

# The Impact of Islam on Medieval Ghana And Mali (10 - 14th Century)

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This essay discusses the impact of Islam on West Africa where until the 14th century, two ancient African states - Ghana and Mali - flourished. This area witnessed the beginning of the impact of Islamic civilization thanks primarily to the activities of Maghribi traders.

Arabic sources are the only written sources available to us concerning the history of the Western Sudan in the Middle Ages, since the tribes of West Africa had not yet known writing at the time.

The spread of Islam in Western Sudan served as a unifying factor among the tribes of the region. Islam contributed towards the solution of the problem of tribalism.

Ancient Ghana reached the zenith of its power in the 10th century and its prosperity derived primarily from its control of the trans-Saharan gold trade.

Writing in 1068 A.D., the Andalusian al-Bakri says that the king of Ghana and most of his subjects were pagans and that the king was tolerant towards Muslims for he permitted them to have their own town and mosques and he depended upon Muslim functionaries for the running of his administration.

To the west of Ghana lay Takrur on the lower course of the Senegal river. The Takruris were the first people in West Africa to embrace Islam and they were active in spreading it among their neighbouring tribes.

From its inception, the Almoravid State was characterized by the **jihad** and was active in the propagation of **sunni** Islam and the eradication of heresies and paganism. In 1076 A.D., the Almoravids conquered pagan Ghana whose people, known as Soninke, were converted to Islam and, through these itinerant traders (**dyula**), Islam was diffused in many areas of West Africa.

The empire of Mali, which flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries, had as its nucleus the Mande tribes which inhabited the area lying between the upper Niger and Senegal basins. Mali's history begins with Sundiata (d. 1255 A.D.) who appears to have been pagan at the outset of his reign but he soon adopted Islam. Until the decline of Mali in the 15th century, its rulers (**mansas**) were all Muslims, and many of them performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The most famous ruler of Mali was Mansa Musa (r. 1312-1337 A.D.). During his reign, Mali attained the zenith of its power and prosperity. Following Mansa Musa's celebrated pilgrimage in 1324 A.D., Mali attracted a host of Muslim traders and scholars who contributed to its economic and cultural well-being and to its architectural development.

Thanks to Mansa Musa, close relations were established with Mamluk Egypt, Hafsid Tunisia and Marinid Morocco, with the result that Mali became an integral part of the Muslim world.

The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta spent nine months in Mali in 1352-3 A.D. and was impressed by the prevalence of public security and justice, by the people's devoutness and piety, their strict performance of prayers and their zeal in memorizing the Qur'an.

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This historical survey discusses the impact of Islam in an area which lies at the southern periphery of the Maghrib, namely the Western Sudan - the basins of the Niger and the Senegal - known as al-Sahil and al-Hawd, in which until the fifteenth century two ancient African states, Ghana and Mali, flourished. This area saw the beginning of the impact of Islamic civilization after Arab rule in North Africa had been consolidated at the beginning of the eighth century A.D. These Islamic influences continued to grow, thanks to the activities of Maghribi traders across the Sahara. It was largely due to the activities and settlement of these traders that Islam began to spread, initially among the Sahara tribes (Sanhaja al-Sahra') and then in those areas of the Western Sudan which they frequented.

It is noteworthy that the Arabic sources - geographical books, travels and biographical dictionaries - are the only literary sources available to us concerning the history of the Western Sudan in the Middle Ages, since the tribes of the Western Sudan had not yet known writing at that time. These Arabic sources are, therefore, per se a great contribution to the history of civilization. The most important of these sources, in chronological order, are the works of Ibn Hawqal (10th century), Abu Ubayd al-Bakri (11th century), al-Idrisi (12th century), Ibn Sa'id (13th century), Ibn Battuta, al-Umari and Ibn Khaldun (14th century), al-Qalqashandi (15th century), and al-Hasan al-Wazzan, better known as Leo Africanus, (16th century). From among the Sudanese themselves, we have 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di, author of **Tarikh al-sudan**, and Mahmud Ka't (Ibn al-Mukhtar), author of **Tarikh al-fattash** (both of whom lived in the 17th century), and the celebrated scholar and **faqih** Ahmed Baba al-Tunbukti (late 16th and early 17th century), author of **Nayl al-ibtihaj bi tatriz al-dibaj**. In addition, there are the biographical dictionaries, in the compilation of which Maghribi and Andalusian scholars in particular distinguished themselves, for these works contain valuable pieces of information about contacts made by Muslim traders in the Sudan.

It must be emphasized that Islam penetrated into most areas of the Western Sudan not through military conquest but peacefully through the influence of traders and nomadic groups from the Sahara who used to frequent the fringes of the Western Sudan for trade and who set up stations and markets where they could exchange their wares for those of the Sudanese (Hunwick, 1970: 115). Thanks to these Maghribi traders, Islam began to spread not through missionary activities but through contact and example, particularly among pagan monarchs and their pagan functionaries. The emergence of the Almoravid state in the western Sahara in the middle of the 11th century - a state based on **jihad** and the propagation of orthodox Islam - played a significant role in the diffusion of the Maliki school (**madhhab**) of Islam among the tribes of the western Sahara as well as in the Sudan, thereby accelerating the pace of Islamization in

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the basins of the Senegal and the upper Niger. As their kings and most of their subjects adopted Islam, the Sudanese themselves assumed the role of propagators of Islam in their homelands and surrounding territories. Thus, the Hausa and Dyula, when converted to Islam, extended the faith through their wide-ranging trading connections throughout West Africa. (Lewis, 1974: 109)

The spread of Islam in the Western Sudan served as a unifying factor among the tribes, as the new faith conferred upon them a sense of brotherhood. Ethnic distinctions in this vast area were reduced by the spread of Islam and through the adoption of Arabic as the language of instruction in schools and as a language in which works on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tarikh* (history) were written (Lewis, 1974: 107). Islam as a supratribal religion thus contributed to the cohesiveness of the multi-ethnic empires which emerged in the Western Sudan. Muslim rulers were also able to consolidate their traditional authority and were provided with "a doctrine, a flag and an army" and, occasionally, with a justification for the conquest of surrounding pagan kingdoms (Lewis, 1974: 110).

Islam and Islamic culture contributed to the solution of a major internal problem which for so long had bedevilled the states in the Western Sudan, namely the problem of tribalism and tribal allegiance. Muslim rulers resorted to the creation of a central administration which could transcend the allegiance based on tribe or kinship. Thanks to the increase in the number of Islamic schools, a cadre of literate Muslims came into being and these were recruited by the sultans to run their administrations. Thus, of Ghana, al-Bakri says, "The King's interpreters, the officials in charge of his treasury (*bayt al-mal*) and most of his ministers are Muslims". (Al-Bakri, 1965: 175)

### **Trade and Trans-Saharan Caravan Routes**

Four major trans-Saharan caravan routes linked North Africa with the Western Sudan. The first route ran alongside the Atlantic coast and had its terminal in the Senegal basin (Takrur and Silla). The second route ran from Sijilmasa in southern Morocco to Taghaza and terminated in Awdaghust in the southern fringe of the Sahara. The third route started from Tahert, the Rustumid capital in the Central Maghrib, passed through either Taghaza and Awdaghust or through Tadmekka (al-Suq) and terminated in Gao (Kawkaw) on the Niger bend. The fourth route began in Ifriqiya (Qayrawan or Tripoli), passed through Ghadames and Tadmekka and had its terminal either on the Niger or in Kanem (Lake Chad area) (Lombard, 1975: 223-224). Under the Fatimids and the Mamluks, Egypt, too, had close and active trade links with the Western Sudan, caravans reaching Cairo by way of Fezzan and Kanem and Upper Egypt (Ashtor, 1976: 291).

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Through these routes, gold from the Western Sudan reached the Maghrib and the Muslim East as well as southern Europe. This gold led to the prosperity and well-being of both the Western Sudan and the Muslim states, which were established in the leading cities of the Maghrib, such as Sijilmasa, Aghmat, Tlemcen, Tahert, Wargala, Qayrawan, Mahdiyya and Marrakesh as well as Muslim Spain, Sicily and Egypt.

The chief wares carried by caravans to the Western Sudan consisted of grains, dates, textiles, manufactured metal and leather goods and various types of beads (**nazm**) made of glass and shells, rings, tar (**al-qatran**), timber, perfumes and, above all, salt (from Taghaza and Awlil) of which the Sudan was in dire need. Al-Idrisi, a son of Sabta (Ceuta), says that there exists in Sabta a market "for processing (coral), rubbing it and turning it into beads which were then pierced and strung ... Most of it is carried to Ghana and all countries of the Sudan as it is much in demand in these countries" (Al-Idrisi, 1975: 108). These commodities used to be exchanged by traders for the products of the Sudan, namely gold, ivory and ebony. The main Sudanese export, however, was gold dust (**tibr al-dhahab**) from Wangara in the Senegal basin (Bambuk and Bure goldfields?) (Bovill, 1970: 126).

Traffic in goods between the Maghrib and the Western Sudan was on such a scale that debit notes (**sukk**) were introduced in order to expedite and facilitate commercial transactions. Ibn Hawqal says, "In Awdaghust (in 340 A.H./951-2 A.D.), I saw a debit note (**sukk**) for forty two thousand dinars drawn on a Sijilmasi merchant in Awdaghust. I have never seen or heard of such a thing in the East, and when I related this story in Iraq, Persia and Khurasan, it was considered an interesting story (**istutrifat**) (Ibn Hawqal: 96). The use of debit notes, however, seems to have been common in the Near East in the eleventh century, for the Persian traveller Nasir-i-Khusraw used one during his stay at 'Aydhah, the Egyptian Red Sea port, in 442/1050 (Nasir, 1970: 119-120).

Biographical works (**kutub al-tarajim**) shed a light on the subject of trans-Saharan caravan trade and the contacts which existed between the Maghrib and the Western Sudan since the early Middle Ages. In his voluminous **Al-Mi'yar al-mu'rib**, al-Wansharisi, for example, mentions two **fatwas** (legal opinions) given by the Qayrawani **faqih** (jurist) al-Qabisi (d. 403/1012) which provide direct evidence for the period (10th century) when the Western Sudan was still largely pagan. The first **fatwa** deals with an unfulfilled **qirad** contract (comenda) made in Ifriqiya from the West Sudan. The second **fatwa** concerns a dispute over the inheritance of a merchant who had died in the Sudan. Both **fatwas** deal with trade by Maghribi Muslims across the Sahara. The first **fatwa** concerns an investment loan made in Qayrawan to a merchant who proceeded to Tadmekka, Ghana and Awdaghust where he got married, had children and was away from home for eleven years. This merchant owed a debt in his native land and, following this man's death, the **qadi** sold his estate when the creditor approached the **qadi** claiming his money back. The second **fatwa** concerns a dispute over the estate of a trader from Ifriqiya who died intestate in

the Sudan (Brett, 1979: 1-2).

It is interesting to recall that Abu Yazid Makhlad b. Kaydad, the famous rebel against the Fatimids (943-7 A.D.), was referred to as **al-habashi al-aswad** (black Ethiop) because it is said that he was born to a merchant of the Djerid in Ifriqiya (southern Tunisia) by a black woman at Tadmekka (Brett, 1979: 10 and Ibn Hammad, 1927:18).

The founder of the Midrarid dynasty at Sijilmasa, "Isa b. Mazid, described by al-Bakri as **al-aswad** (the black), was also of Sudanese origin and was chosen by the Sufris as their ruler in 104 / 722-3 (Al-Bakri, 1965: 149).

This shows that Maghribis had been in contact with the Western Sudan since an early period and had intermarried with the Sudanese.

### Islam in Ghana and Takrur

The ancient kingdom of Ghana occupied the area situated at the southern extremity of the Sahara (**al-Majaba al-Kubra**) immediately to the north of the upper basins of the Senegal and Niger rivers. It lies north east of modern Mali's capital, Bamaku, and some 500 miles to the north west of modern Ghana whose name it took, following independence in 1957, on account of ancient Ghana having been the oldest kingdom in the Western Sudan.

Ancient Ghana reached the zenith of its power in the tenth century A.D. and our information about it is primarily derived from the accounts of the Arab geographers Ibn Hawqal and, in particular, al-Bakri. The capital of ancient Ghana has disappeared, but recent excavations have discovered the site of its Muslim quarter at Koumbi-Saleh in the south-eastern corner of Mauretania. The upper section of the town was built of stone, not a very common practice in the Sahil, with spacious, often two-storey buildings. Stones were discovered on the site bearing Arabic inscriptions of verses from the Qur'an (Levtzion, 1978: 674 and Trimingham, 1970: 49).

Ancient Ghana's prosperity was derived primarily from its control of the trans-Saharan gold trade, hence the name **bilad al-dhahab** (gold country) given to it by all Medieval Arab authors. Ibn Hawqal says, "Ghana is the richest kingdom in the world on account of the plentiful resources of gold dust (**al-tibr al-muthar**) ... [The Kings of Ghana] badly need the Kings of Awdaghust on account of the salt which they import from the land of Islam, as it is an indispensable item to them ..." (Ibn Hawqal, 98).

The fullest account we have about the Kingdom of Ghana in the eleventh century is furnished by the celebrated Andalusian geographer and man of letters, Abu 'Ubayd al-Bakri, who completed his invaluable

book **Al-Masalik wa'l-mamalik** in 460 A.H./1067-8 A.D. Despite the fact that al-Bakri had not travelled outside his native al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), he obtained his information about Ghana from reliable sources, the Umayyad archives in Cordoba and from North African traders who, thanks to their frequent visits to the Sudan, were fully acquainted with Ghana. Al-Bakri must have derived much of this information from Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Warraq (d. 362/973) who was brought up in Qayrawan and later joined, in Cordoba, the court of the Umayyad Caliph al-Hakam al-Mustansir for whom he wrote a number of books on North Africa including its trade links with the Sudan (Ibn al-Abbar, 1955: 366). Al-Bakri says, "The capital of Ghana consists of two towns lying in a plain, one of which is inhabited by Muslims and is large, possessing twelve mosques, one being a **jami** (for Friday prayers), each having its **imam**, **mu'adhdhin** and Qur'an reciters (**ratibun**) as well as jurists (**fuqaha'**) and scholars ... The royal town is some six miles from it [the Muslim town] and is called al-Ghaba (the grove) ... In the royal town, near the king's residence, there is a mosque in which his Muslim visitors pray. The royal town is surrounded by huts, groves and coverts (**sha'ra'**), where live their magicians who are their priests, and they contain their idols **dakakir** and the burial places of their kings ... The interpreters of the kings are Muslims, and so are his treasurer and most of his ministers ..." (Al-Bakri, 1956: 175).

This account shows that the king of Ghana and most of his subjects, up to the middle of the eleventh century A.D., were pagans, and that the king was tolerant towards Muslims, for he permitted them to have their own town and their own mosques, and he depended upon Muslims for the running of his administration. This reminds one of the Norman Kings who, on conquering Sicily from the Muslims (484/1091), continued to depend largely on Muslim functionaries in their court and administration.

Al-Bakri goes on to describe how the subjects behaved when they were in the presence of the king: "When the king's co-religionists come near him, they prostrate themselves and sprinkle dust on their heads. That is their greeting to him. Muslims, however, greet him by clapping their hands" (Al-Bakri, 1965: 176).

To the west of the capital of Ghana lay the capital of Takrur, on the lower course of the Senegal not far from the Atlantic coast. The people of Takrur had been pagans until their king, War-jabi, son of Rabis, embraced Islam in 432/1041, i.e. peacefully before the arrival of the Almoravids in the Sudan. Al-Bakri says that "the people of Takrur today [i.e. 460/1068] are Muslims" (Al-Bakri, 1965: 172). The Takruris were the first people in Western Sudan to embrace Islam and they became active instrumental in spreading Islam among the tribes surrounding them. The term "Takrur" later became synonymous with the Western Sudan in

the writings of Arab historians in the East, such as al-'Umari and al-Qalqashandi, after the fourteenth century A.D.

On the impact of the Maghribis on the Takruris, Ibn Sa'id says "Those [Takruris] who associated with the whites [i.e. the Maghribis] and became urbanized (**tahaddara**) began to wear imported clothes made of wool and cotton ... whereas those who lived in rural areas were naked -the Muslims cover their private parts with bones or skins, while the pagans stay naked" (Ibn Sa'id, 1970: 91)

Al-Bakri says that one of the means of exchange at Silla is by pretty cotton strips called **al-shakkiyyat**, a word derived from the Arabic **Shugga** (Hassaniyya shegge) (Al-Bakri, 1965: 173 / Trimmingham, 1970: 43 n.4).

This suggests that cotton growing and cloth manufacture were introduced to Takrur and the Western Sudan through trade and Islam (levtzion, 1980: 179).

### **The Almoravids and the Western Sudan**

Until the advent of the Almoravids in West Africa in the middle of the 5th/11th century, Islam was spreading peacefully and continuously in the Western Sudan at the hands of Muslim traders from the Maghrib. There were Muslim communities in many stations, markets and towns through which trans-Saharan caravans passed on their way from the Maghrib to Ghana.

The Almoravid state (**dawlat al-murabitin**) emerged in the western Sahara to the south of Morocco, thanks primarily to the work of the Maliki **faqih** and reformer, 'Abd Allah b. Yasin, who sought to enforce -in the tradition of the Maliki school of Qayrawan - a rigorous observance of the **shari'a** in the Sanhaji Saharan society which was notorious for its laxity and its ignorance of orthodox Islam. After Ibn Yasin had succeeded in his mission, not without encountering considerable difficulties, the Almoravid state emerged, based on the Lamtuna, Guddala and Massufa tribes which formed the Sanhaja confederation in the western Sahara. From its inception, the Almoravid state, as its name implies, was characterized by the **jihād** or struggle for the consolidation and propagation of **sunni** (orthodox) Islam and the eradication of heresies (**bida'**) and paganism. Ibn Abi Zar' says that, on seeing that sections of the Sanhaja had turned away from him at first, Ibn Yasin "wanted to leave them for the Sudan (**bilad al-sudan**) who had embraced Islam [a reference probably to the Takruris] since Islam had already spread there" (Ibn Abi Zar, 1843: 78). After his cousin Yusuf b. Tashufin had consolidated his position in Morocco, the Almoravid **amir** Abu Bakr b. 'Umar returned to "the Sahara where he stayed for some time fighting the pagans among the Sudanese until he died as a martyr in the course of

one of his campaigns [480/1087] ... after the Sahara country up to the gold mountains in the Sudan had submitted to him" (Ibn Abi Zar, 1843: 87).

In the south, and in alliance with the Muslim king of Takrur, the Almoravids retook Awdaghust in 1054 A.D. from the king of Ghana who had seized it from the Sanhaja in 990 A.D. The Almoravids also seized the capital of Ghana itself in 1076 A.D., thereby bringing to an end the pagan kingdom of Ghana. The people of Ghana, known as Soninke, embraced Islam and spread as itinerant traders (**dyula**) throughout the neighbouring areas to the south. It was largely due to these Soninke traders that Islam was diffused in many areas of the Western Sudan (Bolanle, 61).

Although the control of Ghana by the Almoravids was short-lived in view of their pre-occupation with the affairs of Morocco and al-Andalus, reference in Arabic sources show that close relations were maintained between the Almoravid rulers in Marrakesh and some rulers in the Western Sudan. The fact that 4000 Sudanese troops constituted part of the Almoravid army at the battle of al-Zallaqa (Sacralias) in 479/1086 suggests a possible alliance between the Almoravids and their Takruri co-religionists (Willis, 1979: 5).

The unity which the Almoravids created in the Muslim West, from al-Andalus to the Western Sudan, is attested by the group of Muslim royal tombstones, dated between 1100 and 1110 A.D., which probably had been sculptured and inscribed in Muslim Spain and then carried across the Sahara to be erected at the graves of two kings and a queen of Gao (Kawkaw) who had been recently converted to Islam (Ibn Idrisi 1978: 331).

According to al-Sa'di, Gao's ruling dynasty had been converted to Islam in 400/1009. Al-Bakri says that on their accession, the rulers of Gao received "a ring, a sword and a copy of the Qur'an which, they claim, had been presented to them from the **amir al-mu'minin** [i.e. the Umayyad Caliph in Cordoba]" (Al-Bakri, 1965: 183).

Islam spread among the pagan tribes of Ghana after the advent of the Almoravids. This is attested by what al-Idrisi says, one century after al-Bakri's report: "[Ghana] is visited by wealthy merchants from all adjoining areas in Morocco. Its people are Muslims" (Al-Idrisi, 1957: 7). Al-Zuhri, writing about the same time as al-Idrisi, says that "formerly the inhabitants of Ghana were infidels but, in the year 469 [1076], they became good Muslims under the influence of Lamtuna [i.e. the Almoravids]".<sup>(1)</sup> Thirty years later, Ibn Sa'id adds that the king of Ghana "wages many campaigns of **jihad** against the pagans. His dynasty is well known for this" (Ibn Sa'id, 1970: 92).

It is noteworthy that the Almoravid **mithqal** (**dinar**), struck of pure

gold, was in great demand outside their empire, including the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain where it was known as metical/metcal/mitical. Alfonso VIII, King of Castile and Leon, began, as from 1173 A.D., to strike similar dinars known as "le morabeti Alphonsi" and until the fifteenth century, dinars were known throughout Spain as "maravedis".<sup>2</sup>

A radio-chemical analysis of a number of Almoravid **mithqals** has recently been carried out in order to verify the claim by economic historians that Western Sudanese gold played a significant role in Medieval Mediterranean economic life. The investigation has been successful in proving the claim and has shown the major role played by the Almoravid dynasty in distributing West African gold to other parts of the Mediterranean basin where Maghribi merchants were very active. The Almoravid **mithqals** enjoyed a great international reputation and one modern scholar has gone so far as to call them the "dollars" of the Middle Ages. One possible reason for this reputation is that the gold from which these **mithqals** were struck was very renowned among Medieval merchants who consistently referred to Sudanese gold as "very pure" (Messier, 1974: 31, 36; Goiten, 1973: 325).

Mention must be made of the traveller Ibn Fatima, often quoted by Ibn Sa'id, Ibn Khaldun and al-Qalqashandi, as a source of information about the Western Sudan and the regions further to the south. He is a son of the Western Sudan (Senegal or Ghana) and lived towards the end of the sixth/twelfth century. The naming of sons after their mothers was quite common among the Sanhaja of the western Sahara and in the Sudan (e.g. Ibn Ghaniya, Ibn 'A' isha, Ibn al-Sahrawiyya). Although only quotations from Ibn Fatima's work have survived, they show that he was widely-travelled and well-informed (Mones, 1967: 507).

### **Islam in Mali**

As a result of the pre-occupation of the Almoravids with the affairs of Morocco and al-Andalus as well as the inter-tribal disputes within the Sanhaja in the Sahara, Ghana re-emerged in a smaller area to the south of the old kingdom. In 1203, the ruler of the Sosso took Ghana from which the Muslim Soninke had to flee to Walata (1224), which replaced Ghana as a centre of trade and Muslim education, and to Jenne (1250) (Cornevin, 1965: 1002). Soon, however, Ghana was conquered by a chieftain of one of the Mandingo tribes in the upper basin of the Niger.

The Mali empire, which flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had as its nucleus the Mande tribes which inhabited the area lying between the upper Niger and Senegal basins. Mali was already known to Muslim traders in the eleventh century and was called "Malel" by al-Bakri who gives the following account about the conversion of its

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king to Islam which must have taken place early in the eleventh century, before Ghana was conquered by the Almoravids in 1076.

“[Malel’s] king is known as **al-muslimani** [i.e. new convert to Islam]. The reason for his being so called came about in this way. Year after year, his country was afflicted with drought. The people tried to obtain rain by making many sacrifices of cattle to such an extent that they almost exterminated the breed but achieved nothing except dearth and distress. Now the king had staying with him as a guest a Muslim who passed his time reciting the Qur’an and studying the **sunna** of the Prophet. The king complained to this man about his people’s sufferings. He replied, ‘O King, if you only believed in God Almighty, acknowledged His unity and the mission of Muhammad, and believed in all the articles of faith, then I would pray on your behalf for relief from what you are suffering and from what has befallen you. Thus you could bring universal benefit upon the people of your country and thereby incite all your enemies and adversaries to envy’.. He persisted with him until he agreed to embrace Islam, and that in sincerity. He taught him to recite easy passages from the Book of God and instructed him in those obligations which even the most ignorant should know. He waited until Friday night, then told him to make a total ablution, clothed him in a cotton robe which he had by him, and they went together to a rise in the ground. There the Muslim with the king on his right began to pray throughout the night that God’s will be done, the Muslim doing the petitioning and the king repeating the “Amen”. As dawn began to break, behold, God enveloped the land with abundant rain. In consequence of this, the king ordered the destruction of the idols and the expulsion of the magicians from his country. He is sincerely attached to Islam, as are his heir and courtiers, but the people of his kingdom remain idolators. Since that time, their kings have borne the title of **al-muslimani** ” (Al Bakri, 1965:178 and Trimingham, 1970:61-62).

As has been noted by one modern scholar, the role of the chiefs as early recipients of Islamic influence is a salient feature in the process of Islamization in other parts of West Africa (Iverson, 1978:672).

The history of the Mali empire begins with Sundiata [r. 1230-1255 A.D.] who made Niani his capital and bore the title “Mansa” (i.e. sultan). The new empire covered a vast territory from Niani on the upper Niger to the Atlantic coast in the west. Eastwards, the empire extended up to Hausaland. It included within its boundaries the main sources of mineral wealth, such as the salt mines in Taghaza, the copper mines in Takedda and the goldfields in the south. The new empire contained also the main trading centres such as Walata, Jenne, Gao and Timbuctu.

Sundiata appears to have been pagan at the start of his reign, but he

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soon adopted Islam. Until the decline of Mali in the fifteenth century, its rulers were all Muslims, and many of them performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, thereby enhancing their own prestige among their Muslim subjects and in the Muslim world at large. As a result, Islam went on spreading in Mali and served to break the distance between the social classes. Islamic identity began to rival ethnic or tribal consciousness [Willis, 1979:13-14].

The most famous ruler of Mali was Mansa Musa [r. 1312-1337 A.D.] who was known and popular for his piety and open-handed generosity. During his reign, Mali attained the zenith of its power and prosperity; the fame of its gold wealth spread throughout the Muslim world and Europe.

In 1324 A.D., Mansa Musa went on pilgrimage which became a landmark in the history of Mali. Following Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, Mali attracted a host of traders and scholars who contributed to its economic and cultural well-being and to its architectural development.

On his way to Mecca, Mansa Musa and his large entourage passed through Aujla and Surt whence he took the coastal road to Cairo. It is said that he took with him 100 camel loads of gold all of which he spent or gave away in the course of his journey. In Cairo, he gave one load of gold to the Mamluk sultan's treasury and he gave liberally to senior state functionaries. As a result, the price of gold in Egypt is said to have depreciated considerably (Al-Qalqashandi, 289-291).

In Mecca, Mansa Musa invited four *shurafa'* to accompany him, with their families, to Mali. In Cairo, the Mansa invited a number of scholars and *fuqaha'* to accompany him back to his capital, and he purchased a large number of books on *fiqh* in order to provide his country with proper Islamic culture. Sometime after his return, Mansa Musa sent a book, written by one of his scribes, to the sultan of Egypt.

While in Mecca, Mansa Musa met the Andalusian poet and architect Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili (d. in Timbuctu 1346 A.D.) and invited him to accompany him back to Mali where he was charged with the construction of a number of mosques and palaces in Timbuctu, Gao and elsewhere. Al-Sahili used burnt bricks, the use of which was till then unknown in the Sudan. These new buildings were adorned with the battlemented terraces and pyramidal towers characteristic of the Sudanese style (Trimingham, 1955:63-69). It was thanks to al-Sahili that the Andalusian-Maghribi style of architecture was introduced to the western Sudan.

Mansa Musa's Islamic policy was more ardently pursued after his pilgrimage. He gave Mali the characteristics of an Islamic state by constructing mosques and instituting the ceremonials connected with the Friday prayers and the *ids*. He began to send scholars to pursue their

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studies in Fez and Cairo. It was thanks to Mansa Musa that close relations were established with the Mamluks of Egypt, the Hafsids of Tunisia and the Marinids of Morocco, with the result that Mali became an integral part of the Muslim world (Levtzion, 1980:213-214).

The Takruris, as the people of Mali were known in the East, had a large community in Egypt where they had a special **riwaq** (section) in Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo bearing their name. In fact, the Takruris had a large community in Cairo since Fatimid days. When the pious Takruri, Yusuf b. 'Abd Allah al-Takruri, a contemporary of the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz (d. 386/996), died, the Caliph built, in his memory, a domed mosque which came to be known as Jami'al-Takruri. A number of Takruris were later to serve in the Mamluk army. One of them, 'Anbar al-Takruri was promoted by Sultan Qaytabai to the rank of an army commander (**muqaddam**) in 905/1499 (Zaki, 1961:123-124).

The first reference to Mali in European maps was made in the Italian **mappa mundi** in 1339. Drawing on information obtained from Jewish merchants in North Africa, the Majorcan Jewish cartographer, Abraham Cresques, compiled the Catalan Atlas (1375) which locates a number of Mali cities, such as Gao and Timbuctu, and shows in the middle of the Sahara the figure of Mansa Musa holding a sceptre in one hand and a gold nugget in the other (Bovill, 1970:109 and Trimmingham, 1970, 68, N.I.). In the fourteenth century, Europe's gold reserves were depleted and so Europeans considered the Sudan as very rich in gold, some of which was reaching them through trade with the Maghrib.

The term 'Manding'' comprises at present a number of West African peoples who speak various dialects which stem from the same language, in the writing of which Arabic characters, with some modification, were used. Al-Qalqashandi quotes Abu Sa'id 'Uthman al-Dukali, who had spent some thirty five years travelling throughout Mali, as saying that the people of Mali wear turbans with wraps (**ama'im bi hanak**), while their costumes are not unlike those of Maghribis, i.e. **jubbas** and **durra'as**—loose outer garments—without a front opening (**bila tafrij**). The Malis mount saddled horses and their riding style (**rukub**) is similar to that of the Arabs (Al-Qalqashandi, Vol.V:298-299).

We have an abundance of material about Mali in the middle of the fourteenth century and about its reigning sultan, Mansa Sulayman brother of Mansa Musa, thanks to the contemporary accounts of al-'Umari and Ibn Battuta. Sulayman is said to have built mosques and instituted weekly prayers and 'id ceremonials. He attracted Maliki jurists to his country, and was himself a student of **fiqh** (Al-Qalqashandi, Vol.V:297 and Trimmingham, 1970:71). In addition to al-'Umari's account (written 1342-9), we have an eye-witness account, namely that of the famous Maghribi traveller Ibn Battuta, who spent some nine months in Mali (1352-3 A.D.).

Ibn Battuta's interesting and illuminating account shows that Islam was already well established in Mali's chief cities, yet, perhaps for political and economic reasons, the sultan tolerated a number of pagan traditions and customs such as cannibalism, eating of dogs, donkeys and corpses, woman nakedness and sprinkling dust and ashes on themselves as a mark of respect for the sultan.

Ibn Battuta was impressed by the prevalence of public security and justice in Mali, by the people's devoutness and piety, their strict performance of prayers and their zeal in memorizing the Qur'an.

The absence of racial or colour prejudice on the part of Muslims is attested, for instance, by the fact that the head of the Maghribi community (**al-bidan**) in Mali's capital, Muhammad b. **al-faqih** al-Jazuli, was married to a cousin of the sultan (Ibn Battuta, 1968:665). Among the foreign traders in Walata in the thirteenth century were the prosperous Maqqari brothers from Tlemcen who built stone houses and married local women (Al-Maqqari, 1949:130).

It is noteworthy, too, that mosques were considered as sanctuaries in which people fleeing from the tyranny of a ruler could seek asylum. Ibn Battuta relates that Mansa Sulayman was angry with his senior wife and cousin, Qasa, having accused her of plotting a coup against him. 'Qasa was afraid .... and sought refuge in the house of the **khatib** [preacher]. It is a custom of theirs to seek refuge in the mosque, but should this prove impossible, they seek refuge in the house of the **khatib**' (Ibn Battuta, 1968:671). Muslim jurists would promptly offer to mediate between disputants in order to spare bloodshed. Ibn Battuta reports that, during his stay in Takedda, the **qadi**, the **khatib**, the school-master (**al-mudarris**) and the **shaykh** proceeded to the **amir** of Takedda with a view to bringing about a reconciliation between him and another **amir** (Ibn Battuta, 1968:679).

While in Niani, Ibn Battuta attended a condolence party held by Mansa Sulayman in memory of the Marinid sultan Abu'l-Hasan Ali (d. 1351 A.D.) —an indication of the close relations between Mali and Morocco and between their monarchs. The whole Qur'an was recited at the ceremony which was attended by the Mansa and, among others, the **amirs**, the **fuqaha**', the **qadi** and the **khatib** (Ibn Battuta, 1968:665).

On his arrival at the capital of Mali, Ibn Battuta was welcomed and entertained by a number of Maghribi and Egyptian residents and, on falling ill, was treated by an Egyptian doctor (Ibn Battuta, 1968:664-5). The Massufa of Walata wore clothes made of fine Egyptian cloth (Ibn Battuta, 1968:672-3). All this indicates that Mali's relations with both the Maghrib and Egypt were growing all the time following Mansa Musa's pilgrimage in 1324.

Ibn Battuta was very impressed by a number of good attributes among the Sudanese. These include ‘‘absence of injustice ..... Public security prevailed throughout the country ... [The Sudanese] do not molest or interfere with estates of Maghribis (**al -bidan**) who happen to die in their country, however large they may be, but entrust them to a reliable Maghribi to hand over to those legally entitled to them. [These attributes also include] their punctilliousness in observing the prayer sequence, their assiduanee in attending congregational prayers and bringing up their children to observe them. On Fridays, so great is the crowd that unless one goes early to the mosque, it is impossible to find a place .... Another of their good traits is their wearing pretty white garments on Fridays. Should one possess no more than one old garment, one would still wash it, clean it and wear it for the Friday prayer. Yet another of their good traits is their keenness to learn the Qur’an by heart. If their children show negligence in this duty, they put leg-shackles on them and do not free them until they have memorized it’’ (Ibn Battuta, 1968;.672-3).

Remarking on the impact of Islam on Mali at the end of the fourteenth century when its decline began, Thomas Hodgkin says, ‘‘The relatively rich documentary sources for 14th century Mali provide some basis for judging the extent to which, by this period, the impact of Islam had modified indigenous, pre-Islamic institutions:e.g. as regards court ritual, the observance of Ramadan and the ’ids, the employment of **qadis** (in the towns), the establishment of Koranic schools, the use of foreign specialists (associated with the diversification of external relations to include Egypt and the Hijaz as well as Morocco) (Hodgkin, 1962:323-324).

#### Footnotes

- 1- cf. **al Hulal al-mawshiyya** (anonymous author). Rabat 1936, p.7.
- 2- Vicens Vives, Jaime, **An Economic History of Spain** ( Princeton University Press, 1969) P. 150.

In June, 1980, Mozambique adopted a new currency in place of the Portuguese escudo and named it ‘‘metical’’—a renewal of a 16th century usage current in the Iberian Peninsula when the Portuguese colonized the territory (1505).

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