

The Influence of Islam on West Africa

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Welcome to this segment of “Learn More, Teach More,” on the long history of Islam in West Africa. These days the 16 countries of sub-Saharan West Africa contain some 140 million Muslims. How did that come to be, and what implications does this have for African societies?

Islam, which means “submission to God,” was founded in what is today the country of Saudi Arabia in 610 C.E. by the Prophet Muhammad. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is monotheistic and scripturally based; and its followers respect Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others as prophets. However, Muslims believe that Allah (God) chose Muhammad to be the last and greatest prophets. According to Islamic tradition, Allah revealed to Muhammad how he wanted his followers to live and structure their communities. Muhammad’s revelations are recorded in the Koran, or the holy book of Islam, which is believed to be the literal word of God. The Five Pillars of Islam outline the basic life requirements for Muslims, which are faith in God and his messenger Muhammad; obligatory prayers five times a day; charity to those in need; fasting at Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, if the person is able. These beliefs and practices—along with Arabic literacy, Islamic law (or *Sharia*) and some degree of mystical spirituality--unite Muslims worldwide. But from its early history Islam has taken many forms, with varying interpretations of its laws, different clerical and devotional expressions, and distinct interactions with local cultures.

Soon after Muhammad’s death in 632, his followers embarked upon wars of conquest, first among Arabs and then among non-Arabs in northern Africa and elsewhere. Over the next century, Islamic armies established Muslim authority over a vast area from central Asia to the eastern Mediterranean, including present-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Spain, and part of India. Much of North Africa came under Islamic influence this way; but south of the Sahara the spread of Islam was more gradual, generally the result of peaceful, informal missionary efforts by Muslim Berber merchants who traded along trans-Saharan routes.

Muslims established communities in several of the early states of West Africa and were welcomed by rulers who appreciated their cosmopolitanism, their trading connections and their literacy. In the 11th century, ancient Ghana contained a Muslim center with several mosques. Many rulers of the ancient kingdoms of Mali and Songhay, which flourished between the 14th and 16th centuries, were themselves Muslims, made pilgrimages to Mecca, and worked to promote the religious and cultural influence of Islam in their empires. But they did not insist that their subjects convert, and they were tolerant of local religious practices—a pattern that was more or less replicated in many of the West African kingdoms in the precolonial era.

Islam in West Africa expanded steadily over the next several centuries, but only in pockets of converts. In the towns, as before, many rulers were formally Muslim, but they ruled over populations which generally were not, and few rulers tried to convert the general public or to enforce Muslim law throughout their territories. Islam attracted those whose lives were directed outward from the home village, like the Fulbe, a pastoralist group spread widely over West Africa. Having interests often at odds with settled agricultural populations and their rulers, the Fulbe were particularly attracted to Islam because it provided an alternative basis of identity and government and insisted on the equality of all believers.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries Fulbe Muslim leaders were at the forefront of a succession of Islamic jihads, or holy wars, which swept West Africa. These coincided with a broader movement of spiritual renewal, reform of religious practice, and revival of religious enthusiasm which touched nearly every part of the Islamic world from the mid-18th to the beginning of the 20th century. The largest of the West African jihads took place in what is now northern Nigeria in the early 1800s, but the Islamic wars actually began to the west, in modern Guinea, nearly a century earlier. Fulbe pastoralists had settled in the highlands of Futa Jalon from the early 1500s, living outside the villages of the local farming populations. As their herds grew, the Fulbe increasingly resented the restrictions and taxation of the farmers, and they found common cause in Islam. In 1725 the Fulbe rebelled against their rulers, and with the support of Muslim traders they waged holy war against the settled farmers, whom they derided as pagans. Over the next 25 years they brought the region under Islamic law and created a Fulbe-dominated state.

This jihad in Futa Jalon inspired a similar movement in Futa Toro, directly to the north, near the Senegal River. There, between 1769 and 1776 Muslim Fulbe and Tukolor, another pastoralist people, waged successful jihad and established a new Muslim state. Some historians see both of these jihads as responses to the violence and insecurity brought to this region by the Atlantic slave trade. The jihads themselves, however, also produced war captives who were sold into slavery to European traders at the Senegambian coast.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the jihads of Futa Jalon and Futa Toro had inspired Muslim teachers elsewhere in western Africa, who condemned the accommodations Muslim rulers had made with older traditions and called for a forcible conquest of rural “pagans.” The largest of the new Muslim reform movements occurred in the Hausa city-states of modern northern Nigeria and led to the creation of the Sokoto caliphate or empire. The leader of the Sokoto jihad was Usman dan Fodio, son of a Fulbe, or Fulani, Muslim teacher in the northern Hausa state of Gobir. (In this region of West Africa the Fulbe were and are known by the Hausa name Fulani.) Usman dan Fodio demanded stronger religious leadership within the state and articulated the grievances of pastoralists. In 1804 he called for a jihad to overthrow the king of Gobir. Hausa and Fulani Muslims unhappy with their social or religious position successfully spread the movement to other Hausa states. Over the next several years, Muslim armies united the conquered Hausa city-states and neighboring areas under a caliph (Islamic leader) who ruled from the city of Sokoto. Lasting from 1809 to 1906, the Sokoto Caliphate was the largest state in West Africa since the fall of Songhay in the 16th century.

Within the Sokoto Caliphate, the new Muslim emirates—or the old city-states now under Islamic rule--were centers of Islamic learning and reform. Schools for training boys in Quranic subjects spread rapidly, and the great library at Sokoto attracted many scholars. Political unity invigorated trade throughout the empire and beyond. But non-Muslims were persecuted. Although officials permitted non-Muslims within the empire to follow their own religions in exchange for paying a special tax, they suppressed public performances of dances and ceremonies associated with traditional religions. And Sokoto’s armies carried the jihad to new areas beyond the Hausa city-states, killing,

enslaving and forcing conversion upon the many who resisted the expansion of Muslim rule.

The creation of the Sokoto Caliphate inspired similar politico-religious movements elsewhere in West Africa, most notably in what became the Tukolor and Mandinka empires of what is now Mali, Senegal, and Guinea. The Tukolor Empire was created by a Muslim preacher from Futa Toro named al-Hajj Umar. Umar set off in 1826 on a lengthy pilgrimage to Mecca, during which he was strongly influenced by Muslim reformist movements in Arabia and Egypt as well as by the spirit of jihad in the Sokoto Caliphate. During the 1840s Umar built up a large following on the borders of Futa Jalon. From there he traded non-Muslim captives in exchange for firearms with which to modernize his army. Unable to capture his home region of Futa Toro because the French were starting to build a colonial presence there from their base in coastal Senegal, Umar pursued his jihad towards the north east. By 1854 he had captured the inland kingdom of Kaarta, and in the early 1860s he extended his conquests through the upper Niger River states of Segou and Masina. But Umar failed to establish a stable administration which would survive his death, and his policy of forced conversion to Islam provoked resistance. Following Umar's death in 1864, the Tukolor Empire was weakened by internal revolts and lack of unity among his followers. The encroaching French were able to exploit this situation in the 1880s and 1890s.

Meanwhile, to the south of the Tukolor empire, a Muslim merchant named Samori Touré founded the Mandinka empire on the upper Niger basin to the east of Futa Jalon. As a young man in the 1860s Samori built up and trained a force of soldiers to protect his family's trading interests, which were based in one of the Mandinka-speaking states descended from the great Mali Empire of centuries before. Under Samori's leadership, his family traded gold and cattle for firearms from the coast, and thus strengthened and modernized their army. Between 1865 and 1875 Samori conquered the surrounding states and built up a powerful Mandinka kingdom, establishing a political unity which eased trade and brought prosperity to the merchants. Samori converted to Islam, and although he did not explicitly wage holy war, he used Islam to unite and strengthen his kingdom. He promoted Muslim education and the building of mosques and he used a version of Islamic law as the basis for his government. By the early 1880s his kingdom

had become a huge empire, the third largest in western Africa (after Sokoto and Tukolor). In the last decade of the 19th century, Samori's Mandinka Empire was a major center of resistance to French conquest in West Africa.

Although British, French, Portuguese and other European traders had based themselves on the African coast for centuries, it was not until the late 1800s that African societies fell under European colonial rule. Beginning around 1880, nearly the entire African continent was colonized in the so-called "scramble for Africa." Most of West Africa became part of the French empire, with British Nigeria and the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) as the major exceptions.

The relationship between colonialism and Islam was complex. On one hand, European conquest generally helped facilitate the work of Christian missionaries, who opened schools and hospitals as well as churches of a variety of denominations. More Africans probably came into contact with missionaries than with any other Europeans. But although thousands of followers of traditional religions converted to Christianity during and since the colonial period, Muslims generally did not. Instead, Islam expanded more rapidly than before, roughly doubling the number of adherents during the colonial period. By 1940 over half the population of West Africa was Muslim.

There are three basic reasons for this expansion of Islam. First, in French West Africa and in Islamic parts of British Africa, colonial administrators made arrangements to preserve the power of Muslim elites in exchange for their cooperation with European rule. Indeed, France's government, explicitly secular at home in Europe, defined itself as a "Muslim power" in Africa. By confirming Islamic rulers as the "traditional" African authorities—even in places where Islamic rule had been installed fairly recently, like northern Nigeria—colonial governments helped to spread Islam among subject people. Moreover, under such arrangements, colonial governments restricted the activities of Christian missionaries, because they would have been a threat to the Islamic leaders who were collaborating with colonial regimes.

The second reason for Islam's spread in colonial West Africa is that during the first half of the twentieth century, cities grew and trade increased. This gave Muslims incentives to travel and settle in new areas, especially in coastal cities, where they were able to promote a faith that was not associated with the cultural imperialism of

colonialists. In Senegal, for instance, leaders of an Islamic brotherhood called the Mourides became prominent businessmen, organizing cash-crop cultivation among their followers and expanding their enterprises into new areas.

Finally, Muslim leaders in Africa have generally been much more tolerant than Christians of African customary practices such as ancestor veneration, polygamy, circumcision, magic, and beliefs in spirits. The amalgamation of Islam with local practices has been one of its hallmarks historically and continues to the present. For instance, Islam in Africa tends to be more mystical than it is in other parts of the world, reflecting traditional African concerns with spirits and ancestors. The Islamic Brotherhoods which attract followers throughout West Africa also are fairly distinctive, although they form part of a long tradition of Sufi religious orders in worldwide Islam. Under the inspiration of their religious leaders, West African Islamic brotherhoods bring together believers for political and economic as well as purely religious ends. Some scholars believe that the existence and importance of Islamic Brotherhoods reflect traditionally African communal values.

West African Muslims, like Christians and followers of indigenous religions, have often been quite respectful of religious pluralism. For example, in Senegal, Muslim leaders cooperated for many years with long-time president Léopold Senghor, a Catholic. Family and ethnic loyalties often take precedence over religious ties for many individuals, and in some West African areas there are many families with Muslim and non-Muslim members.

Today there are multiple African ways of practicing Islam. African Muslims, as well as Christians and followers of indigenous religions, are seeking to redefine or modify their religion in response to modern needs and problems. For many Muslims, this means continuing the process of melding more orthodox Islamic practices and beliefs into those of their African religious and cultural heritage. Other West African Muslims seek a fundamentalist reaffirmation of Islam, often influenced by conservative movements in North Africa and the Middle East, particularly since 9/11. In northern Nigeria, for instance, 12 states have adopted a strict version of Islamic law as the basis for their legal systems. Critics fear that this move is politically oppressive, particularly for non-Muslims there, and that it threatens national unity in a pluralistic country where most

Muslims are in the north and most non-Muslims are in the south. In northern Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa, alarming tensions exist between more moderate Muslims, Christians of a variety of stripes, and a growing number of Islamic fundamentalists who would prefer a more theocratic social and political order. This has led some observers to fear that fundamentalist Islam, along with other divisive elements, may undermine the fragile democratic gains that have recently been made in many countries.

Islam has a long and multi-faceted history in West Africa, as elsewhere. Over roughly a thousand years, it has influenced the economy, politics, education, social and gender relations, architecture and other elements of West African culture and history. West African Muslims show us that Islam can be flexible and varied, and that Africa is neither homogeneous nor unchanging.