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Muslim Bible Scholars of Tanzania
The Legacy of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat
(1918 -2005)

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Introduction

Colonialism and Christianity

When colonialists and missionaries set foot in the East African coast their main aim was to wipe out Islam. Christianity was introduced in the region with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. In 1567 the Augustinian order was established to counter the influence of Islam so that Christianity becomes the religion of the whole world. Cardinal Lavigerie founded The White Fathers the Catholic institution whose purpose was and still is to counter Islam.\(^1\) About the same time period Church Missionary Society (CMS) imposed upon itself the duty to deliver the world from Islam, ignorance and darkness.\(^2\) The White Fathers are in Tanzania and other countries in Africa and are still involved in the work which brought them to the continent more than a hundred years ago. This thrust against Islam came to be part of implementing Article IV of the Berlin Conference of 1884 which stated that Christianity should be safeguarded and given special preference over Islam. In compliance with that article Imperial British East Africa Company used political and military force to prop up Christianity in East Africa at the expense of Islam.\(^3\) Even after many years of independence the government in Tanzania has not shied away from using the para-military against Islam.\(^4\) Christianity is still a religion safeguarded by the government. Notwithstanding the end of colonialism Islam in Tanzania is still looked upon as an ‘alien’ religion brought into the country by Arabs.

Missionaries had a free hand to conduct door to door preaching trying to convince Muslims to accept Jesus and be ‘saved.’ Muslims were not intimidated by these campaigns. On the contrary they took that kind of preaching as amusing. This campaign became more serious in 1960s after independence. The thrust and vision of the Church was to turn Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika into Catholic states through the control of indigenous governments. The ‘Islam in Africa Project’ with its headquarters in Kenya was formed with the specific aim of converting Muslims to Christianity. This project was under Rev. James Ritchie advisor to the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCK). The evangelisation campaign went well and by 1965 there were 9171 Muslims converted to Christianity in East Africa while Christian converts to Islam were a mere 3151.

The Church campaign was a success because it was concentrated in rural areas where a majority of the people live avoiding urban centres where Muslims are predominant. The Daystar University in Kenya allocated 56 m. Sterling pounds to counter the spread of Islam in East Africa. This money was used as small hand-out to Muslims, who have converted to Christianity, provide scholarships to their children; build schools and clinics in Muslim majority areas. Other strategy to subvert Islam was through an organisation known as ‘Life Challenge’ which has its headquarters in Nairobi under the tutelage of Padre Gerhad Hehls. Padre Hehls was given the task of preparing a book, Our Challenge, Our Chance which is a manual on how to convert Muslims to Christianity. It is important to end this introduction by stating the fact that all the above strategies by the Church to undermine Islam Muslim never had any plans overt or covert to subvert Christianity. This was the situation facing Islam and Muslims in East Africa when Sheikh Deedat visited Tanzania in 1981.

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6 *James Holway; Mimeo 1965 quoted in Historia Fupi...
Sheikh Ahmed Deedat’s Visit to Tanzania - 1981

It is believed that the study of comparative religion emerged in 1930s when the Ahmadiyya published the first Swahili translation of the Qur’an. In that translation the Bible was extensively quoted to substantiate arguments in the Qur’an and vice versa. This created new interest in the study of the Bible. This knowledge remained confined to scholars and few Muslims for almost half a century until 1980s when it was taught to ordinary Muslims to be used as a weapon in the armory of Muslims to counter Christianity through dialogue. It was the South African Indian, the late Sheikh Ahmed Deedat who for the first time brought this powerful knowledge to the attention of Muslims.

In 1981 Sheikh Deedat was invited in Zanzibar to participate in a seminar organised by Muslim Students Association of the University of Dar es Salaam (MSAUD). After the seminar Sheikh Deedat came to Dar es Salaam to deliver public lectures on the unity of the message of Allah to mankind. Sheikh Deedat delivered two lectures - one at the Adult Education Centre and the other at the prestigious Diamond Jubilee Hall. In these two lectures Deedat lectured on Islam in the Bible. In the lectures Sheikh Deedat dwelt on the Christian belief of 'Trinity,' 'Crucifixion' and 'Eternal Sin.' These are the basic foundation of Christianity. Following the first lecture at the Adult Education Centre in which Sheikh Deedat impressed his audience with his command of English language and knowledge of the Bible and Qur’an, one Christian a journalist Boniface Kyaloechi reverted back to Islam and given a new name, Bilali Mustafa. Other Christians in the audience who were not yet convinced went back to their churches with very pertinent questions demanding answers to them which unfortunately the Church theologians could not provide convincing responses.

Over night Deedat’s presence in Dar es Salaam was felt and his name and arguments on ‘sanctity’ of the Bible spread like bush fire. This caused concern to
the Church particularly when it was learnt that some Christians had embraced Islam on the spot although at that time those were mere rumours. The Church held an impromptu meeting and several options on how to deal with Sheikh Deedat were discussed. The first option was to deport Sheikh Deedat as a prohibited immigrant (at that time during apartheid South Africans were not allowed into Tanzania). If that is not possible the second option was to allow Sheikh Deedat to continue with his public lectures but the lectures should be confined to mosques. If that is not possible the third option was to allow Sheikh Deedat to deliver public lectures but should be restrained from discussing the Bible and should be requested to confine his lectures to Islam.

The Church appeal was delivered to the organisers of Sheikh Deedat’s lectures but was ignored on the grounds that Sheikh Deedat was not in the country to strengthen Christianity and who ever has contrary views to Sheikh Deedat’s lectures was free to air them. That evening Sheikh Deedat addressed a capacity crowd at the Diamond Jubilee Hall and without mercy Sheikh Deedat took his audience through a lecture showing glaring inconsistencies in the Bible. He appealed to Christians to use their common sense and see the universality of the message of Islam which did not begin with Muhammad SAW but with Adam AS and was passed down through prophets among them Jesus Christ. The Church theologians in the audience were astounded none of them could respond to the challenge. Before his departure back to South Africa Sheikh Deedat appealed to Muslims in Tanzania to carry on the dialogue with Christians where he had left. Sheikh Deedat emphasised that it was the duty of Muslims to deliver Allah’s message to those still living in darkness. In 1880s CMS objective in Tanganyika was to deliver Africans from Islam, ignorance and darkness. A hundred years later Sheikh Deedat was appealing to Muslims to deliver Christians in Tanzania from darkness through their own book. This was the irony of history in the making. Sheikh Deedat had dented the confidence of the Church which for many years had been safe under the tutelage of first colonialism and later in post
independence Tanzania – the government which was dominated by Church trained African Christians.

**The Emergence of Muslim Bible Scholars of Tanzania**

The introduction of comparative religion as field of inquiry to Tanzania was fully manipulated by Muslims as a tool to invite Christians to Islam through the Bible. Study groups began to spring up in urban centres as well as rural areas producing Muslim Bible experts. Notable among them was Ngariba Musa Fundi and Mohamed Ali Kawemba who wrote *Uislam katika Biblia*, which was translated from Kiswahili into English as *Islam in the Bible*. The reader who is familiar with the lectures of Sheikh Deedat will not fail to observe the style and the building of arguments characteristic of and expounded by Sheikh Deedat. Muslim Bible scholars began inviting Christians to Islam through dialogue in open air preaching popularly known in Kiswahili as *mihadhara*. In these open air preaching by Muslim Bible Scholars, Sheikh Deedat’s books, audio and video cassettes were at times used as references. Sheikh Deedat’s cassettes and books became popular and were distributed far and wide throughout Tanzania and the whole of East Africa. Fate would have it that this wave coincided with the recession of the Church in Europe accompanied with the emergence of the fad by Christian theologians and scholars doubting the authenticity of the Bible.

At first the clergy from the Church thought it could hold dialogue with Muslim Bible Scholars and hence provide rejoinders after all most of the Muslim Bible scholars were mere lower primary leavers and they were Ph Ds in Divinity but when the clergy attempted to confront Bible preachers on their own ground they soon realised that as Muslims were arguing, there were a lot of inconsistencies in the

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Bible which they had not been aware of despite of their high qualifications. Muslim Bible Scholars pointed out to Christians that God Almighty can not err. Errors are human traits. The Church theologians could not sustain the dialogue for lack of plausible arguments. The Church therefore had to retreat and seek other ways to respond to Muslim arguments and protect not only the Bible but Christianity and the flock as well. This innovation of Muslim Bible scholars preaching Islam through the Bible inevitably became a thorn in the flesh of the Church as Christians became restless demanding answers to questions which the Church had no convincing answers and which hitherto were not an issue. Sheikh Deedat’s video cassettes in which he was debating prominent Christian theologians all over the world penetrated many middle class Christian homes.

The Christian Mass Conversions of 1980s and the Churches’ Strategy of Containment

The open air debates became popular to common Christians and were well attended by both Muslims and Christians. Muslim Bible scholars’ call for dialogue between Muslims and Christians became a thorn in the flesh of Christianity. Christians began to convert to Islam. In Sumbawanga and Kagera regions which are predominant Catholic areas a total of 5000 Christians converted to Islam. In Kagera one Yusuf Makaka a pastor from the Lutheran Church reverted to Islam, and was able single handed, to convert 3000 Christians and mobilised his flock, the new Muslims to build a mosque.10 After having quite a sizeable number of Christians who had converted to Islam these converts formed their own association (Tanzania Reverts Association).

The Church had to retreat and appeal to the government for protection in the face of Christian conversions. In Tanzania the Church is synonymous to the government. The government obeys what the Church commands. The Church as

last line of defence accused Muslims of ‘defamatory preaching’ and demanded that open air preaching by Muslim Bible scholars be outlawed as they were a danger to peace and harmony. The Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT) issued a statement warning the government that it would find itself faced with a much bigger problem if it does not restrain Muslim Bible scholars from preaching. The CCT statement accused Muslim Bible scholars of being financially supported by a foreign Muslim country (meaning Iran) to undermine Christianity. The statement claimed that Muslims have been given USD 6 m to support their activities.\textsuperscript{11} Cardinal Otunga of the Catholic Church in Kenya warned that Christianity was on the verge of dying a natural death on the face of onslaught from the Muslim Bible preachers.\textsuperscript{12}

The Prime Minister in one of his speeches in winding up government business and adjourning the Parliament issued a strong statement banning Muslim Bible scholars. Emphasising to the Speaker that he was speaking as an Anglican Christian, he issued an order banning open air preaching by Muslims confining them to mosques.\textsuperscript{13} Muslims ignored the ban challenging it as unconstitutional. The Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) issued a statement warning that there would be bloodshed if Muslim Bible preachers do not stop their preaching. The state-radio, the government and party daily\textsuperscript{14} gave statements by the Church wide publicity. These party and government controlled media overnight became propaganda tools of the Church.

The government had no legal ground to interfere on matters of religion short of breaching the constitution. In 1994 attempts by the Minister of Judiciary and Constitution Affairs to pass a law which would ban Muslim Bible preachers failed. Muslim sent a petition to the parliament warning of the consequences of passing

\textsuperscript{11} Lengo (Nairobi), Toleo la Kwanza No.198,July 1989. Also see Warsha ya Waandishi wa Kiislam, ‘Kanisa na Utulivu wa Dini Tanzania?’ 22 August, 1989.
\textsuperscript{12} The Standard (Nairobi), 13 January 1993.
\textsuperscript{13} May, 1992 Parliamentary Session.
\textsuperscript{14} Uhuru, 2 March, 1993.
such a bad law. Muslims argued that the law which is intended would prevent Muslims from propagating their religion. To pass that kind of law Muslims warned, was unconstitutional as the government which is secular would be directly indulging in religious affairs safeguarding the teachings of Christianity to the detriment of Islam.  

In his untiring efforts to resolve the stand off between Muslim Bible scholars and the Church President Ali Hassan Mwinyi convened a meeting at the State House between church leaders and sheikhs to discuss the problem of Muslim Bible scholars and their open air preaching. Muslim Bible scholars set a powerful delegation to the meeting to argue its case. Church leaders were asked what they found offensive in the Muslim preaching. Church leaders could not pin point exactly what they found unpalatable in Muslim arguments about Christianity. Muslims argued that the teachings of the two faiths were diametrically opposed to each other in all aspects. While it is the basic foundation in Christianity to believe in that Jesus Christ is God Almighty or he is the son of God and that he died on the cross; to a Muslim that is blasphemy.

The Church leaders called for a postponement of the meeting to a later date to enable them prepare their case. The church leaders did not have stomach for another face to face meeting with Muslim Bible scholars and therefore did not return to the round table meeting. The Church changed tactics and withdrew from the thrust of the media campaign to restrain Muslims from Bible preaching to insisting the government to use force to curb Muslim Bible scholars. There were arrests and intimidation of Muslim preachers here and there but the pace of the movement remained unabated and conversions still continued. As a result of this intimidation Muslims in Tanzania woke up and they saw behind the ‘secular government’ façade. The government was not truly secular as it proclaimed but a

Christian government hostile to Islam. Having realised this Muslims began to organise themselves in whatever manner possible to safeguard their religion.\textsuperscript{16}

In desperation the Christian lobby in Tanzania played its last card. As the quagmire of Bible scholars remained in stalemate, the unthinkable happened. While Muslims as well as Christians were assembled at ‘Picha ya Uwanja wa Ndege’ mosque in Morogoro to listen to the Bible preachers \textit{Al Malid} from Dar es Salaam, riot police in five Land Rovers and two small cars surrounded the place and attacked the mosque with tear gas bombs and firing bullets into the air. As people ran into the mosque to seek refuge riot police in hot pursuit followed them into the mosque and beat them up desecrating the mosque. To ensure that maximum damage was inflicted to the Bible scholars, the expensive public address equipment which they used in their meetings was completely wrecked. Muslim Bible scholars were arrested including some of the people in the audience. Two Muslims died as a result of the beatings.\textsuperscript{17} More than sixty canisters were exploded. Some canisters failed to explode and were tendered in court as exhibit of police brutality towards Muslims.

When it came to be known that those arrested included Christians and after seeing their statement which stated that they did not find the preaching offensive and that is why they always went to those gathering, the were released without charges opened against them. Muslims were charged for unlawful assembly. A

\textsuperscript{16} When Muslim Bible scholars visited Mombasa for a series of lectures their reputation had superseded them. The Church in Kenya was aware of the force of the Bible scholars. It did not therefore even attempt to confront them with counter arguments. It asked the government to withdraw the permit it had issued which allowed them to preach in Kenya. The Bible scholars were rounded up and escorted to the border under heavy guard just as they were preparing to hold a meeting. When Muslims were informed that the permit for the meeting was withdrawn by the Provincial Commissioner of Coast Region, they marched to his office to demand explanation. The crowd rioted and there were arrests and loss of property. In Kenya as it had been in Tanzania, wherever Muslims Bible preachers visited to call people to Islam, when they left, they usually leave Christianity shaken and Islam firm.

month before the police attack the Bible scholars had challenged the police to come to their meetings to learn the truth but the offer was ignored. The attack on the mosque was not spontaneous. It was a calculated move organised and planned well in advance with the help of BAKWATA leadership in Morogoro. A few days before the fateful day, a meeting between the government and BAKWATA was held. In attendance was the MP for Morogoro, Shamim Khan. This meeting was preceded by one between BAKWATA and CCT. This meeting was also attended by the Ambassador of Denmark in Tanzania. In this meeting the Chairman of BAKWATA castigated Muslim Bible Scholars and called upon the police to arrest them as people who endanger peace.

Muslims throughout Tanzania were horrified by the act of the riot police to invade and smoke-bomb a mosque under the pretext of breaking an unlawful assembly. Muslims where relieved of the prospect of the case going before a court of law. Muslims thought that was their chance to pit their belief against Christian teachings. Muslims believed that if Christian believed that Jesus was Man - God and they were allowed to proclaim that belief Muslims likewise have the right to proclaim that Jesus was a prophet. Muslims thought the court would provide this opportunity to them. This was not to be. The ever unseen hand of the Christian lobby came to realise the futility of the case in their hand. If the case gets a hearing a lot of groundwork which had gone into preparing the attack would be revealed in the court. Muslims had done their home work and had lot information which in a court of law would prove the fact that the attack was preordained as part of conspiracy against Islam and the Bible scholars. The case was blocked from proceeding and all the accused were set free.

Meanwhile at international level the Church wanted the world to believe that the problem was not Islam but ‘Muslim fundamentalists.’ While visiting Tanzania the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. George Leonard Carey warned the country of ‘Muslim fundamentalists’ as a danger to peace. Likewise in a special synod held in Rome on Islam, the Catholic Church singled out ‘Muslim fundamentalism’ as its greatest challenge. The government in Tanzania has not been able to resolve the issue of Muslim – Christian dialogue and Muslims are continuing to invite Christians to Islam through the Bible as bequeathed by the late Sheikh Ahmed Deedat. May Allah SW reward him.

**Epilogue**

In June 2000 I came to Durban to visit Sheikh Deedat. At that time he was confined to bed and his speech was impaired. I told him about the legacy which he had left behind in Tanzania. Sheikh Deedat looked at me and tried to speak but only unintelligible sound came from him. Sheikh Hafidh who had escorted me told me that my words about Christians reverting back to Islam had touched his heart and that Sheikh Deedat was crying with happiness. This is the memory of Sheikh Deedat which I will always carry with me.

When the news of his death reached us in Tanzania many mosques in Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar and other places prayed *salat janaiz* for Sheikh Deedat. In deep anguish and as remembrance of Sheikh Deedat, his obituary was published in one of the leading Muslim paper in Tanzania – *Al Huda*.

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**Recommendations**

Sheikh Deedat’s contribution to Islam in the world is immense and as away to honour his memory and keep alive his work it is important that research be conducted on his influence on delivering the message of Islam to non Muslims. Research has also to be done on Sheikh Deedat’s contribution to comparative religion as a field of inquiry. This research should be carried far and wide in all the countries in which Sheikh Deedat lectured and in those which he never visited but his books and video cassettes found their way into the country. The research should not only attempt to show Sheikh Deedat’s influence on non Muslims alone but should also show to what extent his work strengthened Islam in majority Muslim countries as well as in those countries where they are a minority. This should go hand in hand with establishing of ‘Sheikh Ahmed Deedat Institute of Compilation and Publication.’

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