

9

Sub-Saharan African Arabists and Higher Education in the Arab World

The theocratic Muslim states of the nineteenth century, from the Umari state of Ségou to the Mahdist state of Sudan, not forgetting the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria, were fiercely opposed to European colonization. Hence, following the consolidation of European colonial rule, the British and the French, who took the lion's share in the division of Africa, set up a quarantine line between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, in order to avoid Islam becoming a base for a 'subversive' mobilization of colonial subjects. Independence from colonial domination then became an opportunity for cooperation and the renewal of ties between the North African countries and the Islamized countries south of the Sahara. In this context, the Arab countries offered many scholarships to African students, both through the official channels of diplomacy and through African Muslim personalities who distributed them to their constituencies. Thanks to these scholarships, students trained in the Koranic and traditional Arab-Islamic schools had an opportunity to continue their secondary studies and higher education in Arab countries.

The training of sub-Saharan African Arabists in the Arab world is a field for research that has long been neglected. Most of the work on sub-Saharan Islam has focused on Sufi orders. In rare cases, they mention without going into detail, the involvement of Arabists in political contestation when they return to their countries. The first substantial work was carried out by a group of researchers in the Centre d'étude d'Afrique noire in Bordeaux (Otayek 1992).⁹ Thanks to their work, we now have better information on certain networks for training Arabists. Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Libya and Sudan are the main Arab countries receiving sub-Saharan African Arabists.

For a long time, Egypt was preferred by Arabists from sub-Saharan Africa and thousands of them have trained there (Mattes 1993:50). At the beginning of the 1960s, eighty-two Senegalese students were attending Al-Azhar University, together with hundreds of nationals of other West African countries. At the time, the Al-Azhar University served as a policy instrument for Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who saw himself as a leader of the Third World. The Egyptian president tried to mobilize as much support as possible in the Muslim world and in the Third World in general, which is why Al-Azhar received so many African students. After Nasser's death, Al-Azhar continued to be an instrument for Egypt's cultural policy and welcomed thousands of students from the Muslim world. It also supplied technical assistance, especially teachers, to most of the Arabic schools and institutions of learning in sub-Saharan Africa.

Until the 1990s, most of the schools teaching Arabic in sub-Saharan Africa provided no secondary schooling. Thus, the graduates of these schools going to Al-Azhar did not tackle university level studies immediately, but followed remedial courses in a specialized institute at Al-Azhar for non-Arabophone students. After a few years of study, the African Arabists were admitted to the faculties of the Al-Azhar University. A very small number of them were admitted in Egyptian high schools. After completing high school, this minority was then qualified to study scientific subjects at Al-Azhar or other Egyptian institutions like Cairo University and the 'Ayn Al-Shams University. Most African students were in the faculties of religious studies. Upon their return to Africa, they suffered from a double handicap. The first was that they have received instruction in a language other than that of the administration or of the business world. The second was that their expertise was not highly valued in the job market. Thus, competition with graduates from the schools of engineering, business and even literature who trained in the Europhone universities of Africa or Europe, found them at a disadvantage.

This unfortunate experience of the first generation trained at Al-Azhar and in other Arabic countries, and who found difficulty in securing employment back home, had an impact on the second generation. Some of the second generation, rather than return to their country after graduating from Arab universities, left for Europe. France was the favourite destination for citizens of former French colonies because the French universities had established equivalence systems that enabled nationals from Arab countries to be admitted. A number of African graduates from Arab universities took advantage of this system to pursue graduate studies in France. Some humanities students attended the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris. However, most of the Arabist Africans who were admitted to universities could not succeed in exams because of poor command of French. Those who were admitted for post-

graduate studies were luckier, for they obtained their doctorates without having a good knowledge of French. As they did not intend to work in France (at least it was assumed), their dissertation sponsors were not too demanding regarding their command of the French language. However, upon their return to their country of origin (such as Chad, Cameroon, Senegal, Mali, Niger), these Arabists who possessed a French degree had better chances of obtaining professional occupations than their peers who spoke only Arabic.

Morocco was one of the first countries to welcome African Arabists. Like Egypt, Morocco's policy aimed at extending its zone of influence to the Muslim countries of West Africa. It should be noted that sub-Saharan Islam, which is dominated by Sufi orders, is strongly influenced by Moroccan Islam. In fact, the Sufi order that was most widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, the Tijaniyya, was an Algerian-Moroccan brotherhood (Triaud and Robinson 2000: *passim*). Following its spread, there were cultural ties between the different *tijani* communities of sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco. At the beginning of the 1960s, Morocco, in the name of its historical presence in part of the sub-Saharan territory, claimed a Great Morocco that extended to the north of Senegal. The cultural ties that existed between Morocco and Africa south of the Sahara, as well as the political ambitions of King Hassan II, constitute the background of Moroccan policy towards sub-Saharan Africa, which is expressed not only in the formal channels of diplomacy but also in the informal sector of international relations. King Hassan II had special ties with the Muslims of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly with the leaders of the Sufi brotherhoods. Through the influence of the latter, scholarships were given to Arabists from West Africa to study in Morocco as from the early 1960s and, to date, Morocco continues to receive nationals from the Muslim countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

African students were studying in Algeria before it obtained independence. Some of the first Senegalese Muslim reformers were trained in that country. Cheikh Touré, the former leader of the Muslim Cultural Union, and Alioune Diouf, the first emir of the Ibadou Rahman movement, studied in Algeria during the 1950s (Loimeier 1994:57). After Algerian independence and, above all, after the oil boom, thousands of scholarships were offered to African students by Algeria (Mattes 1993:50). Some of them were trained in the humanities and religious studies in Arabic, others in scientific disciplines in Arabic and in French.

Libya, under Colonel Ghadaffi, was also one of the Arab countries that welcomed students from black Africa. When Ghadaffi came to power, two institutions were created to promote Libya's cultural policy: the Association for the Islamic Appeal (*Jam' iyyat al-da'wa al-islamiyya*), founded in 1972, and the Faculty for the Islamic Appeal (*Kuliyat al da'wa al-islamiyya* – AAI), set up in 1974. The latter has branches in Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan and England (Mattes 1993:43)

and offers various university degrees, culminating in a doctorate (Mattes 1993:44). An excellent propaganda machine, the AAI is well-financed and has considerable freedom in transferring funds abroad. It is active in a number of fields, including preaching and training, communication and financial support (Mattes 1993:42-43), and has branches around the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. It awards scholarships to nationals from African, Asian and European countries, as well as from the New World, to pursue Arabic and Islamic studies in Libyan universities and at the Faculty for the Islamic Appeal. The Association for the Islamic Appeal also organizes conferences, provides financial assistance for the construction of mosques and Islamic training centres, as well as medical help for the destitute, while sending out hundreds of African and Asian preachers to proselytize in Libya and other African countries (Mattes 1993: *passim*).

Libya has often supported local opponents to destabilize African governments. The hegemonic aims of Colonel Ghadaffi have created diplomatic incidents and led to the breaking of diplomatic relationships between Libya and other African countries. In Senegal, Ahmad Khalifa Niass is considered to be one of Ghadaffi's men. Also known as the Ayatollah of Kaolack, he announced at a press conference in October 1979 at the George V Hotel in Paris, the creation of a party whose ambition was to establish an Islamic state (Coulon 1983:139, Magassouba 1985:136). In May 1982, he was arrested and imprisoned for having burnt the French flag during the official visit of President François Mitterand, but was freed shortly afterwards. However, it was a rare incident in Senegal, a country of secular culture and where radical Islam has not been able to take root.

Saudi Arabia has also made a major contribution to the promotion of Arabic language in black Africa. It is difficult to evaluate the Saudi effort because it is transmitted through official channels as well as non-governmental organizations and individual benefactors. According to Fouad al-Farsy (1990:295) Saudi assistance to Third World countries represented 6 per cent of its total GDP. In Africa, 96 per cent of this assistance went to Muslim countries until the early 1980s (Nyang 1982:13). There are many organizations that handle this aid to African countries, including the World Muslim League, the Dar al-Ifta, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), the International Federation of Arab and Islamic Schools. Through these organizations, funding is given to Muslim associations, schools and leaders in Africa, Asia and America. At the beginning of the 1980s, there were 2,000 African students attending Saudi universities (Nyang 1982:13), all of them taught in Arabic.

In Tunisia, the sub-Saharan Arabists have usually attended one of two institutions (Bahri 1993:76): the Rakada Lycée or the Theology Faculty of the University of Zeytouna. Like Libya, Tunisia only admitted a few hundred students from black Africa, most of them Senegalese, and this was mainly between 1960 and the mid-1970s. However, some of them were able, during their training, to

become familiar with the writings of Islamist thinkers such as the Sudanese Hasan Al-Turabi, the Egyptians Hasan Al-Banna (killed in 1949) and Sayyid Qutb (hanged in 1966), the Pakistanis Abu 'Ala al-Mawdudi (d. 1979) and Rashid Ghannouchi (Bahri 1993:90). Most of the university teaching staff of the Rakada Lycée are Islamists and the sub-Saharan students find brotherly attitudes among them, which they do not find in Tunisian society as a whole. Thus, a certain number of African students have been converted to Islamism during their stay in Tunisia (Bahri 1993:90).

Sudan is another popular destination for African Arabists. Like Mauritania, this country which is half-way between Arabized North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, is an exception as far as the Arabization of black Africa is concerned. The northern population of Sudan speaks Arabic and is largely Islamized, while the southern populations are predominantly Christian or followers of traditional African religions, and are non-Arabophone. Before it became independent, Sudan received a limited number of Arabists from the British colonies of sub-Saharan Africa. One of the most illustrious was the Nigerian Abubacar Mahmud Gumi (1922-1992), the former grand *qadi* (supreme judge) of Northern Nigeria during the first Republic (1960-1966) and certainly one of the towering figures of the Islamic revival in black Africa in the twentieth century. After the independence of Sudan, there was a policy to promote Islam and the Arabic language in black Africa, which had to be adapted to the limited means of the country. The Sudanese trained young students from these countries, offering them 'a model of modernity that was different from that of the West and that combated the negative imagination of the Arabs and of Islam' (Grandin 1993:98) which had been built up in black Africa by the colonial library. Unlike countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Libya, the efforts of Sudan to promote Arabic in black Africa did not seem to be motivated by expansionist aims of seeking the leadership of the Muslim world. According to Grandin (1993:98-99), there were three main reasons that explained Sudanese cultural policy in sub-Saharan Africa: the Sudanese view regarding the low level of training, both in religious fields and in the general education of the African youth; an old tradition of Arab-Islamic proselytization towards neighbouring black populations; and finally, the strong anti-Western and anti-colonial attitudes among the nationalist political elite, constituted in large part of advocates of the Arabization and Islamization of Sudan.

From a Sudanese perspective, religious knowledge is not enough to train preachers capable of playing a decisive role in the Islamization and development of their country of origin (Grandin 1993:99). Importance is given to expertise in scientific and technical fields. So, the elaboration of the curriculum of the African Islamic Centre (*al-markaz al-islami al-ifriqi*) for training Africans took this into account (Grandin 1993:114). There is therefore a clear difference with Al-Azhar, for example, which receives thousands of students from black Africa, but who are mostly oriented towards religious studies.

Created by decree in 1966, the African Islamic Centre was opened in Omdurman in 1967 as an institute affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. It functioned until 1969 when it was closed for eight years (Grandin 1993:107). In 1977, the centre was reopened as an institute that was essentially aimed at religious proselytization (Grandin 1993:113). This development should be seen in the context of the 1970s and the expansion of Islamism in the Muslim world (Kepel 2000 *passim*). Especially in Sudan under the leadership of Hasan Al-Turabi, the Muslim Brotherhood was very popular and recruited many sympathizers from all social backgrounds.

The centre was then attached to the Ministry for Religious Affairs and it recruited from countries in black Africa and Muslim communities outside Africa. Bearing in mind the employment problems experienced by the first generation of African Arabists, the renewed Centre, now based on the outskirts of Khartoum, was careful to train students who were fluent in English or French as well as Arabic (Grandin 1993:108). It also offered basic training in scientific disciplines that enabled graduates to enter a profession or further their training elsewhere after graduation. On returning to their countries, they then had every chance of obtaining professional employment, a pre-condition for credibility. As in the Gulf countries, the centre has also adopted the strategy of recruiting young people from influential families (Grandin 1993:111) and inculcating in them an Islamic ideology that would prepare them for contributing to the reform of their own societies in the sense of greater Islamization.

It should be mentioned that when it reopened, the African Islamic Centre, after considering the different methods of propaganda (communist, missionary and others), saw the need for new methods of proselytization and training missionaries to deal with current challenges. This echoes the more global concern of the Islamic movements and thinkers about the most efficient methods of proselytization. Like the Christian missions, the Islamists concluded that, as well as religious training, it was indispensable to include fields like health care, the creation of clinics and schools and the granting of financial assistance.

Mention should also be made, to conclude this round-up of the networks, issues and contexts in the training of Arabist students, of the fact that attendance at the Arab universities can create two very different attitudes among students when they return to their own country. Some, after witnessing a lesser degree of religiosity in the Arab countries and having suffered from all kinds of racist prejudices (Bahri 1993:89), not only returned as Arabophobes, but they also abandoned practising the Muslim religion. Others, who acquired an in-depth knowledge of Arabic and the Muslim religion and who were fascinated by Islamism, preached a reform in the practice of Islam, if not an Islamic state.

This was all the more the case as the period of the expansion of Islamism corresponded with the considerable increase in the number of African Arabists attending institutions of higher learning in the Arab World.

Nevertheless, the return to the homeland was a disappointment for most of the graduates from Arab countries. Not proficient in Western languages, the first graduates of the 1970s had difficulty in securing jobs. As from the 1980s, some of them began to master Western languages and had a better chance of employment, but they were confronted with the unemployment crisis which spared no graduate of any system. The state, which had been the main supplier of jobs, froze recruitment in public service. While some Arabists managed to become economic or cultural private entrepreneurs, most of them had difficulties in finding satisfactory jobs, as reflected by the poet Cheikh Tidiane Gaye in a work entitled 'Arabist':

<i>Zalamuna wa rabbina zalamuna</i>	They have oppressed us, O God, they have oppressed us
<i>Absat al-baqq fi'l-dunya baramuna</i>	Of the most elementary right they have deprived us

Moreover, although most of them possessed a scholarly certified religious capital, these Arabists were unable to compete for control over religious and social matters with a local religious establishment that had a solid economic base, social capital and access to the state. Partly because they could not secure employment or acquire social influence, they challenged the status quo by advocating greater Arabization and the Islamization of the state – a new political dispensation that would entail greater social recognition for them. This was the African context at the beginning of the 1980s when Islamist movements became visible throughout the Muslim world.

