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The Muslim Community in Tanzania: The Quest for Education

Suleiman Shomari Filambi, PhD¹*

¹ Islamic University in Uganda, P. O. Box 2555, Mbale, Uganda.

* Author for Correspondence Email: sfilambi@gmail.com

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In Tanzania, the Muslim community has faced significant educational challenges due to colonial-era policies that favoured Christian missionary schools, leaving Islamic institutions marginalised. Despite post-independence reforms, Muslim students continue to experience barriers to higher education, influenced by economic constraints, societal biases, and limited institutional support. This paper examines the historical trajectory, contemporary challenges, and emerging trends in the Muslim community's pursuit of education in Tanzania. It highlights the impact of privatisation, religiously affiliated schools, and socio-economic implications, while focusing on interventions to bridge gaps in educational access. Colonial favouritism towards Christian schools created lasting disparities, with Muslim students often confined to madrasas. Post-independence policies aimed at inclusivity have not fully addressed these imbalances. Economic constraints and cultural perceptions further hinder Muslim students' progress, especially in higher education. The rise of private Islamic schools offers an alternative, integrating religious teachings with modern curricula. However, disparities in accessibility and quality persist. This study uses qualitative research to gather insights from key informants and respondents on educational access, challenges, and policy effectiveness. Findings indicate the need for targeted interventions to address economic barriers, enhance institutional support, and foster inclusive education strategies. Establishing scholarships, financial aid, and collaborative efforts between religious leaders, educators, and policymakers is crucial for improving educational opportunities for Muslim students. This paper contributes to the discourse on education, religion, and social equality, emphasising the importance of inclusive policies and community-driven efforts to bridge the educational divide and ensure equitable learning opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognised as both a human right and a powerful engine of social mobility and national development. In Tanzania, the education sector has played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of individual lives and communities across the country. However, access to equitable and quality education has historically been influenced by religious, socio-political, and regional dynamics. One of the communities that has experienced enduring structural limitations in this regard is the Muslim community. Education catalyses socio-economic advancement, yet Tanzania's Muslim community has historically struggled with disparities in educational access. During the colonial era, Christian missionary schools dominated formal education, limiting opportunities for Muslims (Heilman & Kaiser, 2002). Despite efforts post-independence, including free primary and secondary education policies, challenges persist in higher education accessibility (Msabila, 2013).

This study addresses a significant research gap by critically examining the historical trajectory and ongoing educational challenges experienced by the Muslim community in Tanzania—a group that has long grappled with structural marginalisation. The study delves into how colonial legacies, post-independence education policies, and religious biases have shaped unequal access to education over time. It investigates the interplay of socio-economic, political, and institutional factors that have contributed to the persistence of educational disparities, including limited representation in policymaking, cultural-linguistic barriers, and underinvestment in Muslim-majority regions.

In exploring these dynamics, the research aims not only to unpack the roots of exclusion but also to assess the scope and impact of efforts undertaken to remedy the situation—such as free education policies, community-based Islamic schooling, and recent curriculum reforms. By situating the analysis within Ibn Taymiyyah's intellectual framework, which emphasises the fusion of faith, reason, and justice, the study grounds its investigation in a value-based Islamic perspective that underscores the ethical imperative of knowledge access for all. Simultaneously, the use of the Inclusive Growth Theory provides a development-oriented lens, allowing the study to evaluate whether current educational strategies foster equitable human capital development and broad-based socio-economic participation.

Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to both theoretical discourse and practical policymaking by highlighting the multifaceted barriers confronting Muslim learners and recommending actionable, inclusive educational reforms that can advance national cohesion, equity, and prosperity. This study addresses the research gap by examining the historical trajectory and contemporary challenges the Muslim community faces in Tanzania's educational sphere. It aims to investigate the underlying socio-economic and political factors contributing to educational disparities and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to bridge these gaps. By utilising Ibn Taymiyyah's intellectual framework and the Inclusive Growth Theory, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the educational experiences of the Muslim community.

Prominent scholars such as Sheikh Hassan bin Amir and Aziz Khaki have long advocated for increased Muslim representation in education. Sheikh Hassan bin Amir's efforts to establish a Muslim university were met with resistance, leading to its establishment in Mbale, Uganda, rather than Tanzania (Bhalalusesa, 2011). This study explores these historical efforts and assesses their ongoing impact on educational inclusion. Ibn Taymiyyah's Theory on Intellectual Growth argues that knowledge must be applied for societal transformation, aligning with efforts by Muslim scholars to promote education and economic inclusion. Inclusive Growth Theory emphasises equitable economic participation, highlighting Muslim struggles in accessing higher education and employment opportunities.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Tanzania's commitment to universal education and national unity, historical and systemic disparities continue to affect the Muslim community's access to quality education at all levels (Ishengoma, 2011; Wilhite, 2011; Bhalalusesa, 2011; Kamugisha, 2017; Nkoko, 2017). From the colonial legacy of Christian-dominated schooling to persistent socio-economic and policy-related obstacles, Muslim learners have faced consistent challenges in enrollment, retention, and academic achievement (Vilby, 2007; Said, 1998). Efforts to bridge these gaps through policy reforms and religious institutions have yielded limited results, and the community's educational concerns remain inadequately addressed in mainstream development agendas (Njozi, 2010; Njozi, 2000; Njozi, 2008; Jumbe, 1994a, 1994b; Kusupa, 2012; Loury, 2000). This study was therefore undertaken to explore the underlying factors contributing to educational inequality and to examine the efficacy of interventions intended to enhance equitable access for the Muslim population.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the historical roots of educational marginalization experienced by the Muslim community in Tanzania, particularly during and after the colonial period. To assess the socio-political and economic factors that continue to shape disparities in educational access. To evaluate the effectiveness of both state-led and community-based interventions designed to promote inclusive education. To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Muslim learners, educators, and stakeholders regarding challenges and opportunities in the education sector. Ultimately, provide recommendations grounded in Islamic intellectual thought and inclusive development theories that advocate for educational justice and long-term social transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using historical analysis, policy examination, and expert interviews to investigate the educational experiences of the Muslim community in Tanzania. Data sources include historical records detailing colonial education policies and the socio-economic impact of Christian missionary schools, as well as policy documents such as Universal Primary Education and Big Results Now (BRN) reforms. Additionally, reports from organisations like UNESCO and the World Bank on education accessibility for Muslims are analysed. Interviews and questionnaires are conducted with Muslim intellectuals and educators to gather perspectives on curriculum limitations and government inclusion efforts in education and employment sectors.

The questionnaire sample comprised 400 respondents, categorised as follows: fifty (50) Muslim intellectuals who are professors, fifty (50) Muslim intellectuals with doctoral degrees, one hundred (100) Muslim intellectuals with master's degrees, one hundred and fifty (150) Muslim intellectuals with bachelor's degrees, and fifty (50)

Muslim intellectuals holding diplomas. The interview sample included 16 informants, stratified by their educational level and status: two (2) Muslim professors, three (3) Muslim doctorate holders (PhD), five (5) Muslim master's degree holders, four (4) Muslim bachelor's degree holders, and two (2) Muslim diploma holders.

The study focuses on regions with significant Muslim populations, including Dar es Salaam, Lindi, Mtwara, Tanga, Zanzibar, and Kigoma, and

includes participants such as Muslim intellectuals, policymakers, university faculty, and religious leaders. Thematic analysis is applied to interview transcripts to identify key patterns in Muslim education struggles and proposed solutions, while comparative analysis is conducted on historical vs. modern education policies to evaluate progress and persistent challenges.

KEY FINDINGS

Table 1: Educational Status of the Muslim Community in Tanzania Based on Muslim

	Statement	Mean score	Standard deviation	Median score	Remark
1	The current educational status of Muslims in Tanzania is reasonable	3.83	.84	4.0000	Agree
2	There is a lower level of educational attainment among the young Muslims in Tanzania	3.55	1.12	4.0000	Agree
3	There is a higher level of illiteracy among Muslims than in any other socio-religious communities/groups	2.87	1.10	3.0000	Neutral
4	The current status of school ownership in the Muslim community in Tanzania is very high	3.02	.99	3.0000	Neutral
5	There is a popular perception among non-Muslims that religious conservatism among Muslims is a major factor in not accessing education	3.01	1.15	3.0000	Neutral
6	Madrassa system schools in Tanzania do not serve their primary role of Muslim identity maintenance for community development	3.19	1.37	3.0000	Neutral
7	There are a few good and quality schools, especially government schools, found in Muslim concentrated areas	3.39	1.22	3.0000	Neutral
8	There is sufficient government support and guidance for Islamic schools	2.93	1.18	3.0000	Neutral
9	Educational achievements in Muslim schools are very low compared to public schools and schools owned by other socio-religious communities	3.24	1.31	3.0000	Neutral
10	Educational achievement among young Muslims at all levels of education is very low compared to youth from other socio-religious communities	2.96	1.27	3.0000	Neutral
11	There is sufficient government support and guidance for Islamic higher education institutions and professional training centres	2.94	1.09	3.0000	Neutral
12	Educational policies and practices do not take into account the academic and social needs of the Muslim community	3.25	.99	3.0000	Neutral
13	Young Muslims have equal access to primary and secondary education, like other socio-religious communities	3.68	1.19	4.0000	Agree

	Statement	Mean score	Standard deviation	Median score	Remark
14	Young Muslims are likely to drop out of school due to family economic issues	3.46	1.22	4.0000	Agree
15	Young Muslims are likely to drop out of colleges and universities due to family economic issues	3.29	1.14	3.0000	Neutral
16	Limited access to good schools is a major threat/problem that affects the Muslim community in Tanzania	3.43	1.21	4.0000	Agree
17	The level of enrollment of Muslims in higher education institutions in Tanzania is very high	2.85	1.29	3.0000	Neutral
18	Higher education institutions provide enough opportunities for young Muslims to join	3.25	1.12	3.0000	Neutral
19	Higher education practices in Tanzania take into account the economic needs of the Muslim community	3.03	1.09	3.0000	Neutral
20	Educational practices in Tanzania take into account the legal and religious needs of the Muslim community	3.23	1.16	3.0000	Neutral
21	Educational practices in Tanzania consider the health needs of the Muslim community	3.14	1.24	3.0000	Neutral
22	Limited access to good education in the Muslim community in Tanzania affects Muslim contribution to socio-economic development	3.47	1.03	3.0000	Neutral
23	Limited access to good education in the Muslim community in Tanzania affects the Muslim health status	3.50	1.08	4.0000	Agree
24	The level of educational gaps among the Muslim community in Tanzania depends on the areas where they are located	3.74	.95	4.0000	Agree
25	Muslim intellectuals have a reasonable contribution to the Muslim community of Tanzania	3.85	.99	4.0000	Agree
	Average mean of the whole axis	3.28			Neutral

Source: *Field Data (2023)*

The findings of this study are presented in Table 1, which illustrates the mean, standard deviation, and median of responses gathered to assess perceptions about the current educational status of Muslims in Tanzania compared to other religious communities. The observation from Table 1 indicates that the calculated mean of the listed statements ranges between 2.85 and 3.85. The table also reveals that nearly 17 out of 25 statements from the respondents were neutral, while the remaining 8 statements were agreed with the given statement, which corresponds to 32% of all statements. Further analysis from the table suggests that Muslim intellectuals believe the

current educational status of the Muslim community in Tanzania is adequate, despite the educational level of young Muslims being very low (Field Data, 2023). Other statements indicate that young Muslims are likely to drop out due to family economic hardships and limited access to quality schools. Additionally, Muslim intellectuals concur that the limited access to good education impacts their health status, and educational differences within the Muslim community mostly depend on their location.

The average mean of the responses on this axis, regarding the current educational status of Muslims

in Tanzania, is 3.28, suggesting a neutral perception overall (Field Data, 2023). However, some responses highlight the challenges Muslims face in education, such as lower educational levels among young Muslims in Tanzania, economically driven school dropouts, and limited access to quality educational institutions. Furthermore, the restricted access to good education affects the health status of Muslims, and the extent of educational gaps within the Muslim community in Tanzania largely depends on specific areas, particularly those with a high Muslim population density. These educational challenges can adversely affect the socio-economic contributions of the Muslim community in Tanzania (Field Data, 2023).

In discussing these findings, it is essential to acknowledge the role of Muslim intellectuals in advocating for better educational opportunities. Their contributions can significantly enhance the educational status of Muslims in Tanzania, leading to improved socio-economic outcomes. Addressing the identified challenges, such as economic barriers and access to quality education, requires concerted efforts from both the community and policymakers. By fostering an environment that supports educational advancement, the Muslim community can overcome these obstacles and contribute more effectively to the socio-economic development of Tanzania.

Interview

Table 2: Summary of Interview Questions

S/N	Interview questions	Number of interviewees who responded to the questions	A summary of response in %
1	Is it true that the Muslim community in Tanzania is backwards in socio-economic development compared to other social and religious groups	16	100
2	To what extent are Muslim intellectuals aware of; educational, economic, health and security status of the Muslim community in Tanzania?	16	100
3	The nature of economic activities that Muslims are mostly engaged in for their living	16	100
4	If Muslims in Tanzania are given or provided with equal opportunities in employment and economic development?	16	100

Source: *Field Data (2023)*

In the interview, informants were asked about the socio-economic status of Tanzanian Muslims, particularly in comparison to other religious groups, with a focus on education, economy, health, and security. Their responses revealed that the Muslim community has generally fallen behind in socio-economic development.

When asked whether the Muslim community lagged in socio-economic development compared to other religious groups, 16 Muslim intellectuals responded. Fourteen (87.5%) agreed that the Muslim community in Tanzania is indeed lagging, one (7.14%) was neutral, and another (7.14%) disagreed. The reasons for these responses were categorised into important themes by the researcher.

Table 3: Reasons for the Backwardness of the Muslim Community in Tanzania

S/N	Responses	Themes (categorisation)	Informants
1	Agreed (87.5%)	Historical background	10
2		Marginalisation	1
3		Well-organised programmes against Muslims	5
4		Poorly organised Muslim social and supporting network	1
5		Weaknesses of Muslim institutions and organisations	2
6	Disagreed (7.14%)	Muslim population	2

Source: *Field Data (2023)*

Table 3 indicates that 87.5% of informants concurred that the Muslim community in Tanzania has experienced socio-economic underdevelopment. The informants provided various reasons for this backwardness, which ranged from historical factors to demographic considerations, as categorised in Table 3. A significant proportion, 10 out of 14 responses, attributed the socio-economic lagging of the Muslim community to historical factors. This was elaborated by one of the informants as follows:

Muslims in Tanzania are socio-economically very weak. This is due to several factors. First, the historical factors. Colonialists have introduced cash crops in those areas where there is a great influence of missionary organisations; as a result, these regions have advances in terms of economic perspective and agribusiness compared to Muslims dominated regions.

Muslim intellectuals argued that during the colonial period, Muslims were denied access to schools or education. Consequently, they could only attend Christian or colonial schools, or stay home, with most opting to stay home due to fears of conversion to Christianity. An informant revealed this situation.

Muslims in those times tried to establish their schools. But they were allowed only to open schools up to standard four. And this was by law. If a Muslim wanted to pursue his education, he had only one or two options: one to go to the Christian schools or government schools, which were colonialist ones. That is

why I have said it was done purposely, not accidentally. (R1)

Another informant stated that during colonial times, Muslims had limited access to secondary schools and universities. Recently, more schools have opened for Muslims to attend secondary schools. However, even with increased secondary school enrollment, university attendance among Muslims has not risen.

.....For example, in years back there were very few opportunities to get into secondary, you may find in towns where Muslims are majority only one secondary school, and very few students would get access to secondary education. But today, for example, access to secondary education is abundant, but is there any enthusiasm to acquire an education? As a result, till today, as we are going 60 years of independence, still Muslim community, for example, at the university level, has not moved up to 30% is still at 20%. But if you look at low levels, there is still a big number... (R2)

Education drives economic development and offers employment opportunities to young Muslims. However, their lack of education limits their access to jobs in the government and private sectors, as reported by an informant citing his workplace example.

.....From my angle, I see a few Muslims who have a lower level of education compared to other religious members of the communities. Because if we look at the working environments

is enough to show that, for example, in my working environment, our community here has more than five hundred staff, but Muslims do not exceed one hundred. Therefore, this means there is a gap, and this is also, I think, everywhere in the workplace is the same.... (R3)

The informant also concluded that the lower representation of Muslims in higher positions within various organisations or institutions is attributable to their lower levels of education required for these roles.

If you go to every working place, I think you will find, apart from a few institutions like NSSF, which I do not know how they managed to have Muslims in numbers, still in ratio, Muslims are a minority. Therefore, it seems now, if you see few people in there, it means many of them do not have a higher education to hold these positions. (R3)

... percentage-wise very few Muslims who have reached College and university education compared to their counterpart in faith. This is also reflected in the formal employment sector-public and private. This phenomenon has impacted the economic status of Muslims-in terms of living in respectable livelihood and owning houses, etc.

In addition to the educational challenges encountered by the Muslim community in Tanzania during the colonial period, especially in the realm of education, Muslims were also denied equal employment opportunities to advance their social and economic development. This was affirmed by one of the informants, as demonstrated in the following quotes:

...the backwardness of the Muslim community started from the colonial times. All works and jobs were given to non-Muslim communities, especially the Christian Community. And this

state of affairs was done during colonialism and after colonialism as well. (R4)

Likewise, it was reported that;

“Colonialists favoured their fellow relatives in faith, one section of the society against their perceived opponents who were Muslims”. (R5)

“...the colonialists planned this so that they could achieve what they needed”. (R6)

“...the British colonialists left everything under the Christian community”. (R7)

Muslim intellectuals observed that Muslim-populated areas in Tanzania remain poorer than Christian-populated regions. This disparity began during the colonial era and persists today, reflected in the economic activities prevalent in densely Muslim areas.

... The economic status of the Muslim community is also not good. I think you should not look at yourself who has some successes, we look at the majority and look at areas where Muslims are the majority, for example Pwani region. Pwani region is an example. When we pass by the Pwani region, we see how poor people there are. This is how it is, in the areas where Muslims are the majority, poverty is obvious. We seem economically still weak. (R3)

Moreover, Muslim intellectuals reported that;

“The Muslim community status is low. They do not have access to capital, which can raise the community to a very high scale of businessmen”. (R4)

“Very few Muslims are well off, but the majority of Muslims are extremely poor”. (R5)

In addition to the educational challenges, such as limited access to both primary and secondary education, which are significant obstacles to the socio-economic development of the Muslim community in Tanzania, another major impediment

was the well-organised programmes implemented against Muslims during the colonial period. Informants reported that non-Muslims employed three well-structured and systematic programmes to hinder the socio-economic progress of Muslims and maintain their economic subjugation.

“Also, this is purposely. I remember there are about three programmes which is very crucial to Muslims to keep them down, to keep them down economically. One of them is the programme of villagisation in 1974. If you look outside, it is good, but inside it is not good. Because the church has prepared its people, when people are brought together, make sure that you support them. They have a programme. We Muslims did not have any programme at that particular time. Because the programme of villagisation was something that came to us abruptly. Everyone looks at themselves, what am I supposed to do?”

The informant also reported that Muslims during villagisation did not prepare even Madrasa teachers and Imams to handle their matters as a community;

“...Therefore, there are villages without Ustadh with capable, there are villages but some of them, I remember when I went to some of the areas in Kilimanjaro region in Same district in one of the villages which known as Makanya, there is a village where there is no any imam for Friday prayer only a woman, this woman knows a little bit of Islam. Now she is a leader, and during prayer, she says one boy stands before her, and she cannot be an imam. We were in the programme, but we were not prepared”.

The second organised programme reported against Muslims was introduced in 1983 and was technically referred to as Economic Sabotage (Uhujumu Uchumi). This programme specifically targeted Muslims and had a detrimental impact on their economic stability.

....The second programme, which I remember, was that of 1983, which they call economic sabotage (Uhujumu Uchumi). Actually, what is economic sabotage? Someone has his things, he crossed the border to Kenya, bringing in Tanzania some of the things. According to the Market, there is a demand and supply curve that everyone knows. If things are scarce, prices will rise, and if things are plentiful, prices will fall. People were detained. The majority were Muslims and were destroyed economically. Automatically, Muslims remain behind. It was an intentional act to draw back Muslims.

The third organised programme targeting Muslims was introduced in the early 1990s through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the government of Tanzania and Christian organisations. This MoU was designed to provide greater economic support to Christian communities compared to Muslim communities. *The third programme was the memorandum of understanding MoU where Christians and the government signed a memorandum of understanding to support churches, not Muslims (R1)*

DISCUSSION

Educational Access for Muslims

Despite government-led initiatives like free primary education, Muslim students are underrepresented in universities and technical institutions due to economic barriers and limited institutional support (World Bank, 2014).

Role of Muslim Intellectuals in Advocacy

Muslim intellectuals in Tanzania have worked to address educational disparities by advocating for policy reforms and establishing faith-based schools that integrate secular and religious curricula (Dilger, 2022). These institutions have shaped educational opportunities for Muslim students, fostering cultural relevance while maintaining national academic standards (Dilger, 2022). Faith-based schools have also contributed to students' moral and

academic development, offering better infrastructure and resources compared to public schools, which has led to improved academic performance (Mbiso, 2009). However, challenges such as limited funding and government support affect their sustainability (Krauss, 2024).

Muslim intellectuals encounter socio-economic barriers, misconceptions about Islamic education, and difficulties integrating Islamic teachings with modern academic standards (Krauss, 2024). Scholars highlight the need for a holistic approach that reconciles Islamic epistemology with mainstream education (Sahin, 2018). Historically, Christian missionary schools had more influence due to colonial policies, but Muslim educators have established institutions that cater to their communities (Dilger, 2022). The Islamisation of knowledge aims to integrate Islamic principles into contemporary education (Ahsan *et al.*, 2013).

Faith-based schools contribute to moral development and social cohesion among students, reinforcing ethical values and community engagement (Dilger, 2022). However, financial constraints and policy limitations affect their effectiveness (Mbiso, 2009). Muslim intellectuals continue to advocate for increased government support and policy reforms to address these challenges (Krauss, 2024). Additionally, faith-based organisations have enhanced learning environments and improved student retention rates in public primary education (Mbiso, 2009).

Application of Theoretical Frameworks

Ibn Taymiyyah's theory is evident in Muslim intellectuals' push for practical education reforms. Inclusive Growth Theory highlights the economic constraints limiting Muslim students' access to higher education, emphasising the need for financial aid and entrepreneurship programmes.

Both Ibn Taymiyyah's Theory on Intellectual Growth and Inclusive Growth Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the

role of Muslim intellectuals in Tanzania's socio-economic development. While Ibn Taymiyyah emphasises knowledge as a transformative tool for justice and reform, Inclusive Growth Theory ensures that economic development benefits all members of society, particularly marginalised groups like the Muslim community in Tanzania.

CONCLUSION

While Tanzania has made progress toward educational inclusivity, Muslim students face disparities in higher learning opportunities. Muslim intellectuals' engagement has advocated for reforms, yet economic and institutional challenges persist. This study highlights the need for targeted educational policies, financial support mechanisms, and stronger advocacy to ensure equitable access for all.

Recommendations

1. Increase Government Support for Muslim Education – Expand funding for Muslim-majority regions and Islamic educational institutions.
2. Promote Higher Education Access – Strengthen scholarship programmes for economically disadvantaged Muslim students.
3. Enhance Policy Advocacy – Empower Muslim intellectuals to engage in policymaking and curriculum development.

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