

Historians in Chad review their opinion of the colonial era. The Saudi-Arabian influence today is of more concern.

Published in Dutch in *NRC Handelsblad*, januari 2018.

An empty space in an old neighbourhood of clay houses. Low sunlight over yellow grass, a few thorny trees, some goats. That is all. No tomb, no names, according to Muslim tradition. But this is the 'Cemetery of the Martyrs' in Abeché, the capital of the Chadian province of Wadai. The bodies that are buried here, an estimated 150, are of victims of a tragedy that happened right here in november 1917. Early one morning they were killed with machetes or 'coupes-coupes', by order of a French colonial officer. Among them were about 20 ulema or Muslim scholars.

One hundred years later, historians in Chad try to get a grip on the event that came to be known as 'kubkub'. They end up in the debate that is important today, between salafists and moderate Muslims. The growing tension between two main streams of Islam determines the view of many Chadians of the country's colonial history and France.

Until recently, 'kubkub' was unknown in the rest of Chad, but in Wadai it has become a myth. There, stories are told of ulema who escaped by flying away. Dr. Ateib Idriss Halawlaw, vice-rector of the Université de Ndjamena, is from Wadai. The corridors of the university are empty, the staff is on strike again, since months, so Halawlaw has time. In his office and surrounded by some colleagues, he explains the goal of a conference about 'kubkub' that is organised by historians. «Everybody now has his own story. Sometimes, the number of victims is terribly exaggerated. What we should do is put all those stories together, compare them methodically and then determine what really happened. That can only be good for our relationship with France.» He speaks in Standard Arabic, because «one can not discuss science in dialect.» Nevertheless, his words are translated in the Chadian Arabic dialect (Showa Arabic), because none of his colleagues understands Standard Arabic.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the sultanate Wadai was the last independent state in the Sahel. In 1889 it was attributed to France, in a complement to the Berlin Agreement of 1884. Wadai's power was based on trade, especially with North-Africa, along routes that crossed through the desert. Its main export commodity were slaves whom Wadai captured or claimed from neighbouring peoples, by thousands yearly. Good terrain for the 'mission humanitaire et civilisatrice'. So France cut of the trade-routes, established its military authority and in 1909 replaced sultan Dud Murra by a puppet sultan.

Historians agree that the immediate cause that triggered kubkub was trivial: a drunken slave stabbed a Frenchman one evening in Abeche, because a shaykh had promised him paradise if he killed an unbeliever. The French commander of the 'circonscription' saw the murder as a signal of a complot against the French. Three weeks later, on november 15, he ordered his troops – West African 'tirailleurs' to kill the men in the neighborhood where religious and social leaders lived, who had all gathered at the mosque for morning prayers. The tirailleurs were told to use coupe-coupes, so that the inhabitants of surrounding villages would not be alarmed by the sound of fire-arms.

Otherwise, the views of historians are far apart. The initiative for the conference came from an organisation for support of the Arabic Language. Its goal, according to the invitation, was to spread the Arabic language, to promote national unity and to call on France to compensate for its hideous crime.

As for the first two goals: according to its constitution, Chad has two official languages, French and Arabic. But the Chadian Arabic dialect is far removed from Standard Arabic, as it is used in literature, journals, television and anything official in the Middle East. It can not be used for international communication. Since decades, Saudi-Arabia and other countries in the Middle East stimulate the use of Standard Arabic in Chad, through investments in education, media and ngo's. These investments go

hand in hand with the promotion of Saudi, salafi Islam. If salafism would win the whole country, is their adherents' reasoning, that would make for national unity too.

Salafis, who in Chad call themselves Ansar al-sunna (supporters of the sunna), reject the form of Islam to which Chadians have adhered for centuries, and which goes by the name of Tijaniyya since the 19th century. Tijani Muslims have more rituals when they pray, they respect Christians and Jews, and women participate fully in economic, public and religious life, without 'hijab'. Salafis keep their women inside, they prohibit social exchange with Christians and Jews as well as all rituals of which the Quran or the Prophet do not speak. It is said that only five percent of Chadian Muslims are salafi. But nobody has hard figures and the concern about their influence is the talk of the day. The impact of the salafis seems bigger, because in Ndjamen, for instance, they take up relatively much space: they are typically people with money, large houses and shining mosques.

The government policy with regard to salafis is ambiguous. Extremist preachers are suppressed. That reassures the population (50% Christian and 50% Muslim) which sees itself surrounded by the extremists of Boko Haram, and by the religious wars in the Central African Republic and Darfur. And it reassures international partners (France, EU, US) who work with Chad as a partner in the fight against terrorism and extremism. At the same time, however, the government accepts that the Gulf States finance Islamic universities that teach solely in Arabic and provide hundreds of scholarships for study in the Gulf States. From where students often return 'converted'.

With regard to the second goal, the organisers of the kubkub-conference raised the question: why did the French specifically kill so many ulema? One of the contributors later gave the expected answer: «Because France wanted to destroy our Arabic, Muslim culture. And it had almost succeeded. After the killings, many remaining ulema fled to Sudan and since then the level of our knowledge of Islam has plummeted. It is now time for France to apologise and to pay retribution. And French should be abolished as our national language.» Applause and cheering from *this* audience.

Other Chadians however, Christian as well as Muslim, have no problem with the old coloniser, but with the new one: Saudi-Arabia. They hope that France will remain involved with politics in Chad and offer protection against the influence of salafism and the threat of far-reaching changes in their society. Historians with that opinion - all Muslims educated in French at a time when public schools still functioned - held their own commemoration of the 'kubkub' tragedy. Their conclusion: it was a black page in history, and it is good that it has been turned.

That is also the opinion of Mahamat Saleh Haroun, the celebrated filmmaker and minister of Tourism (and culture), who refused to sponsor the conference. He is better informed than many historians and reminds me that the killings in 1917 were in fact carried out by 'tirailleurs', West Africans in colonial service. And why commemorate that? Another high official of his ministry especially objects to historic research with political intentions. Things go bad for Chad. On the United Nations Human Development Index, the country has fallen to place 186, on the list of 188 countries. This official believes that the 'kubkub' commemoration was an effort to shift the responsibility for the misery to outsiders.

A commemoration was also planned in Abeché itself. But discussions there about the way to do it became too sensitive. In the same weeks, a group of salafis in the city went behind the backs of the Islamic Committee of Abeche and obtained permission for building its own mosque. Redressing that situation was now a priority for the elite. Commemorating could wait.