

FULL TEXT

CHAPTER 14 - The Influence of Islam on West Africa

Name and Date: _____
Text: HISTORY ALIVE! The Medieval World

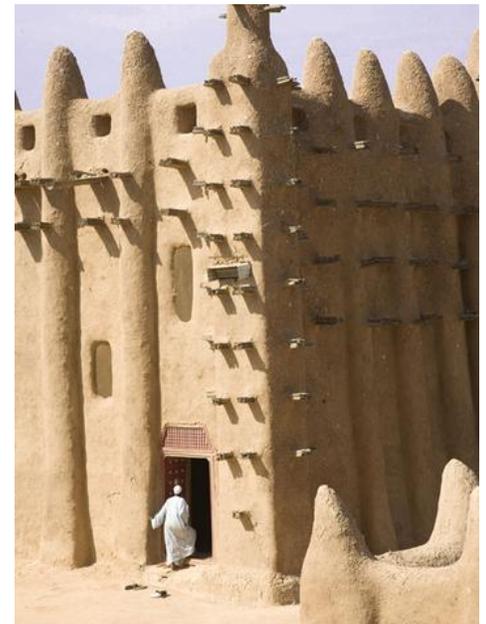
14.1 Introduction

Several important early empires developed in West Africa, such as Ghana. In this chapter, you will explore how Islamic faith and culture influenced West African culture.

During the 7th century, the religion of Islam spread quickly through the Middle East and North Africa. In the 8th century, trans-Saharan trade brought Muslim merchants and traders to West Africa. Over the next few hundred years, Islam spread among West Africans. The new faith left a lasting mark on the culture of the region.

West Africans often blended Islamic culture with their own traditions. For example, West Africans who became Muslims began praying to God in Arabic. They built mosques as places of worship. Yet they also continued to pray to the spirits of their ancestors, as they had done for centuries.

Islamic beliefs and customs affected many areas of life besides religious faith. In this chapter, you will learn about the spread of Islam in West Africa. Then you will look at Islam's influence on several aspects of West African culture. You will explore changes in religious practices, government and law, education, language, architecture, and decorative arts. You can still see the effects of these changes in West Africa today.



The Grand Mosque in Mali was built of bricks and mud.

14.2 The Spread of Islam in West Africa

Trans-Saharan trade brought Islam to West Africa in the 8th century. At first, Muslim traders and merchants lived side by side with the non-Muslims of West Africa. Over time, however, Islam played a growing role in West African society.

Traders Bring Islam to Ghana Between the years 639 and 708 C.E., Arab Muslims conquered North Africa. Before long, they wanted to bring West Africa into the Islamic world. But sending armies to conquer Ghana was not practical. Ghana was too far away, and it was protected by the Sahara.



Muslim traders and the missionaries who accompanied them spread Islam to Ghana and beyond.

Islam first reached Ghana through Muslim traders and missionaries. The king of Ghana did not **convert** to Islam. Nor did the majority of the people. But the king did allow Muslims to build settlements within his empire.

Many Muslim merchants and traders settled in Kumbi, the great market city of Ghana. Over time, a thriving Muslim community developed around the trans-Saharan trade with North Africa. The Muslims in Kumbi had 12 mosques and their own imam (spiritual leader). Scholars studied the Qur'an.

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In the 11th century, Muslims from the north, the Almoravids, invaded West Africa. In 1076, they captured Kumbi. The Almoravids did not hold power for long in Ghana, but under their rule Islam became more widespread.

Islam in Mali To the south of Ghana, the Mande also accepted Islam. The **tolerance** shown by Muslims toward traditional religious practices helped Islam to spread. For example, West Africans continued to pray to the spirits of their ancestors.

In about 1240, the Mande conquered Kumbi. They took control of the trade routes to North Africa and built the empire of **Mali**.

The early leaders of Mali accepted Islam, but they did not follow all of its teachings. In 1312, a new leader, **Mansa Musa**, took over in Mali. He became the first West African ruler to practice Islam devoutly.

Under Mansa Musa's rule, Mali became a major crossroads of the Islamic world. Muslim merchants, traders, and scholars from Egypt and North Africa came to Mali to do business or to settle.

Like other Muslims, Musa made a hajj, or pilgrimage, to the sacred city of Makkah in Arabia. The hajj was an enormous undertaking. The journey covered some three thousand miles. Officials and servants started preparing for the trip months before Musa left. As many as eighty thousand people may have accompanied Musa on the hajj.

Musa reached Cairo, Egypt, in July 1324, after eight months of travel. A writer from Cairo described Musa's caravan as "a lavish display of power, wealth, and unprecedented by its size and pageantry." Ahead of Musa arrived 500 slaves, each carrying a six-pound staff of gold. He was followed by a caravan of 200 camels carrying 30,000 pounds of gold, along with food, clothing, and supplies.

In Cairo, Musa met the local sultan, or ruler. When Musa was asked to kneel before the sultan, he felt insulted. He was very proud of being the ruler of Mali. After Musa finally agreed to kneel, the sultan invited him to sit beside him as his equal.

After leaving Cairo, Musa traveled to Arabia to visit Makkah and Madinah. When word spread that the king of Mali was visiting, people lined the streets to see him. Musa's wealth impressed the people and rulers of Arabia. He paid in gold for all the goods and services he received. He also gave expensive gifts to his hosts.

Because of Musa's hajj, Mali became known as an important kingdom. By 1375, Mali appeared on a European map of West Africa.

Islam in Songhai One of the groups within Mali's empire was the **Songhai** people. In the 1460s, the great warrior Sunni Ali became the new ruler of the Songhai. He built a powerful army that enabled the Songhai to break away from Mali and, eventually, to conquer it.

The early Songhai rulers did not practice Islam seriously. In the 1490s, Muslims in the Songhai empire rebelled. They placed Askia Mohammed Toure, a devout Muslim, on the throne. Toure set up rigid controls to be sure Islam was



The pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Makkah was so impressive that when news of it reached Europe, mapmakers there produced this map of West Africa with Musa's image prominently displayed.

practiced properly. He also led a series of wars to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Under his rule, the Songhai empire covered a territory as large as western Europe.

14.3 Religious Practices

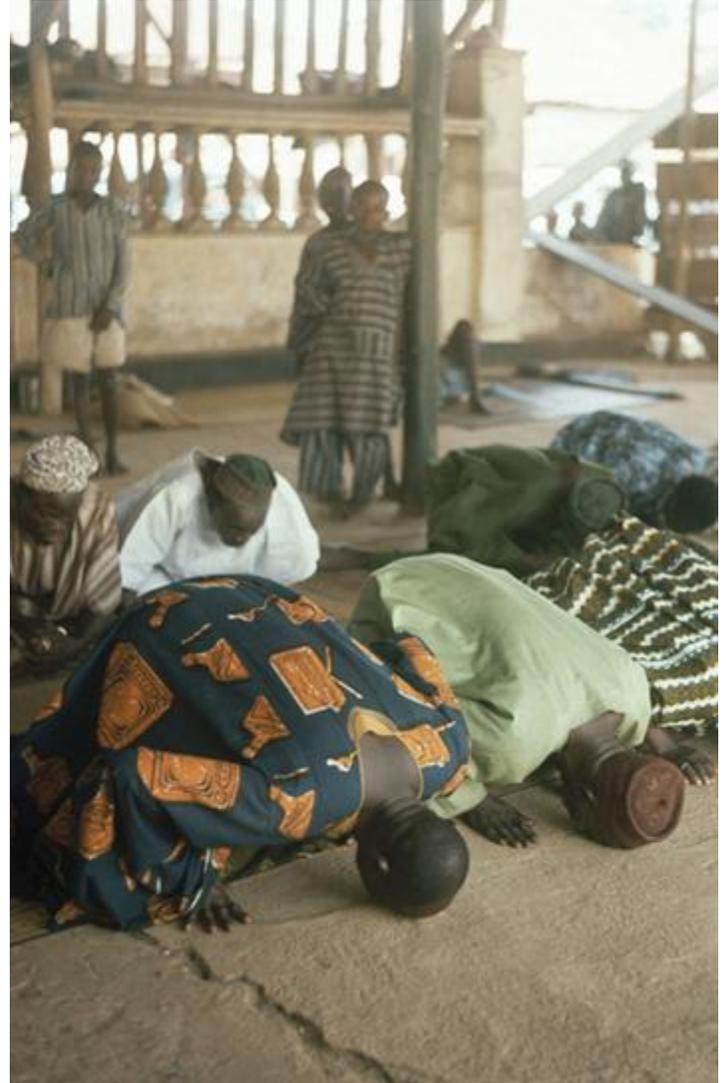
As Islam spread in West Africa, the people adopted new religious practices and ethical values. African Muslims learned the Five Pillars of Islam. They prayed in Arabic, fasted, worshipped in mosques, made pilgrimages, and gave alms. They were taught to regard themselves and all other Muslims as part of a single community.

West Africans also began to celebrate Muslim religious festivals. The festival of Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the holy month called Ramadan. Eid al-Adha commemorates a key event in the story of the prophet Abraham. As a test of faith, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. God spared the boy after Abraham proved his faith through his willingness to offer his son to God.

Alongside these new customs, West Africans preserved some of their old religious practices. Muslim leaders allowed them to continue religious traditions as long as they did not contradict the Five Pillars of Islam. So, for example, West African Muslims continued to show respect for the spirits of dead ancestors. They kept their belief in spirits who could help those who prayed to them or made sacrifices to them. They used amulets, or charms, that they believed helped people or protected them from harm.

Ibn Battuta was an Arab who traveled to Mali in the 14th century. Battuta was upset by some local customs there. For instance, women, including the daughters of rulers, went unclothed in public. Battuta also saw Muslims throwing dust over their heads when the king approached. These customs upset him because they went against the teachings of Islam.

Yet Battuta was also impressed by how **devoted** West Africans were to Islam. He wrote, “Anyone who is late at the mosque will find nowhere to pray, the crowd is so great. They zealously learn the Qur’an by heart. Those children who are neglectful in this, are put in chains until they have memorized the Qur’an.”



With the introduction of Islam, West Africans began praying five times daily, as many still do today.

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14.4 Government and Law

Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa developed Islamic forms of government and law. Muslim rulers in West Africa also adopted some of these ideas.

One major change concerned the line of succession, or inheritance of the right to rule. In West Africa, the succession had traditionally been matrilineal. That is, the right to rule was traced through the mother or female relative, rather than the father or a male relative. As you learned, in Ghana the son of the king's sister inherited the throne. After the arrival of Islam, succession became **patrilineal**. The right to rule now passed from father to son.

A second change affected the structure of government. Muslims believed in a highly centralized government. After West African kings converted to Islam, they started to exercise more control over local rulers. The kings also adopted titles used in Muslim lands. Often, the head of a region was now called the sultan, the amir, or emir. *Amir* and *emir* are shortened forms of Amir al-Muminin. This Arabic expression means "Commander of the Faithful."

A third major change was the adoption of shari'ah (Islamic law). In many towns and cities, shari'ah replaced customary law. The customary law of West Africa was very different from shari'ah. Laws were not written, but everyone knew what they were and accepted them from long tradition. A chief or king usually enforced customary law but did not give physical punishments. Instead, the guilty party paid the injured party with gifts or services. The family or clan of the guilty person could also be punished.

One example of customary law was "trial by wood." Suppose a man was accused of not paying debts or of injuring another person. The accused man was forced to drink water that had been poured over sour, bitter wood. If the man became ill, he was believed to be innocent.

Unlike customary law, shari'ah is written law. Muslims believe that shari'ah came from God. Shari'ah is administered by judges called *qadis*. The *qadis* hear cases in a court. They listen to witnesses and rule on the basis of the law and the evidence.



With the arrival of Islam, the power of the central ruler increased and local chiefs grew less important.

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14.5 An Emphasis on Education

In West Africa, Muslims encouraged people to get an education. They built many schools and centers of learning.

One key center was the trading city of Timbuktu, on the Niger River. Under Mali and Songhai rule, Timbuktu became famous for its community of Islamic scholars. It remained an important center of learning until the Songhai were conquered by Morocco in the 1500s.

Several universities were built in Timbuktu. The most famous was the University of Sankore. At that time, it was one of the world's great centers of learning.

Sankore was made up of several small, independent schools. Each school was run by an imam, or scholar. The imams at Sankore were respected throughout the Islamic world.

Students at Sankore studied under a single imam. The basic course of learning included the Qur'an, Islamic studies, law, and literature. After mastering these subjects, students could go on to study in a particular field. Many kinds of courses were available. Students could learn medicine and surgery. They could study astronomy, mathematics, physics, or chemistry. Or they could take up **philosophy**, geography, art, or history.

The highest degree a student could earn at Sankore required about ten years of study. During graduation, students wore a cloth headdress called a turban. The turban was a symbol of divine light, wisdom, knowledge, and excellent moral character.

When travelers and traders passed through Timbuktu, they were encouraged to study at one of the universities. Trade associations also set up their own colleges. Students in these colleges learned about the profession of trading, in addition to studying Islam.

Muslims also set up schools to educate children in the Qur'an. Timbuktu had about one hundred fifty Qur'anic schools, where children learned to read and interpret Islam's holy book.

With their love of education, Muslims treasured books. Muslims did not have printing presses, so books had to be copied by hand. Mosques and universities in West Africa built up large libraries of these precious volumes. Some individuals also created sizable collections. One Islamic scholar's private library contained 700 volumes. Many of his books were extremely rare.



The influence of Islam made the medieval city of Timbuktu a center for learning. Several universities were established there.

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14.6 The Arabic Language

Islam is rooted in Arab culture. As Islam spread throughout West Africa, the Arabic language did, as well.

In West Africa, Arabic became the language of religion, learning, commerce, and government. However, West Africans continued to use their native languages in everyday speech.

For Muslims, Arabic was the language of religion. The Qur'an, of course, was written in Arabic. All Muslims were expected to read the Qur'an and memorize parts of it. As West Africans converted to Islam, more and more of them learned Arabic.

Arabic also became the language of learning. The scholars who came to West Africa were mainly Arabic-speaking Muslims. Some of their students became scholars themselves. Like their teachers, they read and wrote Arabic.

Scholars used Arabic to write about the history and culture of West Africa. They wrote about a wide variety of topics. They described how people used animal and plant parts and minerals to cure diseases. They discussed ethical behavior for business and government. They told how to use the stars to determine the seasons. They recorded the history of the Songhai. They also wrote about Islamic law. These writings are an invaluable source of knowledge about West Africa in this period.

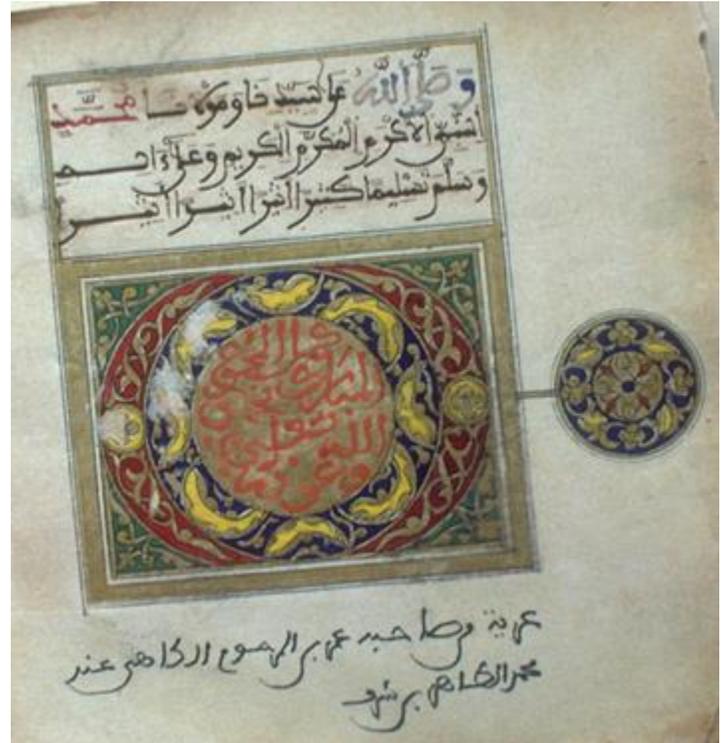
Finally, Arabic became the language of trade and government. Arabic allowed West African traders who spoke different native languages to communicate more easily. Arabic also allowed rulers to keep records and to write to rulers in other countries.

14.7 Islamic Architectural Styles

The influence of Islam brought new styles of architecture to West Africa, too. People designed mosques for worship. They also created a new design for homes.

Traditionally, West Africans had built small shrines to honor the forces of nature. As they converted to Islam, they began to build mosques. The materials that were most available on the savanna were mud and wood. Using these materials, West Africans built mosques that blended Islamic architectural styles with their own traditional religious art. For example, the minaret (tower) of one mosque was designed to look like the symbol of a Songhai ancestor.

After his pilgrimage to Makkah, the Mali ruler Mansa Musa wanted to build more mosques. He convinced al-Saheli, an architect from Spain, to return to Mali with him. Al-Saheli built several structures in Mali. One of them is the most famous mosque in West Africa, Djingareyber (jin-gar-AY-ber). Located in the city of Timbuktu, Djingareyber was



Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, became the language of learning, government, and trade in West Africa.

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built out of limestone and earth mixed with straw and wood. The walls of the mosque have beams projecting out of them. Workers used the beams as scaffolding when the building needed to be repaired.

Al-Saheli also introduced a new design for houses. Most traditional houses in West Africa were round with cone-shaped, thatched roofs. Al-Saheli built rectangular houses out of brick and with flat roofs. The outside walls were very plain and had no windows. Only a single wooden door, decorated with a **geometric** design, interrupted the rows of bricks.

Al-Saheli introduced another feature to houses; clay drain pipes. The pipes improved the quality of people's lives, because during the rainy season they prevented damage to homes from rainwater.



Islamic architects built flat-roofed houses made of sun-dried bricks.

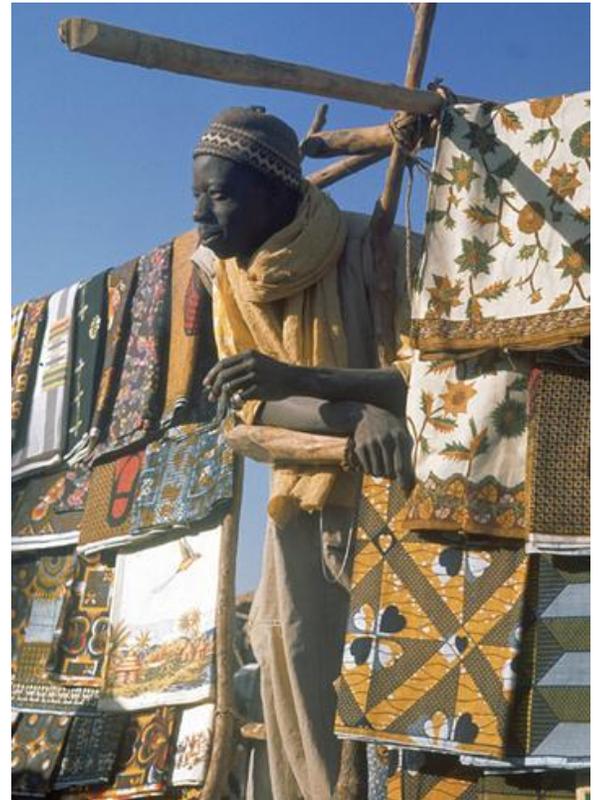
14.8 Islamic Decorative Arts

Muslims used calligraphy (artistic writing) and geometric patterns in their decorative arts. West Africans adopted these designs for their own art and textiles.

Muslims used calligraphy to decorate objects with words or verses from the Qur'an. West Africans adopted this practice. They began using the Arabic word for God to decorate costumes, fans, and even weapons. They also wrote verses from the Qur'an on amulets.

Geometric patterns are an important element in Islamic art. Muslims use these patterns rather than drawing pictures of animals or people. Geometric designs were popular in traditional West African art, as well. West Africans used them to decorate **textiles** and everyday objects, such as stools and ceramic containers. The arrival of Islam reinforced this practice.

Muslims also influenced the way people dressed in West Africa. Arab Muslims commonly wore an Arabic robe as an outer layer. An Arabic robe has wide, long sleeves and a long skirt. Muslims used calligraphy to personalize and decorate their robes. West Africans adopted the Arabic robe. Like Arabs, they still wear it today.



Islam reinforced the West African tradition of using geometric designs in arts and crafts, such as weaving.

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SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned about the influence of Islam in medieval West Africa. Islam left a deep mark on West African culture.

The Spread of Islam in West Africa Traders and missionaries first brought Islam to Ghana in the 8th century. The influence of Islam increased under the rulers of Mali and Songhai.

Religious Practices Islam changed West African religion. Many continued to show respect for the spirits of ancestors and to follow other traditional beliefs, but they learned to adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam and to celebrate Muslim religious festivals.

Government, Law, and Education Islam brought new ideas about government and law. The royal succession became patrilineal. Government became more centralized. Shari'ah replaced customary law. There was a new emphasis on learning. People studied at Qur'anic schools and Islamic universities. Timbuktu became a center of Islamic and academic study.

Arabic Language and Islamic Architecture and Decorative Arts Arabic became the language of religion, learning, commerce, and government. New styles of architecture developed as West Africans built mosques and changed the designs of their homes. They also adopted new, geometric styles in their decorative arts.