

The Spread of Islam in West Africa: Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century

While the presence of Islam in West Africa dates back to eighth century, the spread of the faith in regions that are now the modern states of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Nigeria, was in actuality, a gradual and complex process. Much of what we know about the early history of West Africa comes from medieval accounts written by Arab and North African geographers and historians. Specialists have used several models to explain why Africans converted to Islam. Some emphasize economic motivations, others highlight the draw of Islam's spiritual message, and a number stress the prestige and influence of Arabic literacy in facilitating state building. While the motivations of early conversions remain unclear, it is apparent that the early presence of Islam in West Africa was linked to trade and commerce with North Africa. Trade between West Africa and the Mediterranean predated Islam, however, North African Muslims intensified the Trans-Saharan trade. North African traders were major actors in introducing Islam into West Africa. Several major trade routes connected Africa below the Sahara with the Mediterranean Middle East, such as Sijilmasa to Awdaghust and Ghadames to Gao. The Sahel, the ecological transition zone between the Sahara desert and forest zone which spans the African continent, was an intense point of contact between North Africa and communities south of the Sahara. In West Africa, the three great medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and the Songhay developed in Sahel.

The history of Islam in West Africa can be explained in three stages, containment, mixing, and reform. In the first stage, African kings contained Muslim influence by segregating Muslim communities, in the second stage African rulers blended Islam with local traditions as the population selectively appropriated Islamic practices, and finally in the third stage, African Muslims pressed for reforms in an effort to rid their societies of mixed practices and implement Shariah. This three-phase framework helps sheds light on the historical development of the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay and the 19th century jihads that led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in Hausaland and the Umarian state in Senegambia.

Containment: Ghana and the Takrur

The early presence of Islam was limited to segregated Muslim communities linked to the trans-Saharan trade. In the 11th century Andalusian geographer, Al-Bakri, reported accounts of Arab and North African Berber settlements in the region. Several factors led to the growth of the Muslim merchant-scholar class in non-Muslim kingdoms. Islam facilitated long distance trade by offering useful sets of tools for merchants including contract law, credit, and information networks. Muslim merchant-scholars also played an important role in non-Muslim kingdoms as advisors and scribes in Ghana. They had the crucial skill of written script, which helped in the administration of kingdoms. Many Muslim were also religious specialists whose amulets were prized by non-Muslims.

Merchant-scholars also played a large role in the spread of Islam into the forest zones. These included the Jakhanke merchant-scholars in [name region], the Jula merchants in Mali and the Ivory Coast, and the Hausa merchants during the nineteenth century in Nigeria, Ghana, and Guinea Basau,]. Muslim communities in the forest zones were minority communities often linked to trading diasporas. Many of the traditions in the forest zones still reflect the tradition of Al-Hajj Salim Suwari, a late fifteenth-century Soninke scholar, who focused on responsibilities of Muslims in a non-Muslim society. His tradition, known as the Suwarian tradition, discouraged proselytizing, believing that God would bring people around to Islam in his own ways. This tradition worked for centuries in the forest zone including the present day, where there are vibrant Muslim minority communities.

Although modern Ghana is unrelated to the ancient kingdom of Ghana, modern Ghana chose the name as a way of honoring early African history. The boundaries of the ancient Kingdom encompassed the Middle Niger Delta region, which consists of modern-day Mali and parts of present-day Mauritania and Senegal. This region has historically been home to the Soninken Malinke, Wa'kuri and Wangari peoples. Fulanis and the Southern Saharan Sanhaja Berbers also played a prominent role in the spread of Islam in the Niger Delta region. Large towns emerged in the Niger Delta region around 300 A.D. Around the eighth century, Arab documents mentioned ancient Ghana and that Muslims crossed the Sahara into West Africa for trade. North African and Saharan merchants traded salt, horses,

dates, and camels from the north with gold, timber, and foodstuff from regions south of the Sahara. Ghana kings, however, did not permit North African and Saharan merchants to stay overnight in the city. This gave rise to one of the major features of Ghana—the dual city; Ghana Kings benefited from Muslim traders, but kept them outside centers of power.

From the eighth to the thirteenth century, contact between Muslims and Africans increased and Muslim states began to emerge in the Sahel. Eventually, African kings began to allow Muslims to integrate. Accounts during the eleventh century reported a Muslim state called Takrur in the middle Senegal valley. Around this time, the Almoravid reform movement began in Western Sahara and expanded throughout modern Mauritania, North Africa and Southern Spain. The Almoravids imposed a fundamentalist version of Islam, in an attempt to purify beliefs and practices from syncretistic or heretical beliefs. The Almoravid movement imposed greater uniformity of practice and Islamic law among West African Muslims. The Almoravids captured trade routes and posts, leading to the weakening of the Takruri state. Over the next hundred years, the empire dissolved into a number of small kingdoms.

Mixing: The Empires of Mali and Songhay

Over the next few decades, African rulers began to adopt Islam while ruling over populations with diverse faiths and cultures. Many of these rulers blended Islam with traditional and local practices in what experts call the mixing phase. Over time, the population began to adopt Islam, often selectively appropriating aspects of the faith. The Mali Empire (1215-1450) rose out of the region's feuding kingdoms. At its height, the empire of Mali composed most of modern Mali, Senegal, parts of Mauritania and Guinea. It was a multi-ethnic state with various religious and cultural groups. Muslims played a prominent role in the court as counselors and advisors. While the empire's founder, Sunjata Keita, was not himself a Muslim, by 1300 Mali kings became Muslim. The most famous of them was Mansa Musa (1307-32). He made Islam the state religion and in 1324 went on pilgrimage from Mali to Mecca. Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca showed up in European records because of his display of wealth and lavish spending. Apparently, his spending devalued the price of gold in Egypt for several years. The famed 14th century traveler Ibn Battuta visited Mali shortly after Mansa Musa's death. By the fifteenth century, however, Mali dissolved largely due to internal dissent and conflicts with the Saharan Tuareg.

Several Muslim polities developed farther east, including the Hausa city-states and the Kingdom of Kanem in

modern Northern Nigeria. Hausaland was comprised of a system of city-states (Gobir, Katsina, Kano, Zamfara, Kebbi and Zazzau). The Kingdom of Kanem near Lake Chad flourished as a commercial center from the ninth to 14th century. The state became Muslim during the ninth century. Its successor state was Bornu. Modern day Northern Nigeria comprises much of Hausaland and Bornu in the east. By the 14th century all ruling elites of Hausaland were Muslim, although the majority of the population did not convert until the 18th century jihads. Much like the rulers of earlier Muslims states, the rulers of Hausaland blended local practices and Islam.

Emerging from the ruins of the Mali Empire, the Mande Songhay Empire (1430s to 1591) ruled over a diverse and multi-ethnic empire. Although Islam was the state religion, the majority of the population still practiced their traditional belief systems. Many rulers, however, combined local practices with Islam. Sonni Ali, the ruler from 1465-1492, persecuted Muslim scholars, particularly those who criticized pagan practices.

During the 13th century, Mansa Musa conquered the Kingdom of Gao. Two centuries later, the kingdom of Gao rose again as the Songhay Empire. Sonni Ali captured much of the Empire of Mali. Under [Aksia Muhammad] 1493-1529), the Songhay's borders extended far beyond any previous West African empire.

The Songhay state patronized Islamic institutions and sponsored public buildings, mosques and libraries. One notable example is the Great Mosque of Jenne, which was built in the 12th or 13th century. The Great Mosque of Jenne remains the largest earthen building in the world. By the 16th century there were several centers of trade and Islamic learning in the Niger Bend region, most notably the famed Timbuktu. Arab chroniclers tell us that the pastoral nomadic Tuareg founded Timbuktu as a trading outpost. The city's multicultural population, regional trade, and Islamic scholarship fostered a cosmopolitan environment. In 1325, the city's population was around 10,000. At its apex, in the 16th century, the population is estimated to have been between 30,000 and 50,000. Timbuktu attracted scholars from throughout the Muslim world.

The Songhay's major trading partners were the Merenid dynasty in the Maghrib (north-west Africa) and the Mamluks in Egypt. The Songhay Empire ended when Morocco conquered the state in 1591. The fall of the Songhay marked the decline of big empires in West Africa. Merchant scholars in Timbuktu and other major learning centers dispersed, transferring learning institutions from urban-based merchant families to rural pastoralists throughout the Sahara. During this period there was an

alliance between scholars, who were also part of the merchant class, and some warriors who provided protection for trade caravans. Around the 12th and 13th century, mystical Sufi brotherhood orders began to spread in the region. Sufi orders played an integral role in the social order of African Muslim societies and the spread of Islam through the region well into the 20th century.

Reform in the Nineteenth Century: Umarian Jihad in Senegambia and the Sokoto Caliphate in Hausaland

The 19th century jihad movements best exemplify the third phase in the development Islam in West Africa. Specialists have highlighted the ways in which literate Muslims became increasingly aware of Islamic doctrine and began to demand reforms during this period. This period was significant in that it marks a shift in Muslim communities that practiced Islam mixed with “pagan” rituals and practices to societies that completely adopted Islamic values and established Shariah

Scholars have debated the origins of the 19th century West African jihads. The first known jihad in West Africa was in Mauritania during the 17th century. At that time, Mauritanian society was divided along scholar and warrior lineages. The scholar Nasir al-Din led a failed jihad called Sharr Bubba. Unlike the failed jihad in Mauritania, the 19th century jihad movements in Senegambia and Hausaland (in what is now northern Nigeria) successfully overthrew the established order and transformed the ruling and landowning class.

In 1802, Uthman Dan Fodio, a Fulani scholar, led a major jihad. With the help of a large Fulani cavalry and Hausa peasants, Uthman Dan Fodio overthrew the region’s Hausa rulers and replaced them with Fulani emirs. The movement led to centralization of power in the Muslim community, education reforms, and transformations of law. Uthman Dan Fodio also sparked a literary revival with a production of religious work that included Arabic texts and vernacular written in Arabic script. His heirs continued the legacy of literary production and education reform.

Uthman Dan Fodio’s movement inspired a number of jihads in the region. A notable example was the jihad of al Hajj Umar Tal, a Tukulor from the Senegambia region. In the 1850s, Umar Tal returned from pilgrimage claiming to have received spiritual authority over the West African Tijani Sufi order. From the 1850s to 1860s, he conquered three Bambara kingdoms. After Tal’s defeat by the French at Médine in 1857 and the subsequent defeat of his son in the 1880s, his followers fled westward spreading the influence of the Tijani order in Northern Nigeria. Although the French controlled the region, colonial authorities met

another formidable enemy. Samori Toure rose up against the French and gathered a 30,000 strong army. Following his death, French forces defeated Toure’s son in 1901. The French occupation of Senegal forced the final development of Islamic practice where leaders of Sufi orders became allies with colonial administrators.

Although European powers led to the decline of the Umarian state and the Sokoto Caliphate, colonial rule did little to stop the spread of Islam in West Africa. The British used anti-slavery rhetoric as they began their conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1897. The Sokoto Caliphate ended in 1903, when British troops conquered the state. Colonial authorities attempted to maintain the established social order and ruled through Northern Nigerian emirs. Despite the efforts of colonial authorities, colonialism had far reaching effects on Northern Nigerian Muslim society. Modern communication and transportation infrastructure facilitated increased exchange between Muslim communities. As a result, Islam began to spread rapidly in new urban centers and regions such as Yoruba land. Similarly in the French Sudan, Islam actually spread in rates far greater than the previous centuries. Although Muslims lost political power, Muslim communities made rapid inroads in the West Africa during the early 20th century.

The three stages of containment, mixing, and reform can shed light on the historical developments of Islam in this region. The trans-Saharan trade was an important gateway for the spread of Islam in Africa. The legacy of the medieval empires and nineteenth century reform movements continues to have relevance in present day Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, as well as many neighboring communities. Muslim communities have existed in West Africa for over a millennium, pointing to the fact that Islam is a significant part of the African landscape.

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