

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF ISLAM IN MOZAMBIQUE**

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### **1. The Country.**

Mozambique is a country of 800,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the southeast of Africa across from Madagascar, with some 2,500 km of coast along the Indian Ocean. By land it borders with six countries, all English speaking: Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and South Africa. In 1997 it had some 17 million inhabitants, 75% of them under fifteen years of age. The official language of Portuguese lends unity to a country formed by sixteen language groups with their respective tongues. The approximate rate of illiteracy is 78%; only a minority knows the national language.

Some years ago the per capita income was \$70.00. According to official statistics it was the poorest country in the world. After seven years of peace and political democracy, the economy is improving. Despite its great natural wealth, it imports 90% of the goods it consumes. In general the natural products are not processed in the country but rather are exported as raw material, exploited by foreign countries or left untouched due to lack of resources.

The capital Maputo near the Republic of South Africa receives capital investments and strives to be like any other western capital. The rest of the country, especially north of the Zambeze River, receives what is left over in the South and lives in abandon. The scandalous differences between North and South are provoking ethnic rivalries and feelings that could initiate the fragmentation of the country or organized political violence.

### **2. History of the Land.**

Until 1500 we knew nothing of its occupants. There remains no archeological evidence. Only some prehistoric cave paintings discovered by a missionary in Namapa show that Mozambique was inhabited from early time by tribes that lived by hunting and fruit harvesting.

Mozambique was "discovered" in 1498 by Vasco de Gama, who arrived at the current island of Mozambique on his trip toward India. He stays there for several weeks. The place will serve as a port of rest and commerce on future expeditions and, with time, will become the capital of Eastern Africa. At the end of the 19th Century the capital is established in Lourenço Marques in the South. In its trade with India, Portugal takes advantage of the strategic situation of the country and begins to dominate the adjoining populations and then the route of the Zambeze River, searching for the deposits of gold of Monomotapa, 1000 kilometers to the West.

On the eastern coast for more than five centuries live Arab merchants and

Moslem mestizos. Their relation with the tribes of the Interior is sporadic. They live together peacefully and independently.

Mozambique is formed by various Bantú tribes, each one of which has its own customs and ancestral traditions. These groups roam the land with their flocks or make war in order to survive. During the last five centuries, three groups have lived together in dynamic harmony creating a multiracial society that is tolerant and open: the Moslem populations situated near the sea and dedicated to commerce, the Black tribes and the Portuguese, owners of political power.

In 1975 after many years of guerilla activity, the FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique) gains independence and takes power. The people live a passing euphoria. The Marxist government distances itself from the West and breaks with history and ancestral traditions. Basic goods become scarce, ideological persecution, forced atheism and general decadence begin. A new guerilla movement emerges, the RENAMO (National Resistance of Mozambique) which does not seek power but rather tries to change the attitude of the government. The country and all the structures which had remained from Colonial times are destroyed rapidly.

In 1992 through the mediation of the Church (Community of Saint Egidio) the government and guerillas sign for peace. In 1994 FRELIMO obtains power after the first democratic elections. Hope and optimism are felt and national reconciliation begins. But in the last five years hopes have converted into skepticism due to social injustices, extreme capitalism and public corruption. Today the Church is for many the only road of salvation.

### **3. History of the Church.**

Evangelization in Mozambique goes together with Portuguese colonization. From the beginning some priests accompanied the expedition of Vasco de Gama to lend spiritual assistance.

Islam was the religion of the commercial minority situated in the coast. The Black tribes of the Interior practiced their traditional rites and cults to the ancestors. The Portuguese desire to live their Christian faith and bring priests to celebrate the sacraments. From the beginning the priests are aware that they have not come to evangelize or convert the inhabitants, rather to sustain the faith of the Portuguese citizens.

During these five centuries there were various attempts at evangelization. They were not the result of a systematic program sustained by religious or political structures, but rather were born of the audacity of charismatic individuals. One attempt of the Jesuits towards the middle of the 17th century was at the point of gaining the conversion of Monomopata (Tete) but finally failed. The evangelization of Mozambique has suffered from carelessness, abandon, methodological errors and inadequate attitudes.

In 1940 after the concordat between the Holy See and Portugal, the evangelization of the country begins, then a dependent province. Missionary congregations arrive and initiate high schools, seminaries, missions, hospitals, elementary and boarding-schools. The influence of the Church reaches the furthest corners of the country, offering the population opportunities before unknown. The Church is a road of social progress.

With independence and the restoration of Marxism, many missionaries were expelled and returned to their countries. The seminarians were "nationalized" and sent to distinct countries in order to be formed according to the socialist spirit and, in the future, exercise important roles in the government. 90% of the Catholics abandoned their faith. The Whites fled and the missionaries were confined to the cities under vigilance and limited in their rights.

Since 1989 the Church began to recuperate its voice and prestige and gained the confidence of the government. The authorities gave the Church the responsibility for education, health and the human promotion of the population, not for its liking but for necessity. Again the missionaries arrived from Europe, people who had not lived the revolution. So begins an attempt at new evangelization.

#### **4. The Vincentian Family in Mozambique**

Currently there are present almost all of the branches of the Vincentian Family: Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent de Paul Society, International Association of Charity, Vincentian Marian Youth and the Association of the Miraculous Medal.

The Congregation arrived in Mozambique in 1940. It was called by the bishops to direct the seminaries and the technical school of Magude and to attend the rural communities of the district. Among the activities realized what stands out for its importance is formation in the seminaries. Almost all of the seminarians of Mozambique from 1940 to 1975 were formed by the Vincentians: Magude, Namaacha, Lourenço Marques, Nicoadala. Then the Congregation committed itself not to accept native vocations, but rather to direct all the young candidates toward the dioceses. There is one exception: Father German Grachane, current bishop of Nacala.

The Congregation is present through three autonomous groups: the Vice-Province of Mozambique (19 confreres from 6 nationalities), a community from the Province of Sakamance in Nacala (2 confreres) and another from the Province of Mexico in Chongoene (4 confreres). The Congregation collaborates in the entire country with the Daughters of Charity and the lay Vincentians.

In 1946 the Daughters of Charity arrived to serve the poor of the suburbs of the capital, attend the schools and work in health care. Today they form a Province with 60 sisters, -20 of them Mozambique- and 10 communities. They work in 4 dioceses (Maputo, Xai-Xai, Tete and Nacala) and dedicate themselves to child education, health care, youth formation, promotion of women, evangelization and catechetics. Until now

the Daughters of Charity have been established only in places where the Congregation of the Mission is present.

## **5. Contact with Islam**

In the south the Moslems are a minority which still does not draw the attention of the Church. Their attitudes are a concern but they lack demographic weight. On the contrary for the last five centuries on the northern coast almost all the inhabitants belong by tradition to Islam. Although they do not practice their religion, they were born in an Islamic tradition and consider themselves Moslems.

Seven years ago in Nacala there existed a daily relation of peaceful collaboration between Christians and Moslems. There were no reciprocal criticisms: each community lived its faith without interfering with the other and both united to defend themselves against antireligion attacks.

With the war finished, The African Moslem Agency began an intense campaign of expansion: Islamic propaganda among believers of other confessions, strengthening of the religious commitment of the Moslems, schooling of the children in the madrasa, formation of their own in the Islamic School of Nacala, works with an ideological influence, proliferation of mosques, wells in Moslem villages, gifts for the converts, criticism of the Catholic Church, attitudes of intolerance. Various Moslem missionaries sustain and direct this Islamic action and they do it with competence and success. In the last seven years Islamic signs have increased enormously: mosques, Arab style clothing, means of social communication, assiduity in prayer, high lighting Fridays and Islamic feasts. Intolerance has appeared and rapidly extended. Some years ago in the villages some Moslems participated in our Eucharistic celebrations; today they are few.

Nonetheless in the middle of this rare atmosphere, Moslems feel questioned by the example of charity, without distinction of creed, of our communities, by the education which the Catholic Church offers, by the vernacular language (Macua and Portuguese) and the songs in the liturgy, by the attention and leadership of the youth. Guided by the action of the Holy Spirit, they show interest for Christianity.

At the same time Christians, being a 10% minority in Nacala, admire certain virtues which Islam conserves: rigorous fasting, assiduous prayer, the value of tradition and respect for the Sacred Book. This admiration allows for a certain assimilation which could become syncretism if organized on-going formation is lacking on the parochial and diocesan level. Today the lay Christians themselves are the ones who discover the road which the Church ought to follow among the people of the Book.

(JOHN CARNEY, C.M., translator)