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***ATTEMPTS AT A REJUVENATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY IN  
UGANDA. THE ERA OF AMIN (1971-1979)***

**Abstract:** The paper is about the Muslim Community in Uganda, a presentation of the landscape we live in every day. More like an overview, this paper underlines the marginalization of Muslims in all the sectors of national life till the independence in 1962. Nevertheless, Amin's nine year rule changed the history of Islam in Uganda, for the better.

**Keywords:** *Religious Pluralism, Islamic State, Muslim, Abrahamic religion, influence.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Muslim Community in Uganda has passed through episodes of tribulations, trials and triumph since the re-colonial days. Although Islam was the first Abrahamic religion to be introduced in Uganda, its adherents have never enjoyed a favorable status comparable to that enjoyed by the Christian sects which were introduced to Uganda thirty years after the coming of Islam here. Albeit numerous abortive attempts to capture state power and control state apparatus, Muslim influence and participation in the struggle for ownership of means of production as well as politics continued to wane during the era of British colonialism. Most importantly Muslim Identity suffered a heavy Blow under colonial rule, which marginalized and peripheries Muslims in all Sectors of National Life. The attainment of independence in 1962, did little to change the status of Muslims, who, as scholars such as Karugire<sup>1</sup> and Mamdani<sup>2</sup> have

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<sup>1</sup> Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

*Danubius*, XXXIII, Supliment, Galați, 2015, pp. 93-121.

correctly observed, remained behind in political participation, education and the distribution of the national product.

Therefore, there is a conventional belief that the coming of Amin on the political stage of Uganda, positively altered the status of Muslims, their identity, and the general level of Muslims' social, economic and political significance in the country. Contrary to what is generally believed, this paper seeks to assess the extent to which Amin's administration endeavored to redefine Muslim identity or uplift the status of Muslims in Uganda. This paper also seeks to clarify that Idi Amin, himself a Muslim, did not usurp power to salvage Muslims. Neither was he a champion of a Muslim cause. However circumstantial evidence available illustrates that the Muslim Community was one of the large beneficiaries of the bellicose regime. We highlight paradoxes that point to this benefit as having accrued from the political atmosphere of the time and the circumstances in which the military regime found itself entangled

Idi Amin took over power in the coup of 25th January, 1971. But this was not the genesis of his participation in politics in Uganda. The objectives of Amin, during his formative years of political participation (1966-72), his methods, character, attitude and behavior did least reflect a person ready to overhaul the status of his co-religionists in Uganda. But after 1972, Amin changed all the above elements to sway his efforts in favor of Muslims. Whether this was by design, unintentional, instinctual, or a result of tactical political calculation is what this paper seeks to analyze. It is however not contestable that Muslims are singled out as the group which reaped the major benefits from Amin's nine-year reign of political gambling.

An analysis of the relationship between of Amin and the Muslim community in Uganda yields a convincing conclusion that there was a massive attempt by the State to rejuvenate Muslim identity; an identity that had been denuded during the century of Anglican dominance in ownership of the means of production and state apparatus in Uganda. Ironically, Amin's way of doing things reveals that the rudimentary approach he adopted to the Muslim question in Uganda, did not augur well for either what Muslim Community aspired for. At the time Idi Amin took over power, the Muslim Community yearned for a political, social and economic redeemer. In Amin, it seemed, the community had got one. The community had landed on a golden chance which had been elusive for almost a century. However, as it was soon to be evident, this golden opportunity was lost under the Amin's political modus operandi which smirked of inexperience and belligerence

Amin's interference in the affairs of Islam and his usage of the Islamic cloak to achieve his personal goals, almost undid whatever he had done for Muslims. By the end of his regime in 1979 for instance, all his vices were

accounted to Muslims. Those (Muslims) who had a stake in the bellicose regime, and those who never shared the slightest crumb of the cake, were generally regarded as having accomplices of the fallen dictatorship.

Idi Amin's policies towards the Muslim community affected Muslims, both internally and externally. Internally for instance, Amin coerced Muslims into getting united. Yet after achieving this, he egoistically prevailed upon them in the running of their affairs. The effect of this was that, only a year after his exit, the Muslim community fell asunder into the pre-1971 factional squabbles.

At the external front, the Amin-Islam relationship bred elements of Muslim phobia among non-Muslims. This explains why there was further balkanization of Muslims immediately after the fall of Amin. Idi Amin's adversaries inaccurately mistook him for a Jihadist whose legacy would prevail even after his exit. Therefore, to Amin's political foes, his co-religionists had to have a rough time lest they would pursue Amin's plans further.

Generally, this paper seeks to correct some of the notions harbored in this society about Amin and Islam. It is therefore envisaged that findings in this paper will clear the air about the extent to which Amin's political participation did facilitate or inhibit the development of Islam in Uganda.

### **1. THE MILITARY COUP OF 1971: MUSLIM PLOY OR CULMINATION OF A CLASH OF INTERESTS?**

Research has proved that there was no connection between Islam, Muslims, and Amin in the latter's ascension to power. Personal interests and problems that Amin had by 1971 seemed to have overshadowed his political ambitions - if he had any - and the Islamic cause. Otunnu<sup>3</sup> clearly points out that a close look at the "events immediately preceding the coup demonstrate that Amin had personal reasons for attempting to takeover power" from the UPC Government. It is therefore relevant that we identify some of the factors which may have prompted Amin to take over power.

In the first place, there was, by 1970, a growing rift between Idi Amin and Milton Obote, the then president of Uganda. The two differed in matters of policy, approach and tact. By mid-1970, it had become apparent to Obote that Amin had to be eliminated if Obote was to continue having a grip on the Army. By 1969, there were signs of the dwindling of Obote's influence among the military. Obote certainly needed the army for purposes of perpetuating himself in power. This had, earlier than expected, been noticed by Amin, who grew psychologically impatient with Obote whom he had helped to crush his political opponents in 1966, by

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<sup>3</sup> Amii Omara Otunnu, *Politics and the Military in Uganda* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 92.

commanding the troops which ousted the then President of Uganda, Sir Edward Muteesa.

Secondly, owing to Amin's behavioral record in the army, his personal security was at stake. Already, he had been implicated in the mysterious murder of Brigadier Okoya, yet laid the State had plans to arrest and try those who had allegedly been involved in the ploy. In fact, February 1971 had been earmarked for such arrests.

Thirdly, there were elements in the Army which threatened Amin's continued occupancy of the topmost post in the Army. In addition to this, Amin had been implicated to have misappropriated colossal sums of money meant for the army, which he could hardly account for. Perhaps if he had not fallen out with his former ally (Obote), he could have gone away with it. But owing to the rift that loomed between the old pals, Obote was looking for means of eliminating Amin. The issue of accountability thus offered to Obote potential grounds for axing Amin.

Already, before his departure for the Commonwealth conference in Singapore in 1971, Obote had asked for accountability from Amin<sup>4</sup>. The implications of Obote's insistence on accountability were obvious to both Obote and Amin.

There had also been divergent opinions between Obote and Amin in matters concerning foreign policy. The period between 1969 and 1971 was a period during which Arab-Israel rivalry had reached its peak. While on the one hand Obote was trying to construct his Anti-Zionist stance by supporting Egypt, Amin on the other hand was conniving with Israel in supporting the Anya Nya rebels against the Arabo-Muslim government in Sudan. In doing this, Amin was not only jeopardizing the Uganda-Arab relationship, but was also undoing Obote's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring state.

The imperialist connotation in the Amin coup cannot be overlooked either. Obote was increasingly falling out with Britain, a power that had colonized Uganda and that was not ready to see Kampala fall out of its orbit of neo-colonialism. Obote had already gone out of his way by blasting Britain over its policy on South Africa. With this attack on Britain, Obote's own words provided him with a political rope to hang himself. Imperialism sometimes relies on its colonial graduates to sustain itself in the periphery. Thus Britain studied the internal conflicts in Uganda and got the best out of it. She found ready material in Amin who was himself a British trained soldier.

Moreover, the British Premier's reaction to Obote's attempt to step on "Britain's toes", sent panic to the delegates attending the Singapore conference. And, it became doubtful to them whether Obote would not pay heavily for his

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

loose tongue. The British Prime Minister, Edward Heath had remarked that “I wonder how many of you will be allowed to return to your countries after this conference”. It is not surprising therefore that Britain was among the first countries to recognize Amin's Government.

The reaction of the White Hall and the British media also illustrate that perhaps Britain had a hand in the coup. For instance, out of mere imperialistic excitement, Amin was voted “man of the week” by *The financial Times*, in the week after the coup.<sup>5</sup> The editorial of the Daily Telegraph even coined that “One good reason that might be advanced for holding commonwealth conferences more often is that the number of undesirable rulers overthrown as a result of their temporary absence as has happened to Dr. Obote of Uganda, would thereby be increased”.<sup>6</sup>

Three days later, the same paper noted that, with Obote gone, Britain would be at an advantage of pursuing “the course of her own strategic interests lightened on one Millstone”.<sup>7</sup> Of all press statements however, it was *The Daily Telegraph* which gave the clearest impression of the British about Amin. In one of its issues, it was put thus:

Amin provides a welcome contrast to those African leaders... who bring African rule to discredit in their own countries... Dr. Obote, who violated Uganda's independence constitution, and was justifiably ousted by Gen. Amin was in that category... Gen. Amin has been quick to express this in his country's policy.<sup>8</sup>

The takeover of power by Amin also featured prominently in leading headlines in other British papers such as *The Guardian* and *The Times*. The British Prime minister Edward Heath, who hosted Amin in July 1971 could not hide his sentiments when he coined what he termed as his “own ironic memories about the January coup, which came immediately after he had been sharply criticized by Obote”<sup>9</sup> in Singapore.

Nonetheless, before his departure to Singapore, Obote had instructed that Amin be arrested lest he would interfere with investigations on the murder of Brigadier Okoya, and other related investigations. Amin knew this himself<sup>10</sup> and acted swiftly to take over the government in order to avert the impending crisis that lay ahead of him. All the above observations, point to the fact that Amin acted for reasons other than furthering the Islamic cause in Uganda, although he had neither denounced his identity as a Muslim nor his sympathy for his co-religionists. If

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>6</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, January 26, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, January 29, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> “Common Sense Uganda,” *The Daily Telegraph*, July 12, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> *Uganda Argus*, July 14, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Otunnu, *Politics and the Military in Uganda*, 98.

anything, Muslims had reiterated their support for him long before the coup. For instance, Muslims knew him as their “man” in the army, and at one gathering, Sheikh Kamulegeya, one of the leaders of the Muslim community, brought it to Amin's notice that “we support Obote because of you”<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. THE AFTERMATH OF THE COUP: DID AMIN EXHIBIT PRO-ISLAMIC OBLIQUITY?

There are other factors which point to the fact that Amin did not have overwhelming Pro-Islamic inclination before the coup. In the first place, there is a contradiction which, those who hold views contrary this writer's, - on the above issue -will find difficult to reconcile. Amin himself a Muslim had embarked on a clandestine move to support Christian animist Anya-Nya rebels to oust the Muslim dominated regime in Sudan. We also notice that he found an ally in Israel, which is considered the greatest foe of Arabs and Muslims to further Zionist ventures against the Muslims in Sudan.

Secondly, after the coup, Amin's first official international visit was to Britain, but he made a stop-over in Tel Aviv show to the whole world his pro-Israel stance. It is imperceptible for a leader with a pro-Islamic agenda to conduct himself in a manner that would hurt his Muslim brethren from whom he would expect to enlist support for furthering his Islamic cause.

Thirdly, during the first year of his reign, Amin adopted an anti-Arab policy. On many occasions he vehemently denounced Arab racism as was practiced in Sudan, and attributed the 18th and 19th century's slave trade to this racial prejudice against Blacks. The situation in Sudan at the time was referred to by Amin as an atavistic carry-over of Arab racism. Although there is a difference between Islamism and Arabism, it is inconceivable that Amin could delineate between the two, owing to the “thin layer” that distinguishes the two cultures. Amin also openly accepted Israeli support during the first year of his reign. Israel supported him hoping that he would perpetually pursue his cosmetic anti-Arab policy<sup>12</sup>.

Fourthly, the early days of Amin's era were also characterized by his attempt -whether consciously or otherwise - to adopt an ecumenical approach to

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<sup>11</sup> A. Kiyimba, “The Muslim Community in Uganda through One Hundred and Forty Years: The Trials and Tribulations of a Muslim Minority,” *Journal of African religion and philosophy* 2 (1990): 101.

<sup>12</sup> Omari Haruna Kokole, “*Black Africa and the nuclear factor, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the struggles in southern Africa*,” microfilm, National Library of Canada, Ottawa, (1989):20.

political governance<sup>13</sup>. Amin attempted to make an appeasement policy towards the three major religions in Uganda; Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Islam. In doing this, he seemed to have made accurate political calculations that would contain pressures within a society characterized by religious pluralism. According to Amin, political stability in the country was partly determined by religious tranquility, coexistence and a climate free of religious bigotry.

In order to enlist support of religious leaders, Amin offered material and psychological encouragement to the leaders of the three Abrahamic religions. For instance he donated 100,000 shillings and a sleek Mercedes Benz to each of the trio; Archbishop E.K Nsubuga (Catholic), Bishop Eric Sabiiti (Anglican) and Sheikh A. Matovu (Muslim) as part of the appeasement package.

In order to pursue his ecumenical stance further, and to ensure stability in the said religious institutions, Amin christened himself a peace broker. He attempted to spearhead the solving of internal problems between and among various religious groups. He called inter-denominational dialogue in Kabale and later in Kampala<sup>14</sup>. He intervened prominently in the Muslim community affairs by inducing the then prevailing factions to repudiate their claims of legitimacy and unite under one umbrella body. The result was the formation of the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council<sup>15</sup>. Amin also encouraged discipline and unity in the divided Anglican community.

Although the Catholic Church seemed to be impermeable and with less internal conflicts, Amin appeased Catholics by releasing a leading Catholic Politician, Benedicto Kiwanuka from detention where he was languishing and named him Chief Justice. In 1972, he presented a check to the Catholic Arch-Bishop to facilitate the construction of the Martyrs' Monumental Shrine at Namugongo. He also promised Catholics that two of his sons were to be trained as priests<sup>16</sup>. Although this proved to be an empty promise, it gave Catholics some hope and renewed vigor in political participation in Uganda.

Amin played his cards well to prove that his was a non-denominational regime. In addition to all the above, in 1972, he included on his entourage to the OAU summit in Morocco, the Muslim Chief Kadhi, Catholic Arch-Bishop and the Protestant Arch-Bishop. However what we need to note here about Amin's ecumenism is that, although under this arrangement, Amin was not favoring Muslims, the arrangement did not suppress them either. It is also important to mention that Amin had realized the relevance of religious balance of power in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>16</sup> A.B.K. Kasozi, "The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991," unpublished paper.

managing a multi-religious society of the ilk of Uganda. This is a fact that both Amin's friends and enemies do acknowledge. It is however unfortunate that what seemed to be Amin's foresight in his early days later turned out to be political myopia, when he abandoned the scheme and inclined to Muslims at the expense of other religionists.

Another variable that helps to show that Amin had no pro-Muslim plans in the early days of his regime is to be found in the composition of his cabinet and administrative structure 1971-72. For instance out of a cabinet of 20 ministers, only two were Muslims (see Table 1 below). He also heavily relied on an advisory panel of non-Muslims such as Wannume Kibedi, Wadada Nabudere, Edward Rugumayo, and Bob Astles.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1: Showing The Religious Distribution Of Amin's Cabinet 1971/72**

Ministry	Minister	Religious affiliation
President	Idi Amin Dada	Muslim
Internal Affairs	Obitre Gama	Christian
Defense	Oboth Ofumbi	„
Foreign Affairs	Wannume Kibedi	„
Finance	E.B. Wakhweya	„
Planning & Econ. Devt	Arolo Kwonde	„
Cabinet & Public Affairs	Ovonji	„
Cooperatives And Marketing	F.L Okware	„
Local/ Provincial Admin	V.A.Ovonji	„
Agriculture	F.L.Okware	„
Animal Resources	B.W. Banage	„
Commerce	W. Lutara	„
Industry( & Power)	W. Lutara	„
Tourism	W. Lutara	„
Information And Broadcasting	W, Naburi	„
Works, Housing, Transport & Communication	J.M.N. Zikusooka	„
Culture & Community Devt	Engur	„
Health	J.H.Gesa	„
Labour	J.M. Byagagaire	„

<sup>17</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983).



Education	Abu Mayanja	Muslim
Justice & Attorney General	Nkambo Mugerwa	

Source: Jorgensen J.J., *Uganda, A modern History* (London: Croon Helm Ltd, 1981): 267

### 3. FROM ECUMENISM TO MANIACAL MUSLIM BIAS

Amin's ecumenical stance was short-lived. By the end of 1972 he had drastically changed his attitude towards a plan that he had initiated and showed his true political colors. It dawned on the Christian community that the 1971 coup had marked the decline of Protestant ascendancy and the rise of Muslim influence in Uganda. Amin, without regard to public opinion, embarked on an ambitious campaign to rejuvenate the identity of Muslims, which - though had started in the 1960s<sup>18</sup> - had been obscured throughout colonial rule.

Although from the evidence produced above, Amin had no Islamic ascendancy agenda in plotting the coup, as a Muslim he hastened to realize that the most reliable ally would be his co-religionists. It seems Amin had recognized an advantage in Muslim buoyancy; that is the universalistic nature of Islam. This would help create an ethnically mixed support since Islamic brotherhood cuts across ethnic identities. This strategy, according to Amin, would work better than an ethnic-oriented regime. A non-Muganda, as Amin was, could not rely on Buganda support, despite having appeased them by deposing their much hated enemy (Obote), and by returning the body of the beloved fallen king, Sir Edward Muteesa from London where he had died in 1969. If anything, as Kasozi<sup>19</sup> has rightly observed, it seems "the Baganda rejoiced to see Obote go although we are not sure whether they were happy to see Amin come." Amin knew that the shaky alliance that the fall of Obote and the return of the remains of Muteesa created between him and the Baganda would be short lived. To the Baganda, the memory of the destruction of their monarchy in 1966-67 - in which Amin played a profound role - was still fresh in their minds. Secondly, he could in no way promote an ethno-political strategy by relying on the dominance of his tribe the Kakwa. The Kakwa were insignificant in number, yet a northern corridor alliance with "tribes" such as the Acholi and Langi could not work out either. Most of the northern "tribes" were bed-fellows with the fallen regime of Obote and the UPC. Therefore Amin found in Islam a ready instrument to consolidate himself in power. Already

<sup>18</sup> Kokole, "*Black Africa and the nuclear factor, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the struggles in southern Africa.*"

<sup>19</sup> Kasozi, "*The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991.*"

the Muslims had applauded his coming to power. Prince Badru Kakungulu, their respected leader, whom Amin had just released from jail, had in 1971 extended a congratulatory message to Amin saying, “We Muslims have added reasons to feel grateful for your Excellency, since under the previous regime our religion had been debased to a play thing and we had been denied the most elementary freedom of worship.”<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, Amin was neither a staunch practicing Muslim, nor a Muslim fanatic. It appears therefore, that his tilt towards -Islamic promotion was a consequence of his entanglement in a quest for political, personal and economic survival. What marked the beginning of a 7-year Muslim dominated era was Amin's visit to Libya in 1972. The result of the visit was the signing of a communiqué of cooperation between the two countries.

The major implication of this deal was that Amin found himself in relationship with two arch rivals; Libya and Israel. Israel was shocked by this visit and it was apparent that the trust they had in Amin had waned. Amin's visit to Libya was not a function of abandoning his former political allies, Israel and Britain. But it was purely for reasons of his “personal, political and economic” survival<sup>21</sup>, the Tripoli Communiqué changed Amin's philosophical bias towards Islam and the Arabs. To Qaddhafi, Amin's visit was construed as having given a chance to Libya, on behalf of the Arab world, to distract Amin from his pro-Israeli orientation, and to further extend Islamic influence in Uganda. Libya acted fast to reap the fruits of the communiqué. On 21st February, 1972, Qaddhafi sent a ten-man contingent to Uganda to discuss with their counterparts, matters pertaining to possible areas of cooperation. Among the vital areas of cooperation assented to by the two parties, the promotion of Islam through teaching, building of schools and mosques featured prominently. Other areas included trade, economic and technical assistance, air force and the Uganda army.<sup>22</sup>

Israel on the other hand, despite having been shocked by Amin's impending shift in policy, laid a desperate strategy lest their interests in Uganda and Africa as a whole, would be jeopardized by the turn of events. A trade mission was hurriedly sent to Uganda to discuss matters of “mutual economic interest with Kampala”<sup>23</sup>. However, it was too late for the Israel. Amin's intellect had already been muzzled by Qaddhafi's ideological morphine. On 25 March 1972, Amin formally denounced what he called “Zionist imperialism”<sup>24</sup>. This followed his edict of 23 March, 1972 that all Israeli military personnel be evacuated within 72 hours.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Otunnu, *Politics and the Military in Uganda*, 114.

<sup>22</sup> *Uganda Argus*, February 28, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> Otunnu, *Politics and the Military in Uganda*, 114.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

He also ordered the reduction of diplomats at the Israeli Embassy to only four, disconnection of Israeli military wireless and the revocation of all orders and plans that were in the pipeline with the Israeli.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, by the end of March 1972, Amin had officially terminated his relations with Israel.<sup>26</sup>

Amin is known for having possessed an overwhelming instinctual drive, which in most cases governed, directed and guided his behavioral actions and decisions. The same psychological phenomenon was exhibited in his dramatic shift in policy towards Israel. For instance, within a period of two months (February-March 1972) Amin had managed to put a seal on the termination of Uganda's relationship with Israel, a relationship that had taken the two countries a decade to build. On March 30 1972 he gave orders to all Israeli diplomats to leave Uganda within ten days. In doing all this Amin was almost oblivious that the "Zionists" had helped him to ascend to power only a year before.

Amin's expulsion of the Israelis and his denunciation of Zionism were a boost to the development of the Islamic influence and to the strengthening of his newly adopted pro-Arab attachments. His government started reaping immediate economic, financial and political benefits. The Arabs had to act instantly to ensure that they exert a tight grip on Amin's regime. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia visited Uganda later in 1972, the visit being his first ever to Africa. Faisal also granted 6.1 million Riyals and promised more in consideration of Amin's stance to fight Zionism and imperialism.<sup>27</sup> This increased morale in Amin and escalated his zeal for Islamic promotion. Qaddhafi's visit to Uganda in 1973 signaled confirmation of Amin's allegiance to the Arab world. With this visit, Amin totally abandoned his non-partisan religious spirit and bent towards the furtherance of Islam.

He embarked on an ambitious task of trying to Islamize Uganda. For instance, he expelled 58 white Christian missionaries in 1973 and initiated a program to reorganize religion in the army ostensibly to put the leadership of various religions in African's hands. There seemed to be no problem with Africanizing religious leadership. But the Programme directly affected non-Muslims and favored Muslims - since it was only the Christians who had foreign missionaries in the army. The above scenario provides that while Amin was trying to promote Islam, he was doing so at the expense of the other faiths<sup>28</sup>.

Later, Amin's move to Islamize Uganda increased his bigotry towards non-Muslims. For instance, he banned all the minor Christian churches (sects) such as the Adventist Church, the Orthodox Church, "Mungu Mwema" (redeemed) Church and others, leaving only Islam, Anglicanism and Catholicism. He could have

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<sup>25</sup> *Uganda Argus*, March 24, 1972.

<sup>26</sup> *Uganda Argus*, March 31, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> *Uganda Argus*, November 15-20, 1972.

<sup>28</sup> *Uganda Govt.*, 1973, 53.

tolerated the two churches only because their adherents by far outnumbered Muslims and therefore had neither the courage nor the means to ban them. Amin's politicization of religion in a secular state was also exhibited in the membership of his cabinet. For example, while in 1971 his cabinet had only 2 Muslims, by 1975 it was dominated by Muslims where 70% of his ministers were Muslims<sup>29</sup>.

The expulsion of the Asians in 1972 also intensified the influence of Muslims. This is because, most of the departed Asians' property was entrusted to Muslims, either directly or indirectly. In the army, religion inter alia became a criterion for recruitment and promotion. This saw an influx of Sudanic speaking Muslims into the army from southern Sudan. By the end of Amin's rule, most of the commanders and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) were Muslims, even though most of them lacked educational qualifications for the posts they held.

One of the indicators of the Islamisation process which Uganda went through during the period (1971-79) was the massive conversion of people to Islam. There were basically three factors to explain the reason behind this enormous conversion. First, as Islam had become a basis for redistribution of state resources, most people converted in order to have access to the then scarce resources. Secondly others converted in order to win favors, respect and for the purposes of security for the job-posts they held. An example here is that of Obura (later Kassim Obura) who the Commissioner of Police was until 1979. Thirdly other people converted out of fear of persecution. Such people saw in Islam a shelter to protect them from unprecedented repression, since most of the targets of Amin's tyrannical rule were non-Muslims. The rest converted either out of free will or after envying the status that Muslims held at the time. The Islamic propaganda spread during Maulid functions also attracted many people to Islam.

The role of the Maulid functions in the Islamisation process need not be underestimated. Many such functions were organized frequently throughout the country. The festivities that accompanied such functions definitely pulled non-Muslims nearer to Islam and consequently some had embraced Islam. Maulid once again became one of the platforms to spread government propaganda. Government officials and soldiers used to attend these functions in order to "sugar-coat" the regime's image. Maulid became political forum, where even some government plans were communicated. "Matali" (tambourine) groups took the place of political associations. Matali groups were merely entertainment clubs. But the competition amongst them and the alliances these groups sought with politicians, particularly those in army uniform, surpassed even that which existed between political

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<sup>29</sup> Kokole, "*Black Africa and the nuclear factor, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the struggles in southern Africa,*" 25.

associations. By 1979, the number of the “Matali” groups had risen to about 60. Table 2 below shows some of the most prominent matali groups in various districts.

**Table 2** Showing The Most Prominent Matali Groups In Various Districts

NAME OF MATALI GROUP	HEADQUARTERS
Misbahu Dini	Naguru/Kampala
Misbahu Dini	Kawoko/Masaka
Nujum Matali Group	Kibuli/Kampala
Kamar Matali Group	Kibuye/Kampala
Kawempe Mbogo	Kawempe/Kampala
Nateete Matali Group	Mpigi
Nakawa Matali Group	Kampala
Shubban Matali Group	Kawempe
Nekoyedde Matali Group	Luwero
Kaberamaido Matali Group	Kaberamaido
Bunya Matali Group	Busoga
Sironko Matali Group	Mbale
Lubanda Matali Group	Masaka
Kabasanda Matali Group	Mpigi
Kyamuganga Matali Group	Masaka
Bisanje Matali Group	Masaka
Magamaga Matali Group	Busoga
Ndagwe Matali Group	Ndagwe Masaka

As the Matali groups gained prominence, many army officers-cum-politicians joined as members. One example will be useful to illustrate this. The Misbahu Diini matali group based in Naguru Kampala attracted membership of notables such as Capt. Noah Mohammed (Minister for Commerce), Capt. Yasin Sebbi (CO. Malire Para Troopers Regiment - Lubiri) Capt. Yusuf Amin Gogo, Brig. Moses Ali (Minister for Finance) and Brig. Taban (CO. Marines).

By 1978, Amin's Islamisation process had reached great levels. Even military operations were sometimes given an Islamic touch. For instance, in 1979, during the famous Mugulukusu Operation which marked Amin's short lived annexation of the Kagera Basin, it was reported that Uganda Armed Forces were using the slogan Allah Akbar (God is great) in their encounter. The number of pilgrims to Mecca increased manifold every year during Amin's regime, despite the economic hardships that the country faced during those years. Other Muslim festivities like Dua, Burda, Shukur were held more frequently than ever before. In

these festivities, particularly the Maulid, songs glorifying, praising and thanking Amin and the government in power, were sang repeatedly. This was one of the ways through which the Muslims expressed their support for, and solidarity with, Amin. The song which featured prominently was composed in 1977, and first played at a Grand Maulid organized by the Kampala business community and held at the City Square. Some of its stanzas went as follows:

*Leka twebaze Amin n'amagye ge* - Let's thank Amin and his army  
*Yakuza obusiramu mu Uganda* - he promoted Islam in Uganda  
*Leka twebaze omukulu* - lets thank his Excellency  
*Field Marshal* the Field Marshal  
*Yatugobera abayindi* - For expelling the Asians  
*mu Uganda* from Uganda  
*Chorus: Mulembe, mulembe gwa Daada mulembe* Indeed Daada's (Amin's)rule is  
 a great regime  
*Yatuddiza ebyenfuna etc.* - He Africanized the economy.

However, what is important to mention here is that the more Amin promoted Islam, the more resentment he generated from among non- Muslims. Such resentment, for instance, was expressed in form of people going into exile. Secondly, the most crucial sector- education- which would have enhanced rapid uplifting of the status of Muslims was not given due attention. Apart from blessing the country with an Islamic university - which did not take off until 1988 - most Islamic and Muslim institutions were never overhauled. Very few Muslim founded schools were set up. Besides many Muslim parents never encouraged their children to invest in education. A good many of them dropped out of school and joined their parents in the booming trade; courtesy of the economic war. This was therefore another missed opportunity for Muslims. They would have used this chance to strive to catch up with their Christian counterparts in that sector.

The more Amin became entangled in the mesh of Pan-Arabism or Arab imperialism, the more efforts he put in to make Uganda appear more of an Islamic state than a secular one. Uganda's admission to the OIC as a full member state in 1974, marked the acme of the

Islamisation of Uganda happened at a conference, in Lahore, Pakistan. At the conference, Uganda was admitted to the OIC, as a member state. The implications of this admission were farther than mere membership. The OIC charter restricts membership to only Muslim states. The criterion for determining a Muslim state is that the country must have the majority of its population Muslim (about 70%). Therefore out of the 45 member states of the OIC, Uganda stands alone as the only country which lacks the said qualification.

The technical and legal implication of Uganda's admission to the OIC was that Uganda had legally become a Muslim state. At the conference in Lahore, it was resolved that two Islamic Universities be established in Africa to further spread the influence of Islam. Anglophone and Francophone Africa were to have a University each. Uganda was chosen as the site for the establishment of the University to cater for Anglophone African states, while Niger Republic was to house the Franco-Phone Islamic university. The Islamic university in Uganda, now based in Mbale, is a legacy of Amin's zealous campaign to Islamize Uganda, although the scheme did not take off until 1988, nine years after the fall of Amin.

Uganda's admission to the OIC opened more veins for the inflow of petrol dollars into Uganda from the Arab world. In addition to the military and technical assistance that was extended to Uganda from Libya, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, Muslims benefited in the field of education. Many scholarships were awarded to Ugandan Muslim students to pursue education in the Arab world. Little effort was however made to develop the Islamic education sector locally.

Another indicator of the proliferation of the Muslim influence was the decreeing, in 1978, of Friday as a non-working day (public holiday) of the week<sup>30</sup>. In doing this Amin was trying to refurbish the status of Muslims and to observe recognition of their rights of worship which had been denied to them since the colonial times. Amin reasoned that many Muslims could not go for Juma prayers on Friday while it remained a working day. However, this was mere exaggeration of the Friday issue. Countries like Senegal, Nigeria and Mali which have large Muslim populations have not reached this extent either. Regional governments in Western Nigeria have adopted a motto of "worship and work" regarding the Juma prayers. In other words, they attempt to reconcile between their daily routine work and prayers without necessarily marking Friday as a non-working day. This is what Islam recommends. The Qur'anic injunction regarding Juma prayers is clear on this. It goes thus; "Oh ye who believe, when you are summoned for Juma prayers, hasten to the remembrance of Allah and cease your transactions. That would be best for you if you but knew it"<sup>31</sup>. However, there are countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Brunei, which observe Friday as a public Holiday. What we need to observe here, is that, Amin had in a way gone to excesses on this. The media (radio) was also given an Islamic touch. Bulletins in Arabic were introduced and Arabic literature increasingly flowed to Uganda. But this did not go far since many Muslims could neither write nor understand Arabic.

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<sup>30</sup> Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> *The Glorious Quran* "Surat Juma", verse 9.

#### 4. AMIN AND MUSLIM UNITY: THE CREATION OF THE UGANDA MUSLIM SUPREME COUNCIL

The formation of the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) was a brain-child of a combination of Amin's political tact and the political environment that prevailed in Uganda at the time. This researcher attributes four variables to explain the formation of the UMSC.

In the first place, the formation of the UMSC was a reflection of the attempt to implement the ecumenical stance of the formative political strategies of Amin's regime. We have already indicated the extent to which Amin had endeavored to adopt an ecumenical policy in Uganda politics. To this effect, a department of religious affairs in the President's Office was created in 1971 with Mr. Christopher Ntege as its Permanent Secretary. The subsequent conferences which were held in Kabale to alter the Schismatic structures of the Anglican and Islamic religions were a function of Amin's Endeavour to institute a non-denominationally skewed political system. The UMSC therefore found its birth from these ventures.

The second variable related to the creation of the UMSC, pertains to Amin's Phobic reactions to Buganda's insular 'nationalistic' sentiments which not only cut across religious boundaries, but also were seemingly impermeable. With the return of Muteesa's body for burial, Amin had hoped to get a constituency among the Baganda on a silver platter. In doing this, Amin had miscalculated the equation of Buganda politics. In as much as the Baganda rejoiced when Amin came - which is unlikely that they did so for a reason other than Obote's exit - the return of Muteesa's body had a bi-dimensional implication. In the first place it may have temporarily increased Amin's support in Buganda. On the other hand, however, it exhumed the then buried memories and sentiments of Buganda nationalism. With nostalgia, the Baganda attempted to resurrect their monarchical pride. However, owing to the fact that they had no king at that time, they displaced their honor of reverence - accorded to the king - to the noble royalists. Among the royalists of repute at that time was Prince Badru Kakungulu. Kasozi<sup>32</sup> observes that "Amin began to fear and to perceive Kakungulu as a focus of the rising and surging monarchism that desired to restore Kabakaship in Buganda."

Amin's fears were not unfounded. Already Kakungulu was being showered upon praises, and honors befitting a king<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, in order for Amin to consolidate his leadership, such elements had to be humbled. The connection between Amin, Kakungulu, the Baganda and the UMSC lies in the following

<sup>32</sup> Kasozi, "*The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991.*"

<sup>33</sup> *The People*, May 10, 1971, 8.



analysis. Badru Kakungulu had a large following of Baganda Muslims and non-Muslims. If he ever had political ambitions as Amin may have thought, it could be easy for him to win the support that Amin wanted from the Baganda at the time. Yet Kakungulu's faction the Uganda Muslim Community (UMC) was still very popular in Muslim politics. Therefore, in order to curb the threat of Baganda, Amin had to use all political tactics available to him. One such tactic was to neutralize the influence of the Baganda - who dominated the UMC - in Muslim politics. The success in doing this, lay not in allowing the perpetual existence of Muslim factions, but rather in uniting them under one organization. This would lower the "Gandanisation" of Muslim administration and leadership. If anything, Amin had been an ardent supporter of NAAM, a faction that sought to achieve that purpose. Amin joined the UMC, due to the political and personal differences he had had with Obote.

The third explanation relates to the nature of relationship that exists between religion and politics in Uganda's history. Owing to the fact that religion had greatly influenced Uganda politics, it was necessary for Amin to monitor the activities of religious leaders and institutions lest they could pose a political threat<sup>34</sup>. This explains why the department of religious affairs was set up. However, for monitoring purposes it is easy to deal with a single unit than with Schismatic fragments. Under the guise of helping religious organizations to solve their problems of internal cleavages, Amin prevailed upon Muslims and Protestants to move towards internal unity, which would in the real sense, enable him to meddle in the affairs of these religions with ease. The UMSC was therefore formed partly as a result of this effort.

In addition to the above, the creation of the Supreme Council may have stemmed from Amin's desire to use Islam as his political constituency together with the army. Muslims were the minority. But being his co-religionists, they would be a more reliable and easy to manipulate. But, in order to achieve this, there was a need to eliminate the schismatic elements within the Muslim community. A united Muslim front would be able to penetrate and attach to the State House, as was to be witnessed later after the formation of the council. Since members of a united Muslim community would repudiate their former allegiance to the pre-1971 factions and work under one administrative canopy, it was hoped that this would ease the government's task to influence the affairs of the Ummah and to gain their support.

Finally, the formation of the UMSC, was partly an attempt by Amin to rejuvenate Muslim identity, which the previous regimes had totally undermined.

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<sup>34</sup> Kasozi, "*The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991.*"

However, what worked against the progress of Islam and the respectable identity of Muslims during the pre-1971 period was factionalism. Coupled with the unfortunate historical disadvantage under which Islam grew, letting factionalism to linger on would make the situation deplorable. The colonial regime had placed Muslims at the bottom of the social stratum in denominational distribution of importance. Therefore in order to reverse this, Amin saw the need of unity among Muslims which would be used as the first step towards elevation of Muslims' status. It was in this regard that scholars like Rowe (1991) and Bakaitwaho-Muhima (1981) view Amin as a jihadist with a "golden sword to Muslimise Uganda". Although Rowe's conclusion is sweeping, there is a ray of truth in it. The inaccurate part of it is that it labeled Amin as jihadist, in the superficial context to which the two sources named above understand the term. Rowe and Bakaitwaho-Muhima seem to understand jihad from a narrow perspective, that is, physical confrontation or war. But the meaning of jihad is more than that. Technically it refers to striving in the cause of Allah using a variety of lawful means. If Amin's jihadist element is judged using the latter meaning, then he was a jihadist, but if judged from the view point then the present writer differs from Rowe and his likes, the view of this writer is that he not, nor did he have the urge to become one. He simply utilized opportune circumstances to realize political objectives. If anything, the existence of the UMSC would enable him to use the body as a bait to canvass for foreign donations from the Arab world. It is now pertinent to discuss the process undertaken to create the UMSC.

The idea of forming the UMSC was conceived at the conferences held in Kabale and Kampala between 19 and 22 May and from 1st to 4th June 1971 respectively. The first reconciliatory meeting was chaired by Mr. P.J Nkambo Mugerwa, a non-Muslim who was considered to be a suitable choice in a situation where impartial steps were to be made<sup>35</sup>. Leaders of all factions and sects were invited to these conferences. At Kabale the UMC delegation was led by Sheikh Ali Kulumba, while Sheikh Abdu Kamulegeya led the NAAM delegation. The workshop recognized the following problems, inter alia, which required urgent redress:

- (i) There was a regional disequilibrium in the running of Muslim affairs, which tended to favor Buganda,
- (ii) There was an over accentuation of Buganda as a focus in resource allocation for the development of Islam, at the expense of the peripheral areas.
- (iii) An absence of an all embracing administrative institution to govern the affairs of Islam, hence the need to set up one,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

(iv) Muslims were lagging behind particularly in the education sector; a factor that was considered to be a major source of their problems; and

(v) A need for free and fair contestation for leadership and democratic election for the religious leaders.

After a thorough scrutiny of the above problems, the delegates made the following resolutions:

(1) That an organization comprising of representatives from all districts be set up to unite Muslims, and be their mouthpiece.

(2) That the organization to be formed shall be called the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC).

(3) That all existing factions should relinquish their claims to Muslim leadership, reconcile and work for the common cause of Muslim unity and development.

In the aftermath of the Kabale and Kampala conferences, it became apparent that the, then, existing Muslim factions had been subdued in a “revolution from above”. This marked the greatest government indulgence in Muslim affairs in Uganda. The formation of the UMSC reveals how government was resolved to determine the destiny of Muslims in Uganda.

Contrary to the impression created by Kaliisa (1994), the Muslim community was far from the idea of unity at that time the UMSC was formed. Kaliisa argues that in inspiring the formation of the UMSC, Amin “appealed to sentiments that were already latent in the Muslim community” toward unity. This conclusion is not only sweeping and misleading, but is also based on inaccurate premises. The three instances which Kaliisa mentions with pride as indicators of the latent sentiments are not sufficient to call for an inference like his. First, Kaliisa rightly notes that there were many Muslims (especially elites) who were calling for Muslim unity. But he overlooks the fact that it was the same elite group which formed the technical and parochial bases for Muslim factionalism in the 1960s, which had not changed by 1971.

Kaliisa also cites one of the aims of Uganda Muslim Students Association (UMSA) which stated: “to convince the elders to the necessity of unity”<sup>36</sup>. What Kaliisa ignores is that for a long time, the aims were not reflected in the conduct of the UMSA. The internal wrangles within the association, its unhealthy rivalry with the Young Men Muslim Association (YMMA) and the obliquity of its officials against NAAM, did not only perpetuate factionalism, but also created room for further internal strife in the Muslim community. Thirdly, Kaliisa bases his argument on the Balinda Abbas' “brain child” constitution of united Muslim community of Uganda (sic)\*. But it is common knowledge to those who drafted the

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<sup>36</sup> UMSA Report, 1963.

said constitution, that it was nothing but a ploy by the NAAM clique to legitimize NAAM, constitutionalize their objectives and sideline the UMC. Unity is not mentioned anywhere in this constitution except in the preamble, where Muslims were called upon to unite together under the Sheikh Mufti of Uganda, a post which was created by NAAM.

However, the fact is that the creation of the UMSC is a reflection of the “forced unity” which was engineered by the Lumpen militarist in the State House, to achieve material gains from the outside world, whose prospects lay partly in the existence of an organization, acting as a common voice for Islam in Uganda. There are a number of reasons to support the view that Muslim mechanical unity which was achieved through the formation of the UMSC was done under duress or undue influence from State House.

In the first place, the initiative of forming the UMSC did not emanate from the then warring factions but from the Government. Yet still the idea was not welcomed by the then existing Muslim organizations. Badru Kakungulu, the leader of UMC did not attend the Kabale and Kampala conferences<sup>37</sup>. Even many of the staunch leaders of NAAM such as Swaibu Semakula, Adoko Nekyon and Shaban Nkuutu, shunned the said conferences. Kakungulu himself in sheer frustration, instead retired as leader of the UMC. In a meeting with Amin, Kakungulu indicated that he had withdrawn from the formation of the UMSC, and that he would not seek office in the then impending elections of the UMSC<sup>38</sup>. Zaidi Mugenyiasooka; the AMC Bukoto-Nateete leader, did not support the idea of the UMSC, refused to recognize it, and in the words of Kiyimba<sup>39</sup> he only “bowed to its authority out of fear of the gun”. His argument was that there was no need for annulling the existing sects and factions' sovereignty. The UMSC should instead have acted as an inter-factional body where factions, sects and organizations should converge to discuss matters of common interest.

The AMC continues to exist to date. The Asian Muslim groups also resented the allegiance to the UMSC. Kasozi<sup>40</sup> argues, as reason for their resentment, that they were not willing to surrender their property to an amorphous body of the ilk of the UMSC. Finally, it was apparent that the unity the UMSC sought to achieve would be a sham since many supporters of the existing factions still had “irrevocable” allegiance to their respective factions. For instance NAAM

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<sup>37</sup> Kasozi, “*The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991.*”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kiyimba, “The Muslim Community in Uganda through One Hundred and Forty Years: The Trials and Tribulations of a Muslim Minority,” 101.

<sup>40</sup> A.B.K Kasozi, *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers Ltd, Kampala, 1987), 42.

diehards who had harassed UMC supporters or those who had crossed over from one faction to another construed the possibility of reconciliation as impracticable. When Shaban Nkuutu announced the dissolution of NAAM, many of its supporters expressed discontent with this decision. To many of such people, particularly the non-Baganda petty bourgeois, the dissolution of the NAAM was a recipe for the re-emergence of Buganda's ascendant position in Muslim administrative structural affairs. The conduct of the President also indicated that the UMSC was to be formed and maintained using legal, technical and rudimentary instruments of coercion. Although it had been resolved that the UMSC shall follow democratic and proper administrative procedures, the Religious Affairs Department worked far from this. In November 1971, the department announced the postponement of the UMSC elections sine die. This was followed by the naming of a committee comprising soldiers to appoint 11 representatives from each district. By April 1972 the committee had accomplished its task and 229 members were duly announced as UMSC representatives. Thus, from the very onset the method of democratic contestation in which the UMSC elections were to be based was thwarted.

**Table 3:** *The factional distribution of the maiden UMSC representatives*

FORMER FACTION OR ORGANISATION	NUMBER OF REPRESENTATIVES
Uganda Muslim community	77
NAAM	59
AMC- Bukoto-Nateete	9
Muslim Asian organisations	11
Those with unidentifiable inclination	75
Total	229

Source: Kathleen Goodman Lockard. *Religion and political development in Uganda, 1962-72*. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1974, p.159

After the appointment of the representatives, an impromptu assembly was convened to elect the office bearers for the new Uganda Muslim Supreme Council. What transpired in the hotly contested elections however, revealed that, although Muslim leaders had accepted to relinquish their factional claims to Muslim leadership, it had been done under undue influence. The old factional game was still in play. For instance, during the elections for the post of Chief Kadhi both NAAM and UMC fielded candidates in the names of Sheikhs Abdul Razak Matovu and Ali Kulumba respectively. In the 1972 elections it was obvious that old wounds

of inter-factional rivalry had been opened. After a lot of lobbying and counter-lobbying, the NAAM “candidate” Abdul Razak Matovu defeated Ali Kulumba by polling 160 votes against 60. The runner-up Ali Kulumba was named Deputy Chief Kadhi, under a directive from Amin, as a gesture of appeasing UMC and partly to avoid further polarization of the Council. The political tactics of NAAM however, prevailed over the UMC during those elections, since most of the members subsequently elected on the executive of the UMSC were formally supporters or sympathizers of NAAM.

**Table 4:** Showing the factional inclination of the maiden leadership of the UMSC

POST	OFFICIAL	FACTIONAL INCLINATION
Chairman	Ahmed Sulaiman	NAAM
Deputy Chairman	Ali Balunywa	NAAM
Chief Kadhi	Shk. A Matovu	NAAM
Deputy Chief Kadhi	Shk. Ali. Kulumba	UMC
Secretary General	A.Juma Birmahire	NAAM
Deputy Sec General	Sekulima	NAAM
Treasure	Abdul Khaliq Abdullah	NAAM

The UMSC was duly inaugurated on 1 June 1972, with a secretariat operating from parliamentary buildings. This sent signals to the non-Muslims about the politicization of the Muslim leadership as well as the Islamisation process that government had started undertaking.

Following the inauguration of the council, many individual and state donations were extended to the UMSC. Foreign countries like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, also extended financial assistance to the new body. The council was “economically revitalized” after the expulsion of the Asians in 1972. Many of the departed Asians properties were entrusted to UMSC. These fell under two categories. The first category included property especially houses, which were granted by the state out of its “loot” from the “economic war”. The second category consisted of property which was voluntarily handed over to Muslims (through the UMSC) by Asians Muslims who were living Uganda. Such property included mosques and schools.

With such enormous donations and grants, the UMSC had by 1973 become the “richest land lord in the country”<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The UMSC operated very successfully during its first year of operation, and it seemed apparent that for the first time in a period of 70 years the Muslim community was sighing with relief from the religious-political wrangles that had adversely affected it.

## **5. STATE PERMEATION OF THE UMSC**

Although Amin continued throughout his rule to favor Muslims, the Muslim community started feeling the negative effect of Animism barely three years after the creation of the UMSC. This was particularly so when he continued to pinch his influence into the affairs of Muslims. By 1975, it had become apparent that the honey moon between the Muslims and Amin would bear negative consequences to Muslims. This was the time when the state exhibited beyond reasonable doubt, that it was resolved to make the UMSC a state organ. Amin prevailed upon the Muslim community by trying to make himself an expert and a consultant in Muslim affairs. Although he had started this earlier in 1971, when he took it upon himself to declare a self-chosen day for Idi el-fitir, and by forcing Muslims to 'unite', he exhibited his true colors after 1974. The UMSC was reduced to a mere implementation unit of the state policies towards Muslims.

From the very onset of its creation the UMSC never functioned independently. The democratic and transparent principles, upon which its operations were to be based, were thwarted right from its formative years. Instead it was the President's orders and guidelines which were to be followed. In 1975, the President, with no reasonable or rational explanation, sacked the Chief Kadhi Sheikh Abdul Razak Matovu and his entire executive. Although the dismissal of these officials followed a Col. Khamis Safi commission of inquiry report, it was a naked violation of the constitutional procedures of the UMSC. It also exhibited the extent to which government was determined to interfere in the affairs of Muslim leadership and administration. Kasozi considers this phenomenon to have been the greatest problem that faced the UMSC in its institutionalization.

The sacking of Sheikh Matovu's executive is considered to have been unbecoming on two accounts. In the first place, the head of the commission Col. Safi Khamis was not competent enough to head the commission. Although fairly learned in Islamic knowledge, he lacked the technical skills to handle matters of such sensitivity as were inherent within the UMSC. Secondly, the persons implicated by the commission for having stunted the proper running of the UMSC were not given chance to defend themselves regarding the findings of the commission. Lastly, the dismissal itself was procedurally wrong. This is because the General Assembly, that is to say, all representatives, were neither consulted nor allowed to act constitutionally to boot the executive. After the dismissal of Sheikh

Matovu's executive, a new Chief Kadhi, Sheikh Yusuf Sulaiman Matovu, was appointed to head the Muslim community. Sulaiman Matovu's appointment was unconstitutional. For, he was hand-picked by the President, and not by the proper appointing organs of the council. The current writer agrees with Kiyimba<sup>42</sup> that Amin was anxious that "the UMSC does not become a hostile body so he had to keep a keen eye on whoever went to its leadership". While I agree with the above contention, it must be made clear here that Amin's anxiety was purely political and not spiritual.

However, where Amin missed a point in the endeavor to tranquillize the leadership of the council, was in his failure to utilize shrewd political tactics as he had used in the suppression of factionalism in 1972. He instead used rudimentary martial tactics to achieve his ends. Whether or not Amin had good intentions to maintain sanity in the administration of Muslim affairs, he cannot be exonerated by history from the responsibility of reducing Islam to a State organ to serve his political interests. Indeed some of the problems encountered by the Muslim leadership today are a legacy of his interference<sup>43</sup>.

Government interference in Muslim affairs did not end with the exit of Abdul Razak Matovu's executive. In 1977, the second Chief Kadhi, Yusuf Sulaiman Matovu was also dismissed, not by the council, but by the President of Uganda. The methods by which he came to office were the very methods that were used to axe him - "unconstitutional hire and fire". Sulaiman Matovu's "crime", unlike his predecessors was neither incompetence, mal-administration nor allegation of corruption. Instead there was no sound reason given by the Government for his exit. But the truth of the matter is that his dismissal followed his vehement insistence that the Government had not given satisfactory explanation regarding the mysterious death of Anglican Arch- Bishop Janan Luwum, Col. Erunayo Oryema, and Oboth Ofumbi<sup>44</sup>, who allegedly died in a motor accident. It is said that Sulaiman Matovu put Amin to task to explain more, lest the public would construe their deaths as having been government-inspired. Amin could not stand such a challenge from his subordinate, whether be it a religious leader. Sulaiman Matovu was therefore axed. After his dismissal, Matovu sought asylum in Mombasa following his narrow escape in a motor accident which according to him had been engineered by Amin<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Kiyimba, "The Muslim Community in Uganda through One Hundred and Forty Years: The Trials and Tribulations of a Muslim Minority," 101.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>44</sup> Kasozi, "The life of prince Badru Kakungulu Wasajja and his development of a forward looking Muslim community in Uganda, 1907-1991."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 93-96.



The exit of Yusuf Sulaiman Matovu created a leadership vacuum in the UMSC which persisted until after the fall of Amin in 1979. The affairs of the council were administered by Haji Mufanjara who was appointed by Amin as acting secretary general. Thus the UMSC eventually became a department in the President's Office. All matters of crucial importance and major decisions that would have required either the executive or the general assembly, were referred to the President. Even district Kadhis were appointed or fired at will in the name of the President. This was unconstitutional.

Amin's regime had thus started devouring the biggest beneficiaries of the 1971 junta (Muslims). Earlier on, Amin had warned Muslims that if they failed to live up to his perceptual required standards, he would ask non-Muslims to administer Muslim affairs<sup>46</sup>. This threat became a reality in 1978, when he appointed a commission of inquiry headed by Col. Emirio Mondo, to probe into the affairs of the Muslims, especially Brigadier Moses Ali's performance as Chairman of the mosque building committee. In the light of the recommendations of the Mondo Report, Brig Moses Ali was relieved of his duties as Minister for Finance, head of Mosque building committee, dismissed from the army, and stripped of all military ranks and honors. Kasozi and Collin Legum<sup>47</sup> attribute Moses Ali's dismissal to Amin's fears of Ali's increasing popularity, among the military. However, the possibility of the existence of irregularities in the performance of the mosque building committee cannot be ruled out. After the entire mosque at Old Kampala was only completed long after Amin had left power.

Again, following the Mondo report, all checks of the UMSC had to be counter signed by an official from the Ministry of Finance. Thus even the financial management of the UMSC was engulfed by the state. Amin - through the paramilitary "State Research" intelligence operatives and military officials - continued running and monitoring the affairs of the UMSC until his down fall in 1979. This had a significant negative impact on the UMSC in particular and Muslims in general during the first year of the post-Amin period. It increased the correlation between Amin, Islam and Muslims. And to non-Muslims, the three became seemingly synonymous. Thus the atrocities committed by Amin were later to be blamed on the entire Muslim community after the fall of Amin. However what is significant to mention about Amin's interference in the Muslim affairs, is that it defeated the reasons for which the UMSC was created. Despite having been given vast privileges and enormous donations, UMSC did not manage to cater for the development of Islam in Uganda, at least to a creditable degree.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>47</sup> Collin Legum, "*Africa in the 1980's*" (McGraw-Hill Companies, 1980), 424-5.

In circumstances where there was no security of tenure or job, transparency and efficiency among the Muslim leaders - both at the center and in the country side –became elusive. But state interference per se was not the only factor that affected the smooth running of the affairs of the Muslim community. There were also other problems inherent within the council itself that inhibited the development of Islam. The major problem stemmed from the manner in which the council was created. We have already noted how former members of the NAAM tactfully hijacked the first executive of the UMSC. This bred an unhealthy environment which was crystallized by residual factional considerations among the Muslim leadership. Although they had been subdued by the state into unity, the spirit of latent antagonism of the pre-1971 factional days, was exhibited in the post-factional era of Amin.

From the grass roots some partisan diehards refused to recognize leaders who formerly belonged to factions opposed to theirs.<sup>48</sup> This mostly affected the former NAAM supporters, who had been appointed as Imams or district Kadhis. Although they had the backing of the UMSC headquarters, the Muslim folk in the countryside adopted a silent policy of non-cooperation. Some extremist factions-cum-sects such as the Africa Muslim Community, refused to hand over their assets to the UMSC for supervision and control.

The administrative models that the UMSC constitution adopted also constituted a major problem to the leaders. The methods and procedures which were to be followed in the running of Muslim affairs were kind of strange to many sheikhs who took office. Major administrative conflicts arose among the executive members of the council particularly on the definition of roles. The cause of such conflicts was a function of the loopholes within the UMSC constitution which had many vague contradicting clauses. For instance, it remained allegorical to the Muslim leadership on whether it was the chairman of the UMSC or the Chief Kadhi who should exercise supreme powers.

However brawls were most significant in matter pertaining to financial and accounting systems, and responsibility. Kasozi sums the confusion in the following words: ... lack of rules of procedure within the organization itself often caused heated arguments. Conflicts arose mainly on financial matters and how the system of authority to withdraw funds would work. Mainly sheikhs objected to signing vouchers to strict accounting systems and to taking responsibility for money that was given them (sic) for official use. Each of the top officials wanted control of the housing department where annual rent was about two million shillings.

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<sup>48</sup> Mugambe, Sengendo & Co., *Advocates Memorandum and Articles of Association of the UMSC*, 1972, 3-4.

In such circumstances accountability became very difficult to effect. Worse still, colossal sums of money were lost owing to this unscrupulous way of doing things. This was a big indicator of the failure of UMSC to achieve the purposes for which it was created. Perhaps this might have been the reason that prompted the state to interfere in order to have a stricter grip on such affairs.

### CONCLUSION

Whether Amin had ideological or philosophical intention in trying to make Uganda a Muslim state is an issue that was probably known to himself. But the analysis based on his behavioral and practical aspects in Islamic matters reveals that Islam was used as a political propaganda bait to tap the Arab support and the benefits that accrued from thereon.

It is indeed doubtful whether Amin was that zealous in Islamic theory and practice. He was an open wine drinker, had married outside the provisions of the Sharia, and rarely practiced Islamic obligatory rituals such as prayers. Like Muteesa I Amin was caught up in a situation of Islam and superstition. The view held by many a scholar is that his intention to Islamize Uganda was not in good taste. However, the fact remains that, whatever his intention, Amin endeavored to rejuvenate Muslim identity by lifting the social, economic and political status of Muslims from the marshes where the colonial and neo-colonial political situations had dumped them.

What however marred the continuation of this course, in post Amin days is that, Amin had not used a logical approach to the question of revamping Muslim identity. He had endeavored to do it at the expense of the majority non-Muslim population, a factor that explains the trials and tribulations that Muslims were subjected to after the departure of Amin from Uganda's political scene. Muslims thus became an "orphaned" group (1979-80) and more vulnerable to forces against their progress and unity.

The irrational approach to the task of elevating the status of Muslims is also exhibited in the way Amin conducted his affairs towards them. Throughout his rule, he had identified himself as the god-father and protector of Islam, his rudimentary knowledge and unbecoming practice of Islam notwithstanding. He prevailed upon himself to drive the Muslim community into mechanical unity - by coercion and unfair persuasion. Even worse, by 1975 he had hijacked the powers to administer the Muslim affairs and had made the UMSC his personal organization. This alienated him from a good number of Muslims. For, he used to appoint and sack at will any Muslim leader who had conducted himself contrary to Amin's expectations.

The effects of forced unity of Muslims under Amin coupled with lack of serious, rational and persuasive endeavor to sustain that unity, made the situation more pregnant for the explosion and rebirth of Muslim factions should Amin go. Therefore Amin's endeavor were destroyed by his own conduct. After Amin's fall in 1979, the Muslim community sank deep in factional turmoil to which it is hitherto embroiled. However, whatever the mishaps, it is on historical record that Amin's nine year rule changed the history of Islam in Uganda, for the better.

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