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**Politics and the Development of Muslim Communities  
in Sub-Saharan Africa: Potential Lessons from  
the Ugandan Experience**

*Sekatawa Muhammad\**

The Muslim communities in sub-Saharan Africa lag behind in many sectors of life. Their debacle has a lot to do with the treatment of Muslims by the colonialists.

It is surprising to note that though Islam was the first foreign religion to be introduced in these countries yet by the end of the colonial rule the Muslims were the least developed of the faith communities. In Uganda, the colonial regime totally alienated the Muslims. By the time the country acquired independence, there were only two Muslim university graduates. Very few Muslims were in formal/professional employment; most were employed in the informal sector as drivers, butchers, and domestic servants, etc.

This remained the case during the first ten years of independence until the rise of Idi Amin Dada to power in 1972. Amin began appointing Muslims to important positions in the political and civil service. He also granted opportunities to Muslims in business. Within the eight years that Amin was in power, Muslims were able to raise their standard of living. Despite the frantic attempts by the post-Amin governments in Uganda to marginalize Muslims, they have managed to survive. What they had achieved under Amin is still visible almost thirty year after his overthrow.

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\* Islamic University In Uganda, e-mail: sektamohd@yahoo.com

This paper traces the history of the Muslim community in Uganda from the earliest times to the present with particular reference to those events that have had great impact on its evolution. The paper outlines the achievements made by Muslims in Uganda during Amin's regime for the purpose of underlining the need for Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa to participate in the political life of their countries.

## Introduction

*"Seek ye first the political Kingdom....for without political independence none of our plans for social and economic development could be put into effect."*(Nkrumah)<sup>1</sup>

One thesis that makes Nkrumah a renowned political theorist has to do with the above statement. Nkrumah understood Africa's problems in the colonial period to be directly linked to its political domination. He was convinced that without political power Africans could not make any serious headway in any sphere. Despite the unfortunate political developments in Ghana in the decade after its independence in 1957, there was significant development in all spheres of life under Nkrumah's government.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for many other African states.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of these achievements it may be argued that Nkrumah's thesis was proven.

In his acceptance speech for the Sonning prize in 1991, Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, declared "power unto death." He observed that politics is an area of human endeavor that places great emphasis on moral sensitivity and genuine responsibility which should be taken on by modest people. He dismissed the notion of politics being a dirty game as a lie that tries to prevent good people from joining the field.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, London, Panaf Books Ltd, 1963, p.50

<sup>2</sup> Peter Calvo-coressi, *World Politics: 1945-2000*, Harlow, Pearson, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Many Independent African states registered significant developments before Neo-colonialism set in to disrupt their agenda. See Ali, A. Mazrui and Micheal Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa from about 1835 to the Present*, Nairobi, London, Heinemann, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> "Vaclav Havel on the temptations of political power,"  
<http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/vl/notes/havel.html>

This paper begins with a premise that the term “development” extends beyond the economic sphere to include the cultural and political spheres as well. The purpose is to emphasize the importance of political power for the advancement of Muslims especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In one of his works Ameer Ali observed that despite the existence of a significant population of Muslims (over one billion), they are relatively under developed in the social and economic spheres of life.<sup>5</sup> This observation is true for Muslim communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Muslims in this part of the world remain insignificant in numbers and influence in the important aspects of life. We rarely hear of any important Muslim political party or organization in this part of Africa. Apart from Uganda in the 1970s and Tanzania and Malawi more recently, there has never been any Muslim head of state elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. This has in a way affected the development of Muslim communities there.

It is in this vein that, this paper attempts to trace the history of the Muslim community in Uganda right from the inauguration of Islam in the country to the present day with an emphasis on the importance of the Idi Amin era in improving the fortunes of the Muslims. The idea behind this paper is to emphasize the importance of political power to development. The Ugandan situation illustrates this very clearly.

## **The Emergence of the Muslim Community in Uganda: A Miraculous Survival**

### **a) The Pre-colonial Period**

The history of Islam in Uganda, though it dates back several centuries, is hazy due to the fact that scholars give divergent dates of when and where it was introduced. Kasozi (1986), for example, traces the introduction of Islam to 1844 and Buganda while Soghayroun (1980) argues that by the 1830s Islamic influence was already felt in Northern Uganda.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the correct date, the

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<sup>5</sup> Ameer Ali, “Religio-cultural identity and Socio-economic Development in the Muslim World,” *The American Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no.3, 1995, p. 329.

<sup>6</sup> Kasumba Yusuf, “*The development of Islam in Uganda: 1962-1992 with particular reference to Religio-Political factionalism.*” M.A Thesis, Makerere University, 1995. p. 3

fact is that Islam preceded Christianity in Uganda by over thirty years.<sup>7</sup> Unlike in some other parts of Africa, Islam was not brought to Uganda by professional propagators. It was introduced by Arab traders and spread through commercial and social contacts.<sup>8</sup> Those with a noble character became the chief influencing agents of Islam. These teachers, however, had no defined program of action. They preached the faith in their free time, transmitting what little knowledge they had of Islam. This situation was later to affect the position of Muslims especially in Buganda leading to the entry of Christian missionaries.

The major difference between Islam in Buganda and the rest of Uganda, especially the north, was the manner in which it was perceived. It is probable that because of the excesses of the slave raiders who operated in the north, coming from Sudan, the indigenous people were somehow scared away from the religion which they associated with the Arab slave raiders. Thus the conversion levels were not as high as was the case in Buganda.

In the case of Buganda the Arabs were welcomed by the Kabaka (King) Suuna himself. For over a decade in the 1860s and early 1870s, Kabaka Mutesa I, the head of state practiced the religion.<sup>9</sup> This period, which has been referred to as "the golden age of Islam" by Kasozi (1986), saw Muslims gain considerable prominence and enjoy great benefits. The Kabaka instituted an Islamic polity in Buganda, establishing a mosque department at his court to enforce Islamic principles. Such principles included making it compulsory for his subjects to greet him and each other in the Muslim fashion. Those who violated this rule were punished. Twelve subjects were for example executed for not knowing the appropriate salutation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Church Missionary Society Missionaries arrived in 1877 and the Roman Catholic White Fathers in 1879.

<sup>8</sup> Semakula Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda from the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*, Longman, London, 1971. p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Kasumba, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Sallie Simba Kayunga, "Islamic Fundamentalism in Uganda: The Tabligh Youth Movement" in Mahmood Mamdani and Joe Olaka Onyango (ed.s), *Uganda: Studies in Living Conditions, Popular Movements and Constitutionalism*, Vienna and Kampala: JEB Book Series and Centre for Basic Research, 1994.

By 1875 some sectors of the Muslim population had started to become a concern for the Kabaka. Islam had become the basis on which the legitimacy of the Kabaka was being questioned. Also, opposition to Mutesa came from a number of Baganda chiefs who detested the dictatorial ways in which Islam was being imposed from above.<sup>11</sup> To deal with this situation Mutesa ordered the massacre of two hundred Muslim youth at Namugongo who had refused to recognize his leadership of the Muslim community.<sup>12</sup> But the event that seriously neutralized the force of Muslims was the invitation of Christian missionaries through the European explorer Sir Morton Stanley in 1875.<sup>13</sup> The coming of the Christian missionaries in 1877 to “serve” the Protestant Church Missionary Society (CMS) and in 1879 the Roman Catholic White Fathers drastically affected the fortunes of the Muslims. Religious rivalries soon emerged and very rapidly degenerated into inter-religious confrontation and war.

The arrival of the missionaries brought about drastic transformation. Soon, Mutesa’s faith in Islam was compromised and he began looking for alternatives. All three religious groups started to compete for his attention and as a result religious conflicts arose. During the 1880s each of the three major religious faith groups - Muslims, Catholics and Protestants saw the control of state power as extremely important for its own survival. This led to religious wars in Buganda which soon engulfed and affected all the other parts of the country. In 1888 the Muslims succeeded in assuming power by overthrowing Kabaka Mwanga who had succeeded Mutesa after his death in 1884. The Muslims first appointed King Kiwewa and then later Kalema. The capture of state power by the Muslims led to an alliance between the deposed Mwanga, the Catholics and the Protestants. Consequently, Muslims were defeated. What followed was systematic persecution of the Muslims by the state. Muslims lost their land and many were forced to go into exile to Ankole, Bunyoro, and Busoga.<sup>14</sup> In these regions the exiled Muslims were able to propagate Islam.

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<sup>11</sup> H. P. Gale, *Uganda and the Mill Hill Fathers*, London, Macmillan, 1959, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Semakula Kiwanuka, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124 and p.p. 228-33.

<sup>14</sup> Bunyoro, Ankole and Busoga were Kingdom states neighboring Buganda which led for long been at logger heads with her.

The religious wars of the 1880s and early 1890s relegated the Muslims to the lowest status and provided the Colonial masters the opportunity to sideline them permanently. The British had joined the fracas of the religious wars when their agent Captain Lugard assisted the Protestant party in their victory over the Catholics in the battle of Mengo of 1892.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, in 1894, the British declared a Protectorate over Buganda and began the process of removing the Muslims from all positions of responsibility. This policy was later confirmed by the 1900 Buganda Agreement.

### **b) The Colonial Era**

The colonial era in Uganda began with the signing of the 1900 Buganda Agreement. The agreement among other things spelt out rules governing the relationships between the Colonial government and the Buganda Kingdom. The most important aspects of this agreement in relation to Muslims were those dealing with its policy on land and the distribution of chieftainships.

The 1900 Buganda Agreement came up with a comprehensive land policy. Land was divided into Crown land owned by the state for public development and Mailo land, which was given to a few notables in Buganda for the role they had played in consolidating colonial rule. Since the criteria for land acquisition was loyalty to the state and since the Muslims had rebelled against the colonial rule, very few of them were given land.<sup>16</sup> And whereas both the Catholic and the Protestant churches were given land on which to develop their clerical work, the Muslim community was given none. Since land was the main factor of production, it was denied the basic means of survival. The community had to rely on the generosity of its leader Nuhu Mbogo who had received land in his personal capacity as a member of royal family and one of the regents of the infant Kabaka Chwa II.

To make matters worse, the Muslim did not fare well in the other sectors of the agreement. By this agreement, most of the chieftainships went to the Protestants and Catholics. Of the twenty countries in Buganda, the Muslims

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<sup>15</sup> Semakula Kiwanuka, *op. cit.*, p.232.

<sup>16</sup> Sallie Simba Kayunga, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

were only given two, Butambala and Gomba. Since the chief was the law maker, policeman, tax collector and judge, the political fortunes of the Muslims were greatly undermined. Furthermore, the fact that both areas had poor soil and a low rainfall denied the Muslims' economic prosperity.

What was even more unfortunate was that even the small favors that the Muslims had acquired in other parts of the country were eventually removed. After the struggle between Semei Kakungulu and Apollo Kaggwa for the premiership of Buganda ended in favour of the latter, the Muslims who had sided with the former moved out with him to the eastern parts of the country. During their sojourn, they were made sub-chiefs under Kakungulu administration in those parts of the country. However, when Kakungulu fell out with the colonial masters, his Muslim chiefs were also dismissed along with him. In other areas like Busoga, there was a deliberate policy not to appoint Muslims as chiefs.<sup>17</sup> These developments set the scene for the systematic alienation of the Muslim community during the colonial era.

Once the colony was in place, the Government began the process of systematically denying the Muslims opportunity to progress. Let us consider the case of education. The colonial state operated two education systems. These were the state and missionary controlled schools. The state-controlled schools only catered for racial groups with established religious convictions such as the Asians and the Europeans. The education of the natives was the responsibility of the missionaries. In the circumstances, the Muslims, without an established missionary group and land could not set up schools. Even the initial attempts by some of the colonial officials to establish schools for the Muslims were opposed by the missionaries. In 1905 George Wilson, the governor of Uganda, suggested that a school be established for the Muslims but Bishop Tucker promptly opposed it. He argued that the government contribution to education should be directed to the missionary schools already in existence.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>17</sup> Mudoola Dan, "Chiefs and Political Action," *unpublished Ph. D. dissertation*, Makerere University, 1974.

<sup>18</sup> Abasi Kiyimba, "National Politics and the Development of Muslim Education in Uganda since 1962," *A paper presented at the Islamic Civilization Symposium organized by the Islamic University in Uganda*, December, 2003.

missionaries had successfully argued against the teaching of Swahili on the basis that it would increase Muslim influence in the country.<sup>19</sup>

What made matters worse was that the missionary schools turned out to be conversion centres. Many Muslim youth who went through these missionary schools ended up converting to Christianity. It became impossible to acquire any status without a Christian name, a factor which attracted many Muslim children to these mission schools. This state of affairs eventually scared off the Muslims who stopped sending their children to mission schools. One of the most prominent persons who converted from Islam was the late Professor Yusuf Kironde Lule, the first President of Uganda, at the fall of Idi Amin in 1979.

Thus up to 1922 the only kind of education that existed for the Uganda Muslims was the Islamic education carried out in the Qur'ān schools (*madrassa*). These had far less human and financial resources and facilities compared to the mission schools. But those who established them were committed and were, therefore, able to provide some form of education to Muslim children. Fortunately, given the need for further exploitation of the colony, the government realised that it needed an educated Muslim community. Thus, from the 1930s it began to establish schools for Muslims. A school was for example started for the Muslims at Nyanjaeradde but the absence of Islamic studies instructors created suspicion in the minds of Muslims and they shunned the school. It was, therefore, compelled to close down.

Eventually, however, the Muslim themselves came to realise the need for secular education. In the course of time they started to set up their own schools with a curriculum that included an Islamic component. In 1935 the first Muslim teacher training school was opened at Kigayaza. By the mid 1940s many Muslim schools had been opened up all over the country. This period also saw the establishment of a Muslim education umbrella organisation known as the Uganda Muslim Education Association (UMEA) in 1944. These moves seemed to be in the right direction and there was significant improvement in the fortunes of Muslims in this sector. However, the Muslims' progress was not looked upon with favour by the political powers. The colonial regime still favoured the Christians against the

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<sup>19</sup> J.C. Sekamwa, *History of Education in East Africa*, Kampala, 1971; Abasi Kiyimba, "The Problem of Muslim Education in Uganda," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1986).

Muslims. For example, in the budget of 1944, out of the total £134,000 meant for the education sector, the Muslims were given £ 213.<sup>20</sup> This partly explains why despite all the efforts of the Muslims, there were only two Muslim graduates at the time of independence in 1962.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, with an unfavourable land, chieftainship and educational policy, which were the most important factors for progress, it is to be expected that the Muslims would lag behind.

What was even more unfortunate, the colonial regime interfered in the affairs of Muslims. The government allowed Buganda political leaders to fuel factionalism within the Muslim community. Until 1920, Prince Nuhu Mbogo was recognised as the leader of the Muslims. However, after 1920 some sectors of the Muslims began to challenge his authority. These rebels led by Twaib Magatto and Abdallah Sekimwanyi were helped by the then Katikiro (Prime Minister) of Buganda, Sir Apollo Kaggwa, a Christian. Though this struggle did not go very far, it set in motion the basis for future factionalism. Prince Badru Kakungulu, the successor of Mbogo was challenged throughout his reign. In fact, from the 1920s the non-Muslim political leaders have remained active participants in Muslim affairs to date. When Kakungulu was challenged by Magatto and Sekimwanyi with the support of Apollo Kaggwa, the Kabaka, Daudi Chwa threw his weight behind his uncle Kakungulu. With these conflicts within the Muslim community it became practically impossible to have any meaningful progress.

It was partly for this reason that when independence loomed, the Muslims were not ready to make any strong political gains. Amidst the marginalisation in education, land ownership and political leadership, factionalism was the last nail in the fortunes of the Muslims during the Colonial era.

### **c) The first decade of independence 1962-1971**

The attainment of political independence in 1962 did not significantly alter the fortunes of the Muslim community in Uganda. Although the party politics that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibrahim E. Soghayroun, "Education status of Ugandan Muslims: A Historical Note," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jeddah, 1980), p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> The only Muslim graduates by 1962 were the late Abubakar Mayanja and Hon. Ali Kirunda Kivejinja.

preceded the granting of independence did offer Muslims some political offices, this was limited to a few individuals. As Kasumba (1995) observed, Muslims continued to occupy their traditional third class position in the Ugandan social and political circles. Whereas a number of Muslims like Abu Mayanja, Kassim Male and Ntege Lubwama went on to become ministers in the central and Buganda governments, they were there as individuals. In fact Kiyimba (2003) rightly posited that these were just junior partners. Muslims were brought on board because of the support they had offered to victors after the power struggles in the wake of independence.

As earlier observed, Muslims were unable to establish their own political party because of the problems that had engulfed the community since the inception of the colony. Thus, when political parties were formed at the time of independence, the Muslims chose to ally themselves with those parties that seemed least hostile to their cause. It should be noted here that there was no concerted effort by the Muslims to have a common stand. Each individual or group allied with a party of its choice. Both the Catholics and Protestants had Muslim allies. The Protestant parties, however, proved the more viable and had the biggest following from amongst the Muslims. This was partly because Protestants were more prepared to allow Muslims in their schools. Also they seemed more tolerant toward the Muslims in matters of faith. Thus the Ganda Muslims joined the Kabaka Yekka Party while those from outside Buganda joined the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC). Fortunately for Muslims the UPC – KY Alliance eventually won the elections and formed the first independence government.

However, these gains were rather short lived. The UPC – KY alliance was rather shaky from the start. The two groups had more differences in perception than points of agreement. KY was deeply conservative and did not recognise anything that undermined the position of the Kabaka. UPC, on the other hand, was nationalistic and viewed everything in the light of the general state. It was on these grounds that the two groups clashed and soon the marriage collapsed. The alliance was formally dissolved in 1966.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive review, see: S R Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda*, (Heinemann, Nairobi, 1980); Phares Mutiibwa, *Uganda since Independence*, (Kampala: Fountain, 1992).

It must be noted that the Muslim leadership was not neutral in the conflict between UPC and KY. All along the Muslims had identified themselves with one or other party. Thus when relations between the alliance parties started deteriorating after 1964, the Muslim leadership also began taking sides. One group under Abu Mayanja, a cabinet minister, but loyal to the Kabaka formed the East African Muslim community to undermine Obote. In response, Obote first influenced the UPC Muslim youth in Buganda to form an autonomous Muslim Youth movement known as the Uganda Muslim League headed by a UPC youth winger Musa Sebirumbi. Later, he influenced the UPC Muslims in the country to organise themselves into a new organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Muslims (NAAM).<sup>23</sup> The efforts by Obote and the UPC to retain their Muslim constituency gave birth to a new factional war between Muslims.

Though at independence Muslims were clustered into various factions, mainly the Uganda Muslim Community (UMC) led by Prince Badru Kakungulu, the Africa Muslim community (A.M.C) led by Shaykh Zaid Mugenyi-asoka and the Juma-Zukuli sect led by Mivule. Their differences up until 1964 were theological in nature. In real terms Prince Badru Kakungulu of UMC was widely recognised as the overall political leader of the Muslim Community in Uganda.<sup>24</sup>

Kakungulu had attained the position largely because he was a Muganda Royalist and uncle of the then President of Uganda Mutesa II. Since the relations between UPC and KY were still cordial, the UPC led central government accepted Kakungulu's leadership.<sup>25</sup>

However, as noted earlier, the alliance between UPC and KY started collapsing after 1964. This forced UPC to think of ways of gaining and maintaining a Muslim constituency in Buganda and resulted in the formation of a new organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Muslims (NAAM) in 1965, NAAM was founded by a group of progressive Muslim petty bourgeois who were mainly opposed to the leadership of Prince Badru Kakungulu. Unlike all the other Muslim organisations which were Buganda-led,

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<sup>23</sup> Sallie Simba Kayunga, *op. cit.*, p.333.

<sup>24</sup> Mudoola, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Kasumba, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

NAAM had a more national character and a more representative leadership. Its president was Akbar Adoko Nekyon, a Langi cousin of Obote. The Chairman was Shaban Nkuntu from Busoga; Ahmad Muwanga, the Secretary-General was from Bukedi; Abasi Balinda, the Publicity Secretary was from Ankole; Ausi Rwakaikara the Organising Secretary was from Bunyoro; while Aziz Mitha, the Assistant Secretary-General, was an Iteso. Only Shaykh Abdu Obeid Kamulegeya, the Vice Chairman, hailed from Buganda. Thus, at inception, NAAM seemed the only all embracing Muslim organisation and as such gained many supporters from those who had for long been disgruntled by the persistent monopoly of the Baganda over the leadership of Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

There are divergent opinions as to whether the UPC government was responsible for the formation of NAAM with some scholars pointing an accusing finger while others exonerating it. But all said and done the emergence of NAAM had a dramatic effect on the Muslim Community in Uganda. In the first place, it laid bare the Muslim community to the machinations of unscrupulous politicians, and worsened relations between Muslims and non-Muslims especially in Buganda. For example, when NAAM government operatives did anything unpleasant, it was squarely blamed on the Muslims. Secondly, the operations of NAAM widened the scope of Muslim disunity. Fights between Muslims of opposing groups became a common occurrence and in many instances were rather fatal. One particular incident in 1968 occurred at Kajara in the Ankole district which saw the deaths of two people who, in an attempt to block NAAM take over of their mosque, were shot dead by government forces. As a consequence of this conflict, developmental projects like building of schools and hospitals became secondary consideration and fighting took centre stage. In this regard the UPC government bears the blame for having condoned and supported the excesses of its Muslim ally, the NAAM. This increased division among Muslims renders irrelevant all the benefits that could have accrued from the formation of NAAM.

Apart from the factional politics that the Obote I regime encouraged, the government also attempted to block Muslim educational prospects. In 1965, it abolished denominational schools. In theory this policy meant that every

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<sup>26</sup> Pinyawa Ginyera, *Apollo Milton Obote and His Times*, (New York: Nok publishers, 1978), p. 145.

Ugandan had the opportunity to attend any school of his/her choice in Uganda. But in practical terms this policy was detrimental to the Muslims. There was an influx of non-Muslim pupils into Muslim schools, and the leadership of these schools was also taken over by non-Muslims who had the required qualifications. In fact by 1970, there were far more non-Muslim students in Muslim schools than there were Muslim students in Christian schools. Also, UMEA, which had by 1963 established 180 primary schools and 8 Junior secondary schools, one senior secondary school and one teacher training college, lost control over them and practically went into limbo.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the Christian institutions, because of historical factors, somehow managed to retain a sizeable amount of influence over their schools. Thus the substantial progress that UMEA had made in the 1940s and 1950s in advancing Muslim education was undermined during this period. As a result, Muslims did not make much headway in the field of education during the first decade of independence.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the first decade of independence was a period of crisis for the Muslim Community. Despite some positive gains that the community made in the political arena, its overall achievements were negligible. The government through encouraging factionalism marred its potential for development. By the time of Idi Amin's takeover, the Muslim Community was still by far the least developed in the country.

### **The Era of Amin: The Rejuvenation of the Muslim Community**

The coming of Idi Amin to power altered the status of Muslims in Uganda. During his eight year rule, the Muslim community went a long way in overcoming many of the problems that had dogged it since its foundation. Though many of the gains were achieved by default, they have stood the test of time. It is true that Amin had many excesses and to many he was a devil incarnate, but to the Muslims he was a "saviour" His reign established Muslims in positions from which they cannot easily be removed. While they were non-entities in the pre-Amin era, Amin opened for them opportunities which they had never enjoyed before. The Muslims were able to offer their allegiance to one

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<sup>27</sup> Kasumba, *op. cit.*, pp. 107 – 109.

leader, they became economic masters, their social and religious events became state functions, and they made impressive progress in education.

As hinted earlier, Amin created as many enemies as friends. The same was true of the Muslim Community. All the irresponsible actions of Amin were blamed on the community.<sup>28</sup> After his overthrow there were even attempts to exterminate the community. In my view it was not for the excesses that Amin was hated but for advancing the interests of the Muslim community. A case in point was the statement made by the Minister of Education in the Obote II government of 1981-1985, Professor Isaac Newton Ojok, in reference to the Islamic University in Uganda, "That University was intended to Islamise Uganda, well knowing that Uganda is a Christian Country. It will be built over my dead body."<sup>29</sup> The statement signifies that it was not Amin who was the target but the whole community. The achievements made under Amin brought the entire Muslim community under attack after his overthrow.

By the time Amin took over power in 1971, the Muslim Community was in a state of oblivion. It was divided into many factions- NAAM, UMC, AMC, JUMA-ZUKULI etc. Their political fortunes had been dealt a death blow with the collapse of UPC-KY alliance as Muslim ministers [Abu Mayanja, Ntege Lubwama and Kassim Male] were dismissed for belonging to the wrong party. Their education fortunes had been undermined with the policy of nationalisation of schools and, because of historical factors; they were non-entities in the economic sphere. It was from this state that Amin rejuvenated the Muslim community. It should, however, be noted that his modest education level and experience, Amin used rudimentary means to achieve his goals. There is little doubt that the Muslim Community in Uganda did make great strides in all sphere of life under Amin's rule. It is necessary at this stage to dwell on the achievements made by the Muslim community under Amin.

### **i) Uniting of Muslims in Uganda**

The greatest legacy that Idi Amin bequeathed to the Muslims of Uganda was the creation of the first pan-Islamic organisation – the Uganda Muslim Supreme

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Kiyimba, *op. cit.*, 2003.

Council (U.M.S.C). It should be recalled that by the time Amin took over power the relations between the Muslim factions were at their lowest ebb. Fights between them were the order of the day. Thus, upon assumption of power Amin took it upon himself to create some form of unity by forming a new organisation to bring together all Muslims under its umbrella. In the words of Kasumba (1995) the formation of the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council was partly an attempt to rejuvenate Muslim identity which the previous regimes had undermined. Amin had hoped that by uniting the Muslims he would be able to elevate the status of Muslims. Writers like Kasumba (1995), Ginyera Pincywa (1977) and Kasozi (2002) have attributed various motives to the formation of the U.M.S.C such as an attempt to check the growing influence of Kakungulu in the politics of the Muslims and the Baganda and a desire by Amin to fulfil a political agenda. While these ideas are valid, the creation of the U.M.S.C. provided a catalyst for Muslim development.

Amin ensured that all the warring parties within the Muslim Community were represented at the Kabale and Kampala conferences that culminated in the formation of U.M.S.C. As Kasumba (1995) indicates, many leaders of the former sects did not welcome the idea of forced unity for the obvious reason of loss of authority. Nonetheless the state was determined and went ahead to have the organisation constituted. Kasumba (1995) roundly blames Amin for allowing former NAAM members to dominate the maiden executive committee of the council. However he contradicts himself when he says that as a gesture of reconciliation, Amin directed that Ali Kulumba of UMC, the runner up in the race for the office of Chief *Qāḍī*, to become the deputy Chief *Qāḍī*.

Following the inauguration of the U.M.S.C on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1972, all matters pertaining to the Muslims of Uganda were now directed to it. This has remained the case to date. After the overthrow of Amin, many pessimists had thought that the U.M.S.C would collapse but this has not happened. Certainly, the U.M.S.C did have many challenges after the departure of Amin but it has managed to survive.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after its founding, Amin declared an economic war, which saw the expulsion of over 70,000 Asians from Uganda. Many of the departed Asians' property ended up in the hands of the UMSC. Some of these properties were assigned to the U.M.S.C by the state while others were donated to it by the departing Muslim Asians. With such donations and grants, UMSC had by 1974

become the biggest landlord in Uganda.<sup>35</sup> Given this financial muscle and the history of disunity and greed, there was need for close supervision. Amin did exactly that, by ensuring that all transactions of U.M.S.C were closely monitored. Against that background, he dismissed the first executive of Shaykh Abdu Razaq Matovu in 1975. Many scholars have criticised him for having meddled into the affairs of the organisation but given the circumstances, the writer is of the opinion that he was justified. Ever since his departure, there have been continuous struggles between the Muslim leaders over the control of the U.M.S.C resources. As recently as July 2006, the Muslim Community was entangled in a row regarding U.M.S.C properties, which the present Mufti Shaban Mubajje and his executive are accused of having sold. The creation of U.M.S.C and its ability to survive make the Amin regime a very important agent in the development of the Muslim community in Uganda. Over 25 years after his departure, the UMSC still remains the most important and respected Muslim organisation in Uganda.

## **ii) Economic Empowerment of Muslims**

At the time Amin took over power, the Muslims were economically weak. Given the colonial policies that had denied them the means of production especially land, the Muslims could not make any convincing headway in economic terms. Thus during the colonial period the Muslims took on petty jobs to make ends meet. Many became domestic servants especially in Indian homes while others became drivers given that they were known to be sober all the time. Others, backed by the rice culture that characterises Muslim rituals, were employed in the hotel business as cooks and attendants. Eventually they were able to evolve into the owners of some small businesses using savings they made out of their previous employment.<sup>30</sup> No effort was made by the colonial government to help the Muslims redress their economic marginalisation. Even when the Uganda Development Corporation was established in the early 1950s to help the Africans get capital and skills to join the commercial sector, the Muslims were

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<sup>30</sup> See M. Sekatawa, "The Asian question in Uganda: 1900-1982," unpublished M. A. thesis, Makerere University, 2001.

not given any due consideration.<sup>31</sup> The same was true in the first decade of independence. The UPC-led government put in place measures to help Africans redress the colonial mistake of only aiding Asians in the commercial sector, but nothing was done to assist the Muslims. While some Africans were able to become big entrepreneurs as a result of the Africanisation programme of the Obote I government, the Muslim community was not given recognition as one of the groups which had been marginalized by the Colonial regime and was, therefore, not provided with any assistance.

When Amin assumed office, he set out to redress this injustice. In 1972, Amin declared an economic war, which among other things saw the expulsion of Israelites and Asians from Uganda. The expulsion of Asians proved to be very significant to Ugandan Muslims. As noted earlier, the Asians dominated the commercial sector in Uganda. Their expulsion therefore created a vacuum that Muslims were able to occupy. Muslims took advantage to redress their economic grievances. Many of the businesses of the departing Asians were directly or indirectly entrusted to the Muslims.<sup>32</sup> It should, however, be noted that not only Muslims acquired these properties. Many other groups acquired them as well, but given the circumstances, the Muslims reaped the greatest advantage. The Muslims formed the basis of the Mafuta Mingi (Affluent) class that dominated the commercial sector throughout the Amin era. Not surprisingly, Muslims came to be known as the richest group in Uganda. To date those Muslims who started business enterprises during the Amin era continue to perform well. Muslims are still known to be the best businessmen, courtesy of Idi Amin.

### **iii) Political Empowerment of Muslims**

When Idi Amin came to power, the political fortunes of the Muslims changed dramatically. As a politician he needed a power base and to this effect the Muslims seemed the appropriate group. In the beginning Amin had tried to involve all the parties in his government. In fact in his first cabinet of 20, there were only two Muslims. However, he later realised that the Muslim constituency

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<sup>31</sup> Sallie Simba Kayunga, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-330.

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was the more reliable and as such he brought them on board. Kokole argues that by 1975 Amin's cabinet had 70% Muslims. For the first time Muslims were able to dominate the Ugandan cabinet. This has not happened again in Uganda. Even the all-embracing National Resistance Movement (NRM) government of 1986 could only afford five Muslims on its cabinet of over 30 people.

Amin also ensured that Muslims got employment in the public service. He placed strong Muslims like Abubakar Kakembo and Jumba Masagazi in strategic positions in government with the specific task of ensuring that they found Muslims jobs in the public service. It is as a result of the efforts of these officials that many Muslims found themselves in government employment. Many of the people Amin appointed survived his regime and went on to prove quite valuable to the development of the Muslim community long after Amin's departure. Such is the power of political authority, creating opportunity where none existed before. In the words of Sallie Simba (1994), Islam was one of the criteria for promotion in the security forces and the civil service.

It is no wonder, therefore, that a Muslim by the name of Muhammad Kibirige Mayanja, had the audacity to contest for the presidency of Uganda in 1996 and 2001. There have also been many Muslims taking part in parliamentary elections. In the present (eighth) parliament there are about thirty Muslims out of the 300. This number looks small but compared to the pre-Amin era times this is a great leap forward. The confidence of the Muslims can be attributed to the policies of Amin.

#### **iv) Increase in the Muslim Population**

The era of Idi Amin saw an increase in the number of Muslims in Uganda. There were many conversions to the Islamic faith during the 1970s partly due to the expected material gains accruing from being Muslim and for personal security. At that time it was a privilege to be a Muslim. The previous situation in the country which had seen Muslims treated as second class citizens was dramatically altered. All of a sudden everyone wanted to associate with Islam and Muslims. The *maulid* functions became the most important vehicle for conversion. The festivities that accompanied the *maulids* pulled non-Muslims nearer to Islam. While writers like Harrell Bond argue that conversion was only

for strategic reasons, the bottom line is that many of these converts were to contribute significantly to the development of Islam in Uganda.<sup>33</sup> For example a Haji Musisi converted at a Mauledu at Old Kampala Mosque in 1977 and to date is involved in teaching Islam and Arabic language at Tauheed Academy in Kisenyi, Kampala.

#### **v) Membership to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC)**

In 1974 Amin secured the admission of Uganda to the organisation of Islamic conference as a full member. This admission meant that Uganda was recognised as a Muslim majority state. With this membership Uganda was able to secure the fruits enjoyed by OIC members. At the very conference in Lahore where Uganda was admitted, it was decided that an Islamic University was to be established in Uganda to help improve the education standards of Muslims from Anglophone Africa. Amin left power before this dream was secured but in 1988, the university was finally established. Indeed this university has done a great deal in improving the education fortunes of the Muslims of Uganda. The country's admission to OIC also opened more avenues for the in-flow of petrodollars from the Arab world. This saw Islamic teachers (Shaykhs) earning salaries for doing *da`wah* work, helped the Islamisation process and assisted the development of Islam in Uganda. Remote areas henceforth were able to get access to well trained Islamic propagators. To date a good number of Muslim scholars involved in *da`wah* work continue to earn a monthly salary. Shaykhs are able to drive nice vehicles and do not have to rely on handouts. These Islamic teachers do command a lot of respect. Their trade has actually become attractive. Scholarships from the Arab countries have continued to flow in long after Amin, who secured them, was deposed.

#### **vi) Improvement of Muslim Education**

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Amin made to the Muslims of Uganda was in the education sector. The educational plight of the Muslims must have taken Idi Amin by surprise. There is evidence that he assumed that educated

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<sup>33</sup> B. Harrell Bond, *Imposing Aid*, Oxford, 1986, p. 139

Muslim manpower for him to run government affairs with was available. He soon realised that it was not. For example, the number of Muslims who had university degrees by the time he took power in 1971 could be counted on fingertips. He thus placed in position various Muslims to ensure that the plight of Muslims in respect to education was improved.<sup>34</sup>

**Leadership of Muslim schools:** The other problem that bothered Idi Amin was the domination of Muslim schools by non-Muslims. In response to this problem, he decreed that every religious group must head its own schools. For the Muslim community, this was one of the most significant steps adopted by Amin. Today - especially at the primary school level - while there are isolated cases of Muslim schools still headed by Christians, the principle is clearly recognised by the government and everybody concerned with education.

**Government grants to Muslim schools:** One of the plights faced by the Muslim community was that the number of Muslim institutions receiving government grants was terribly small. Idi Amin tried to address this problem as well, but it was an uphill task. At the time when he took power, the only Muslim schools that received government aid were Kibuli, Nabisunsa, Gombe, Bukoyo and Nkoma. By the time he left power, the following were among those which had been added: Bombo, Arua Public, Masaka S.S., Kampala High School and Kololo High. He also established a teacher training college. When Idi Amin came to power, the Muslim community had only one Teacher Training College (TTC) as opposed to more than 40 for Christians. He used his political office to direct that a second TTC be established at Kabukunge in Masaka district. Up to today, the TTC is still operational and government funded, and it has served the Muslim Community by training teachers for their schools. Since it started graduating teachers in the year 1980, it is estimated that it has added more than one thousand Muslim teachers to Uganda's workforce, and continues to do so.

**Teaching of Islam in Schools:** Idi Amin's attention was soon drawn to the fact that Islam was not being taught in secondary schools. When he asked why, the reason was even more puzzling - there were no teachers. So he directed that

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<sup>34</sup> Kiyimba, *op. cit.*, 2003.

a course to train teachers of Islam at Diploma level be started at Kyambogo National Teachers' College. The course was started, and the President's office participated closely in the appointment of the teachers. A teacher who taught on this programme, Shaykh Bruhane Sebayigga, reports that while he was appointed by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education (then Jamada Luzinda), which in itself was unusual, the President himself monitored developments to ensure that the appointment was made. One of the students who enrolled for this course, completed it and later pursued a degree at Makerere University is Ahmad Nsubuga, a long serving but recently retired teacher at Kibuli Secondary school. This course provided the backbone for the teaching of Islam at secondary level in Uganda, which has in turn enabled many Muslim students to pursue a variety of university programmes at Makerere and elsewhere, including Law and Mass Communication. Islamic Religious Education also found its way in the University curriculum at Makerere.

**Islamic University in Uganda:** In 1974, at a meeting of the Heads of States of the Organisation of Islamic Conference in Lahore (Pakistan), Idi Amin negotiated for the Islamic University to be located in Uganda. This proposal was viewed with great hostility by the Christian Ugandans, but the decision was accepted in principle. The university was to open fourteen years later. At the present moment, the Islamic University is one of the most vibrant institutions of higher education in Uganda. It produces graduates in various areas of learning, and has also positively affected the condition of Muslims in the country. This university is the most powerful legacy of Amin's rule in Uganda.

**Scholarships:** Given that there were very few Muslims who had university degrees by the time Amin took power in 1971, he took it up on himself to overcome this impasse. He set up a scholarship desk in the president's office which he used to redress the Muslims' education plight. He negotiated for scholarships for the Muslim community from the Arab world to study both secular and Islamic studies. These scholarships were very important in improving the education standards of Muslims and continue to be offered up to today. For example there were about 200 Iraqi scholarships in various disciplines. These have made it possible for more than 20 Muslims to attain

Ph.D. degrees and to contribute significantly to the development of the Muslim community in Uganda. These graduates are to be found in many sectors of Uganda's public service.

### **The Post-Amin Era: The Moves to Impede the Development of the Muslim Community**

#### **The years of turmoil in Uganda: 1979-1985**

The events following the overthrow of Idi Amin were particularly frightening for the Muslim community. The most memorable aspect of them was the brutal murder of hundreds of Muslims in Ankole, Masaka and Arua districts as punishment for supporting Idi Amin. Even previous close friends turned against them. Currently there are still people in Shema who occupy land they grabbed from the Muslims whom they killed after the deposition of Amin<sup>35</sup> Muslims were also evicted from public offices. In the Ministry of Education, the Permanent Secretary, Jamada Luzinda, and the Chief Education Officer, Abubakr Kakembo, were both put in prison. Ugly words were also said about the National Mosque that was being constructed at Old Kampala, a hill given to the Muslims by Idi Amin. Some even suggested that it should be turned into a hotel to be named Nyerere Hotel. Kabukunge TTC, which had just been opened officially by Idi Amin, was closed immediately.

When Obote came back to power, Kamulegeya renewed his links with his old friends, and tried to win what he could for the Muslim community. But the Obote II government had several power centres, and there were those within it who were determined not to allow a Muslim in cabinet. Prominent among them was the Army Chief of Staff, Oyite Ojok. Ntege Lubwama, who had been appointed Minister of Tourism, had his house bombed, and he fled into exile in Britain where he lived for a long time. It was never the intention of the Obote II government to build Muslim schools, or even to assist Muslims in any way, because it associated them with Idi Amin. It blocked the setting up of the Islamic University in Uganda as indicated earlier.

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<sup>35</sup> A. Kiyimba, *Is the 1979 Mbarara Muslim Blood-Bath in Bushenyi History?: A Review of the Genocide that was called Liberation*, Kampala, 1989.

Nonetheless, because some Muslims such as Abubakar Kakembo who had been appointed to positions in the Ministry of Education by Idi Amin still held their positions, the Muslim community was able to receive some benefits. The most significant of these benefits was the construction of new schools under what came to be popularly known as the "TATA Schools" programme. The UPC government decided that a new school should be built wherever there was a sizeable population that supports the government. Through this programme and through the hard work of Kakembo and his other colleagues in the Ministry such as Muhammad Mayanja Kibirige, the Muslim Community was able to establish many secondary schools.

The Obote II government was also notorious for promoting Muslim disunity. Government officials led by the president himself interfered in Muslim affairs directly. Obote renewed his ties with Shaykh Kamulegeya and assisted him in destabilising the leadership of Shaykh Kassim Mulumba who was the Chief *Qādī* and enjoyed the protection of the vice-president Paul Muwanga. Once again the Muslim community found itself divided into bitter factions. Power struggles took centre stage and all attempts at uniting them were futile. However, on a positive note, all the struggles centred around the leadership of the U.M.S.C which Amin had created. Fortunately, the Muslim community survived the Obote regime amidst all the factional wrangling.

### **The National Resistance Movement Era: 1986-2006**

In general terms, Muslims have found political developments since the NRM government came to power very confusing. On the one hand, it came in with a number of Muslims within its ranks. There were Haji Moses Kigongo, Haji Abdul Hafiz Mukwaya, Haji Abu Mayanja, Haji Kirunda Kivejinja, Hajat Janat Mukwaya, and later General Moses Ali, and a few others that belonged to different cabinets and held other prominent positions within government. Also, when the NRM came to power it made what seemed like genuine moves to have the Muslims united, and this process gave birth to the Mecca agreement, which brought Shaykhs Hussein Rajab Kakooza and Saad Ibrahim Luwemba under one administration. Factionalism, however, persisted to a degree that for almost a year, there were three recognised Muftis in the country. This was eventually

resolved in 2004 when the Muslims finally buried their differences and agreed to one leader. Even then there have been some misunderstandings over the management of Muslim resources. Nonetheless, the Muslims have remained tied to their U.M.S.C. This makes Amin's contribution quite significant. The establishment of the Islamic University which had been stalled for fourteen years since the idea was mooted, received the backing of the NRM government, and it was able to start in a record two years after the regime came to power.

But it should be kept in mind that this government had within its ranks many people who had subjected Muslims to torture after the overthrow of Idi Amin. Many still hold prominent positions. This would explain why there have been near repeats of the post- Amin atrocities such as the arrest of Muslims on trumped-up charges of terrorism. On the educational front, the community still faces problems with the regime. For example, the government-aided Muslim schools continue to be flooded with non-Muslim students through the so-called computer allocation of students to schools. The principle is presented as an innocent one of mere merit. But the problem is that this "merit" works only in the interest of non-Muslims. In one particular year, the computer "allocated" 120 students to Nabisunsa Girls School. Of this number, only 20 were Muslims. The Muslim community has found this very frustrating, since these schools are run in the name of the Muslim community, but they seemed to be serving mainly the Christians.

The other significant development during the NRM regime is that there has been a high level of infiltration into the Muslim community by government agents, to the extent that Muslims are known to spy on one another and report to government on petty issues. This has a detrimental effect on the development of the Muslim community.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it is clear that national politics has played an essential part in the way Muslim community has developed. Three points need to be emphasised. First, the Ugandan state was founded with the ideal of creating a Christian hegemony, and this set the stage for Christians to use their privileged position to interfere with the development of the Muslim community.

Secondly, the culture of political injustice towards the Muslims, which was started by the colonial regime and continued by successive post independence governments, has severely affected the Muslims, especially in the allocation of resources, which started with the denial of land in the 1900 agreement and positions of authority in government. Thirdly, the Amin regime interrupted years of Christian domination of the political affairs of Uganda. It was a very useful intervention because it gave Muslims opportunities that they had been denied for nearly a century. This was a very important development in the history of the Muslim community in Uganda. It changed the status quo transforming the Muslims from third rate to first class citizens. The Amin regime gave the Muslim community a new lease of life and its contributions will continue to be felt for a long time.

From the above discussion, the importance of political power can be determined. It is vital for Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa to take a leading role in the politics of their countries. Even in situations where they constitute a small minority, they can wield influence. Their participation, however, should not be confined to taking the highest office, but joining in coalitions with similar objectives.

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