

The Comorian Presence in Precolonial and Early Colonial Congo (19th Century-1908)

Keywords: Congo – Comoro Islands – Islam – Zanzibar – Swahili

Abstract:

The historical sources related to the Muslim presence in Congo during the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century usually mention Arabs and Swahilis, though many other ethnic communities were involved: Omani and Yemeni Arabs, Baluchis, Indians, Banyamwezi, Batetela, Basonge, Bakusu, Comorians, etc.

The goal of this article is to depict one of these ethnic groups, the Comorians, to define the reasons of their presence in Congo, but also their social position inside the Muslim community in Congo and the surrounding countries, since they occupied various professions: soldiers, scribes, chiefs, religious leaders, etc.

Mots-clés : Congo – Comores – Islam – Zanzibar – Swahili

Résumé :

Les sources historiques traitant de la présence des musulmans dans l'est du Congo dans la seconde moitié du 19^e siècle les décrivent généralement comme des Arabes et des Swahilis, mais en réalité la composition ethnique était bien plus complexe : Arabes d'Oman et du Yémen, Baloutches, Indiens, Banyamwezi, Batetela, Basonge, Bakusu, Comoriens, etc.

L'objet de cet article est de présenter l'un de ces groupes aux origines géographiques les plus lointaines, en l'occurrence les Comoriens, en analysant la raison de leur présence au Congo et notamment le rôle d'intermédiaire joué par Zanzibar, mais aussi en se penchant sur les différentes professions exercées par les Comoriens du Congo et des pays voisins, allant du commerce à l'administration en passant par la carrière religieuse, ainsi que sur leurs personnalités les plus importantes.

Congo – Comoren – Islam – Zanzibar – Swahili

Samenvatting :

De historische bronnen over de moslimgemeenschap in Oost-Congo gedurende de 2de helft van de 19de eeuw spreekt in het algemeen van Arabieren en Swahilis, maar in werkelijkheid waren er ook veel andere volken: Arabieren van Oman en Jemen, Beloetsjen, Indianen, Banyamwezi, Batetela, Basonge, Bakusu, Comorezen, enz.

Dit artikel zal een van deze verschillende gemeenschappen voorstellen, de Comorezen: waarvan komen ze, waarom zijn ze naar Congo gegaan, wat was de rol van Zanzibar in hun reis, wie waren hun meer bekende leden, welke beroepen hadden ze in Congo, in het handel maar ook in het gebied van godsdienst, enz.

0. Introduction

Although the Omani Arabs and the Swahilis of Zanzibar are often presented by colonial sources as the main representatives of the Muslim community in 19th century Eastern Congo, many other ethnic groups belonged to this community as well: Yemeni Arabs, Baluch, Comorians, Indians, Nyamwezi, Tetela, Songe, Bangu Bangu, Kusu, Songola, etc. The first European explorations in Congo took place in the 1880s, after which the area became the *État indépendant du Congo* (EIC) or the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908, ruled by the Belgian King Leopold II. The country then officially became the Belgian Congo until its independence in 1960. As a result of the European colonization, the ethnic variety in Congo was maintained and even increased, due to the great mobility created by the needs of the colonial movement in terms of military recruits and manpower, and by its commercial appeal: Somalis, Egyptians, Sudanese, Hausa, Yoruba, Senegalese, Malians, etc. eventually joined the existing Muslim communities all over the country.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the presence in Congo of one of these ethnic groups, the Comorians, since the very beginning of the expansion of Muslim communities, in the second part of the 19th century. In addition, I also wish to examine the role of Oman and Zanzibar in this diasporic movement, since the Comorians mainly did business with the Omani and Swahili traders in East and Central Africa, and also managed to establish a strong community in Zanzibar.

1. The Muslim communities in Congo (19th century-1908)

The first Muslim communities settled roughly at the same period in Eastern and in Northern Congo, during the **early** 1860s. Regarding the Eastern part of Congo, they consisted of Arab (mainly Omani) and Swahili traders from the Eastern Coast of Africa, which was then ruled by the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar. During the 19th century, Zanzibar had developed its trade with the African hinterland, venturing further and further into the continent, so that the Muslim traders reached the area of the Great Lakes around 1850, where they established a well-organized station in Ujiji, on the Western shore of the Lake Tanganyika, around 1858. In the 1860s, they had crossed the Lake and started founding new settlements in the Maniema, their main stations being Kasongo, Kabambare and Nyangwe. Later on, they moved northward and reached Kirundu and the Stanley-Falls around 1882-1883 (Ceulemans 1959, p. 42).

These traders were in search of ivory and slaves, as well as other goods like copal, gum, palm-oil, parrots, etc. They also introduced new goods in the area like fabrics, coffee, certain species of fruit-trees, etc. Thanks to their commercial network, they gradually acquired more political power and their influence in the area grew. **However, if the Omanis and the Swahilis made up the predominant element of these Muslim traders, other ethnic groups were also found among them, like the Baluchi, who were often hired to escort the caravans, the Nyamwezi – an ethnic group of Tanzania – and the Comorians.**

The local population **of Eastern Congo** consisted of various Bantu-speaking kingdoms and chiefdoms, like the Bangu Bangu, the Basongye, the Bakusu, the Bazula, the Benyemamba, the Batetela, the Basongola and the Barega (Vansina, 1965, p. 248). Part of the local population was attracted to the culture of the newcomers and subsequently adopted some of their customs by appropriating their dress, converting to Islam, speaking Swahili etc. They were called **Wangwana or Waungwana** in Swahili, as opposed to the *Washenzi* (literally the ‘Savages’), a term used to refer to the local Bantu and non-Muslim populations.

Consequently, it is important to note that these Muslim communities were already established before the arrival of the Europeans in **Eastern Congo, in the early 1870s, and the foundation of the Congo Free State, ruled personally by King Leopold II, in 1885.** Though the Muslim presence was generally considered as a problem by the **Europeans**, initially due to their political and commercial weight and later because of their potential competition in the religious field, their presence was pragmatically tolerated until the so-called ‘Arab campaign’ **in 1892-1894.** Ironically, their presence across the country was even encouraged during the 1880s and 1890s

through the enrollment of Muslim African recruits in the European caravans, namely Zanzibari, Baluch, Nyamwezi, but also Hausa and Sudanese. **But I will focus on one of these ethnic groups, that was actually present in Congo since the very beginning of the Omani-Swahili exploration phase.**

2. The sources about the Comorian diaspora

At least three different kinds of sources refer to the presence of Comorians among the Muslim community in precolonial and early colonial Congo: **published** historical sources in Arabic and Swahili, the European colonial sources, and finally the Arabic and Swahili documents found in Congo and housed today in Belgium.

As regards the first category, the first useful document is Tippu Tip's autobiography. Tippu Tip or Ḥamad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī (1840-1905), was a famous Swahili merchant, probably born in Zanzibar, who developed an important trade network in the African hinterland between c. 1860 and 1891, exploring Eastern Congo, where he lived for many years and even served as *wali* (governor) of the Stanley Falls for the Congo Free State. The document, originally handwritten in Swahili using the Arabic alphabet, is entitled *Maisha ya Ḥamad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī yaani Tippu Tip* (The Life of Ḥamad bin Muḥammad al-Murjabī alias Tippu Tip). **In 1902-3, it has been published in Swahili together with a German translation by H. Brode, a German working in Zanzibar who encouraged him to write his memoirs. In 1952, an English translation was proposed by W. H. Whiteley, a great specialist of Swahili (Bontinck 1973, p. 9). In 1973, the Belgian F. Bontinck published a French translation, with a very rich and detailed series of notes and a large bibliography (Bontinck 1973).**

Another very useful source can be found in the Omani testimonies recollected in *Juhaynat al-akhbār fī tarīkh Zinjibār*, a book written in 1938-39 by the Omani historian, Sa'īd bin 'Alī al-Mughīrī', but published only in 1979. In a chapter entitled *Ḥadīth gharīb 'an al-qāra al-afriqiyya al-sharqiyya* (A Strange Account about East Africa), al-Mughīrī exposes the recollections of old Omanis who had personally been acquainted with the first Arab and Swahili explorers of Congo (al-Mughīrī 2001, p. 317, Luffin 2008, p. 425).

Considering the European sources, quite some useful information may be found in travelers' diaries and books: **the famous explorer, Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), who made several expeditions in East and Central Africa, first as a journalist, then as an agent for Leopold II, King**

of Belgium, refers several times to the Comorian presence in his books, like *How I found Dr Livingstone. Travels, Adventures and Discoveries in Central Africa*, published in 1875 (see Bibliography). Jérôme Becker (1830-1912), a Belgian officer who participated to two expeditions from Zanzibar to Congo for the sake of the *Association Internationale Africaine*, in 1880-1883 and in 1883-1885, mentions the presence of a Comorian community in Zanzibar in his book, *La vie en Afrique*, published in 1887. E. Trivier (1842-1910), a French traveler who visited Eastern Congo in 1888, published a description of his journey where he gives us some useful information regarding Kibonge, a Comorian chief established in Kirundu (Trivier 1891).

In addition, the colonial archives contain official reports, correspondence and personal notes and records written by the officers of the EIC in Eastern Congo that also mention the presence of Comorians in the area, like a letter sent in 1891 from Kibonge town to Lieutenant Tobback, a Belgian officer based in Eastern Congo (see Royal Museum for Central Africa, Historical Archives, Collection Tobback, HA 01.0008.9).

Finally, a handful of Arabic and Swahili documents kept in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, Belgium) and the Royal Museum of Armed Forces and Military History (Brussels, Belgium) cite some of the Comorian actors and document their presence and activities in Eastern Congo in 1891, especially one letter sent by ‘Alī Ḥamādī, alias Kibonge, the Comorian chief of Kirundu, to Lieutenant Tobback at the Stanley Falls in Shawwāl 20, 1308 (May 29, 1891) (see Royal Museum for Central Africa, Historical Archives, Collection Tobback, HA 01.0008.21).

3. The Comorians in Zanzibar

The Comoros is a small archipelago located in the Indian Ocean, at the Northern end of the Mozambique Channel in East Africa. It consists of four islands – Mahori (Mayotte), Ngazidja, Mwali (Mohéli) and Nzwani (Anjouan) – inhabited by a Bantu-speaking population whose language – Comorian – is related to Swahili. Apparently, Swahili ships were already trading with the Comoros and Madagascar as soon as the 10th century, and since then the contacts between the Swahili coast and the archipelago were regular, as shown by archaeology (Beaujard 2007: 15). Islam was introduced in the archipelago around the 15th century by the Shirazi, who also settled on the Swahili coast. From the 16th to the 19th century, the islands were exposed to internal conflicts as well as to regular attacks from Madagascar. In the first half of the 19th century, the European influence in the area grew, the British seizing the power in Anjouan in

1833, and the French in Mayotte in 1841 (Rotter 1986: 380). These old historical links between Comoros and Zanzibar and their peak during the 19th century explain why most of the Comorians who traveled to or settled in Congo came through this island.

In his book about Zanzibar, **the British explorer** Richard Burton mentions the presence of a Comorian diaspora on the island: ‘there are almost 2000 men from Angazijeh (Great Comoro), Mayotta, Hinzuwan or Anjuan (Johanna) and Muhayli (...). [They] preserve their own language (...). A considerable emigration was caused in the early part of the present century by intestine divisions and by piratical attacks from Madagascar, whilst the slave emancipation by the French in 1847 set a large class free to travel (...). The Comoro men settled at Zanzibar are mostly servants in European houses, others are rude artisans, and the rest are Mercuries, beach-combers and bumboat-men (...). When expecting invasion, Sayyid Majid equipped about 130 of these fellows as a garde du corps’. (Burton 1872: 340). About a decade later, J. Becker, **previously quoted**, also mentions the presence of a Comorian diaspora in his description of the island’s population: ‘There is also in Zanzibar quite a lot of people coming from the Comoro islands (Oua-Ngazidias), appreciated by the Europeans as servants because of their nice appearance, as well as Somalis and people from Madagascar, Maurice and Bourbon.’ (Becker 1887, p. 22).

Two other sources provide much more detail about the Comorian community in Zanzibar: Ibuni Saleh’s book entitled *A Short History of the Comorians in Zanzibar* (1936), and al-Mughīrī’s book mentioned previously. **Contrary to the previous sources who depict the Comorians of Zanzibar as belonging to the rather lower layer of the population, both authors insist on their participation in the development of Zanzibar and indicate that many of them occupied positions as judges, ministers, chamberlains, officers and soldiers, as well as imams, muftis, Muslim scholars and Quran teachers (Saleh 1936, p. 10, al-Mughīrī 2001, p. 524). In fact, Ibuni Saleh was himself a Comorian of Zanzibar, and his short book intended to present a good image of his community by highlighting the role of Comorians in the social and intellectual life of Zanzibar.**

4. The Comorians in Congo

Members of the Comorian community have played different roles and social ranks in Eastern Congo during the second half of the 19th century: soldiers, interpreters, chiefs, religious scholars, etc. this shows the important role they played in the local Muslim society, although

they were a minority, partially reflecting their polyvalence in the Zanzibar society before their departure to Central Africa, not only accompanying the Arab and Swahili traders but also being a part of the community.

4.1. The explorers and the local chiefs: Kibonge, Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Anjazījī and Ali Mchangama

Sa'īd al-Mughīrī, an Omani historian quoted earlier, states in 1938-9, after an enquiry made among the descendants of the first Zanzibaris who went to Congo, that the first wave of Arabs who visited Eastern Congo in the years 1860s was followed by a second group, composed of Nāsir bin Sayf al-Mi'marī, 'Isā bin 'Abdallah al-Kharūṣī, 'Ubayd Allah bin Sālīm al-Khaḍūrī, Kibonge and Muḥammad bin Aḥmad the Comorian (Aḥmad al-Anjazījī) (2001, p. 317). Kibonge is well-documented in the Western sources, as we shall see, and is clearly identified as a Comorian, whereas Muḥammad bin Aḥmad, who is presented as a friend of 'Ubayd Allah bin Sālīm al-Khaḍūrī, receives no further mention in al-Mughīrī's book and is not mentioned at all in the European sources. According to al-Mughīrī, all these people first settled in Nyangwe, after which Nāsir bin Sayf al-Mi'marī, 'Isā bin 'Abdallah al-Kharūṣī, 'Ubayd Allah bin Sālīm al-Khaḍūrī and Kibonge set out to explore the Lualaba river and the territories between the Lomami and Kisangani rivers for six months. Their explorations led them to an open place close to a large river, where they found a lot of ivory. This was Kirundu, where they stayed there for one year and collected a huge amount of ivory, which was not exploited by the local population. After four years, Nāsir bin Sayf al-Mi'marī, 'Isā bin 'Abdallah al-Kharūṣī and 'Ubayd Allah bin Sālīm al-Khaḍūrī decided to go back to Zanzibar, and 'Ubayd Allah bin Sālīm al-Khaḍūrī appointed Kibonge as the governor of Kirundu and its surroundings (al-Mughīrī 2001, p. 317). Al-Mughīrī's book is very interesting, although it stops with the exploration phase of Eastern Congo and does not say anything about the colonial period, except for a short sentence about the 'military resistance' against the Belgians. Curiously, Tippu-Tip's *Maisha* mentions Kibonge only once, if we follow Bontinck's interpretation stating that Mwerevu the Comorian should be identified as Kibonge (1974, p. 295), but then Tippu-Tip does not really reveal a lot about either Kibonge or his role in the exploration of the country.

A number of European travelers and officers also mention a Comorian called Kibonge in Eastern Congo, probably the son of his homonym quoted by al-Mughīrī. The German explorer von Wissman, who met him, affirms that he was born in the Comoro islands and that he

travelled with the Arabs from Zanzibar to Nyangwe (2001: 171). Moreover, all the Western sources consider him as the chief of Kirundu (Bontinck 1974, p. 295). In a list of the Arab chiefs of the Upper-Congo **made by Lieutenant Tobback and then published by A. J. Wauters** in the *Congo illustré* in 1893, we find the mention of Kibonge as the first chief of the Stanley Falls and the father of the actual chief of Kirundu [also named Kibonge]. The author also mentions that, when Stanley came to the region, Tippu Tip's and Kibonge's men preceded his party and had even made some incursions into the Aruwimi where they had lost many of their men due to the fierce resistance of the local population both male and female (Wauters 1893, p. 17). The same list mentions another Kibonge, 'chief of Wanatschundu-Kirundu, originating from Kamerun (which should be read as 'Comoro' according to the erratum published in the same journal in 1894), around 50 years old, very rich, he should not be confused with his adoptive father, the friend of Tippu Tip's grandfather. He has a lot of slaves and guns, he is a friend of Tippu Tip, he is cruel and had splendid plantations. His men operate in the Unyoro, the Muta-Nzige (Lake Albert-Edward) and the Aruwimi. He is obese.' (1893, p. 18).

Regarding the relations between Kibonge and the European colonizers, it seems that the chief adopted a friendly and cooperative attitude, helping them in their explorations. He accompanied Stanley from Nyangwe to the North in 1876, as well as von Wissmann whom he led from Lusuna to Nyangwe in 1882. The French traveler, Trivier (1842-1910), who visited Eastern Congo in 1888, describes the way he had been welcomed in Kirundu by 'the chief Kibonge', who offered him a house for a couple of days as well as a meal: 'a chicken cooked in palm-oil, a great dish of rice, pineapple and bananas.' (Trivier 1891, p. 104). Ceulemans insists on the fact that Kibonge was eager to develop his relations with the Europeans, and that, in 1892, he even asked them to send a European 'resident' to Kirundu, so that he could exchange his ivory for guns, powder and fabrics (Ceulemans 1959, p. 302). In the same year, Kibonge stayed loyal to the Europeans when Mohara, the chief of Nyangwe, rebelled against them, for which he was about to be officially appointed by the EIC as governor (*wālī*) of Kirundu, a status similar to Tippu Tip's at the Stanley Falls (Ceulemans 1959, p. 315). The situation turned sour in June 1893, when Kibonge was expelled from Kirundu by Ponthier and Lothaire, who seized the city. After his escape, he was eventually arrested and accused of having dealt with Charles Stokes, who was selling arms to the Arabs fighting the EIC. He was also held responsible for the death of Edouard Schnitzer a.k.a. Emin Pacha, who had been killed during an expedition for the German East Africa Company across the Maniema, in October 1892. Kibonge was executed on January 1st, 1894 (Cambier 1948, p. 835).

Kibonge's son, Sa'īd, is also mentioned several times in the Europeans sources. He is described as an ivory trader associated with his father and dealing with the local population as well as with the Europeans in Eastern Congo (Ceulemans 1959, p. 318, 328)

Tobback's list also mentions another Comorian chief: 'Ali-Mchangama, or Mabilanga. He is a Black originating from Kamerun (sic), 40 years. He works for himself. He is a despicable man. He operates in the Utchiva and has 23 guns.' (1893: 19). According to Bontinck, the Sambalamu quoted in Tippu Tip's *Maisha* should also be identified as 'Alī Shanzi alias Msangama or Mabilanga. After the fall of Nyangwe in July 1893, he surrendered to the EIC. Having led a failed conspiracy against the garrison, he escaped, but was later arrested and executed by the EIC (Bontinck 1974, p. 295).

4.2. The soldiers

The first European expeditions to the region of the Great Lakes started from Zanzibar, not only by means of the trade routes already known by the Arab and Swahili traders, but also by taking advantage of their human resources. Since the caravans were constituted on the Arab-Swahili model, people – soldiers, bearers, guides and interpreters – were enrolled *in situ* when leaving the island for the continent, as described by H. M. Stanley or R. Burton. Comorians were present at a very early stage in the European caravans heading to the hinterland of East Africa. They were enrolled in Zanzibar as well as on the Comoro islands and Johanna men were engaged to join Livingstone's expedition to the Zambezi as early as 1860, (Simpson 1975, p. 46). The Comorians were generally appreciated by the European travelers. John Kirk, who accompanied Livingstone in his expedition, describes that the Johanna men as 'very steady and useful fellows, little subject to fever or disease which incapacitate Europeans and not so difficult to manage as Krumen' (Simpson 1975, p. 48). Stanley has a similar impression about the men who accompanied Livingstone to Nyasa in 1866: 'the Johanna men, who had been engaged for the Doctor's service by Mr. Sundley, the English consul at Johanna, were considered preferable for the service to Zanzibar men' (Stanley 1895, p. XXIX). Other Europeans, however, like Richard Burton, were less positively inclined towards the Comorians (Burton 1872, p. 340).

Regarding the expeditions of the Congo Free State, Zanzibari soldiers were especially appreciated by the European officers, together with the Senegalese and the Hausa. Indeed, between 1883 and 1901, no less than 1775 men had been recruited in Zanzibar as soldiers serving in the campaigns and stations of Congo (Flament 1952: 510). However, the term

Zanzibari was a general term used to name the people enrolled in situ, even if they were not necessarily natives of the island. Consequently, an unknown proportion of the *Zanzibari askaris* who accompanied the European caravans to Eastern Congo were actually Comorians. This is illustrated by the Belgian Lieutenant Coquilhat, who details the composition of his garrison stationed at the Bangala in 1884: two Kabinda, eleven Hausa (2 actual Hausa and 9 Yoruba) and seventeen Zanzibaris, of whom eight are actual Zanzibaris, three are Nyamwezi (East Tanganyika), one from Nyangwe, one Comorian and four from the Eastern Coast (Coquilhat 1888, p. 228). It seems that in 1883, Maximilien Strauch, a German officer in the service of King Leopold II, even proposed to travel directly to the Comoro islands in order to recruit soldiers for his expedition in Congo, after the sultan of Zanzibar had momentarily refused to provide the Belgian king with more Zanzibari soldiers (Vandewoude 1988, p. 240).

4.3. Scribes and interpreters

Several works (Simpson 1975, Chrétien 2005, Lawrance 2006) have highlighted the crucial role played by the African guides, translators, interpreters and clerks in the colonization process all over Africa. Thanks to their linguistic skills as well as their knowledge of the local cultures, they were hired by the European explorers and later on by colonial authorities in order to play the intermediaries with the African population. In the case of Congo, some of the clerks and interpreters who were mastering Arabic and Swahili and who translated important letters for the European officers of the Congo Free State have been identified (Luffin 2017). Some of them came from the neighboring countries like Sudan, others were probably born in Congo, but they also numbered some Comorians.

Ali Shanzi, also called Msangama or Mabilanga, was mentioned above as a local chief, according to several authors. However, in other sources he appears more as a man whose skills are related to his knowledge of languages and his ability to write. Trivier for instance mentions him during his stay in Kirundu in 1889, where he acted as an interpreter for Kibonge: ‘We had a real conversation in French, thanks to Hamadi (sic) M’sangama. This Muslim was born in the Comoros and he had lived for a long time in Mayotte and in the Reunion. He even quoted some well-known names of Saint-Denis, and I was really delighted to hear my language spoken by an Arab.’ (Trivier 1891, p. 105). Visiting Kirundu one year earlier, Jameson was probably referring to the same person when he mentioned ‘an Arab from Madagascar who speaks a little French, but it is very difficult to understand the little he does speak’ (Jameson 1890, p. 233). In a letter sent from Kirundu to Lerman at the Stanley Falls and dated May 1890, Mshangama

(sic) is described as a teacher (Bontinck 1974, p. 295). The *Congo illustré* also contains a picture taken at the Stanley Falls in 1892 by M. Sanders, featuring a local chief, Rachid, his wife and a man described as ‘Chanzy, the interpreter.’ (Wauters 1894, p. 18). This man may either be Ali Shanzi, or one of two other men who appear in the Swahili and Arabic correspondence kept in the Belgian colonial archives, namely Shanzī bin Jum‘a and Shanzī bin Ḥamad (MRAC, Archives Tობback R. G. 617). In any case, the fact that ‘Alī Shanzī knew French certainly ensured a good position for him as an intermediary between the French-speaking representatives of the EIC and the Arabs and Swahilis.

In general, interpreters were often hired by the Europeans in order to facilitate their journey through the hinterland. They were sometimes recruited locally but were more often enrolled in Zanzibar, the point of departure for European expeditions. This was due to the fact that, most people who had already traveled on the continent had acquired some knowledge of local languages, in addition to Swahili which was the lingua franca along the East African trade routes. Some of these interpreters were Comorians, like one of the men who accompanied Baron von der Decken and Richard Thornton to Mount Kilimanjaro in June 1861 (Simpson 1975, p. 164). According to Saleh, Comorians were already much appreciated as interpreters by the Zanzibar authorities themselves, especially in the Navy (Saleh 1936: III). Al-Mughīrī also mentions several Comorians acting as interpreters for the Zanzibari authorities in their dealings with Europeans thanks to their exceptional linguistic skills (2001, p. 530).

4.4. The Muslim scholars

The colonial sources do not clearly mention the presence of Comorian Muslim scholars in Congo, but in fact, very little information is given about this important section of society as a whole. It is well known that the Comorians played an important role in the expansion of two Sufi brotherhoods, the Shādhiliyya and the Qādiriyya, in Eastern Africa, **and that by the early decades of the 19th century, the Comoros had already established a solid reputation as a regional center of religious learning (Alpers 2009: 160).** Around 1900, the Shādhiliyya was introduced by Sayyid Muḥammad Ma‘rūf, a Comorian shaykh, on the Swahili Coast from where it penetrated into the African hinterland, reaching Tabora and Ujiji (Constantin 1999, p. 152). Another Comorian shaykh, Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin Abī Bakr al-Anjuwānī (1850-1904) also played an important role in the expansion of the brotherhood in East Africa (Cuoq 1975, p. 467). Since Ujiji was in contact with the Muslim communities of Eastern Congo, we can

assume that the Shadhiliyya had some local members, even though the European sources mentioning the Sufi brotherhoods in Eastern Congo are rather late and only mention the Qādiriyya (de Thier 1963, p. 67, Abel 1969, p. 17, Cuoq 1975, p. 320).

We know that the Qādiriyya was brought into East Africa by scholars from various origins. It was first introduced in Tanzania 1880s by the Somali scholar, shaykh ‘Uways bin Muḥammad, after which it spread to Maniema (Constantin 1987, p. 115, Constantin 1999, p. 151). Regarding Eastern Congo, Cuoq states that the brotherhood was introduced in Maniema by the Zanzibaris (Cuoq 1975, p. 325) or by a local Muslim from Kabambare called Abdallah Kitenge (Abel 1959, p. 117). According to de Thier, however, who conducted an inquiry in Stanleyville, the brotherhood was introduced in the Stanley-Falls area by a Comorian shaykh called Ḥabīb bin Aḥmad, who arrived in Stanleyville in 1904 and died in Avakubi in 1916 (de Thier 1963, p. 68). In fact, the role of the Comorian diaspora in the expansion of the Qādiriyya elsewhere in East Africa is well-known. This is reflected in the case of ‘Īsā bin Aḥmad al-Injazījī, for instance, a Comorian scholar from Zanzibar, who introduced it in Northern Mozambique starting from 1905-6 (Bang 2014, p. 56). Furthermore, as I will mention below, the Qādiriyya in colonial Burundi also seems to reveal certain connections with the Comorians.

5. The Comorians in the rest of the Great Lakes area: Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda

Because of the historical connections between the Muslim communities of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, one can expect the presence of some members of the Comorian diaspora in the two latter countries, formerly united in a German colony that was administrated by the Belgians under the name Ruanda-Urundi after WWI. Few historical sources regarding Islam in this area are available, and the authors detailing the ethnic groups constituting the non-indigenous communities of Ruanda-Urundi do not mention the Comorians (Anciaux 1949, Baeck 1957, Kagabo 1988). However, Abel writes that Sharīf bin Aḥmad bin ‘Abd al-Raḥman, a Qādiriyya leader based in Rumonge, on the Burundian shore of Lake Tanganyika, but originating from the Comoro islands, was an important religious figure in the 1950s (Abel 1959, p. 117).

As for Uganda, the presence of Comorians was attested since the very beginning of the Arab and Swahili exploration of the country. Several sources mention that Mtesa, the king of Buganda from 1856 to 1884, had two personal scribes: Masudi, a man from the Swahili Coast, and Idi, dubbed ‘the Emperor’s writer’ by H. M. Stanley, who came from the Comoro islands. As early as 1874, Idi acted as King Mtesa’s interpreter and scribe, but he also occupied a series

of political positions. He was the leader of: military campaigns for the king, the local chief or *muteregga* at the border with Bunyoro, and the *sekiwala* of Ssinga, another rank in the Buganda's political hierarchy (Oded 1974, p. 86; Médard 2007, p. 397). As a scribe and interpreter, he translated some of Stanley's explanations of the Bible as well as the Ten Commandments into Kiganda, for King Mtesa (Stanley 1988 [1899], p. 159, 253). Another Muslim figure from Mtesa's entourage was Toli, who is said to have come from Madagascar. However, Zanzibar also had a significant Madagascan community (Becker 1887, p. 22), and given the occasional confusion between Madagascar and the Comoro islands, it cannot be excluded that this Toli was in fact originally from the Comoros. A former sailor, he worked as a private cook for Khamīs bin 'Abdallah, an Arab trader in Tabora, whom he accompanied to Buganda around 1867. He eventually stayed in Buganda and taught Mtesa more about Islam, explaining for instance how to slaughter animals, although he would also lead Mtesa's army in various campaigns (Médard 2007, p. 396).

6. Conclusion

The Comorians settled in Congo from the very beginning of the Arab-Swahili presence during the second half of the 19th century, were concealed like other communities – such as the Baluchi – by the generic terms 'Arabs, Swahili or Zanzibari' which are often used by European sources.

The Comorians in Congo occupied all social levels of the Muslim community, from the *askari* serving the European caravans to the highest political chiefs, like Kibonge in Kirundu. Some Comorians apparently also played a role in the religious sphere and helped to develop the Qādiriyya, a Sufi brotherhood, as they did elsewhere in East Africa, notably in Mozambique.

Although the Comorian presence in Congo was largely related to the historical and cultural ties between the Comoro islands and Zanzibar, **an island that hosted an important Comorian community**, Europeans also played a role by hiring them as *askaris* for their expeditions, departing from Zanzibar or even directly from the Comoros.

Finally, the presence of a Comorian diaspora in Congo should also be analyzed through the larger prism of the Comorian presence across the whole of East Africa, from Kenya and Tanzania to Mozambique and Madagascar, as well as in the area of the Great Lakes spanning Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

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