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Obligatory Almsgiving
An Inquiry into *Zakāt* in the Pre-colonial
Bilād al-Sūdān

by
Holger Weiss



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PREFACE

This book originated as an attempt to place the introduction of *zakāt* as a tax in the Sokoto Caliphate within a larger context. My attempt was to list and compare various efforts to introduce an “Islamic” system of taxation, i.e., one which its propagators identified as resting on Islamic law and was collected and controlled by an Islamic government in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the course of time, my survey led me to investigate various polities throughout Sudanic Africa. Sudanic Africa, or perhaps more commonly known by its Arabic name, Bilād as-Sūdān, or “the land of the Blacks south of the Sahara” is a region stretching from Senegambia in the west to the Nilotic Sudan in the east.

At first, my purpose was only to prepare a kind of short-list of all those political entities where *zakāt* could be identified as being part of the public domain of a political entity. In the end, however, I ended up making an odyssey through time and space, noting many attempts by Muslim rulers to introduce Islamic taxation, but only a few of which were to last for a period longer than a few years or even decades.

Zakāt turned out to be a much more complex issue than I had imagined at the beginning of my survey. Whereas it has been a relatively easy task for any political and religious reformer to demand the introduction of what was called Islamic taxation, the transformation of an idea and concept into a fiscal policy was almost always a much more difficult task. On the other hand, during my odyssey through Sudanic Africa, I realized that my investigation into *zakāt* could not be limited to the public and ideological/religious sphere alone. Outside, and often parallel, to the public domain of a political entity, *zakāt* was collected and distributed within enclaves of Muslim communities, such as the communities of “holy men” or Sūfī shaiḫs. At the same time, it turned out that *sadaqa*, private and voluntary almsgiving, had an even more profound importance than *zakāt* in the everyday life of both Muslims and non-Muslims in Sudanic Africa. Thus, although many of the reformers failed to introduce *zakāt* as a public duty, *sadaqa* became the basis of the moral economy in Sudanic Africa.

Many scholars have contributed in one or another way to the shaping this book and directing my ideas. My debts, scholarly and private, are legion. First, I owe my greatest debt to my friend and colleague Roman Loimeier who read and critically commented on an earlier version of the text. Over a decade ago I already started to discuss matters of *zakāt* with my colleagues in Bayreuth who gave

endless support: Roman, Franz Kogelmann, Rüdiger Seesemann and Gottfried Müller. In Toronto, researchers in Professor Paul Lovejoy's research seminar gave me valuable criticism as did the participants in the SNID-research seminar at Queens University in Kingston (Ontario) as well as Anders Bjørkelo and Knut Vikør at the Centre for Islamic Studies at Bergen university. Bob Shenton and Paul Lovejoy kindly opened their personal archives for my use, and I had endless discussions with Bob about my ideas. At a later stage, Hajj Mumuni Sulemana further added to my understanding of the complexity of *zakāt*. Last, but not least, the late Michael Cowen gave me his full backing and support 24 hours a day during his years in Helsinki. Without his encouragement and our friendship, I would have ended my odyssey somewhere in the middle of the Sahara, never reaching my destination.

My research was first financed through a research project from the University of Helsinki and later on through funds from the Academy of Finland. The librarians of the Institute of Development Studies as well as Helsinki University Library were always helpful. Margot Stout Whiting struggled with my English, and Kaj Öhrnberg and Juha Laulainen assisted me in finishing and editing my manuscript. Henrika Lax drew the cover picture. And during all these years of searching, Minna, Rasmus and Anni have been supplying an endless amount of joy in my life.

Helsinki, 13 June 2002
Holger Weiss

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