

A STUDY OF SELECTED ISLAMIC INTERNET SITES IN EAST AFRICA

by

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Islam is making increasing use of the Internet to propagate ideas and to inform followers as well as to attract non-adherents. The paper examines selected Islamic Internet sites whose content is oriented for East Africa.

Initial expectations had been that many Internet sites would be 'home-grown', however it became apparent that most Internet sites have been set-up and are operated by the Muslim Diaspora.

The paper examines four sites from Kenya and Tanzania looking at the content and approaches used by these sites.

The failure of the diaspora to maintain sites is explored. Some tentative suggestions are made as to why Islamic Internet Sites have yet to be a successful in East Africa.

INTRODUCTION [1]

Islam is making increasing use of the Internet to propagate ideas and to inform followers as well as to attract non-adherents. The writings of Gary Bunt: *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2000) and *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2003), and D.F. Eickelman, & J.W. Anderson, (Eds.) *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Second Edition) (2003) give some idea of this use world-wide. In the Introduction to *Islam in the Digital Age* Bunt refers to the use the Internet to express political views, especially as a medium for opposition voices:

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Muslim political expression online forms part of the dialogue about Islamic identities. Some ideologues make little distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' in Islam. The Internet has not superseded traditional forms of political expression, but is a means through which conventional boundaries can be transcended. Opposition voices creating websites outside the direct influence of governments have propagated their perspectives through channels that are difficult to censor or block (Bunt 2003:11).

The paper examines four selected Islamic Internet sites whose content is oriented for East Africa. The purpose and content of the sites is examined, the religious and political dimensions of the content are examined in particular, in order to assess how much Global versus Local influence and information is being generated by the various sites.

Initial expectations had been that many Internet sites would be 'home-grown', however it became apparent that most Internet sites have been set-up and are operated by the Muslim Diaspora.

The paper examines four sites from Kenya and Tanzania looking at the content and approaches used by these sites.

Two of the sites are managed locally:

1. Dar Tabligh www.dartabligh.org in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
2. Muslim Education and Welfare Association www.mewa.or.ke in Mombasa, Kenya

Two were produced by Muslims in the diaspora and both are now no longer available:

3. Islam in Tanzania www.islamtz.org registered in Canada
4. Garissa.Net www.garissa.net registered in the United Kingdom

The failure of the diaspora to maintain sites is explored. Some tentative suggestions are made as to why Islamic Internet Sites have yet to be successful in East Africa.

Each of the sites in the study are reviewed and points of interest in the sites development are focussed on.

DAR TABLIGH [2]

This site is operated from Dar es Salaam by the Shi'iah community and is very sensitive to any criticism. It is not a radical site, despite the use of Tabligh in the title. Over the past three years the site has developed from a

fairly static site with relatively little content to a dynamic site with many external links and an active forum with many subjects under discussion.

When the technical and content providers for the site were interviewed in November 2004 they were extremely cautious and not willing to meet until I was vetted. The site content is produced locally in Tanzania and vetted before being posted to the web-site. Interviewing various people involved with Dar Tabligh, they stated that they were 'sensitive' to the local situation and took great care not to cause offence. They receive 90-150 e-mails a day and respond to these. The content of the web-site is collected by one person and then approved by a committee.

The site has a series of pages of content and has expanded over the time that it has been monitored. It provides information on Islam from a Shi'ah perspective and is gradually becoming more prepared to present views. It now provides links to a variety of sites including sermons from a variety of sources.

In 2004 when monitoring of the site began Dar Tabligh advertised that a forum was coming soon, but they had not begun it then, as they were 'waiting for an intellectual, who can deal with the questions raised and act as an informed moderator'. The current web-page now advertises the forum which is called ASK. This has a range of topics and it appears that it is reasonably active with a large number of postings. The site seems to allow for official responses as well as opinions from other contributors.

Even though Dar Tabligh is locally based and content is provided locally, the actual hosting is done in Malaysia, because the infrastructure in East Africa does not allow the effective running of the site.

MUSLIM EDUCATION AND WELFARE ASSOCIATION (MEWA) [3]

This is a locally distributed site and provides information concerning the organisation, which supports Muslim students through grants and runs a hospital on Mombasa Island. The offices are next to Masjid Musa and the MEWA hospital on Mombasa Island. The home page explains:

MEWA was formed in 1985 (in Mombasa, Kenya) and one of its key objectives is to promote the educational, economic, social and cultural welfare of all Muslims. At MEWA, we promote, encourage and improve the standard of Education and Welfare of the Ummah. We invite you to send us

you[r] comments and suggestions regarding this site (MEWA 2006).

The site has various pages and concentrates on the activities supported by the organisation. It appears to avoid any contentious issues.

The reported speeches from the organisation show that it is aware of the tensions between different faith groups and is prepared to speak out in defence of its own activities and purposes. This is seen in a speech given earlier this year and posted on the internet.

As predicted, Life has become more difficult for the Muslims of the World. We ARE the target. Left, right and Centre! The writing has been on the wall for some time now... It is time we woke up to the threats that face us from all sides. We cannot continue burying our heads in the sand and wishing that it [wi]ll go away IT WILL NOT!

We have to take the bull by the horns and wrestle it to the ground! But we can only do this if we unite as ONE UMMAH. ...

But they will Never succeed in this for long, because Alhamdulillah, Muslims are finally waking up to the fact that they have been taken for a ride.

True Muslims are watching and preparing themselves for JIHAD.

But not the Jihad the Kuffar would wish the rest of the world believe we are embarking upon.

The true meaning of Jihad means to Struggle and to Strive.

We are Jihadis, because we prepare our Youth to become responsible leaders of tomorrow. ...

We are Jihadis because we fight the scourge of Drug Abuse amongst our Youth. ...

We are Jihadis because we see our Brothers and Sisters struggling to educate their children. ... (MEWA 2006)

The purpose of the site is primarily to publicise the work of the organisation and to inform interested parties of assistance available from them. It tends to be slow in up-dating itself, it has not been updated since the beginning of October 2006. It also makes no attempt to address current issues or to offer a forum for discussions.

Sites run locally are more sensitive to content and take care to ensure that the content is not offensive. Now let us move on to the sites run by the diaspora.

ISLAM IN TANZANIA [4]

This site was developed by young Tanzanian Muslims in the diaspora who were living and working in Canada. It has a home page with links to additional pages, including articles on Islam in Tanzania.

It has an impressive content list and some very useful links to other sites: Al-Zinjibari and articles on Islam and Politics; Zanzinet for Islam in Tanzania Forum and other sites concerning both Islam and Tanzania, including the Government of Tanzania site but has not been updated since 2001. It also has links to two Muslim journals: *An-Nuur* a weekly paper available within in East Africa in Swahili and which tends to be outspoken concerning the actions of the government and *Nasaha* listed as an Internet newspaper, again in Swahili. The newspaper *An-Nuur* has been made available from May 1998-March 2002 and *Nasaha* from February 2000-May 2002, however after that date no more issues were entered and a notice appears on the webpages seeking volunteers who are willing to help to post the newspapers on-line.

A series of articles by Mohamed Said are also posted, which raise concerns with the government over unfair treatment of Muslims and their second-class status. In one of the articles, 'Tanzania's Religious Politics', Said sets out to demonstrate some of the inequalities that Muslims have suffered since Independence, especially as regards education:

In the past, Muslims did not complain about the Christianisation of the Education Ministry, so why should any Christian complain about the appointment of four Muslim directors in the ministry by President Mwinyi? The government cannot allow the ministry to become a Christian enclave. To accept this is to accept fundamentalism which your story cautions President Mwinyi against. If Muslim fundamentalism is unacceptable, the same goes for Christian fundamentalism.

Christians have been able to rule the country and jealously guard their privileged positions since independence by ensuring that they command an absolute educational superiority over Muslims. This is not Mwinyi's dilemma, it is a dilemma for all Tanzanians because it is only through genuine equality between Muslims and Christians in all aspects of national life that peace and stability can endure (Said 1989:35).

This is an example of the way that Muslims felt that they had lost out to Christians and that Christians were unwilling to allow Muslims to have their turn. So even though certain advantages were taken during Mwinyi's time in office, these "gains" have not been continued after President Mkapa came to power.

Extracts from Hamza Njozi's book *Mwembechai Killings* and the correspondence between the Muslim community and the government are also posted. The killings which took place after a raid by police on a mosque in Dar es Salaam still have not been adequately addressed by the government even after eight years.

Khatib M. Rajab, a Zanzibari, has posted several strongly worded attacks on the political system of Tanzania. The target of the attacks is the ruling party *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) and its perceived link with the Catholic Church. In *The Role of Islam on Politics in Zanzibar*, Rajab seeks to link nineteenth-century pan-Islamism with the development of Islam in Zanzibar.

After the partition of India in 1947, the Indian National Association was split into the larger association called the *Muslim Association* (MA), led by an Indian scholar called Shah Muhammad Chowdary. ... [Another] group was the *Arab Association* (AA) whose first President was Abdullah bin Sulayman al-Harith, ... However, this association was not as much effective as another ethnic group, the *Shirazi Association* (SA) formed in 1939 under the Presidency of Sheikh Thabit bin Kombo bin Jecha al-Shirazy. ... This discourse started in the late 1940s when the Shirazis became restless because of the British colonial frustration and arbitrary rule which destabilised their economic security (Rajab 1999:3-4).

This article concentrates on the pre-Independence era and of necessity attacks the British, however it is remarkably silent on the role of the Sultan in the run-up to Independence.

Visiting the site in June 2006, the site was no longer available; on checking with the Allwhois site, it became apparent that when the domain address came up for renewal in June 2006 it was not renewed. This means that at present the site is unavailable apart from via the Web Archives. On July 14th 2006 the domain fee was paid for an additional twelve months. The site is now registered in Chicago and the content concerns sale of lingerie. However access to the web-archives has not been blocked, so the 'Islam in

Tanzania' material is still available.

Why did this useful site fail? The expatriate Tanzanians who started the site are no longer based in Canada; one is now working in the United States and the other is in Indonesia. It seems that the lack of tangible and practical support from Tanzania may have effectively discouraged the web-site managers.

GARISSA.NET [5]

Garissa.Net is a site set up by a group of expatriates from North Eastern Province, an area of Kenya which borders Somalia and is underdeveloped. It includes many people who are ethnically Somali but who are considered as Kenyan. The site reflects the tensions of identity. The site was registered in London and the operators appear to have been based there.

The stated purpose for setting up the site was:

Garissa.net is a brainchild of youths from North Eastern Province of Kenya who are currently in studies or other intellectual fields of work across the globe in order to put back something to the community via the current Technology.

This site is devoted to highlighting the problems of NEP Kenya with the aim of supporting society by providing information. As a medium, it focuses on the history, culture, and socio-economical developments of the people of North Eastern Province of Kenya. As part of its aim, this site encourages knowledge and awareness creation of hitherto neglected areas by producing and reproducing works related to NEP. In a small way, it contributes to the understanding of the prevailing contradictions and the human conditions. We also believe that change, progress and improvement are always possible provided there is will (Garissa.Net 2004).

The site provides a variety of pages of information concerning issues of interest to people of North Eastern Kenya, including News and Articles. However the area which provoked the greatest interest and activity was the Forums.

Garissa.Net has five different forums: General Issues; Important Issues (both concerning North Eastern Province, Kenya and the Horn); General Chitchat; Sports; Computers. The forums included areas for Islam, however in general the traffic these discussions generated is very small, in some cases

no new postings appeared during the whole of the survey period. It was unclear as to the level to which the various forums were moderated. Some of the postings are offensive, which indicates a low level of moderation.

The postings on Garissa.Net are more forthright than on many other forums, however when it began it set out the 'Golden Rules':

Dear brothers and sisters, This is a new website that is for us by us. Here are some golden rules that applies: While we accept and appreciate freedom of speech and everyone's opinion, please let us have a sensible discussion and views on the matters that affect the general NEP population and try to come up with solutions and ideas. Vitriolic criticism, abuse, prejudice, tribal stereotyping and other unwarranted attacks that might jeopardise an individual or group shall be refrained from. We accept and welcome liberal views, posts, articles and suggestions that we deem fair. This is your platform. Make the most of it.....SENSIBLY! (Garissa.Net 2004).

The forums set out to allow real discussion between its members on matters concerning them and their people.

The site lists 159 members, as at August 2004. It is the most overtly political of the sites studied. The list of members gives a *nom de web* and a location. Analysis of the membership of forums showed that many of the contributions come from outside of the region. This raises questions concerning the value of the contributions: are the contributors really aware of the situation, also the lack of local input reflects the difficulty of gaining Internet access particularly in an area such as North Eastern Kenya. One of my research student's who works in Merti in NEP, lives 200 kms away from the nearest cybercafé.

During 2005 it was found that Garissa.Net had, instead of the content: 'This site is defaced!!! NeverEverNoSanity WebWorm generation 19' on every page. In May 2006 the site was revisited and it has been re-established. Looking at the content it became clear that someone else had taken over the domain name and it advertised a Travel Agency. Using Archive searches produced a block by robots.txt, which means that the previous material is no longer accessible. This block has been put in by the current domain holders, who are different from the ones originally studied. Whois also produced a block which prevented obtaining any details of the present operators of the site. Allwhois revealed the site is now operated from Las Vegas. In Novem-

ber 2006 the web site is now advertising itself as being up for auction and the robots.txt block has now been removed meaning that some of the pages are now accessible again through www.archives.org.

CONCLUSION [6]

The Internet is providing a means for the diaspora to have an input into local affairs. In most cases it is clear that there is local input of content especially information and images. Where sites have become static: such as MEWA; or have disappeared: such as Garissa.Net, it could well be because the individual who is running the site has too many other commitments and cannot put in the time to maintain the site.

The diaspora provide the technical know how. Where they have regular local input, the sites are informative and provocative, providing an avenue to express feelings concerning the local situation. However, the global-local interaction appears to depend on willingness from the web-site managers to spend time and resources maintaining the site and up-dating it. It also relies on local sources of information to feed the site. The drive to maintain the site also relies on generating a sufficient number of hits to make the site maintenance worthwhile. A slowly loading site with no new information will not be attractive and will not generate much traffic. At present access to the Internet is still an urban phenomenon, costly and reliant on cybercafés.

The future development of internet access and services in East Africa may already have been superseded by parallel developments in other forms of communications. In particular the use of the GSM cell-phone networks to inform and to alert in East Africa is already a surer method of contact amongst a self-defined group. With the increase in GSM capability with e-mail and internet access it may be that the Internet will then have an influence and therefore a use for the community it is seeking to serve or influence.

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WEB ADDRESSES USED IN PAPER

- [1] <http://www.allwhois.com>
- [2] <http://www.archive.org/index.php>
- [3] www.dartabligh.org
- [4] www.garissa.net
- [5] www.islamtz.org
- [6] www.mewa.or.ke
- [7] <http://www.whois.net/>