



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

Form of Worship or Burden? Re-thinking the Islamic View of Youth on Environmental Conservation

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INTRODUCTION: WHERE ARE WE?

The youth are a force to reckon within most countries across the globe, forming the largest category of most countries' population. In many instances, they have been cited as a difficult lot, popularly known to cause trouble and engage in violence. They face mass unemployment, or lack of decent work opportunities ineffective and undemocratic political participation structures, exclusion, poor health problems, poverty, protracted conflicts, HIV, and lack of education (Commonwealth 2016; Makori 2015). In most cases, they are relegated to secondary leadership positions and are often sidelined or generally secluded from expressing their view or opinions in matter that are of importance to them. This is especially apparent in the African context.

The landscape in which young people respond to the challenges they face has changed. More than ever, the

majority of young people in the current generation are bypassing the traditional participation structures and institutions to express themselves. The advent of social media and mobile telephone has made it possible for some leaders to read and understand the minds and feelings of youth, on one side, and has created a massive gap on the other, with faith leaders and institutions that have not embraced the new ways of engagement.

With the world currently battling increased global warming and climate change, it is natural that concern for the environment has increased today with increased awareness around the globe, particularly among the youth. Some of the environmental problems that exist today have become a harsh reality that we need to face, endangering human life both in the present and in the future. The situation could become worse if no action is taken unless our youth decide to change their behaviour and attitude for the better. It goes

without saying that if human beings had abided by the teachings of their faith, complied with its injunctions, and heeded its warnings; they would have avoided all the causes at the root of environmental problems. Allah, Sublime be His Name, the Creator of the human soul, knows what is good and what is bad for that very soul. Almighty Allah said in His Holy Book: “Should He not know—He that created. And He is One that understands the finest mysteries (and) is well-acquainted (with them)” (Mulk 14).

Our faith scriptures and sacred sources have clear guidelines on the environment, yet our modern societies have lost the understanding and respect for the interdependence of all life forms on earth. Islam has tackled all environmental issues in a comprehensive manner, without going into the finest details. Allah, Most High, said: “Nothing have we omitted from the Book” (An’am 38). In another surah, He said, “Then We put thee on the (right) way of religion: so follow thou that (way)” (Jathiya 18). Furthermore, in the Hadith, the Prophet has dealt with all of the topics that came up in the Qur’an. Allah said: «Nor does he speak of (his own) Desire. It is only a Revelation revealed.” (Najm 3-4).

The Quran shows that there is a correlation between the behaviour of people and the conditions of the environment. The right and moral behaviour yield positive results: “If the people of the towns had but believed and feared God, We should indeed have opened out to them (all kinds of) blessings from heaven and earth...” (7:96) “And o my people! Ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him (in repentance): He will send you the skies pouring abundant rain, and add strength to your strength: so turn ye not back in sin!” (11:52)

The opposite is also true. Disbelief and swerving from the right path that God has designated for humanity will result in negative impact on the environment: “But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him is a life narrowed down ...” (20:124). In addition,

there are verses that establish a correlation between natural disasters and disbelief, immoral behaviour, or a combination of both: “Do ye feel secure that He will not cause you to be swallowed up beneath the earth when you are on land, or that He will not send against you a violent tornado (with showers of stones) so that ye shall find no one to carry out your affairs for you? Or ...a heavy gale to drawn you because of your ingratitude...” (17:68-69)

One of the most important outputs of the Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in 1992 was Agenda 21: An action plan for the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century, elaborating strategies and integrated programme measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation and to promote environmentally sound and sustainable development in all countries (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) This agenda includes an action plan for cities wishing to enhance urban sustainability. Some of the recommendations of the agenda include among others, the need to promote actively, to strengthen and expand waste re-use and recycling systems.

To effectively study this claim, two study areas were chosen, the Eastleigh area within Nairobi Suburbs and the Mvita Constituency in the coastal regions within the Mombasa County in Kenya. Both study areas are predominantly inhabited by a great number of youths from the Muslim population. The area, predominantly occupied by Muslim youth, has witnessed an increase in the generation of solid waste, generally through illegal waste disposal in areas that have been reserved for roads and other services.

THE STUDY

According to Rimer et al, 1981, it has been observed that we do not merely consume materials, but rather, we use them and then finally return them, mostly in

different state to the environment. Materials originate from three main sources: Raw materials from the face of the earth and used to manufacture products; scrap materials produced in the manufacturing operation; and materials recovered after the products have been used. The industrial operations are not efficient therefore, producing some waste that must be managed well. The output of the processed are sold to consumers, who in turn either dispose of the materials after use or collect the material for use in energy generation or recycle it back to the industrial sector, or reuse the material without remanufacture.

This is a closed system with only one input and output, like a mass flow model, at a steady state, materials injected into the environment must be equal to materials disposed back into the environment. Materials disposed back into the environment can generally be referred to as solid wastes.

The generation of solid waste in Eastleigh and Mvita Constituency is on the increase, as a result of rising population and high rates of resource consumption, among other reasons. The composition of solid waste has witnessed three key trends:

1. Increase in sheer volume of waste generated by its residents;
2. Change in the quality or make-up of waste generated as a reflection of the changing lifestyles;
3. The disposal method of waste collected by, incineration or use of organic waste for urban agricultural purposes. While this is expected, the handling capacity of the council has been exceeded. The shear and poor management manifests itself in large volumes of waste being dumped illegally in areas that have been reserved for roads and other services.

The engagement of grassroots CSO's with local religious organizations and local faith actors has

changed. The very religious institutions that have always been considered as safe spaces or hubs for engagement, welcoming all groups regardless of their ethnic affiliation or faith, are now questionable in their roles, specifically in the lives of youth. The current age of information and the vast world of technology has not only presented opportunities that exist within our religious institutions but has also laid bare the gaps and the deep-rooted issues that exist that ultimately affect their engagement in youth activism on issues such as environmental conservation. This changing landscape has to be interrogated deeply to understand how the current youth engage these institutions in religion and faith.

During the caliphate of Umar ibn Al-Khattab (RA), when Abu Musa (RA) was sent to Al-Basrah as the new governor, he addressed the people saying: "I was sent to you by 'Umar ibn Al-Khattab (RA) in order to teach you the Book of your Lord [i.e. the Quran], the Sunnah [of your Prophet], and **to clean your streets.**". This is a clear illustration that 'clean streets' was one of the primary works of the Muslim population and leadership in the golden age of Islam. (Hayatus-Sahaba, 2: 165)

Study areas

Eastleigh

Eastleigh is a suburb of Nairobi, Kenya. It is located east of the central business district. Predominantly inhabited by Somali immigrants (majority Muslim youth), it has been described as "a country within a country with its own economy" on account of its robust business sector.

Eastleigh was founded in 1921. The colonial government allotted Nairobi's residential estates by race, and Eastleigh was pointed for Asians and elite Africans who worked as clerks, builders or shoemakers. It was originally a large Kenyan Asian enclave until independence in 1963. In recent years,

the suburb has been dominated and almost exclusively inhabited by Somali Immigrants. Administratively, It is divided into North and South, both part of Nairobi's Pumwani division.

It is further partitioned into three areas:

- Section I - from Juja Road
- Section II - the commercial center
- Section III - situated towards Jogoo Road

Eastleigh is almost entirely inhabited by Muslims, except for a few indigenous residents. The suburb's commercial sector is likewise dominated by Somalis, with most if not all businesses owned by the Somali community residents. They have invested heavily in the enclave, contributing over \$1.5 billion in the neighbourhood alone.

As of September 2012, Eastleigh accounted for around 25% of the Nairobi City Council's tax revenues. Businesses in the suburb range from small stalls to shopping malls and night lodges. Products are typically imported from various parts of the world such as China and Dubai.

Mvita Constituency

Mvita Constituency is a constituency within Mombasa Island (county) in the Coastal Region of Kenya founded in 1988, with an approximate population of 143,128 people. It is predominantly inhabited by the Swahili and located within the Mombasa Central Business District.

Majority of the population are youth, most who are unemployed and jobless, often seen in cluster of groups sited idle within the *barazas* (a sitting area just outside the house along the street). The area is mostly famous for its grocery market that is mainly popular for the cheap prices one can get. However, shockingly

alongside these markets are usually unattended piles of garbage with the stench of rotting groceries often considered as disposal areas. These areas have created a health hazard but still remain unattended despite their unpleasant smell.

Methodology

Both areas were selected because they are dominated by Muslim youth and are both situated within an urban region. They are also notorious for solid waste. In an attempt to answer the research questions of this study and to achieve the set objectives and goals, both secondary and primary data was used.

The secondary data was based on a comprehensive review of literature where preliminary information was used from the statement of the problem to go through journal databases and a general search engine to find existing research on the topic of solid waste management. The primary data comprised of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion to help in having a clear understanding on why Muslim dominated areas were solid waste hotspots. This also covered whether the Muslims who lived in the areas consider proper waste disposal as a form of worship. To fill in the identified gap, interviews were organized with businessmen, religious leaders, and the youth, and an analysis of their input was done in line with the research questions. The research questions were curated to interrogate the following:

- Youth perspective on linkages between the Environment conservation and Faith;
- Relationship/engagement of youth with religious institutions, faith leaders and faith actors including Government and Non-governmental Organizations.

The research questions target resident youths, various youth CSO leaders and faith leaders. All respondents were guided through the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Number of youths interviewed- 120 (73 in Eastleigh; 47 in Mvita Constituency)

- All 120 (100% of interviewees)- agreed and acknowledged that environmental conservation is an aspect of the religion.
- On illegal disposal of waste, 90 (75% of interviewees) admitted throwing of litter inconsiderately without guilt, 24 (20% of interviewees) felt guilty, but cited lack of proper waste disposal areas as a justification for their actions, while 6 (0.05% of interviewees)
- 109 (90% of interviewees) cited that neglect by local authority and institutions was the major reason why the areas remained hotspots for illegal waste disposal, while 11 (10% of interviewees) admitted a lack of personal responsibility on their part as the cause.
- 48 (40% of interviewees) admitted that enough is not done by their local faith leaders to create awareness on environmental conservation

On CSO's or Youth Engagement with Religious Institutions, Government and Non-Governmental Organizations

- 53 (40% of interviewees) admitted to not engaging with Religious Institutions, Government and Non-Governmental Organizations at any level to address various environmental issues.
- 44 (36.6% of interviewees) cited partial involvement/engagement with Religious Institutions, and NGO's specifically on environment conservation programs involving capacity building or training

DISCUSSION

There are various reasons that can be drawn used to explain why the nexus between religious or faith institutions as viable mobilizing agents and the youth has changed.

1. Leadership neglect.

The Administration of Nairobi and Mombasa is chaotic, with the city councils and the Central Government often clashing, duplicating roles, and causing confusion. Moreover, policymakers (city council) are generally poorly educated and lack any power to discipline City Council workers.

Local faith leaders and religious institutions in turn lack leadership structures that can effectively engage the city council to intervene and prohibit illegal disposal of waste. Often those that exist, lack sustainable funding to engage effectively, or are visibly unrecognized as religious institutions by locals, or are perceived as political pathways for local leaders to advance their political motives for top government positions.

This association creates distrust among the youth on such institutions, often feeling they are generally unable to express their concerns to the relevant authorities. This combined with mismanagement of the few resources allocated to those leaders/ institutions and general chaos for leadership have become the hallmarks of the administrative system of the areas. (Solid waste management in Eastleigh by Abdirahim Mohamed Ibrahim).

2. Social Media Engagement

The emergence of social media has changed the way youth view the world. They are no longer limited to the geographical, cultural or religious boundaries that once bound their understanding of religion and faith

within a specific geographical, religious or cultural sphere. The youth can now use various social media platforms to articulate their agenda. The mainstream Media has had to borrow and update their information from the knowledge of the youth as displayed in the social media. The social media vibe has also meant that the youth have devised ways of interacting, not just in their social lives, but also in religious affairs, whether negative or positive (Religion and Development in Africa, 2020). Religious institutions need to recognize these changes and be willing to change their traditional approach and adapt to the changes that social media has brought to engage with the youth effectively.

A majority of youth resonate with online platforms such as Instagram and Facebook which have no boundaries and are not morally regulated. While youth are jumping to the latest trends and forms of communication and engagement, a majority of religious institutions have fallen back to engage effectively in this space. As a result, they lose their youth congregation to online groups which are not morally regulated, but are very appealing, and advocate for issues such as environmental conservation without linkage to scriptures. This disconnect further distances the youth on understanding of such a problem and the linkage of religion and faith.

3. The Disconnect: What's in it for me?

According to Kristian & Hanne (2008:352), despite its intensity, influence and magnitude, worldwide, religion is a multifaceted phenomenon, which shapes one's explanation of its very role in the society. The two scholars further argue that within the discipline of religious studies, it is common to distinguish between to basic perspectives; on the one hand, there is the substantive approach which focuses on the elements that constitute religion, or what religion is. This is contrasted on the other hand by the functionalist approach, which focuses on the social and cultural consequences of religion, or what religion does for

a social group or for an individual (Religion and Development in Africa, (2020)).

For many, religion represents hope and gives a sense of purpose or identity to many youths who undergo various challenges. They remain optimistic in their faith, that God will still open doors for them and improve their lives. For others, it is simply the gain, 'What can religion do for me?' approach. While so many grassroots informal CSO groups are driven by the youth, majority of their members are usually jobless often left with nothing but to keep themselves busy with anything that can replace their aggression and disappointment such as charity work or community service. While they still engage in advocating for environmental conservation, i.e., collecting of plastic waste, or cleaning of storm water drainage, they often lack the motivation and capacity to continue such work. Only a few fully commit to the cause while majority become fully absorbed in the search for opportunities and better livelihoods.

It is evident that Muslim youths, have taken a back seat in solving some of the environmental issues in the society. As much as this can be attributed to the challenges they face, there is need for religious institutions, government and non-governmental actors to intervene and equip these groups with the necessary skills and build their capacity to enable them grow sustainably as they try to conserve the environment. There is a need for them to be occasionally funded with tokens of incentives by NGO's and Religious institutions to support their work and recognize their efforts. This could be also done through occasional training to help them build skills that could help them fend for themselves. While addressing such underlying issues of youth, the association of the youth with religious institutions could change. Using the religious spaces as avenues for these trainings and avenues for job creation in collaboration with NGO's could rekindle the relationship and engagement with faith that has been lost over time among the youth.

There is also need for the county and central government to realize the significant contribution these informal CSO's and youth are making in conserving the environment, and the need to develop programs that can build their capacity to develop them as leaders through the collaboration of religious institutions and various organizations in the public and private sector. This could help the government to achieving some of the goals and policies set out in their National Action plans in Environmental conservation.

4. The Islamic perspective

The Islamic perspective on environment protection reflects a positive image about Islam and youth and how it embraces every single matter the humans face on earth. The Islamic attitude towards environment and natural resource conservation is not only based on prohibition of overexploitation but also on sustainable development. The Holy Qur'an says: "It is He who has appointed you viceroys in the earth ... that He may try you in what He has given you." (Surah 6:165) "O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters." (Surah 7:31). Prophet Muhammad (SAW) encouraged the planting of trees and the cultivation of agriculture which are considered as good acts.

This is illustrated in the following traditions: Narrated by Anas bin Malik (RA) that Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him." (Bukhari). Islam is against the cutting or destruction of plants and trees unnecessarily as is evident in the following Hadith: Abdullah ibn Habashi reported that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: "He who cuts a lote-tree [without justification], Allah will send him to Hellfire." (Abu Dawud). The lote-tree grows in the desert and is very much needed in an area which has scarce vegetation. The devastation caused by deforestation in many countries causes soil erosion and kills many of the biodiversity of the earth.

The approach of Islam towards the use of natural resources was brilliantly put forward by the

Fourth Caliph Hazrat Ali ibn Abi-Talib (RA) who said "Partake of it gladly so long as you are the benefactor, not a despoiler; a cultivator, not a destroyer. All human beings as well as animals and wildlife enjoy the right to share Earth's resources. Man's abuse of any resource is prohibited as the juristic principle says 'What leads to the prohibited is itself prohibited.

CONCLUSION

Environmental awareness and protection of natural resource is an integral part of Islamic beliefs. As viceroys of Allah on this earth, we have to utilize natural resources in a sustainable manner in order to ensure that Allah's Bounties to continue. The principle of conservation is beautifully illustrated by the rule that says that while making ablutions (wudhu) we should be abstemious in the use of water even if we have a river at our disposal. As humans, we are keepers of all creation, including soil, air, water, animals and trees. A major objective of Islamic teachings and Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) traditions is to build and maintain a healthy and clean environment which is devoid of any source of pollution and misuse. (Islam and environmental protection by Fatuma Albanna)

Environmental awareness should be done by youth within Mosques, public *barazas* and recycling used papers by reusing them in Mosques in order to store shoes. Spaces for youth to engage with religious leaders and learn valuable teachings from scriptures should be created. This should embrace the new way of working by engaging audiences online through social media. Students, faculty members, and co-workers can be motivated to donate a nominal amount of money towards the plantation campaign. Keeping plants around your home, school or workplace is not only aesthetic and decorative but also keeps you healthy and improves indoor air quality. According to Hazrat Jabir (RA) reported that Prophet Muhammad

[S.A.W] said: “No Muslim, who plants a shoot, except that whatever is eaten or stolen from it, or anyone obtains the least thing from it, is considered [like paying] almsgiving on his behalf until the Day of Judgement.” (Muslim) (Islam and environmental protection by Fatuma Albanna)

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