

SPREAD OF ISLAM IN WEST AFRICA

by

Prof. A. Rahman I. Doi

[The Muslim geographers and historians have provided excellent records of Muslim rulers and peoples in Africa. Among them are Al-Khwarzimi, Ibn Munabbah, Al-Masudi, Al-Bakri, Abul Fida, Yaqut, Ibn Batutah, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Fadlallah al-'Umari, Mahmud al-Kati, Ibn al Mukhtar and Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di. Islam reached the Savannah region in the 8th Century C.E., the date the written history of West Africa begins. Islam was accepted as early as 850 C.E. by the Dya'ogo dynasty of the Kingdom of Tekur. They were the first Negro people who accepted Islam. Trade and commerce paved the way for the introduction of new elements of material culture, and made possible the intellectual development which naturally followed the introduction and spread of literacy.]

Eminent Arab historians and African scholars have written on the empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Kanem Bornu. They document famous trade routes in Africa - from Sijilmasa to Taghaza, Awdaghast, which led to the empire of Ghana, and from Sijilmasa to Tuat, Gao and Timbuktu. Al-Bakri describes Ghana as highly advanced and economically a prosperous country as early as the eleventh century. He also discusses the influence of Islam in Mali in the 13th century and describes the rule of Mansa Musa whose fame spread to Sudan, North Africa and up to Europe.]

Spread of Islam in West Africa

Islam reached the Savannah region in the 8th Century C.E., the date the written history of West Africa begins.[17] The Muslim-Arab historians began to write about West Africa in the early 8th century. The famous scholar Ibn Munabbah wrote as early as 738 C.E., followed by Al-Masudi in 947 C.E. As Islam spread in the Savannah region, it was quite natural that commercial links should also come to be established with North Africa. Trade and commerce also paved way for the introduction of new elements of material culture, and made possible the intellectual development which naturally followed the introduction and spread of literacy, and for which parts of the Sudan were to become famous in the centuries to come [18]. In the *Kingdom of Tekur*, situated on both banks of the Senegal, Islam was accepted as early as 850 C.E., by the Dya'ogo dynasty. This dynasty was the first Negro people who accepted Islam.

It was for this reason that Muslim-Arab historians referred to Bilad al-Tekur as 'the land of the Black Muslims.' War-jabi, son of Rabis, was the first ruler of Tekur in whose reign Islam was firmly established in Tekur and the Islamic Shari'ah system was enforced. This gave a uniform Muslim law to the people. By the time the Al- Murabitun of Almoravids began their attack on Tekur in 1042 C.E., Islam had made a deep impact on the people of that area. Al-Idrisi in 1511 described the Tekur Country as 'secure, peaceful and tranquil.' The capital town of Tekur was also called Tekur which had become center of commerce. Merchants used to bring wool to sell there from Maghrib and in return, took with them gold and beads.

We have enough documents about the history of this region since it was known to the Arab historians as the Bilad al-Sudan, the land of the Blacks. In the medieval period, the most well-known empires

that grew there are known until our day: The empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Kanem Bornu. Eminent Arab historians have written about the glories of these lands, notable among whom are Al-Bakri, Al-Masudi, Ibn Batutah and [Ibn Khaldun](#). Besides these scholars, there were local scholars whose works have come down to us. As for example Tarikh al-Sudan, the history of the Sudan, by Al-Sadi and Tarikh al-Fattash by Muhammad al-Kati.

There were famous trade routes, like the one from Sijilmasa to Taghaza, Awdaghast, which led to the empire of Ghana, and another from Sijilmasa to Tuat, Gao and Timbuktu. There were others which connected the present Nigeria with Tripoli via Fez to Bornu and Tunisia with Nigeria via Ghadames, Ghat, and Agades to Hausa land. These routes had made all the above mentioned places famous trade centers. These centers of trade invariably became centers of Islamic learning and civilization. New ideas came through visiting traders in the field of administrative practices. We shall study briefly the expansion of Islam in each of the ancient empires of Western Sudan.

Islam in the ancient empire of Ghana

Al-Bakri, the Muslim geographer, gives us an early account of the ancient Soninke empire of Ghana. His *Kitab fi Masalik wal Mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) describes Ghana of 1068 as highly advanced. Economically, it was a prosperous country. The King had employed Muslim interpreters and most of his ministers and treasurers were also Muslims. The Muslim ministers were learned enough to record events in Arabic and corresponded, on behalf of the king, with other rulers. "Also, as Muslims, they belonged to the larger body politic of the Islamic world and this would make it possible to establish international relations. [18]"

Al-Bakri gives the following picture of Islam in Ghana in the 11th century: "The city of Ghana consists of two towns lying on a plain, one of which is inhabited by Muslims and is large, possessing 12 mosques one of which is congregational mosque for Friday prayers: each has its Imam, Muezzin and paid reciters of the Qur'an. The town possesses a large number of Jurus consults and learned men." [19]

The end of the Ghana Empire came at the hands of al-Murabitun (Almoravids) in the year 1076 C.E. The Murabitun movement had begun among the militant Muslim tribes of the Barbers of the Sinhaja. The word al-Murabitun is derived from an Arabic word 'ibat which means a sufi monastery. In the 11th century, Tarsina, a Lambtuna leader, went on hajj and on his return proclaimed a jihad on the pagan farmers of Senegal river area.

He was killed in 1023 in this struggle and was followed by Yahya who also went on a pilgrimage and brought with him a famous preacher named, 'Abd-Allah bin Yasin. 'Abd-Allah began to preach Islam among the Goddala. Suddenly Yahya died and 'Abd-Allah felt unsafe. He therefore retired into a ribat where he began to train preachers for spreading Islam among the Berber tribes. Later he used his men of the ribat to launch a jihad. These men of ribat (monastery) are called Al-Murabitun, meaning the ribat dwellers, remembered as Almoravids by European writers. The Almoravids conquered Ghana by 1076 C.E.

Islam in the empire of Mali

The influence of Islam in Mali dates back to the 15th century when Al-Bakri mentions the conversion of its ruler to Islam. There was a miserable period of drought which came to an end by offering Muslim prayers and ablutions. The Empire of Mali arose from the ruins of Ghana Empire. There are two important names in the history of Islam in Mali: Sundiata (1230-1255) and

Mansa Musa (1312-1337). Sundiata is the founder of the Mali Empire but was a weak Muslim, since he practiced Islam with syncretic practices and was highly disliked by the 'ulama. Mansa Musa was, on the other hand, a devout Muslim and is considered to be the real architect of the Mali Empire. By the time Sundiata died in 1255, a large number of former dependencies of Ghana also came under his power. After him came Mansa Uli (1255-1270) who had made a pilgrimage to Makkah.

Mansa (Emperor) Musa came to power in 1312 and his fame reached beyond the Sudan, North Africa and spread up to Europe. Mansa Musa ruled from 1312 to 1337 and in 1324-25 he made his famous pilgrimage to Makkah [[Hajj](#)]. When he returned from his pilgrimage, he brought with him a large number of Muslim scholars and architects who built five mosques for the first time with baked bricks. Thus Islam received its greatest boost during Mansa Musa's reign. Many scholars agree that because of his attachment to Islam, Mansa Musa could introduce new ideas to his administration. The famous traveller and scholar Ibn Batutah came to Mali during Mansa Sulaiman's reign (1341-1360), and gives an excellent account of Mali's government and its economic prosperity - in fact, a legacy of Mansa Musa's policy. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage projected Mali's enormous wealth and potentialities which attracted more and more Muslim traders and scholars. These Muslim scholars and traders contributed to the cultural and economic development of Mali. It was during his reign that diplomatic relations were established with Tunis and Egypt, and thus Mali began to appear on the map of the world.

Whatever may be said of the expansion of Islam in Mali and other parts of West Africa at that time, the fact remains that Islam was not practiced in its pristine purity. Pagan practices abound in the countries of Western Sudan. Ibn Batutah has given a vivid account of such practices in the Sudan. He says he was shocked by the fact that young women walked naked in the streets, taking food to the Sultan during the month of Ramadhan. He also describes the manner in which one appears before the Sultan:

"When he calls one of his subjects to an audience, the man removes his clothes and puts on worn-out garments and replaces his turban with a dirty skull-cap. Then he enters raising his garments and pantaloons halfway up his shins and comes forward in a submissive and humble way and strikes the ground high with his elbows. He then stands like one bowing in prayer listening to the Sultan's words. When one of them addresses the Sultan and the Sultan replies, the man removes the garments from his back and puts dust on his head and back like one washing with water."

These traditional practices continued along with Islamic ones. Some of the pagan practices were also observed with the Islamic worship. Worship of the local cults and shrines and belief in the local taboos continued in spite of the fact that Islam made enormous progress in the hinter-land of the Western Sudan. Al-Maghilli reports that girls customarily went naked until the time of their marriage, in the city of Jenne in the 15th century, although Islam was firmly rooted in the area by that time. In Hausa land, too, we hear of such practices, as late as the 19th century, when Shehu 'Uthman Dan Fodio launched his jihad to revive and revitalize Islam. We come to know about some pagan customs through the writings of the Shehu, such as covering the head with dust and prostration before the ruler. The monotheistic teachings of Islam frown upon prostrating before any one except one God and considers it as polytheism (shirk).

Islam in the Empire of Songhay

Islam began to spread in the Empire of Songhay some time in the 11th century when the ruling Za or Dia dynasty first accepted it. It was a prosperous region because of its booming trade with Gao. By the 13th century it had come under the dominion of the Mali Empire but had freed itself by the end of

the 14th century when the dynasty was renamed Sunni. The frontier of Songhay now expanded and in the 15th century, under the leadership of Sunni 'Ali, who ruled between 1464-1492, the most important towns of the Western Sudan came under the Songhay Empire. The great cities of Islamic learning like [Timbuktu](#) and Jenne came under his power between 1471-1476.

Sunni 'Ali's was a nominal Muslim who used Islam to his ends. He even persecuted Muslim scholars and practiced local cults and magic. When the famous scholar Al-Maghilli called him a pagan, he punished him too. The belief in cults and magic was, however, not something new in Songhay. It existed in other parts of West Africa until the time the revivalist movements gained momentum in the 18th century. It is said of Sunni 'Ali that he tried to compromise between paganism and Islam although he prayed and fasted. The 'ulama called it merely a mockery.

Sunni 'Ali's syncretism was soon challenged by the Muslim elites and scholars in Timbuktu, which was then a center of Islamic learning and civilization. The famous family of Agit, of the Berber scholars, had the post of the Grand Qadhi (Chief Justice) and were known for their fearless opposition to the rulers. In his lifetime, Sunni 'Ali took measures against the 'ulama of Timbuktu (in 1469 and in 1486). But on his death, the situation completely changed: Islam and Muslim scholars triumphed. Muhammad Toure (Towri), a military commander asked Sunni 'Ali's successor, Sunni Barou, to appear before the public and make an open confession of his faith in Islam. When Barou refused to do so, Muhammad Toure ousted him and established a new dynasty in his own name, called the Askiya dynasty. Sunni 'Ali may be compared with Sundiata of Mali, and Askiya Muhammad Toure with Mansa Musa, a champion of the cause of Islam.

On his coming to power, he established Islamic law and arranged a large number of Muslims to be trained as judges (Qadhis) to interpret Canon Law. He gave his munificent patronage to the 'ulama and gave them large pieces of land as gifts. He became a great friend of the famous scholar Muhammad Al-Maghilli. It was because of his patronage that eminent Muslim scholars were attracted to Timbuktu, which became a great seat of learning in the 16th century. Timbuktu has the credit of establishing the *first Muslim University called Sankore University in West Africa*; its name is commemorated until today in Ibadan University where a staff residential area has been named as Sankore Avenue.

Like Mansa Musa of Mali, Askia Muhammad Toure went on a pilgrimage and thus came into close contact with Muslim scholars and rulers in the Arab countries. In Makkah, the King accorded him great respect; he was turbaned. The King gave him a sword and the title of the Khalifa of the Western Sudan. On his return from Makkah in the year 1497, he proudly used the title of Al-Hajj [20].

Askia took such a keen interest in the Islamic legal system that he asked a number of questions on Islamic theology from his friend Muhammad al-Maghilli. Al-Maghilli answered his questions in detail which Askia circulated in the Songhay empire. Some of the questions were about the fundamental structure of the faith, such as 'who is a true Muslim?' and "who is a pagan?" When we read Shehu 'Uthman Dan Fodio's works on jihad, we can see some of his arguments quoted on the authority of Al-Maghilli. In other words, Al-Maghilli's detailed discussions of the issues raised by Askia Muhammad played a great role in influencing Shehu's jihad.

After Askia Muhammad Toure, the empire began to crumble into pieces. He was deposed by his sons who had shared power with him since there was no fixed law of succession to the throne. During the period of 60 years(1528-1591), eight Askias came to power one after another. At last, in 1591 Songhay fell in the hands of the Moors and the glories of Timbuktu began to decline.

Islam in Kanem-Bornu Empire

Kanem-Bornu in the 13th century included the region around Lake Chad, stretching as far north as Fezzan. Kanem today forms the northern part of the Republic of Chad. Islam was accepted for the first time by the Kanem ruler, Umme-Jilmi ruled between 1085-1097 C.E., through a scholar named, Muhammad B. Mani, who is credited for bringing Islam to Kanem-Bornu. Umme-Jilmi became a devout Muslim. He left on a pilgrimage but died in Egypt before reaching Makkah. It is surprising that Al-Bakri has mentioned Kanem as a land of pagans even in the 11th century. Perhaps he meant that a large number of pagan practices also continued along with Islam during that period as we have seen in other West African empires. Al-Bakri also mentions that Umayyad refugees, who had fled from Baghdad following plans to liquidate their dynasty at the hands of the Abbasids, were residing in Kanem [21, 22].

With the introduction of Islam in Kanem, it became the principal focus of Muslim influence in the central Sudan and relations were established with the Arab world in the Middle East and the Maghrib. Umme's son Dunama I (1092-1150) also went on a pilgrimage and was crowned in Egypt, while embarking at Suez for Makkah, during the third pilgrimage journey. During the reign of Dunama II (1221-1259), a Kanem embassy was established in Tunisia around 1257, as mentioned by the famous Andalusian historian **Ibn Khaldun** (d. 1406 C.E.). It was almost at the same time that a college and a hostel were established in Cairo, named Madrasah Ibn Rashiq. Toward the end of the 13th century, Kanem became a center of Islamic knowledge and famous teachers came from Mali to teach in Kanem. By the middle of the 13th century, Kanem established diplomatic relations with Tuat (in the Algerian Sahara) and with the Hafsid state of Tunis at embassy level. The Kanem scholars and poets could write classical Arabic of a very high standard. We have evidence of this in a letter written by the Chief scribe of the Kanem court dating from 1391 to 1392.

The historian Ibn Khaldun calls Dunama II as the 'King of Kanem and Lord of Bornu,' because his empire had expanded as far as Kano in the west and Wadai in the east. The Maliki school of the Islam was firmly established in the central Sudan region, but the pagan practices also continued. The pre-Islamic tradition of the rulers hiding themselves from the public continued during Dunama II's time. It is said that Dunama II opened a Talisman (Munni or Mune), considered sacred by his people, and thus brought a period of hardship to his people. It was because of his enthusiasm for the religion of Islam that he committed this 'abomination' (perhaps the talisman was a traditional symbol of divine kingship) and alienated many of his subjects).

In the late 14th century, a new capital of the Kanem empire was established in Bornu at Nigazaragamu by 'Ali b. Dunama, also called 'Ali Ghazi, who ruled during the period 1476 to 1503. This thriving capital continued until 1811 when it was captured and destroyed by the Fulani in 1812. 'Ali revived Islam. He was keen on learning its principles. He used to visit the chief Imam 'Umar Masramba to learn more about the Islamic legal system. He, by his own example, persuaded the nobility and Chiefs to limit the number of their wives to only four.

The Islamization of Bornu dates from the time of Mai Idris Alooma (1570-1602). We come to know about him through his chronicler, Ahmad bin Fartuwa. In the 9th year of his reign he went on a pilgrimage to Makkah and built a hostel there for pilgrims from Bornu. He revived the Islamic practices and made them to be followed by all and sundry. He also set up Qadhis courts to introduce Islamic laws in place of the traditional system of customary law. He built a large number of brick mosques to replace the existing ones, built with reeds.

In 1810 during the period of Mai Ahmad the glories of the Empire of Bornu came to an end, but its

importance, as a center of Islamic learning, continued.

Islam in Hausa-Fulani land

There is a well-known Hausa legend concerning the origin of the Hausa state, attributed to Bayajida (Bayazid) who came from Begh to settle down in Kanem-Bornu. The ruling Mai of Bornu of that time (we do not have any information about the time) welcomed Bayajida and gave his daughter in marriage to him but at the same time robbed him of his numerous followers. He fled from the Mai with his wife and came to Gaya Mai Kano and asked the goldsmith of Kano to make a sword for him. The story tells us that Bayajida helped the people of Kano by killing a supernatural snake which had prevented them from drawing water from a well. It is said that the queen, named Daura, married him in appreciation of his service to the people. Bayajida got a son named Bawo from Daura. Bawo, himself, had seven sons: Biran, Dcura, Katsina, Zaria, Kano, Rano and Gebir, who became the founders of the Hausa states. Whatever may be the merit of this story, it tries to explain how Hausa language and culture spread throughout the northern states of Nigeria.

Islam came to Hausaland in early 14th century. About 40 Wangarawa graders are said to have brought Islam with them during the reign of 'Ali Yaji who ruled Kano during the years 1349-1385. A mosque was built and a muazzin was appointed to give adhan and a Qadhi (Shariah-judge) was named to give religious decisions. During the reign of a ruler named, Yaqub (1452-1463), one Fulani migrated to Kano and introduced books on Islamic fiqh (theology). By the time Muhammad Rumfa came into power (1453-1499), Islam was firmly rooted in Kano. In his reign Muslim scholars came to Kano; some scholars also came from **Timbuktu** to teach and preach Islam.

Muhammad Rumfa consulted Muslim scholars on the affairs of government. It was he who had asked the famous Muslim theologian Al-Maghilli to write a book on Islamic government during the latter's visit to Kano in the 15th century. The book is a celebrated masterpiece and is called the Obligation of the Princes. Al-Maghilli later went to Katsina which had become a seat of learning in the 15th century. Most of the pilgrims from Makkah would go to Katsina. Scholars from the Sankore University of Timbuktu also visited the city and brought with them books on divinity and etymology. In the 13th century, Katsina produced native scholars like Muhammadu Dan Marina and Muhammadu Dan Masina (d. 1667) whose works are available even today.

The *jihad* literature of Shehu 'Uthman Dan Fodio, his brother, Abdullahi, and his son Muhammad Bello speaks of the syncretic practices of the Hausa Fulanis at the end of the 18th century. The *jihad* of 'Uthman Dan Fodio in 1904 was introduced as a revivalist movement in Islam to remove syncretic practices, and what Shehu called *Bid'at al-shaytaniyya* or Devilic Innovations.

The spread of Islam in Africa as well as its resulting distribution of Muslim communities are owing to many factors: historical, geographical and psychological; some of which we have tried to outline in this article. Ever since its first appearance in Africa, Islam has continued to grow. The 'ulama (the scholars in religion) and the imams have been Africans right from the time of its spread. Islam has become an African religion and has influenced her people in diverse ways.

REFERENCES

17. C.C. Ifemesia. The Peoples of West Africa, a chapter in A Thousand years in West African History. op. cit., p. 44.
18. Ibid., P. 48.
19. 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. 117.

20. J.O. Hunwick, op. cit., p. 117.

21. The west African Muslims who perform their pilgrimage today like to be addressed as Alhajis. They put on a straw hat which signifies that they have actually been on the pilgrimage. On special occasions they put on a turban of silver or golden brocade.

22. Al-Bakris Al-Masalik wal Mamalik quoted in T. Hodgkin, Nigerian Perspectives, 1960, pp. 67-68.

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).

Copyright © *Al-Ittihad*, 1979

'The Planting and Diffusion of Islam in Africa - South of Sahara.'

Copyright © 1998 Web version prepared by Dr. A. Zahoor.

[The Islamic Legacy of Timbuktu](#)

[Islam and Africa](#)

[Muslims in China and South-East Asia](#)

[Muslims in Europe](#)

[Quotations on Islamic Civilization](#)

[Biography of Prophet Muhammad \(pbuh\)](#)

[What Non-Muslims Say About Prophet Muhammad \(pbuh\)](#)

[Muslims in Africa](#)

[Home Page](#)

(<http://users.erols.com/zenithco/wafrica.htm>)