

ISLAM AND AFRICA

by

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[The famous Arab historian Ibn Khaldun says that the name Ifriqiya was given after Ifriqos bin Qais bin Saifi, one of the Kings of Yemen. To Al-Bakri, the boundries of Ifriqiya were Barga on the East and Tangier on the West, which means that in addition to the Africa proper of the Romans, it included Tripolitania, Numidia and Mauritania. Today, by the use of the word Ifriqiya or Africa, the Arabs as well as non-Arabs mean the entire continent of Africa which includes North Africa (including the Maghrib), East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, and South Africa. It was significant that the first shelter of early Muslims was in Africa (Abyssinia, 615 CE). By the time Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) began his mission, the Egyptians and Syrians had partially severed their active link with the Roman Empire.]

When the Arab conquest began in 647 CE, the Exarch Gregory had already denounced allegiance to Constantinople and had proclaimed himself as an Emperor. In Egypt, the native Copts were instructed by their bishop in Alexandria to offer no resistance to the Arab Muslims marching toward Egypt. The first serious attempt to expand Islam in Africa is credited to 'Uqabah (Okba) b. Nafi, who is revered to this day as the founder of Muslim Africa. In most of the areas conquered, the former religions of those areas, whether Christianity, zoroastrianism, Judaism or indigenous cults, continued to survive, without generally any oppression for centuries after the conquest by Muslim armies. Thus even in those areas where political authority was in the hands of Muslims owing allegiance to the central power of the Caliphate in Damascus or Baghdad, the actual Islamization of the population was generally a fairly slow process of absorption.

Islam spread in North Africa with remarkable speed, and by the year 732 C.E., which marked the first centennial of Muhammed's death, his followers were the masters of an empire greater than that of Rome at its Zenith, an empire extending from the Bay of Biscay to the Indus and the confines of China and from the Aral Sea to the lower contracts of the Nile. The name of the Prophet, as Messenger of God along with the name of God [Allah] was being called out five times a day from thousands of minarets scattered all over North Africa, South-Western Europe, and Western and Central Asia.]

The Old Ifriqiya (Africa) and its Boundaries

The Arabs call Africa Ifriqiya. They gave this name to the Eastern part of Barbary [1], and called the western part of Barbary the Maghrib, the name used until today [2]. The Romans called it Africa after the destruction of Carthage. They included Barbary in it and later called the whole continent as Africa. Al Bakri interprets the word Ifriqiya as the Queen of Heaven [3]. Al-Masudi holds another view that the name Ifriqiya is given after the name of Ifrigos bin Abraha bin al-Raish who built the town of Ifriqiya in the Berber country [4]. The famous Arab historian [Ibn Khaldun](#) says that the name Ifriqiya was given after Ifriqos bin Qais bin Saifi, one of the Kings of Yemen [5]. Some other

historians hold that it comes from the name of Ifriq, son of Quatura, the second wife of the Patriarch [Prophet Abraham, pbuh]. Ibn al-Shabbat says that the name is derived from the Arabic word Bariq meaning 'Clear,' because "in Africa there are no clouds in the sky" [6].

Leo Africanus suggests that Ifriqiya comes from the Arabic word Farawa which means 'to divide' since the Mediterranean divides Africa from Europe while the Nile separates it from Asia. Second, Africa lies between the East and the West. Ibn Abi Dinar [7] also gives the same interpretation. But to Al-Bakri, Ibn Khaldun, and Leo Africanus, the word Ifriqiya did not mean the entire continent of Africa as we know it today. To Al-Bakri, the boundaries of Ifriqiya were Barga on the East and Tangier on the West, which means that in addition to the Africa proper of the Romans, it included Tripolitania, Numidia and Mauritania. Leo Africanus, distinguished the Numidia from Ifriqiya, like [Al-Idrisi](#), Ibn Khaldun called Ifriqiya the central and the northern part of Tunisia. Until the 17th century, scholars understand the land of Qairawan. Today, by the use of the word Ifriqiya or Africa, the Arabs as well as non-Arabs mean the entire continent of Africa which includes North Africa (including the Maghrib), East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, and South Africa.

Islam and Africa

Prophet Muhammad, who was born in 571 C.E., preached the message of Islam until his death in 632 C.E. The early contact of Islam with Africa began during the lifetime of the Prophet. He taught the Oneness of God and abolition of priesthood. The Quaraishites - the priestly class of the Arabs - began to persecute him and his early followers. When their oppression went beyond limits, the Prophet advised the Muslims to migrate and seek shelter in some other part of the world. Acting on his advice, the first batch of Muslims migrated to Abyssinia and sought refuge with Negus, a Christian king of Abyssinia in the year 615 C.E. It was significant that the first shelter of early Muslims was in Africa, and their host who stood firm with them was also an African.

Ibn Hisham has given a vivid picture of these first Muslim-Arab refugees in the court of Negus who were followed by their oppressors, the Quraishites, even up to Abyssinia and wanted to take them back to Arabia. In spite of the appeal of the Quraishite delegation, Negus did not leave the Muslims in the hands of their enemies; on the contrary, he asked Ja'far bin Abi Talib, one of the emigrants, to explain why they had fled Makkah. Ja'far reply has been recorded by Ibn Hisham in the following words:

"We were the Jahilliya (ignorant) people, worshipping idols, and violating peace, with a strong man among us always devouring the weak. Such was our state until God [[Allah](#)] sent to us a messenger from amongst ourselves whose ancestry is known to us, and whose veracity, fidelity and purity we recognise. It was the Prophet who summoned us to God in order to profess him as One and worship Him alone, discarding whatever stones and idols we and our forefathers worshipped instead of God. He, moreover, commanded us to be truthful in our talks, to render to others what is due for them, to stand by our families and to refrain from doing wrong and shedding blood. He forbade committing fornication, bearing false witness, depriving the Orphan of his legitimate right and speaking ill of chaste women. He enjoined on us worship of God alone, associating with Him no other and practice fasting." [8]

Africa on the Eve of Expansion of Islam

The power of the Roman Empire was sapped by religious discord. By the time Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) began his mission, **the Egyptians and Syrians** had partially severed their active

link with the Roman Empire. In the year 634, during the first Caliphate of Islam under Abu Bakr, when the Muslim volunteers advanced with their faith toward new territories, [Abu Bakr](#) [ra] is reported to have instructed them "to do no harm to women, children and old people, to refrain from pillage and the destruction of crops, fruit trees, and herds, and to leave in peace Christian monks and authorities as might be found in their cells. [9]" When Abu Bakr [ra] died, his mission was taken over by Omar [[Umar ibn Al-Khattab](#), ra], the second Caliph of Islam (634-644).

The state of North Africa, on the eve of the Arab conquest, was far from secure or satisfactory. The Latin-speaking provinces were governed from Constantinople. Although the ecclesiastical policy of the House of Heraclius favored the Christology known as Monothelitism, or the doctrine of the single will, the Pope, under whose jurisdiction the African church fell, frowned upon it and repudiated it as heretical. When the Arab conquest began in 647 AD, the **Exarch Gregory** had already denounced allegiance to Constantinople and had proclaimed himself as an Emperor. The peasantry was so much oppressed that they had no inclination to fight for their masters. The native Berbers were highly disorganised and lacked leadership. Only those Berber clans, which had accepted a settled life as cultivators, carried some Byzantinian influence; but the others were kept beyond the reach of civilization. Christianity was not planted among them on a firm footing although there was some missionary work done; it is believed that the modern Tuaregs were once Christians.

In Egypt, the native Copts were instructed by their bishop in Alexandria to offer no resistance to the Arab Muslims marching toward Egypt. "This is not surprising" says Professor Phillip Hitti, [10] in view of the religious persecution to which they (Copts) as Monophysites had been subjected by the official Melkite (Royal) Church. For years Heraclius had tried through his agent Cyrus to forbid the Egyptian (Coptic) form of worship and to force his new Monothelite doctrine on a reluctant Church. On account of his relentless persecution of the priesthood of the Coptic Church, Cyrus was regarded as anti-Christ by the later native traditions in Egypt. In other words, the existence of Monophysite communities in Egypt and Syria and Nestorian congregations in Persia and Iraq, together with persecution by the Orthodox Church, paved the way for the surprisingly rapid progress of Islam. The Hamites of Egypt looked upon the Arabian new-comers as nearer of kin than their hated and oppressive alien overlords.

It was against this background that during the Caliphate of 'Umar b. al Khattab, the Muslim volunteer force, in 639 AD under the command of 'Amr b. Al'As penetrated into Egypt. During the days of Jahaliyyah [ignorance], 'Amr b. Al'As had made many caravan trips to Egypt and was familiar with its routes and cities. The following portrait of the advancing Muslim Arabs has been recorded by an envoy of Cyrus:

"We have witnessed a people to each and every one of whom death is preferable to life, and humanity to prominence, and to none of whom this world has the least attraction. They sit not except on the ground, and eat not but on their knees. Their leader (Amir) is like unto one of them: the low cannot be distinguished from the high, nor the master from the slave. And when the time of prayer comes none of them absents himself, all wash their extremities and humbly observe their prayer."

'Amr built the new capital on the site of his camp and named it al-Fustat (Old Cairo). He erected a simple mosque there in 641-642, the first to be used in Egypt. 'Amr cleared the ancient Pharaonic Canal to open a direct waterway to the holy cities of Arabia. It was named as Khalij Amir al-Mumineen, the Canal of the Caliph.

In reference to the expansion of Islam in Egypt, a story is concocted that by the Caliph's order 'Amr for six-long months fed the numerous bath-furnaces of the city with the volumes of Alexandrian

library. Professor Philip Hitti refutes it saying:

"(It) is one of those tales that make good fiction but bad history. The great ptolemaic library was burnt as early as 48 BC by Julius Caesar. A later one, referred to as the Daughter Library, was destroyed about AD 389 as a result of an edict by Emperor Theodosius. At the time of the Arab conquest, therefore, no library of importance existed in Alexandria and no contemporary writer ever brought the charge against 'Amr or 'Umar."

'Amr's founding of Fustat gave rise to a number of mosques and Madrasahs (Islamic Schools) in Egypt, which helped in disseminating Islam to other parts of Africa and Asia.

The fall of Egypt made the Byzantine provinces, bordering on its west, defenseless. Later Bargah was included in the Islamic provinces without any resistance, and Berber tribes of Tripolis. During the Caliphate of the third Caliph 'Uthman, 'Amr's successor, 'Abd-Allah, advanced through Tripolis and part of Ifriqiya whose capital was Quarter-Jannah (Carthage).

In 652, 'Abd-Allah entered into a treaty with the Nubians[12].

The first serious attempt to expand Islam in Africa is credited to 'Uqabah (Okba) b. Nafi, who is revered to this day as the founder of Muslim Africa [13]. He planted a permanent camp at Kairawan (Qayrawan) in 670 C.E., and thus came closer to the Byzantines and the Berbers. About ten years later, he undertook his famous march to the west and boldly claimed the whole African continent for Islam. This brought Muslims almost close to Europe.

It is reported that 'Uqabah began his march from Kairawan, avoiding the Byzantine towns north of the Awras, and went toward the Central plateau and pushed beyond the Atlas mountains and went as far as Tangier and then turned south to Morocco. In the march, he followed the course of the river Sus to the point where it discharges into the Atlantic Ocean. A story is related to him that when he reached there he spurred his horse into the waves and raising his lance he said: "Great God, if my advance were not stopped by this sea, I would still go on to the unknown kingdoms of the West (Africa), preaching the Unity of Thy Holy Name."

It is said that Uqabah went as far as the Atlantic and died near Biskara near Algeria in 683 C.E. His tomb has now become a shrine. Slowly and gradually, Muslims overpowered Ifriqiya through the statesmanship of Hasan b.Nu'man al Ghassani, who was sent to Africa by Mu'awiyah. The Byzantines' authority and Berber resistance were put to an end. The Byzantines' fled from Carthage in 698 C.E., and Hasan gained absolute power over the Berber country. Soon a Berber revolt broke out under the leadership of a Prophetess (Kahinah) [14], a Berber Deborah. She was also defeated. She gave her life but before dying instructed her son to embrace Islam and make common cause with the Muslims. A few miles to the south of Carthage, a new city was founded on an isthmus joining two salt lakes and was named Tunis.

Hasan b. Nu'man was succeeded by Musa b. Nusair, an able general of the Umayyad Caliph Walid b.'Abd al-Malik. He pacified Morocco and many of the Berber tribes accepted Islam. He extended the boundaries of his province of Ifriqiya up to Tangier.

Professor John Hunwick says that "although this (the expansionist movement of the Arab people) has sometimes been pictured as the greatest religious war of all times, it was in fact a simple imperialist expansion motivated more by economic than by religious factors. In most of the areas conquered, the former religions of those areas, whether Christianity, zoroastrianism, Judaism or indigenous cults, continued to survive, without generally any oppression for centuries after the

conquest by Muslim armies. Thus even in those areas where political authority was in the hands of Muslims owing allegiance to the central power of the Caliphate in Damascus or Baghdad, the actual Islamization of the population was generally a fairly slow process of absorption [15]."

The true factor of Islamization lies in the religion of Islam itself. Every Muslim has been asked to carry the message of the Prophet to others. The Prophetic Tradition says: "Preach even if it may be one verse." Wherever the Muslims went, they took their religion and culture with them. The Arabic language formed almost a part of their religion, as the Qur'an was in Arabic. There were long-distance trade routes, running from North to South. The Arab traders and business men and some quiet missionaries, who had dedicated their lives to the cause of Islam, carried the message of Islam wherever they travelled. It is also true that wherever the Muslim conquests took place a large number of Muslims chose to settle down in newer places. The period between 660-670 C.E., was remarkable for the expansion of Islam further into Africa along the Mediterranean coast. Morocco came under Islamic influence in the 8th century and the Berbers began to join the Muslim armies. Islam spread in North Africa with remarkable speed, and by the year 732 C.E., which marked the first centennial of Muhammed's death, his followers were the masters of an empire greater than that of Rome at its Zenith, an empire extending from the Bay of Biscay to the Indus and the confines of China and from the Aral Sea to the lower contracts of the Nile. The name of the Prophet, as Messenger of God along with the name of God [[Allah](#)] was being called out five times a day from thousands of minarets scattered all over North Africa, South-Western Europe, and Western and Central Asia.

The Source Material on Islamic Diffusion in West Africa

The scholars who wish to write on Africa, South of Sahara, have to deal with two categories of source material, external and internal. The most reliable external sources are Islamic and taken from some Europeans records, while the internal sources are mostly oral traditions and some later compilations by African Muslim scholars, mostly in Arabic Language.

The Muslim geographers and historians have provided us with excellent records. **Ibn Batutah** will always be remembered as the earliest Muslim scholar to travel through the thick forest of Africa. The Europeans named the forest as 'the white man's grave,' even in the early 19th century. Early geographers, like [Al-Khwarzimi](#), have indicated various names of African territories. The famous Muslim Scholar, Ibn Hawqal in his book, *Surat al-Ardh* has discussed the life-style of the black people [16]. More copious material on West Africa is available from **Al-Bakri** who wrote in 1067 C.E., and later Ibn Khaldun. The *geographical dictionary* compiled by **Abul Fida** and **Yaqut** between 1212-1229 C.E., gives excellent material on cultural geography of West Africa. Ibn Fadlallah *al-'Umari's Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al Amsar* which was written between 1342-1349, provides accurate material on cultural geography of Mali. He derived his material from people who had lived in Mali.

When the *Sankore Mosque University of [Timbuktu](#)* became a famous seat of learning in West Africa, it attracted a large number of scholars who came and lived in the quarters adjacent to the Mosque. Some works of that period have come down to us while others are lost. The famous African Muslim Scholar, Mahmud al-Kati began to write his magnum opus *Kitab al-Fattash* in 1519 C.E., and died before it was completed. His illustrious son, Ibn al Mukhtar completed it around the year 1565 C.E. This work provides us with rich material on the *Askiya dynasty* of the Muslim Empire of Songhay of West Africa. The other famous work of an African Scholar is *Tarikh al-Sudan* by Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di who completed it in 1665 C.E.

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14. Baladhuri, p. 229. Ibn Khaldun, Vol. VII. pp. 8-9.
15. John O. Hunwich, Islam in West Africa in A Thousand years of West African History, ed. J.F.A. Ajayi, I.U.P., 1967 p. 115.
16. cf. Opus Geographicum Ibn Hawkal, edited by J.H. Kramer, Leiden, 1938, I, 9-10.

Allah: Allah is the proper name in Arabic for The One and Only God, The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is used by the Arab Christians and Jews for the God (Eloh-im in Hebrew; 'Allaha' in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, pbuh). The word [Allah](#) does not have a plural or gender. Allah does not have any associate or partner, and He does not beget nor was He begotten. SWT is an abbreviation of Arabic words that mean 'Glory Be To Him.'

s or pbuh: Peace Be Upon Him. This expression is used for all [Prophets of Allah](#).

ra: Radiallahu Anhu (May Allah be pleased with him).

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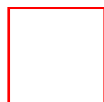
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