

ISLAM IN MADAGASCAR



MADAGASCAR was not known to the European world until the beginning of the sixteenth century. It was, in fact, in 1510 that Portuguese mariners, for the first time, landed on the great African island. But this country was known to the Arabs several centuries previously. They had not only touched it in passing, but had founded colonies on the eastern and north-western coasts.

It is impossible to state positively in what era the Arabs first came to Madagascar. Long discussions have been held on this point without arriving at any definite conclusion, and in this matter one can speak only of probabilities. It seems to us very probable that the Arab incursions go back to a period preceding the Hegira. The great explorer Flacourt, who was one of the first French governors of Fort Dauphin in the middle of the seventeenth century, speaks in his book, which is an authority on the subject, of a tribe called Zafi Ibrahim (literally, little sons of Abraham), who then occupied the Island of Ste. Marie and the neighbouring shores, as descendants of the Arabs, but not yet Islamized. Monsieur E. Gautier, in a thesis recently given at the Sorbonne on the Geography of Madagascar, maintains, not without reasonable arguments, that the Zafi Ibrahim must have left Arabia exactly at the time of the troubles which arose in that country because of the religious reforms of Mohammed. But the Zafi Ibrahim were followed in succeeding centuries by other immigrants from the same source, who were driven either by the spirit of adventure or by contrary winds and currents into the channel of Mozambique. And this time the newcomers were for the most part followers of the prophet of Mecca. Hence

Islam made its appearance in Madagascar long before Christianity, every good Moslem being, as everyone knows, a sort of missionary.

The history of Islam in Madagascar is divided into two very distinct periods. The first, which we have already mentioned, may be called the period specifically Arab, and extended from a short time after the Hegira until the end of the seventh century and until the formation of the great kingdom of Sakalava. The second, or modern, period dates from the beginning of the eighteenth century, after the destruction of the petty Arab kingdoms existing along the coast of Madagascar. The first period is that of the material occupation, political rather than religious, of north-western and eastern Madagascar by Moslem descendants of the Arab immigrants mixed with the indigenous population, who had become Moslem either voluntarily or by force. The second period, on the contrary, is marked by the diffusing of the Islamic ideas of the conquerors among the conquered, a process which has gone on constantly, and in the last fifty years has been aided by a new element, namely, Indian traders.

One could devote a whole paper to the study of the first period and the kingdom of Antalaotra, or the Arab-Madagascar tribes of the east coast (Zafi Ibrahim, Zafi Raminia, and Antaimoro), of which abundant traces exist, namely, in the ruins in the bay of Mahavavy in the north, and in tribes with peculiar customs as in the neighbourhood of Farafangana and Vangaindrano. But such a study would be above all historical and only of archaeological and ethnographical interest. For these kingdoms and principalities, after a brief period of splendour, were arrested in their progress, either by opposition from without or by internal strife, and play but a small part in the history of Moslem propagandism.

It is a remarkable fact that Islam, introduced into Madagascar as early as the eighth century, has not succeeded in penetrating the interior of the island. During all these centuries it has remained entrenched within the borders of the small Arab states, without being able to extend its influence to the purely native population, who, however, have borrowed from the Arab

traders their table of measures, their calendar and certain astrological practices. It seems that while Arab political power has continued in Western Madagascar, the animist peoples, proud in spirit and determined to reject everything foreign, have resisted from the beginning all attempts at proselytism on the part of the conquerors whom they instinctively despise. This was even more the case after the overthrow, by the Sakalava, of the Arab kingdom of Antalaoatra, and the establishment of the great native Kingdom of Boina. Very soon the Arab element resigned itself to its fate, and thought only of profiting by its intellectual superiority and commercial instincts, and so enriching itself at the expense of conquerors. For many years a certain amount of antagonism existed between the two races, and Moslem propaganda struggled for a long time against great obstacles, advancing but little. But the old enmity gradually disappeared. The Sakalava were won by the fact of the non-existence of political aims among the descendants of the Antalaoatra, whose numbers, however, were constantly increased by new arrivals, Africans, Asiatics or Comorons. The inherent objections to Islam disappeared, and from the beginning of the nineteenth century one finds numbers of the Sakalava adopting Moslem rites. The Arabs or the Comorons married women of Madagascar (often several at a time) and imposed their religion upon them. We even learn of a Sakalava princess being converted to Islam and yet retaining her throne.

In spite of all this, Islam gained little ground in Madagascar until recent years. To-day we are witnessing a recrudescence of proselytism on the part of the Moslem inhabitants of the island. One might ask if this new impetus, this forward movement among the followers of Mohammed, is not due to a new element which has appeared during the last fifty years, namely, the Indian traders from Bombay and Madras who are engaged in commerce along the rivers flowing into the Indian Ocean, between the Cape of Ambre and Cape St. Andre. The majority of these traders are in reality Moslems (although among them are found representatives of all the religions of India), but their influence in spreading the Moslem

faith is very slight and merely indirect. It is true that their presence, their number, and their wealth are proofs of the existence and the power of Islam, and that this appeals in some measure to the imagination of the Sakalava. But the Indians hold themselves aloof from the other inhabitants of the country, and do not interfere with them, nor seek to carry on a propaganda among them. Moreover, they are Shiahs, while the Arabs and Comorons are Sunnis.

The real cause of the new zeal on the part of the latter for the conversion of the black races of Boina, is hard to determine. It must come from outside, as a result of the general awakening in certain parts of the Moslem world. Recently, Moslems from Zanzibar or directly from Arabia have travelled from port to port, and from village to village, doing direct missionary work. It is not a difficult task to convince the Sakalava that small bits of paper, on which verses from the Koran have been written in the Arabic character, are better amulets than the pieces of bone or pearl in use among the coast tribes.

The Islam of Sakalava is very superficial,—hardly more than a name and a few rites added to the original paganism. The native changes his mode of life but little when he becomes a Moslem. The recitation of one or two sacred phrases, a number of ritualistic genuflections, more or less faithfully observed, and the wearing on the neck or wrist of a small cloth sack containing a parchment covered with Arab characters,—this is all that is necessary. The majority even continue to use strong drink, according to report. Converts among the women are numerous, owing to the fact that the Arabs marry, in a more or less lawful way, two or three women of the country and compel them to adopt these Moslem rites and practices.

If the Sakalava and the other peoples of north-western Madagascar do not understand a great deal of the doctrine of Islam, it nevertheless serves to enrol them, at least outwardly, under the banner of the crescent, and to inculcate in them a certain spirit of Moslem solidarity. This was shown at the beginning of the recent Balkan-Turkish war, when all Moslems in this part of the world,—

Shiahs, Sunnis, Arabs, Comorons, Indians, and Malagasy, gave their obolus to help the "Commander of the faithful" attacked by "those vile Christians." They declared to all who would listen that the Turks could not be conquered,—in case of great danger, God would annihilate the enemy by some unforeseen cataclysm.

The great ignorance of these Moslems, even in matters pertaining to their own religion, makes the task of evangelization the more difficult. With the exception of a few Arabs recently come from Hodeida, I have yet to find one who was really well acquainted with the history of Mohammed, or with the Koran. The majority refuse to discuss religious matters, and fortify themselves behind a scornful silence. Nevertheless, some day we shall succeed in reaching these hearts, at present so unyielding, and yet in such need of the salvation of Jesus Christ.*

Madagascar.

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[* The total Moslem population of Madagascar is estimated at 75,000; for further information the reader is referred to Gabriel Ferrand, "Les Musulmans à Madagascar et aux îles Comores"; 2 vols.; pp. 163 and 204. Paris: Ernest Leroux.—ED.]