against slave traders of Arab, and often, Muslim origin. Islam had come to Malawi in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> Century by means of Arab traders from the east coast of Africa. They were not only businessmen, but missionaries, intentionally spreading Islam as they peddled their wares.<sup>1</sup> When speaking of Islam in Malawi one must necessarily speak of the Yao tribe. It “offered the toughest opposition” to the colonial ruling authorities<sup>2</sup> in the early years and for this reason possibly contains (to this day) the highest percentage of Muslims compared with other Malawian tribes. This religious preference could also be conceived of as a rejection of the Christianity of the Europeans.

Currently, Malawi’s population is approximately 20% Muslim, though the estimates range from 15% (1999 Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia) to 40% according to others.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, nearly 70% of the population is professing Christian.<sup>4</sup> It appears that the primary conflict between the two religions came with Livingstone as Christianity was not present prior to his arrival.

In the late 1800s, as Christian missionaries made their presence felt in Malawi, they provided education to the indigenous children. According to Matiki, there was discrimination against the Muslim children due to their distinctiveness as Muslims (social identity through clothes, diet and worship). Islamic schools were built to provide an education for them as both the Christian missionary and government schools were teaching contrary to Islamic belief.<sup>5</sup> Matiki believes it is this Islamic training of the youth that kept Islam alive in a minority population to this day. Michael Mumisa notes that the training of Muslim youth did not produce a literate population and so Muslims were relegated to the menial jobs with little influence in the Malawian society.<sup>6</sup> However, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Shaykh Abdallah and his student, Shaykh Thabit, traveled in Malawi teaching the Qur'an and encouraging literacy in Arabic and Swahili, but not indigenous languages.

Unfortunately, apparent Christian discrimination was evident in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Mumisa quotes B.I.C. Mnembo as saying, “As late as the 1950s there were instances of Muslim pupils in Malawi at some mission schools being required to show that they had renounced their religion by eating pork in order to be allowed to continue their schooling.”<sup>7</sup>

These particular Islamic writers focus on the lack of committed Muslims in Malawi. Between the Christian missionary movement in Malawi and primarily Christian

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jana Matiki, “The Social and Marginalization of Muslim Youth in Malawi,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Volume 19, No. 2, 1999, page 249

<sup>2</sup> Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 467,646.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “US State Department: 2006 Report on International Religious Freedom”, 15 September 2006, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71311.htm> (26 July 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Matiki, “Muslim Youth in Malawi,” page 250.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Mumisa, “Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Volume 22, No. 2, 2002, page 282.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

sympathizing Malawi government, the Islamic faith has not had much of a chance to be more than a religious opiate to the people. Islam as a whole way of life, as idealized in Muslim teaching, is sorely lacking in Malawi according to these authors.

Islam, in some localities, has taken on various Malawian traditional tribal religious traits which seem to weaken its distinctiveness as well. According to Sicard,

*A number of traditional ceremonies have survived and have been given orthodox Islamic names. For example, the term *sadaka* in Malawi has nothing to do with alms, but refers to a funeral feast held at the time of a funeral and at intervals thereafter. It is associated with a special dance, known among the Yao as *cindimba*, and is associated with the brewing of a special beer. It has been partially Islamized through the *sikiri* (ar. *dhikr*), which is now perceived purely as a dance.<sup>8</sup> [italics mine] The use of dance and certainly connections to the brewing of beer are clearly African cultural imports and would probably move this form of Islam into the category of “folk Islam”.*

During the early 1900s relations between Muslims and Christians were tense due to a variety of factors. There was a so-called “Mecca Letter”, purportedly sent by the head of the Uwaysiya ta’iqā or Sufi Order in Mecca giving instructions to the faithful to prepare for the final battle.” This letter brought unrest to Malawi and “apocalyptic rumors” in the Yao tribe, “were claiming that the Arabs would come and kill all Europeans and Africans alike who refused to accept the Muslim faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Sicard also notes that the Muslims in Malawi saw incongruity in the Europeans’, who were assumed to be Christians, way of life and Christian teaching. The indigenous people were kept in poverty and were taught complete obedience to Christ and yet this didn’t seem to apply to the Europeans.<sup>10</sup> This appears to have contributed to the growth of Islam and conflict with Christianity.

In the past 30 years, Malawi has undergone many changes. The first democratically elected president, Bakili Muluzi, in 1994 was a Muslim (at least professing the faith). He and the Parliament brought sweeping changes to the laws in Malawi including freedoms of press, speech and religion. The “Presbyterian” (professing) president, Banda, who ruled with nearly an iron fist from 1964 (Malawi’s independence) to 1994 limited religious freedom to mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations.

Muluzi fulfilled the maximum number of terms (2) and Bingu Mutharika was elected in 2004 from Muluzi’s same political party. However, Bingu is a Catholic and has since broken away from Muluzi’s party and started a new party. There has not been the sense that differences are of a religious nature however. Bingu’s Vice President is Muslim and, again there has been political unrest between them (a planned assassination by the VP) but, there does not seem to be any *religious* animosity!

The government of Malawi has taken many steps in the past 14 years to create a peaceful and pluralist religious society including: Observing Muslim and Christian holidays, registering religious groups without discrimination, and offering Christian and Islamic

---

<sup>8</sup> S.V. Sicard, “The Arrival of Islam in Malawi and the Muslim Contribution of Development,” *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Volume 20, No. 2, 2000, page 300.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

instruction in the government schools (both optional to students). There have been no reports of forced conversions or other religious rights violations recently.<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent that there is a need to not only reach out to the growing Muslim population evangelistically, but also seek positive living interactions with them, seeking bridges to relationships in a culture that is currently open to that interaction.

---

<sup>11</sup> “US State Department”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Matiki, Alfred Jana. "The Social and Marginalization of Muslim Youth in Malawi." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. Volume 19, No. 2 (1999): page 249.

Mumisa, Michael. "Islam and Proselytism in South Africa and Malawi." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Volume 22, No. 2 (2002): page 282.

Sicard, S.V. "The Arrival of Islam in Malawi and the Muslim Contribution of Development." *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* Volume 20, No. 2 (2000): page 300.

Sundkler, Bengt, and Christopher Steed. *A History of the Church in Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

"US State Department: 2006 Report on International Religious Freedom." 15 September 2006.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71311.htm> (26 July 2007).