

The further expansion of Islam reaching West Africa

As we can see in the so far described developments, most Muslim influence on African ground came by military and political force. Anyway, as I have also mentioned before, another factor of why the Muslims were able to expand so largely, was because of their great activities on the far-reaching trading routes. From the 8th to the 15th cent. CE, these routes also went through the old West African Kingdom of Ghana, which was located around today's Mauritania, Senegal, and Mali. The region was mostly savanna grasslands with three major rivers called Gambia-, Senegal- and Niger River. So internally, the natives were able to trade on their rivers.

After the Arab Muslims had consolidated their power up to the Sahara, their successors started to engage themselves more in this sub-Saharan trade. What helped them in the process was that otherwise as the Romans in earlier times, the Arab Muslims were well grounded in their old knowledge about nomad's life in the desert, and they possessed a culture heritage of camel and dromedary caravans. Anyway, until the late 11th cent. CE, the people in West Africa did not easily overtake Islam. This was because their kings strongly held to the traditional beliefs of their ancestors. In his book "The Roads and Kingdoms", the Muslim historian al-Bakri (c. 1014- '94 CE) described the richness and power of ancient Ghana with the following words: "Ghana (...) is a title given to their kings; the name of the region is Awkar and their present king, who came to the throne in 1063 CE, is Tunka Manin (1010- '78 CE). He rules an enormous kingdom, and has great power (...) When he calls up his army, he can put 200.000 men in the field, more than 40.000 of them archers. The country was rich in gold (...), and the royal metal was prized: When the king gives audience, or hears grievances against officials, he sits in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold embroidered cloths. Behind the kings, stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold and on his right are the sons of the vassal kings of his country, wearing splendid garments with gold plaited into their hair (...)." ¹ In fact; the people of that kingdom successfully traded in gold and salt, and they also merchandised ivory, slaves, horses, swords, spices, silks, and even European literature. Ancient Ghana had its own road network as well as a law book. ² French archaeological findings from the 1920ies until 1950 and around 1980 have confirmed Al-Bakri's descriptions to be true: In the region are ruins of a considerable number of stone-built towns, which must have been supported by extensive

¹ Josef W. Meri and Jere L. Bacharach, *Medieval Islamic Civilization* vol. 2, L-Z (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 764.

² Kate Santon and Liz McKay, *Der große Atlas der Weltgeschichte: Von den Ursprüngen bis in das 21. Jahrhundert* (Köln: Parragon Vlg, 2006), 160.

agricultural and commercial activity. Even at Kumbi Saleh, leftovers of buildings have been generally identified with the capital described by the historian.³

From 1067 CE on, peaceful political alliances opened the way for a stronger religious impact of Islam in the region.⁴ They also brought new forms of economic activity that nourished an expanding trade. Nine years later, the Almoravids, which were a Berber Muslim dynasty centred in Morocco, for the first time invaded the region by force. Their fights went on for the next ten years, and they even raided the empire's capital of Kumbi Saleh.⁵ The Ghanaian philosopher De Graft-Johnson (1919 - '77) wrote that during this process, the above mentioned King Tunka Manin continued to rule as a vassal for two years until he died, and he had to pay tribute to the Almoravids. The invaders, then, enthroned one of their generals as governor, who was killed by the people in 1087 CE. However, the empire had been severely weakened, and many of its former territories had become independent. Islam had successfully been introduced as the dominant faith of the upper class who now imposed it on their subjects. This caused many traditional religious people to emigrate.⁶

In 1240 CE, the Muslim King Sundiata (1217- c. '55 CE) founded the Mali (also called Manden) Empire, which succeeded Ghana. With a strong decentralised administration, it grew very rapidly. Soon, it covered a larger area for a longer period than any other West African state, before.⁷ It also became one of the richest systems of tax and tribute in the world West of India and China. Independent verification of King Sundiata's existence was provided in the century after his death, when two travellers went to Mali. One of them was the Tunisian historian Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami (1332- 1406 CE). In addition, there exists a semi- historical, but legendary "Epic of Sundiata", which had been spread mostly orally, and which the scholar Nehemia Levtzion (1935- 2003) called pivotal.⁸

The most celebrated emperor of the kingdom was King Sundiata's grandnephew Mansa Musa I of Mali (c. 1280- c. 1337 CE). He was very devoted to Islam and went on a pilgrimage to Egypt and Mecca, which made him well known across Northern Africa and the Middle East.⁹ His fame

³ Paul Thomassey and Raymond Mauny, "Campagne de fouilles à Koumbi Saleh" *Bulletin de l'Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire* (B), 13 (1951): 438-462.

⁴ Pekka Masonen and Humphrey J. Fisher, "Not quite Venus from the waves: The Almoravid conquest of Ghana in the modern historiography of Western Africa", in *History in Africa* vol. 23, (1996): 197-232.

⁵ Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* vol. 1 (Oxford: Univers. Press, 2010), 407.

⁶ John Coleman De Graft-Johnson, *African Glory: The Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1954), 88.

⁷ Elizabeth Pollard, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* (New York: W.W. Norton Comp Inc., 2015), 362.

⁸ Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (New York: Africana Co., 1980), 58.

⁹ Basil Davidson, *The story of Africa* (London: Mitchell Beazley Publ., 1984), 111.

increased even more when after the Muslim “Sadaqah” tradition, the king flooded all these places with his benefactions. To Mansa Musa, Islam was "an entry into the cultured world of the Eastern Mediterranean". This was why he spent much time fostering the growth of the religion within the Mali Empire. In Timbuktu, he built the eldest Islamic university on West African ground called “Sankoré University”. Together with three mosques and a large library, it became a very famous learning centre, where scholars from all over the Muslim world of that time came to study religion, mathematics, law, music, and literature.¹⁰

The success of the Mali Empire, however, depended on its rulers maintaining firm control of the Niger waterway and the ethnic people living there. Especially strong were the Songhai people who had monopolized the fishing and canoe transport at the river’s middle part. In 1464 CE, the Songhai king Sonni Ali (†1492 CE) arose and called together an army to fight the Mali Empire. He did so in the name of his people’s traditional religion to be defended against the “Islamic universalism” of the Mande system. After their victory, he founded the Songhai Empire, which he ruled from the capital Gao. Even though this kingdom grew profitable and strong, a certain dependence from the Manden as well as the established Muslim system remained. When Sonni Ali died, his son was alleged not to be a true Muslim and was quickly deposed as his successor by General Muḥammad Askia (†1528) who was both a Mande and a Muslim. From this time on until the 1590ies, struggles between the two cultures and religious groups continued and brought a series of plots and coups. These forced the empire into a period of decline and instability.¹¹ Finally, the Arab Berbers from Morocco conquered them in the famous “Battle of Tondibi”. Several of the empire’s old cities have survived into modern times, but none remained as solidly as “Kano” in the Hausa region in Northern Nigeria. It had been founded early as around 1000 CE, and as some travellers noted around 1500, their inhabitants were “civilized handicraft workers and rich merchants”. Around 1800, the German explorer Heinrich Barth (1821- ‘65) estimated a city population of about 30.000, and he was greatly impressed by their traditional cotton cloth production. He compared this with the European industries of his time and described it as superior because the working conditions appeared to him healthier.¹²

¹⁰ Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, eds. Said Hamdun and Noël Quinton King (London: Collings Publ., 1975), 52f.

¹¹ Josef W. Meri and Jere L. Bacharach, *Medieval Islamic Civilization* vol. 2, L-Z (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 764.

¹² Basil Davidson, *The story of Africa* (London: Mitchell Beazley Publ., 1984), 95.