

## ISLAM AND THE AFRICAN WORLD\*

SULAYAMAN S. NYANG (Ph.D.)\*\*

The Islamic religion is now a major factor in human life and its impact is felt not only in Arabia, where it started out and then spread to the corners of the earth, embracing a significant portion of humanity, but also in Africa where it has in many cases displaced an indigenous belief system whose world view, though similar in certain respects, varies widely from it.

The first section of this paper deals with the Islamic worldview. It does not only seek to elucidate the most salient and very important points about the Islamic faith, but it also wishes to provide the reader with the background information so that he could, after having read the first general literature on Islamic life and society, reach a better understanding of the special experience of the African peoples with the message and traditions of Islam.

### A.I. THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF LIFE.

By way of introduction I would begin by saying that the religion of Islam holds that man is a creature of Allah (God), that his deeds, activities and thoughts, while living in the community of men, will all be scrutinized and judged in the hereafter by the Best of Judges (Allah).<sup>1</sup> The Islamic concept of man emphasizes, *inter alia* three important things about him: namely, his finitude, his dependency upon Allah, and his judgement in the hereafter. To orthodox Muslims, Allah is the Creator who created each and every individual man for a fixed time. During his lifetime this creature is expected to serve and worship his Maker. The Holy Quran says that since the creation of Adam, mankind had been blessed with a chain of messengers bearing the Divine instructions on how to live and worship Him on this earth. It further states that Allah had seen to it that every nation

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Quran*, (translated by Yusuf Ali), Chapter 94 : 8

\*A paper presented at the conference on "The World of Islam: From Morocco to Indonesia" Organized by the Asia Society, the Middle East Institute, the National Committee to Honour the Fourteenth Centennial of Islam, and the School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., USA.

\*\*Associated Professor of Government & Public Administration, African Studies & Research Program, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

and people in history was provided with Divine guidance, and that the process came to a glorious end only with the emergence and departure from this world of the Holy Prophet Muhammad. Hence, his title of KHATAM AL-NABIIN (The seal of the Prophets).<sup>2</sup> Because of this Quranic understanding of the Divine plan for man on earth, Muslims teach their young ones to remember at all times the brevity of life and the sweetness of the hereafter. This strong emphasis on devotion to Allah and things eternal has been taken more seriously by the Sufi sects in Islam. Their adherence to the doctrine that this life is ephemeral and that the hereafter is better, derive from the constant and solemn Quranic reiteration of this fact, and many of their numbers have found solace and joy on earth only in their soul-searching and endless attempts to be in the *presence of their Creator*. Those in Islam who are not too mystical in their rituals and conceptions of the teachings of Islam have tended to be Muslims whose orthodox beliefs and practices are carried out on the surface of life. There is a world of activities whose processes and actors are consciously or unconsciously guided by the beliefs, rituals and ideas enjoined upon men by the Quran. The finitude of man, therefore, is one of the main points emphasized throughout the Quran. In Suratul Asr man is reminded that "by the token of time through the ages, he has been a loser." Allah elaborates upon this theme on human folly by stressing to man that only those with faith and good deeds are winners. He concludes this short Surah by saying that such blessed achievements are obtained by men who are patient, persevering, and truthful.<sup>3</sup> In another Surah, Allah makes it categorically clear that those who believe and do good deeds are the *best of creatures*, (Hairul Bariyat); on the other hand, those who do not believe and do evil deeds are the worst of creatures, (Sharul Bariyat).<sup>4</sup>

The brevity of life on earth is known to all men, and Allah in the Quran cites numerous natural and physical phenomena to teach mankind about the finitude that is its lot. The Quran asks us to consider the dry earth which Allah converts every rainy season from an empty field into a vast area covered with green grass from one end to the other. Yet this beautiful grass field could easily be transformed once again into a dry waste-land without any sign of plant life. These variations in the weather and in the life of the plant kingdom, the Quran teaches, are just examples of Allah's power over what our scientists now call the world of nature. These phenomena we observe daily in the world around us are all signs of Allah, and the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 33 : 40

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 103.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 98 : 6-7

Quran advises man to reflect on them; for by supplementing his faith with reflections on the wonders of creation, he stands to gain a lot spiritually. Such exercises do not only raise his level of spiritual consciousness, but they also enable him to see in the changing phenomena of this world the vague outlines of the Divine Truths he is searching for in his inner self. But since man's life is short and is also ridden with mistakes and errors, he has to cling on to Allah for guidance and protection against evil in all its forms in the universe. Without Divine guidance mankind is eternally lost; and without revelation, life for humanity is action without reflection and meaning. Because of this weakness in the human condition man has to acknowledge his dependency; but interestingly enough, such a state of dependency is paradoxically best expressed in man's assumed and acknowledged dominance in the material universe. To put this rather contradictory fact in another way, I should say that man's superiority over all other factors in the material universe is the most glaring illustration of his weakness. Man, I should also add here, is that being whose dominance and superiority have conspired to confer upon him the mantle of dependency, not of self-sufficiency.

Unlike the African cosmologist who sees a man's life as a link in a chain of beings going back to a mystical founder of his clan or tribe, the Muslim orthodox theologian sees himself as an existential unit who is endowed by Allah with an appointed time to go through the challenges of life. This privileged creature is not by any means responsible for the deeds of his predecessors; nor are they also responsible for his deeds. His life has nothing to do ontologically and theologically with the lives of his progeny, and all their deeds will be judged separately, not collectively. This is to say that Islam holds every man responsible for his needs, and that on the Day of Judgement justice will be met out according to one's deeds, and not on the basis of one's ancestry or birth.

The Quranic teaching on the hereafter is so emphatic that no devout Muslim would have any doubt about it. Allah has mentioned in several Quranic verses (ayats) that man's life on earth is a brief one, that each creature would be called to account when the world comes to an end, and that the Day of Judgement is inevitable. Because of this Quranic concern about the Last Day of life on earth many vivid and attractive descriptions of Heaven and Hell are given in the Quran. Man is given firm and categorical promise of a blissful paradise if only he obeys and serves Allah while on earth. He is equally warned not to do evil in this life, for the punishment and torment beyond the grave await him.

To sum up this discussion on the Islamic view of life, one can say that contrary to traditional African thought, Islamic theology sees man as a privileged creature who is given trust on earth by the Divine; that is to say,

he is called upon to serve as the Viceregent of Allah on earth, and to account for each and every deed of his life in this sublunary world.<sup>5</sup> Another point of importance in the Islamic belief system about man and his destiny is that, although life is short and full of evil, man should take heart in the fact that there is life beyond the graves. This promise of a hereafter is a major difference between Islam and traditional African thought, which generally pays less attention to the details of a hereafter. As already noted in the first section of this study, the traditional African cosmologist focuses primarily on the dead man's post-mortem relations with his family, his clan, his tribe, and the fellow human who have survived him. To put this in another way, one could say that old Africa believed that immortality was obtained through the acts of respect shown to departed ancestors by the community of the living, or through the gradual recession of the dead ancestor into the realm of the spirits.

Last but not least, on this subject, one could argue that the Islamic view of man sees him as a creature whose destiny is determined both by himself and by his Maker. The Quran has addressed numerous warnings to rebellious mankind not to go astray; and it is also known for its announcement that the last days of the earth are ones in which our Lord will certainly bring to justice all those men who have taken no note of man's finitude, his dependency and his judgement before Allah.<sup>6</sup>

## A.2 THE ISLAMIC PENETRATION OF AFRICA

The advent of Islam in Africa was a result of the rapid sweep the Muslim armies were making in the early decades of the Islamic movement. Though Africans had contacts with Arabians prior to the rise of Islam<sup>7</sup>, the fact remains that Africa's territorial integrity and her peoples' destiny were never threatened by Arabians. Such a possibility became a reality only when Egypt fell into their hands.

<sup>5</sup>This point is discussed at great length in my "The Islamic State and Economic Development: A Theoretical Analysis," *Islamic Culture*, Vol. 50, No. 1, (January, 1976). See also Kenneth Cragg, *The Privilege of Man*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1968), especially Chapter 2; Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, (Indianapolis, Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1975).

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed treatment of these aspects of Islamic thought, See Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, (London: George Allen, 1976).

<sup>7</sup>Indeed Cheikh Anta Diop, the Senegalese historian and physicist, has argued in a controversial work that there is overwhelming evidence that the earliest inhabitants of Arabia were racially Negro and that these were later invaded by a coarse white Jectanide tribe who gradually became assimilated into Black life and culture. Diop give credence to his claim by saying:-

The harbinger of the Muslim victory in Africa was 'Amr Ibn Al-As, a Muslim commander who saw the Muslim victory over the Byzantines in Syria as a signal to the Muslims. This act of 'Amr Ibn Al-As opened the doors of Africa to Arab military power and cultural influence.

Soon the Arab armies began to march across the continent in search of new kingdoms and new opportunities for themselves. Those who came as military governors founded towns and villages, which later became the basis of urban life and culture in the Northern part of Africa. To these Arab immigrants from the East this part of Africa was comparable to a new frontier of the Americas of later years and every enterprising fellow in the Islamic world saw the Western part of Daral-Islam as the Maghrib.<sup>8</sup>

The conquest of the Maghrib gave rise to two processes, namely, Arabization and Islamization. The first process proved successful because Arabic was the language of government and trade. Because it was the language of the conquistadores from the East, it gradually gained ground, owing to its prestige and usefulness.

One of the most interesting factors which assisted in the realization of the second process, mentioned above, is the mercantile community. These merchants, who came from as far as Persia (Iran) to conduct business, were bent on gaining a foothold in the centres of civilization in the Maghrib. It was, therefore, in this role that they made a meaningful contribution to the Islamization of this region of Africa. In light of this understanding one could say that this intermingling of peoples and cultures actually paved the way for the gradual penetration of Islam in the Maghrib.

When Islam conquered Egypt the western part of North Africa was inhabited by the Berbers. This large ethnic group which was then occupying the mountains and plain of the area as well as the Sahara, was divided into three major groupings, Lowata, Sanhaja, and Zanata, each subdivided into a great number of smaller tribes. Prior to Islam the

"These facts, on which even Arab authors agree, prove . . . that the Arab race cannot be conceived as anything but a mixture of Blacks and Whites, a process continuing even today. These same facts also prove that traits common to Black culture and Semitic culture have been borrowed from the Blacks." See his *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, edited and translated by Mercer Cook, (New York: Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974), pp. 123-128.

<sup>8</sup>For a detailed account on the emergence of Islam in the Maghrib, see Bernard Lewis' brief chapter on "The Invading Crescent" in Roland Oliver, edited, *The Dawn of African History*, (London: OUP, 1969). 5th edition, Chapter 6. See also J. Spencer Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa*, (London: OUP, 1975), Chapter 1; Jamil Abu Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib*, (London: OUP, 1965); E.W. Bovill, *Caravans of the Old Sahara*, (London, 1933); E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, 2nd edition, revised and with additional material by Robin Hallett, (London & New York: OUP, 1968).

majority of these groups remained outside the cultural orbit of the powerful civilizations that dotted the shores of North Africa. Though ancient historians gave us some account about the subservient relationship between these Berbers and the Phoenicians, Greeks, Cathaginians, Romans and Byzantines, who came over as conquerors and traders, the fact remains that up to the time of the Islamic conquest, Berbers enjoyed a high degree of political freedom. They came under Arab rule only after much struggle and blood. E.W. Bovill, in describing this crucial period in North African history, captured this fact when he wrote:

Just when the Arab triumph seemed complete the Berbers' passionate love of liberty gave birth to one of those supreme national efforts, which, at the moment of crisis, have so often saved the conquered from extinction.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their heroic resistance to Arab domination of North Africa, the Berbers gradually lost ground to these invaders from the East. They succeeded only in keeping the highlands, which proved too difficult for the Arabs to attack and take over.

The Arab triumph in North Africa was a result of a series of raids by commanders from the East. The most historically significant invasion took place in the middle of the eleventh century when the members of the Banu Hilal and Sulaim fell on the Maghrib. The atrocities perpetrated by these tribes sent a shock wave throughout the length and breadth of the area. Much arable land was destroyed and many of the Berbers for the first time in their national history, came directly under Arab dynasties and rulers.

The decision of these tribes to settle down in the Maghrib led to the intermarriage and cultural fusion that took place between certain groups in North Africa and the Arabs. The process of Arabization gained limited momentum as a result of the mass exodus of Arab tribesmen from the East. Many of these men settled down in urban areas and hence intermarried with Berber women. This integration of families of Arabs and Berbers made it possible for Islam to grow and spread.

The growth of Arab power, be it noted, did not mean the total collapse of Berber resistance. To the contrary, the processes of Arabization and Islamization were accompanied for several decades by violence and coercion. In fact, so unstable and rebellious were the Berbers that they "apostatized twelve times before Islam gained a firm foothold over them."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> E.W. Bovill, *op cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Histoire de Berberes*, ed. de Slane, (Algiers, 1847) Quoted by J. Spencer Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, p. 9

When the Berbers finally succumbed to Islam the Muslims in the Maghrib began to build up a major civilization in the area. This process was made possible, and in part accelerated by the constant passing of men and ideas from the East to the Far West (al-Maghrib AlAqsa). These new arrivals from the East were pioneers who were in search of adventure. Many passed through the Maghrib on their way to Andalusia, which was already conquered by the Arabs in collaboration with Berbers and other Africans from the Maghrib.

This conquest of Spain was very significant for, as Bovill noted in his *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, the transaction flow between the Maghrib Muslims and their brethren in the Andalusian country, helped keep them well-posted with the great achievements of their fellows in Europe. Such a transaction flow made Morocco a vital link in the chain which bound eastern and western Islam. From the East came scholars, merchants, and craftsmen seeking a share in the wealth and culture of the West. Bovill captures the mood of the day when he wrote the following passage:-

From Spain there was a ceaseless flow of the oppressed, victims of political and religious persecution, and fugitives from justice; most of them were skilled agriculturists, but many erudite scholars were of their numbers. Thus was the Maghrib al-Aqsa nourished by two converging streams of fresh and invigoration blood. Now richly their confluence blessed the country is strikingly illustrated by the city of Fez.<sup>11 1</sup>

With the growth of this Islamic civilization in Morocco, ideas and wares began to flow to the south of the Sahara. This trade between the Maghrib and the Sub-Saharan peoples, which many historians believe to have existed prior to the advent of Islam in the area, must have been of great benefit to Morocco. Bernard Lewis has suggested that the two most important Moroccan exports to the East, at this time, were gold and slaves and that when the Berbers became Muslims, the rulers felt it necessary to find alternative sources of slaves. This alternative source of supply was found in the still unconquered lands to the south, and Muslim merchants from the Mediterranean coast travelled for months to reach the trading centres of Ghana, where gold and slaves were easily obtainable.<sup>12</sup>

These merchants were to a certain extent responsible for the spread of Islam in the Sahara, because it was through their constant peddling of

<sup>11</sup>E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.34



goods from both the Maghrib and the Sudan that they succeeded in impressing upon the Africans the beauty and simplicity of their faith. These merchants, however, were not primarily interested in propagating Islam; they came to the south mainly to make money and to buy at a very low price. It was not until later that they set out deliberately to win converts, and then it was largely a Berber affair.

The Berbers seemed to have been chosen by history to carry the banner of Islam into West Africa, because of their geographical location and their historical role as middle-men between Arabs and black Africans. The first Berber tribe in the Sahara to play a major role in the Islamization process was the Sanhaja. This ethnic group became Muslim as a result of their interaction with the Muslim traders who have settled in their midst. One result of the Sanhaja conversion to Islam was the performance of the Hajj by their rulers. Islam could be a useful tool with which to rally and organize themselves. The historical evidence seems to point out that such politically astute decisions were taken only under circumstances of grave danger, and that the most interesting example which is directly related to our discussion of early Islam in the Sahara and the West of Sudan, is that which occurred at about 1020 A.D. This act of unity by the different Berber tribes was motivated by their collective desire to bring down the Ghan Kingdom. In fact, this much-needed unity which the Lemtuna, Godala and Masufa Berbers hoped for, was based on the ideas acquired by one of their leaders, Tarsina the Lemtund, whose pilgrimage to Mecca inspired him to rationalize his campaigns against black Africans in the name of the Islamic Jihad.

Added to this political calculation was also the fact that "these Atlantic Berbers were feeling hemmed in between the Zanata who had gained control of the Moroccan oases and ruled from Sijilmasa and the powerful black kingdom of Ghana which had captured awadagha, their south Saharan centre."<sup>14</sup> The insecurity of these Berber groups led to much

<sup>13</sup> The role of the Almoravids in the diffusion of Islam in the West Sudan is still being argued among scholars. One of the leading authorities is the Israeli scholar, Nehemia Levtzion. In a recent publication he sums up his position on the role of the Almoravid in spreading Islam in the West Sudan, in the following manner:-

"There can be little doubt that the Almoravids accelerated the Islamization of Ghana, but they did so only after the ground had been prepared through the peaceful influence of Muslim traders."

For details about the life of the founder of Almoravid movement, see Levtzion's chapter of Ibn Yasin in John Ralph Willis' edited volume, *Studies in West African Islamic History*, (London & Totowa: Frank Cass, 1979), p. 103 ff.

<sup>14</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, p. 84.



conflict between them and the sources of their fears and apprehension – the Kingdom of Ghana.

The Kingdom of Ghana collapsed only after the Almoravids were successfully organized in the name of Islam. With their Islamically oriented organization these Atlantic Berbers embarked on a campaign to win converts by force of arms. After many years of planning and organization the Berbers, under the leadership of Abu Bakr, finally succeeded in 1076 to seize control of the capital of Ghana, Kumbi. This triumph of the Berbers led to the massacre of the inhabitants of the city and the subjection of the whole country to a form of Berber imperialism based on Islam.

“The consequences of this Almoravid conquest,” E.W. Bovill has told us, “were not as far-reaching as might have been expected, because the collapse of the Almoravids in the south was even more rapid than in the north.”<sup>15</sup> What Bovill wished to say was that, with the destruction of their common enemy (Ghana) the Atlantic Berbers, particularly the Godala and the Masufa, soon found themselves at each other’s throat. This growing disunity within the Berber ranks finally led to the end of Almoravid hegemony in 1087.

Such a rapid decline in the power of the Almoravids paved the way for the liberation of the peoples of Ghana. In fact, little more than a decade after their defeat, the peoples of Ghana succeeded once again to exercise control over their own destiny. But such a recapture of their independence did not necessarily mean a return to the old order. To the contrary, they too, like the Berbers of the Atlantic area, began to fight each other and soon their once great empire degenerated into a number of petty states, each vying for power and being very jealous of the other.<sup>16</sup>

The end of the Almoravids dynasty and the collapse of Ghana did not necessarily mean the Islamization ceased with the death of the Almoravid movement. The process of propagation continued and Islam began to penetrate more and more into the western Sudan. This phase in the propagation of Islam in Africa was made possible by the active involvement of three different groups of Arabo-Berber and Sudani Muslim cultivators of Islam in the West Sudan. These three groups, according to J.R. Willis and his fellow contributors in the volume entitled, *Studies in West African Islamic History* (1979), are the Zawaya clerisy, the Mande Islamic clerisy, and the Torodbe clerisy. The first group has been traced to a community of Berbers who suffered oppression at the hands of fellow Berbers and

<sup>15</sup> E.W. Bovill, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> For this section of the paper, I relied heavily on John Ralph Willis’ edited volume, *op. cit.*, especially his Introduction.

Arabs. According to Willis in his comprehensive introduction to the volume cited above, the Zawaya formation began to take shape in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They decided to be pacifist and so laid down their arms and took up the life of Muslim scholars dedicated to the propagation of Islam in the area.<sup>17</sup>

The Mande Islamic clerisy emerged out of the numerous trading centers created by Mande Muslims throughout the West Sudan. Because of their range of activities and the very wide area in which they lived, these men of commerce and Muslim learning came to be known by different names. They were known as Marka to the Bambara, Dafin to the peoples in the Upper Black Volta area, Yarse to the Mole-Dagbane speaking peoples, and Wangara and Djula to many others in the West Sudan. In the Senegambia area, the Jahanke (a Mande-speaking people of Serahule origins), are well-known for their historical role of peaceful promotion of Islamic culture and learning. Perhaps the best work on the Jahanke is that which was recently completed by the Gambian historian Dr. Lamin O. Sanned. According to him, the Islamic religion was promoted by the descendants of al-Haj Salim Sumare, (the father of the Jahanke) not by the sword or through trade as is commonly thought by many scholars on the West Sudan, but through their dedication to the life of piety and scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

The Torodbe clerisy has been traced to manumitted slaves in Futa Toro. According to Willis and many others, the Torodbe evolved out of a mass of rootless peoples who saw in the religion of Islam and opportunity to change their subservient lives for better ones, based on Islamic solidarity and brotherhood. Those who hold this view regarding the origin of the Torodbe clerisy usually see the group only as culturally Fulbe, and so deny its member any direct and respectable connection with the ruling Fulbe classes. Such negative definitions of the Torodbe are not very correct, for it should be noted that the Islamization process also included some members of the noblesmen. The detractors of the Torodbe would cite all the negative accounts in folklore mentioned by Willis in his introduction, but as he himself pointed out, among the people of Futa Toro, the term Torodbe "came to be associated with the inhabitants of the villages and towns", who were committed to Islamic learning, speak Fulfulde and disavow the inferior occupations.

<sup>17</sup> See his *The Jahanke*, (London: International African Institute, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Omar Jah, "Islamic History in the West Sudan," *The Bulletin of the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C.*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (May, 1978), p. 24. Reprinted from *The Journal of the Muslim World League*, (January, 1978).

In addition to what is said above regarding the roles of the Arabo-Berber and Sudani merchants whose activities in the West Sudan gradually led to the conversion of many African rulers and their entourage, one can also point out that Islam penetrated the southern reaches of the West Sudan through the labors of Sufi Shaykhs and divines.

Writing in January, 1977, the Gambian Islamic scholar Dr. Omar Jah of Bayero College in Kano, Nigeria, has suggested that the spread of Islam in the West Sudan was to some degree, accelerated by the decline and fall of Mali and Songhay. In his view, the political disintegration of these two centers "added more learned people to the group of itinerant scholars – who contributed tremendously to the dissemination of Islamic culture in the area. This situation coincided with the introduction of the Qadiri Sufi order into West Africa, under the leadership of celebrated people like the Kunti family."<sup>19</sup> Dr. Jah further informed that members of this order "played a prominent role in disseminating Islam in the West Sudan."<sup>20</sup> This view is shared by Dr. Batran, whose chapter in J.R. Willis' volume, *Studies in West African Islamic History*, is one of the best studies on the role of leading Muslim family in the propagation of Islam in the West Sudan. Dr. Batran has recently revealed to the scholarly community that the Kunta *shaykhs* helped extend the frontiers of Islam through their longstanding custom of *Siyaba* – their peripatetic travels in pursuit of knowledge and the propagation of Islam. According to him, Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkai was the prime mover behind the earliest dissemination of the Qadiri *wird*\* in the West Sudan. The family exercised great influence over the members of their Sufi order because they were noted for their learning, piety and noble pedigree. In fact, so conscious of their origin were the members of the Kunta family that they hardly let an outsider marry one of their female members. Yet, in all their travels in the West Sudan, they did not hesitate to marry Sudani women in the various communities they settled or passed through.<sup>21</sup> Jenkins, who also contributes a chapter in the above-mentioned volume, has pointed out that the spread of Islam in the West Sudan could also be traced to the trade and commercial activities of the *туруq* (Sufi brotherhoods). He informs that the tendency of the Maghribian *туруq* to diffuse southwards into the West Sudanic zone culminated in their occupation of strategic position along the trans-Saharan trade routes. Such advantages, Jenkins argues, were enjoyed by the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> See Dr. Batran's Chapter in J.R. Willis', edited, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> See R. G. Jenkins' paper in Willis' edited volume.

\**Wird* is one of the rituals of an initiated member of a Sufi brotherhood. It usually consists reciting the prayers and divine names strongly recommended by the founder of an order.

shaykhs because their influence enabled them to guarantee the smooth operation of trade and commerce along the routes under their control. This capability to keep the peace and to protect the merchants' person and wares (through the provision of guides to travellers and places of lodging and board for voyagers) gave lucrative income to the leaders of the *туруқ*.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Norris another contributor in the above-mentioned volume, has informed us in another work of his that the Kunta controlled the salt "mine" at Ijjil (near Shinqit) in Mauretania, and that the people paid them a paltry sum in relation to that which they received from their customers.<sup>23</sup>

In order for us to understand the role of the two major Sudani clerical groups mentioned above, we must go back to the early history of Islam in Tekkur and Ancient Ghana. The conversion of the Tukulor (Torodbe) and the Serahuli (Soninke)\* led to their gradual emergence as active cultivators of the faith of Muhammad in the West Sudan. The arrival of Islam on the banks of the Senegal dates back a thousand years or more. The Arabic sources tell us that Tekkur was the first Sudani Kingdom to enter the commonwealth of Allah in the West (Maghrib) and that Ibn Yasin, the founder of the Almoravid movement contemplated about going to Tekkur to seek support from his Muslim co-religionists, who were then at the helm of things in this West Sudanic society. From the same medieval and post-medieval writers we learned that the Ghanaian kings and ruling emperors allowed Arabo-Berber merchants to settle in their land and that these traders from the North Africa lived in their own residential areas which served as the pivot of trade and commercial transactions between the Muslim guests and the traditional Africans began to observe Islam at work. Some of these early hosts of the Muslims, we can argue, were most probably very much impressed by the religious devotion of the merchants who most likely stopped their business transactions to engage in the prescribed five daily prayers. Another area where the early Muslims could have affected the mind and heart of the traditional Africans was their possession of the powers of the written word. This technology of intellectual conservation must have deeply impressed their early African hosts in the West Sudan, for it must have look like a miracle to them that a man could reduce long court proceedings into signs and symbols.

<sup>22</sup> See Norris, "The History of Shinqit, according to Idaw Ali Tradition," Bulletin I.F.A.N., XXIV, 3-4, 1962, pp. 393-403. Quoted by R. G. Jenkins, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> For more information on this subject, J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), Chapters 6-8, Part 2. See also his earlier work, *A History of West Africa*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

\*Here I use Serahuli because of the ambiguity associated with the term. In my part of Africa, the term is used to describe a pagan Mandinka. I am using the term Tukulor because of the reading public is more familiar with it than with the term Torodbe. Added to this is the fact that the term Tukulor is generally but mistakenly associated with Futa Toro and the people therefrom.

In the course of this transaction flow between the North and the Sahel and the West Sudan areas, a new class of black African traders came to being. At first this body of men was very insignificant and their activity was limited to the securing of gold, slaves, and other marketable items in the North-South Saharan trade. However, as they gained knowledge of the various trade routes and cemented their relationships into religious solidary bonds, many of these early Serahuli traders adopted the role of trader-cum-marabout. It is, indeed, against this background that one can speculate about the role of the Serahuli or any other Muslim group that entered the West Sudanic trade and helped promote the cause of Islam among their pagan African clientele.

The Serahuli contribution to the spread of Islam was not significant in the beginning. There were many reasons for this slow speed in Islamic proselytization. First of all, one can argue that Serahuli propagators of Islam were not only limited in numbers but also in effectiveness. This early phase of the Serahuli effort to propagate Islam was limited because their empire was in the main, based on traditional African religious symbols. Things began to change when the number of Muslims increased in the West Sudan. This trend became more evident when the Ghana empire was about to come to an end. During this period the rulers accepted Islam and tolerated Muslim minorities trading or living within the empire, by letting them occupy a certain part of the town or village.<sup>24</sup>

The Serahuli propagators of Islam must have constituted a part of this gradually expanding Islamic base within the West Sudan, and their activities as Marabout-cum-merchants must have prepared the ground for later expansion of their faith, even though they made no effort at direct proselytization. Indeed, it should be added that the Serahulis' activities as marabouts and traders took them to many parts of the West Sudan.

When the Mali empire replaced the Ghana empire the Serahulis, who were the northern branch of the Mande-speaking people, found themselves dispersed and weakened. Those who had converted into Islam found trading and religious instruction useful occupations. This became very clear to them when the Mali empire was firmly in the hands of Muslims. There are many historical accounts of how, under the Mali empire and the other kingdoms after it, the Marabout-cum-traders were guaranteed the right of passage at both peacetime and war.<sup>25</sup> The Serahulis were certainly

<sup>24</sup> For some interesting discussion on this subject, see Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Pre-Colonial Africa, Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*, (Madison, Wisconsin & London, England: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> See Mungo Park, *Travels of Mungo Park*, edited by Roland Miller, (London, Dent, 1954).

among these traders, and Mungo Park revealed a great deal of the Serahuli preoccupation with, and love for the west Sudanic trade, when he wrote that, among the Serahuli a merchant who returns from a long trip without any exciting report of profit and gain, becomes the laughing stock of his peers. Such a man, according to Mungo Park, is socially and disrespectfully described as the one who came back without anything but the hairs on his head.<sup>26</sup>

Tukulors, too, have left an indelible mark on the pages of West Sudanic history. This ethnic group has given to Africa not only pastoralists, but also warriors and scholars. From this original homeland in the upper Senegal region called Futa Toro, the Tukulors have successfully migrated to different parts of the Senegambia and beyond. Indeed, it was their migration which led to the gradual expansion of Islam in the West Sudan. The activities of Fulaah shepherds along the transhuman route in the West Sudan gradually opened the doors of opportunities to the inhabitants of Futa Toro. This became most evident in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the Tukulors and their maraboutic leaders led the Islamic revivalist movement in West Sudan. Their propagandistic drive did not only bring them into conflicts with the defenders of the African *status quo* at the time, but it also helped them conquer a huge portion of the West Sudan. These revivalist movements were a reaction to the corrupt and compromised nature of Islam in the West Sudan. With the collapse of the Major West Sudanic empires, African Muslims found themselves at the mercy of traditionalists who were desperately trying to re-establish the *Ancien Regime*. Unwilling to turn the historical and religious clock backwards, and determined to concretize their longstanding dream of an Islamic state and society, some of the leading West Sudanic intellectuals saw the *Jihad* as the only solution to the problem of pagan intransigence. Another fact which must have affected their thinking and their attitude towards the traditional rulers, was their knowledge of what was going on in the other parts of *Darul Islam* (the Land of Islam). B.G. Martin has written that "in West Africa, the Torodbe (Tukulor) intellectuals were not isolated from political or cultural developments in other parts of the Islamic world. He adds that it is quite probable that Usman Dan Fodio's teacher, the Tuareg Jibril bin 'Umar al Aqdasi who had made pilgrimage to Mecca twice and was sojourned in Egypt for many years, must have passed on the young Shehu news about the Muslim lands to the east and

<sup>26</sup> See B.G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa*, (Cambridge, London, New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 17.

the determination of the dedicated ulema who wanted to wage a Jihad against the vile ulema and their traditionalist patrons.<sup>27</sup>

Though we may never know the exact details and the extent to which the developments in the Muslim east affected the trains of events in the West Sudan, we can say with some degree of confidence that almost all scholars agree that the revivalist idea was first put into action in Futa Jallon where the Torodbe (Tukulor) and other Ffulbe-speaking elements ganged up on the tyrannical rulers in the name of Islamic reform.

This successful Islamic movement was led and directed by Karamoh Alfa (1726), whose victory resulted in the establishment of an *al-mamiyyab* (an Islamic order headed by an Imam) in Futa Jallon. Following the Muslim success in Futa Jallon, the idea spread to Futa Toro, where another revivalist movement, under the leadership of Sulayman Bal and Abdal Qadir, quickly took root and the traditional pagan hierarchy dismantled.<sup>28</sup>

After the idea of an Islamic reform has gained ground in the Senegambia region of the West Sudan, other enthusiastic reformists to the east found it useful in their own communities. The acceptance of these ideas from the two Futas gave rise to the revivalist movements of Usman Dan Fodio in Hausaland in 1804 and Shaykh Ahmad Lobbo in Macine in 1818. After this long trip to the east the idea of the jihad once again, like the Hegelian spirit, started to take a westerly course, giving rise to the jihad wars of Alhaji Omar al-Futi in Futa Toro, Bambara country and in other neighbouring lands, to the revivalist efforts of Maba Jahu of the Senegambia, Samori of Mande country in Upper Guinea, Muhammadu Lamin and several other minor Jihad leaders throughout the West Sudan.<sup>29</sup>

The most widely celebrated hero of this age of Tukulor conquest in the name of Islam was Alhaji Omar Tall (commonly called Shaykh Omar Futi). This Islamic Marabout conquered much of his homeland and regions to the east. In fact, up to the time of his death he held under his rule one of the largest empires in West Africa. Unfortunately for the Shaykh, the empire he struggled hard to build fell to pieces as a result of succession feuds between his children and talibs (students). This was not

<sup>27</sup> Omar Jah, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> For some discussion on these cultivators of Islam in West Sudan, see the respective chapters on Maba Jahn and Samori in John Ralph Willis' edited volume.

<sup>29</sup> For a good background on the early history of Islam in Eastern Sudan, see Yusuf Fadl Hassan, "The Penetration of Islam in Eastern Sudan," in I.W. Lewis, edited, *Islam in Tropical Africa*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 144-159.



new in the West Sudan, for one of the most difficult problems of rulers of empires in this part of the world has always been setting guidelines for orderly succession.

The conquest of Alhaji Omar and like him in the West Sudan led not only to the spread of the Islamic doctrine but also to the breaking up of the traditional order in the area. The successes of Muslims in many areas of the West Sudan led to the gradual destruction of traditional cults and the emasculation of the old aristocracy.

These two processes of de-traditionalization and Islamization were going on at the same time that the West was beginning to seize African territories for the expansion of capitalism. This fact is very crucial to an understanding of the European role in the mediation between African thought and the Abrahamic tradition. That Europe came on the scene just when an embattled Africanized Islam was in the process of settling scores with an older African tradition whose foundations have been undermined over the centuries by the followers of a Holy book and a literate tradition, means a great deal to us today. Those who are interested in the big 'ifs' of history can spend hours debating what would have happened had Europe's expansion into other areas of the world been delayed for a century or more; but for me, one thing is clear: that is, Africa was destined to face up to the Abrahamic challenge in another guise, and her children had to assimilate the new message from Europe and then mobilize themselves for a collective defense of their pride and dignity. Whereas in the earlier days Africans fought and traded with Arab bearers of one version of the Abrahamic heritage, under European rule Africa's peoples became the reluctant subjects of a western civilization in search of converts. It is this tragic experience with the western civilization that I wish to unravel in the next chapter. My purpose is not necessarily to pour fuel into the fires of racial conflicts resulting from the European blunder in Africa, but to trace in brief outline the western conquest of Africa and the resultant planting of Christianity. But before proceeding to the next chapter let us trace the history of Islam in Eastern and Central Africa.

After discussing the rise and spread of Islam in the West Sudan, let us now look at its penetration of the Eastern Sudan. By the term Eastern Sudan, I mean that geographical area which is now called the Republic of Sudan. The religion of Muhammad came to the Eastern Sudan because certain factors propelled the Arab conquerors of Coptic Egypt to move southwards into the regions below the Aswan. One of the major factors was the harassment of Arab Muslim settlements by the Nubians and Bejas. The former were not very happy with the Arabs whose conquest of Egypt brought their Christian co-religionists under Arab domination. Another factor which led to the Arab attempt to conquer and rule the Eastern Sudan was the trade and commercial interest of their mercantile classes. A

third would be the desire of the religiously-devout to gain a foothold for Islam in Nubi and Beja countries.

According to the Sudanese scholar Yusuf Fadl Hassan, the Arab Muslims were able to enter the area by three routes. The first was across the Red Sea, either through Ethiopian territory or directly to the Red Sea ports of Badi, Aydhab and Suakin. In his view, the number of immigrants who took the Red Sea route must have been significant when compared to the large numbers who inched their way through Misr (Egypt). This second route was largely responsible for the gradual but successful Arabization and Islamization of the Eastern Sudan. Many Arab immigrants wangled their way into Nubian territory without the permission of the authorities. The last route, according to Fadl Hassan, was the least significant North-West African route through which many religious men passed. This was the path of the Sufi men of Islam who travelled from the West Sudan to Mecca or Egypt, or who took and promoted their religious causes from the North African desert to the land of the Baja and of the other groups located along the Nile valley. The relationship between the Muslims and the Christian Nubians remained peaceful on account of the strict observance by both parties of the Baqt treaty, which remained the foundation of Muslim-Nubian relations for over six centuries. Though the terms of the Baqt treaty specifically stated that the citizen of one of the two countries cannot stay permanently in the other, evidence shows that Muslim traders began to enter Nubia soon after the treaty, and their growing numbers were to serve as the basis for an eventual takeover by Islamic forces.<sup>30</sup>

According to Fadl Hassan, 'the end of Christian Nubia came at the hands of the Muslim Arabs, who had for centuries entered in small numbers from Upper Egypt.'<sup>31</sup> He adds that al-Maris was the first region to feel the impact, because here the Arab elements settled and intermarried with the local inhabitants. This arrangement proved quite favorable to the expansion of Islam. One factor which has always worked in favor of the Arabs in the whole region called Bilad al-Sudan was the matrilineal system of which the Arabs took full advantage, and so landed themselves in positions of chiefly power in their newly adopted homes. The Banu al-Kanz was the main beneficiary of the Nubian matrilineal system, and in a very short time, they became the virtual rulers of the region of al-Maris.

<sup>30</sup> Yusuf Fadl Hassan, *The Arabs and The Sudan*, (Khartoun, Sudan: Khartoun University Press, 1973), p. 124.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125f.

This process of settlement and penetration of Nubian lands by the Arabs continued and in time the Muslims seized control of the Nubian throne. This came when Sayf al-Din 'Abdallah Barshambu, the nephew of King Dawud, was made King by the Mamluk forces. He was the third puppet king appointed by the Mamluk but he was the first to profess Islam. With his conversion the door was opened for the massive Islamization of the entire kingdom.<sup>32</sup> With the Nubians gradually drawn into Darul Islam, the Arabs began to fish for more converts elsewhere.

The relationship between the Arabs and the peoples of the western coast of the Red Sea dates back to the life time of the Prophet. At the height of the Meccan persecution, he advised some of his followers to migrate to Abyssinia. This major incident in early Islamic history made these peoples no strangers to the Muslims. As early as 640 A.D., the Muslim merchants were already active in the area; in fact, a Muslim migrated to Badi (one of the Sudanese ports) in the same year. Through trade and warfare the Muslims gradually penetrated and conquered the Beja territory. At first the Beja were nominal Muslims, but after many attacks and counter-attacks, the spirit of Islam gradually conquered the Beja and Muslims became the predominant force in the area. Mosques came into being, trade and commerce flourished, and so the Beja became part of the wider world of Islam. Soon the voice of the Muazzin was heard from Aswan to Massawa. This gradual Arabization and Islamization of Beja country intensified during the reign of al-Mu'tasim, whose turkification program deprived many Arab Muslims of their pension rights. This act of the new ruler of Egypt drove many of the Arabs to farming, and many opted to settle permanently in Beja country. This mass settlement of Arabs in Beja country and the Eastern Sudan plus the fact that between 1058 and 1261, pilgrims from Egypt and North-West Africa passed through Beja country on their way to Mecca, exposed the Beja more and more to the influences of Islam.

Although Islam has not succeeded in winning the hearts of all the inhabitants of the Eastern Sudan, we can conclude this brief survey by saying that, in the Islamization of the peoples of the Eastern Sudan, conflict of interest between invading Arabs and self-protecting Eastern Sudanis, trade and religious instruction were the means by which the

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155.

children of Darul Islam brought the area under their control. As Fadl Hassan concludes in his paper in the volume edited by I.M. Lewis, “the process of Islamization was accompanied by a process of Arabization which left its mark on a large part of the country; for Arabic was not only the language of Islam but also of trade.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, (Oxford: OUP, 1952), p. 270f.