

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Islam in Africa

Introduction of Islam in Africa

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Africa, alone among the continents, has a majority Muslim population. Africa gave the Islamic world its first *muezzin*, Bilal ibn Rabah. It was home to its greatest historian, Ibn Khaldun and the birthplace of its best-known traveler, Ibn Batuta. It produced one of its few genuine mass movements, the Murabitun movement and provided the manpower for the injection of Muslim political military power into southwestern Europe. It bankrolled the Muslim world with treasures of gold in its historic struggles with the Crusaders and the Mongols and enriched Europe and Asia alike with its human energy and its rich heritage of music, art, culture and history. Yet, it is astonishing how little attention is paid to the history of Muslims in Africa. At best, Africa-along with Indonesia and China-receives a marginal treatment from Muslim historians. It is almost as if Africa is a footnote to West Asia. This is all the more surprising considering that about 500 million Muslims, constituting more than twenty five percent of all Muslims in the world, live in Africa, while another 350 million live in Indonesia, Malaysia and China.

One may advance several reasons for this neglect. Oriental scholarship is focused on the Middle Eastern character of Islam, embracing primarily the Arab element and including as a corollary the Turkish and Persian elements. In the larger context, African Muslim history suffers from the same neglect that characterizes Africa in general. One may legitimately infer that European denial of African history is in part a deliberate attempt to deny the African his historical past, which was not less brilliant than that of medieval Europe. How else could one justify the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that lasted more than three hundred years and resulted in the forced shipment of a hundred million men, women and children? To enslave a continent one has to first dehumanize it. Until recent times, Africa was referred to as "the dark continent", bereft of historical or civilizational achievements. Muslim scholarship, aping the West during the colonial era, went along with this denial. Only now is the historical contribution of African Muslims to Islamic history receiving the attention it so richly deserves.

Africa is a vast continent, second only to Asia in size and five times the size of Europe. It is home to the most desolate deserts and it has some of the thickest forests. The great expanse of the Sahara separates the Mediterranean world from the rest of Africa. The Nile snakes through the eastern desert, giving life to a narrow patch of green, sustaining more than a hundred million people in Egypt and the Sudan. West of Egypt lies the great Libyan Desert, uninhabitable except for a narrow strip close to the Mediterranean. The Atlas Mountains cover the northwestern territories embracing Algeria and Morocco and protrude into Spain. South of Mediterranean Africa, extending in a broad swath is the Sahara, the

largest and the harshest desert on planet earth. It occupies an area of more than three million square miles, almost the size of the United States. Only a few well-defined trade routes traverse this vast terrain, providing civilizational links between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. The modern states of Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Libya, Egypt and northern Sudan lie partly or wholly in the Sahara.

South of the Sahara lies an equally expansive swath of grassland and agricultural land watered by the great rivers, the Niger and Senegal in the west and the Nile and its tributaries in the east. This area, which is also the size of the United States, is the historical Sudan. Today, this territory is occupied by the modern states of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bassau, Guinea, Mali, Upper Volta, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. The reader should not confuse historical Sudan with the modern state of Sudan, which lies south of Egypt. Historical Sudan is a much larger area embracing the entire territory south of the Sahara from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. East of the Ethiopian highlands, the terrain once again changes to the Somali pastures and desert. As one traverses southward towards the equator, the grasslands change to dense forest. These forests are a few hundred miles deep in western Africa but grow to a dense patch of impassable territory in the Congo basin extending through Zaire, Kenya and Uganda. The forests, until recent times, defined the limit of civilizational influence from the Mediterranean and from the coastline along the Indian Ocean. South of the equator lies southern Africa, which changes gradually from bush land to pastures and agricultural territory towards the modern state of South Africa.

The history of Africa is strongly influenced by its geography and its topography. Egypt, situated at the confluence of Asia and Africa, is a child of the Nile. From the time of the Pharaohs, the Nile valley has provided political, cultural and social unity to the area. The *fellaheen* of the Nile constitute the oldest continuous cultural unit in the world. Egypt also acted as the conduit for African art, science and culture to the rest of the world. Specifically, the development of Greek thought in the eastern Mediterranean in the 5th century BC owes a great deal to the wisdom of Africa. Egypt belongs to the Mediterranean world and is the doorway to North Africa. It sits astride an axis linking the Mediterranean civilizations with the civilizations of the Indian Ocean. It provides a bridgehead to Asia and its historical influence extends into the Syrian highlands. In turn, Egypt has attracted the attention of Asian conquerors, as happened in the Persian invasion of the 6th century BC, the Roman invasion of the first century, the Arab-Islamic invasion of the 7th century and the attempted Mongol-Crusader invasions of the 13th century.

In the Maghrib, the Atlas Mountains are inhabited by the Berbers, a hardy, independent people who have resisted foreign rule through the centuries. Land and sea trade routes interconnect the Mediterranean lands. Ancient empires welded them into a common dominion. The Maghrib, as well as Egypt, was part of the Roman Empire. In the 7th century, as Umayyad armies raced across Asia, Africa and Europe, all of these territories came under the sway of the Islamic Empire. Initially, each of these empires established their presence in fortified towns along the coast, whereas the people of the interior largely remained untouched. Consequently, a certain tension between the settled city population and the pastoral nomadic population of the hinterland has always existed in the Maghrib. In the classical Islamic era (700-1250), the Maghrib held the key to Spain and southwestern Europe. When the Berbers were supportive, Muslim armies advanced into Spain and France. When there were disturbances in the Atlas Mountains, the advance stopped or there was a retreat. In the 11th and 12th centuries, it was the turbulence in the Maghrib that largely determined the fate of Muslim Spain.

Diverse peoples, each with its own rich history, inhabit the grasslands, steppes and agricultural areas of the Sudan belt. In centuries bygone, the proud and independent Tuaregs acted as a conduit between the Maghrib and the western Sudan. Further south are the Soninke, Wolof and Mandinka of Sene-Gambia; the Bambara, Fulbe and Mossi of the western Niger basin; the powerful Hausa-Fulani of northern Nigeria; the Kanuri, Shuwa, Sara of eastern Nigeria and Cameroon and, the Bagrami of the Chad region.

The Sudan belt is connected to the Mediterranean by caravan trade routes. From ancient times, five broad routes are identifiable. The first one leads from Morocco through Marrakesh towards Mauritania and Sene-Gambia. The second one starts from Dudja in eastern Morocco through Bechar in western Algeria and ends in the ancient cultural center of Timbaktu in Mali. The third leads from Algiers and Biskra through Tamanrasset in Algeria to Agadez in Niger and ultimately Kano Nigeria. The fourth is an east-west route connecting the commercially important Niger River basin through Kano in northern Nigeria, Ndjamina in Chad to Al Ubayyid in modern Sudan and ultimately to the Red Sea. The fifth one connects Yemen and Hejaz through the Red Sea to Ethiopia. There were also continuous trade contacts from ancient times between Oman and the Persian Gulf regions with the East African shores.

These trade routes were the conduits not only for a two-way exchange of men and material, but also ideas. One such sublime idea was the idea of Islam. Africa was in the cradle of Islam. Among the most honored companions of Prophet Muhammed (p) was Bilal ibn Rabah, the first *muezzin* of Islam. The proximity of Hejaz to Abyssinia ensured continuous contacts between Africans and the Arabs of Mecca. When enmity of the pagan Arabs to the mission of Islam was at its height, the Prophet ordered some of his Companions to migrate to Abyssinia. Several waves of believers did migrate (circa 620) and were received with honor by the Negus, King of Abyssinia. These émigrés returned to Mecca when peace was established between the Muslims and the pagans, but contacts continued and the highlands of Ethiopia were the first in Africa to hear the call of Islam.

According to oral traditions in western Africa, some of the descendants of Bilal ibn Rabah migrated to Mallel, the Arabic name for Mali. Specifically, the Mandinka clan Keita, which is generally credited with founding the great Mali Empire, claims its descent from Bilal ibn Rabah, referred to as Bilali Bunamah in the Mandinka language. Tradition also has it that some of the Companions of the Prophet migrated to Libya and from there to the Lake Chad area further south. Such migrations would be in keeping with the exhortation of the Prophet to his Companions to go forth and spread the message of Islam in the far reaches of the world. Much of the history of early Africa is oral and there is no reason to doubt that African migrants from Mecca established contact with and settled down in the developed regions of West Africa.

The Muslims took Egypt and Libya from the Byzantine Empire in 642. Islam transformed and uplifted the decaying Byzantine civilization in Egypt, imparted to it a transcendence based on *Tawhid*, so that the land of the Nile became a cradle of the nascent Islamic civilization. Within forty years of the conquest of Egypt, Umayyad armies had reached the Atlantic Ocean. Uqba bin Nafi, the conqueror of the Maghrib, founded the city of Kairouan (circa 670), in modern Tunisia. According to some accounts, Uqba bin Nafi led an expedition towards Mauritania. The Kunta tribe of Sene-Gambia, claim their descent from Uqba bin Nafi. The Kuntas are a distinguished tribe of learned men who in the course of time produced great scholars like Sidi Muhammed al Kunti who had a profound impact on the introduction of Islam into West Africa. Sidi Muhammed's son Sidi al Bakkai introduced the Qadariya order into West Africa in the 15th century. The Qadariya Order, named after Shaikh Abdul Qader Jeelani (1077-1166) of Baghdad, was a major force in the spread of Islam in Africa, India, Pakistan, Central Asia and southeastern Europe. Towards the end of 19th century, another great African, Uthman Dan Fuduye, inspired by the ideas of Sidi Muhammed and of the Qadariya School, waged a valiant struggle for Islam in West Africa.

Kairouan soon grew into an important trade center and a magnet for scholars. Large caravans passed through this city carrying goods from the Sudan, the Maghrib and Spain to Egypt and returned loaded with imports from Persia, Khorasan, India and beyond. More significant was the traffic to the cities of Mecca and Madina for the Hajj. As we have pointed out in earlier chapters Madina was the center for the Maliki School of *Fiqh*. It was natural that Maliki scholars, attracted by the prosperity of Kairouan and of the Spanish cities, moved to North Africa. Some of these scholars accompanied the trade caravans south of the Sahara to the Sudan belt. Thus it was that the radiance from Mecca reached West Africa and the Maliki School of *Fiqh* came to be the accepted school throughout West Africa, the Maghrib and Spain. For the last thousand years, Islamic jurisprudence of the Maliki School, together with the institution of Hajj, has provided a vital civilizational link between West Africa and the rest of the Muslim world.

Mutual trade interests between the Umayyads who controlled the Maghrib and the kingdom of Ghana (not to be confused with the modern state of Ghana, the ancient kingdom of Ghana was centered around southern Mali) helped the flow of merchants and merchandise. Ghana controlled the gold mines to the south and as trade increased, it required an increasing supply of gold. The Omayyads, as well as successor kingdoms in the Maghrib, saw to it that trade routes were protected. They established trade centers along the caravan routes to enhance the flow of goods and ensure the safety of merchants. The primary export of West Africa was gold. Other products included salt, ivory and kola nuts. In return, the North Africans provided religious and administrative services and brought in horses from North Africa, spices from Asia and books of learning from Kairouan, Baghdad and Bukhara. Slave trade was not a principal element in the Arab-African transactions, as is sometimes claimed by European writers. It was much later in the 17th and 18th centuries that Omani merchants competed with the Europeans for slaves in the Bantu areas of East Africa.

It was trade, more than any expedition or migration of Arabs that firmly established Islam in West Africa. Among the important trading centers were Tahert in Algeria, Sijilmasa in Morocco, Tanderi in Mali and Agadez in Niger. These caravan routes were connected to the rich commercial towns in the Sene-Gambia and Niger basins as well as Lake Chad. The Sanhaja who inhabited the Sahara acted as escorts to the trade caravans and were the first to accept Islam as early as the Omayyad period in the 8th century. In the Sene-Gambia and Niger River basins, local merchants, noblemen and chieftains led the introduction of Islam. Several reasons may be advanced for this. The merchants were obviously impressed with the business ethics as well as the contractual laws in the *Shariah*. The noblemen and the chieftains could draw upon the administrative and organizational talents of Muslims. But more important, Islam provided a universal creed and a universal community wherein all believers were equal. By the 9th century, important Muslim centers existed in the cities of Gao, Ghana and Tekrur. By the 10th century, the rulers of Gao had accepted Islam. By the 11th century, the kings of the powerful state of Ghana had themselves become Muslim. The intrinsic spirituality of traditional African cultures helped the early spread of Islam, which arrived on the scene proclaiming that it was *deen ul fitra*, or the natural religion of humankind sent to remind all nations of the pristine relationship between man and the One Omniscient Divine.

The presence of a vibrant Islamic community in West Africa acted as a catalyst for social and political movements in the Maghrib and the Sudan. In the first half of the 11th century, the Murabitun rose from the steppes of West Africa to dominate all of the Maghrib and Spain. They established *ribats*, which were a combination of fortresses, *madrassahs* and spiritual training centers, in the Mauritania-Morocco region. By 1150, these *ribats* had coalesced into a centralized political authority and produced a mass movement, which displaced the fading Omayyad dynasty in Spain and the decaying Fatimids of North Africa. As

late as the 19th century, Islam provided the motivating force for internal reform and resistance to European colonization in West Africa. The work of Uthman Dan Fuduye (d. 1817) established the Sokoto Caliphate and provided inspiration to slave revolts as far away as Jamaica.

The introduction of Islam into East Africa followed a somewhat different path from that in West Africa. East Africa includes a broad swath of territory embracing the modern nations of Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. Of the 100 million people who live in that region today, approximately 40% are Muslim.

Since pre-Islamic times, East Africa was known to the Arabs as the land of the Zanj and was a part of the large and prosperous Indian Ocean trade zone that linked India, China, Persia, Arabia and the eastern shores of Africa. China exported porcelain. From India came fine cotton. The products from the Persian Gulf included silk and manufactured goods while Yemen exported incense and horses. African exports included ivory, gold, animal skins, ambergris and rice. Dotting the coastline of the Indian Ocean were large and small trading centers extending in an arc from the tip of Africa to the Straits of Malacca. Included among these were the East African cities of Mombasa, Pemba, Kilwa and Shofala.

Islam was introduced into East Africa as early as the 7th century by successive waves of refugees from Arabia. The first group arrived in the year 698 fleeing the persecution of the Omayyad governor of Iraq, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf. Shortly thereafter, a second group arrived, led by the Kharijites Sulayman and Saeed, whose revolt against the Caliph Abdul Malik had failed. Sulayman established an Ibadi state at Lamu, just north of Mombasa, in modern Kenya. More migrations followed as the persecution of dissidents in the Omayyad Caliphate increased. In the year 729, after a particularly harsh crack down on the Shi'a community, there was a substantial migration of Shi'as to Mombasa. After the Abbasid revolution of 750, as the Omayyads were hunted down and killed, it was the turn of the Omayyads to flee and seek refuge in Africa. In 908 several thousand Iraqis, fleeing the destructions caused by the Karamatians, arrived in Somalia and built for themselves the new towns of Barawah and Shakah.

Following the Seljuk invasions of the 11th century, there were substantial social dislocations in Persia. To escape the ravages of war, some Persians moved further west towards Anatolia but some migrated to East Africa. Most of those fleeing the political turmoil in Iraq and Persia were men. In East Africa they intermarried with the local Bantu ladies, creating a rich Arab-Persian-Bantu amalgam and a vibrant Swahili (meaning, coastal) culture. It was from this matrix that the powerful Swahili dynasties of the 13th and 14th centuries arose.

Early in the 12th century, the Swahilis founded a state with its capital at Kilwa. By the turn of the century, this state had expanded to include the entire coastline from Zanzibar to Shofala. To the interior it extended its borders to the Zambezi River including the gold mines in Zimbabwe and Manika. Gold and trade brought prosperity to the land attracting immigrants both from Yemen and the African hinterland. New towns such as Titi and Sunnah grew up to cater to the gold trade.

In the 13th century, Oman emerged as a strong naval power in the western Indian Ocean. The Omanis captured the southern coastline of the Arabian Peninsula, including Yemen, and extended their influence to the Sahel. In 1303 the Omani Sultan Suleyman shifted his capital from Oman to Batah in Kenya. For the next 500 years, the history of the Sahel was inextricably linked with that of Oman and the Persian Gulf.

Among the refugees from Arabia and Persia were many *ulema*. The influx of scholars, merchants and refugees planted the seeds of the new Islamic community. The Shariah provided the basis for commercial transactions. The Shafi'i fiqh, practiced in southern Arabia, took hold in East Africa. The community grew as conversion of the Bantus gathered momentum through intermarriage. In the 13th century, as Islam spread on the wing of *tasawwuf* beyond its Arab-Persian heartland, Sufi zawiyas were also established in East Africa. The global network of zawiyas added stability to the newborn communities and facilitated the movement of merchant and scholar alike, furthering the growth of Islam. The melting of Arab, Persian and Bantu elements produced a new language, Swahili, which was written in the Arabic script and had a rich vocabulary of Arabic, Persian and Bantu words.

In 1329, the great world traveler Ibn Batuta visited Mogadishu, Mombasa and Kilwa. He found Mogadishu to be a thriving market place "with paved streets and many large domed mosques". The people were "law abiding and pious, wore plenty of gold and silver jewelry and ate off Chinese porcelain." Further south, the city of Kilwa was the capital of a large kingdom ruled by Sultan Mawahid Hasan, the fourth in the line of the Mahdali dynasty founded by immigrants from Yemen. Ibn Batuta had an audience with the Sultan and found him to be "a man of great humility who sits with poor people, eats with them and respects the *ulema* and the *sheriffs*".

The spread of Islam further south towards the horn of Africa was arrested by the appearance of European gunboats early in the 16th century. In 1505 the Portuguese occupied Kilwa, razed all of its 300 mosques and slaughtered its population. In 1508 they occupied Mozambique and more slaughter followed. The Portuguese challenge was taken up by the Ottomans. The Omani Sultan, Saif ibn Sultan, working with the Ottoman navy, drove off the Portuguese, reclaimed most of the Sahel (meaning, the coast) for the Muslims and moved his capital from Oman to Kilwa. The struggle for control of East Africa continued through much of the 16th and 17th centuries with the Omani capital shifting between East Africa and the Persian Gulf. Successive Omani dynasties, like the Yarubis and Sayyedis participated in this struggle alongside the Ottomans. After the year 1600, a military equilibrium developed with the Muslims controlling the coastline north of Shofala and the Portuguese holding onto the areas south of it.

In the 17th century the Dutch displaced the Portuguese as the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean. Many of the important Portuguese colonies, such as Cape Town in South Africa, Colombo in Sri Lanka and Malacca in Malaysia, fell to the Dutch. It was the Indonesian islands, however, that felt the full brunt of Dutch colonial designs. In their frequent wars with the sultans of the Archipelago, the Dutch captured Muslim prisoners and shipped them to Cape Town. Some among the prisoners were scholars and Sufi shaykhs. These scholars were the first to introduce Islam into the area around the Cape of Good Hope. Today, the tombs of many of these honored shaykhs dot the landscape of southern Africa. The venerated tomb of Syed Abdur Rahman who was brought in chains from Sumatra to Cape Town in 1652 illustrates this observation.

In 1805, the Omani Sultan, Saeed Ibn Sultan shifted his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. A ruler with foresight and wisdom, he built Oman into a prosperous empire. He encouraged agriculture and trade, introduced the cultivation of cloves into Zanzibar, facilitated Muslim immigration and invited the neighboring African rulers to embrace Islam. After his death, the Empire of Oman was divided into an Arab province and an East African province. Sultan Majid Ibn Saeed became the Sultan of the Sahel. It was this sultan who founded the city of Dar es Salaam and moved his capital from Zanzibar to that city.

The death of Sultan Majid in 1870 marked the end of Muslim rule in East Africa. It was the height of the colonial period. Britain, Germany, Portugal and Italy reached an understanding to carve up the East African territories. In 1883, the Germans occupied Zanzibar. The Portuguese moved into the area south of Cape Delgado and annexed it to Mozambique. The British moved into Kenya. In 1887 the Zanzibar Sultan Bargash ibn Saeed sold the cities of Dar es Salaam, Kilwa and Lindi to the Germans for a sum of four million Marks. In 1889 he accepted a British protectorate over Pemba and Zanzibar. The following year he surrendered Mogadishu to the Italians for a sum of 160,000 Indian rupees. In 1894 he gave a perpetual lease on Mombasa to the British for an annual payment of 10,000 British pounds. In 1907 the British organized the territories near Lake Nyasa under the name of Nyasaland that later became the Republic of Malawi. The Germans organized their colonial holdings under the name of Tanganyika; after their defeat in the First World War (1918) they surrendered it to the British.

On the heels of colonization came an army of missionaries from Europe, well financed by private sources and encouraged by the colonial administrations. At stake was the very soul of Africa. The colonialists suppressed the study of Arabic and discouraged the use of Swahili. The missionaries established educational institutions whose agenda, in addition to preparing the students for jobs in the colonial administrations was to convert the Africans to Christianity. Afraid that their children would lose their faith, the Muslims avoided the missionary schools. They waged a valiant battle to survive by running an alternate educational system based on the madrasah and the shaykh. But resources were meager, Muslim societies were in a state of retrenchment, and the quality and comprehensiveness of madrasah based education suffered. The graduates of the missionary schools found good jobs in the colonial administrations so that when colonialism receded after World War II and Africa became independent, it was the Christians who were in control of the civil administrations. The disparity in education introduced an element of tension between the Muslims and the Christians in some parts of East Africa that continues to this day.

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