

THE FACT OF AFRICAN HISTORY (II)

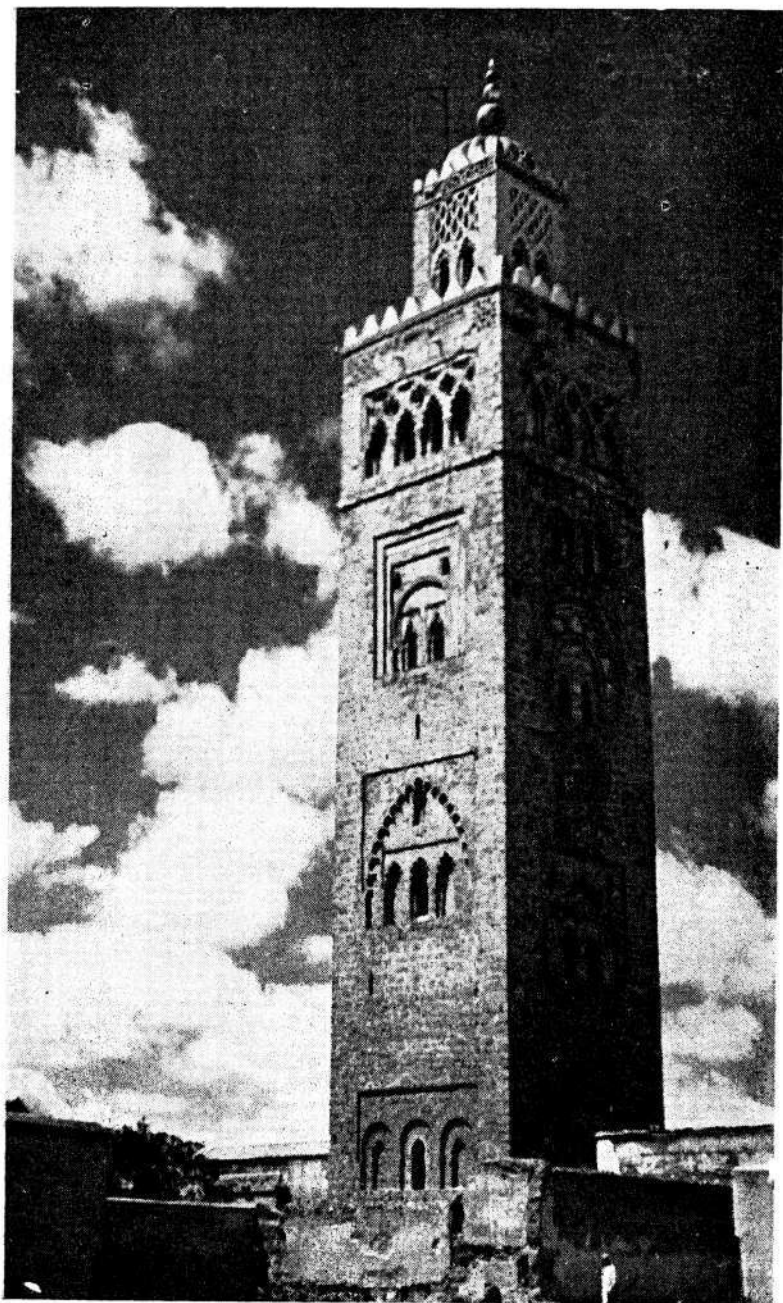
ISLAM IN WEST AFRICA

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IN the present phase of African history, when the colonial epoch, this relatively brief period of European ascendancy, is drawing to a close, it is natural to speculate about the future. What types of political system are likely to replace colonial bureaucracy in its various forms—British, French, Belgian, Portuguese, Spanish? What dominant ideologies will fill the void left by the ideology of White supremacy? One way of trying to handle such speculative questions about the future is to consider what forces have been important in the pre-colonial African past. Not that it is in any way inevitable that such forces will play a decisive part in the post-colonial future. But at least it is worth looking back into African history, to try to assess the influence which particular systems of ideas and institutions have exercised. In the case of the West African region—from Senegal to Chad, and from the southern limits of the Sahara to the Congo—Islam is clearly a system which can be looked at in this way: both because of the sheer numerical strength of the Moslem population of the region, amounting to some 25 million; and because Islam (like Communism or Catholicism) is frontierless, presenting a world-view and attempting to appeal to man universally. What contribution then has Islam made to the development of African civilizations?

The process of Islamization appears to have begun in earnest in the savannah belt of West Africa, traditionally known as 'the Sudan', in the latter part of the 11th Century. As in Anglo-Saxon England, the new faith was first adopted by the Princes, and only gradually seeped through to the people. At about the time when William of Normandy was engaged in the conquest of England, nomadic Lemtuna Berbers, living in what is now southern Mauretania, were militantly propagating their own reforming, puritanical interpretation of Islam by the method of holy war. While the northern wing of these Almoravids, under Yusuf al-Tashfin, after founding the city of Marrakesh in 1062, succeeded in establishing their authority over Morocco and southern Spain, the southern wing, under Yusuf's cousin, Abu-Bakr ibn-Omar, was attacking the Empire



The minaret of the Koutoubia mosque in Marrakesh, 220 ft. high with mosaic of turquoise blue covering the sides,

of Ghana, capturing the capital in 1076 and forcing the ruling pagan Soninke dynasty to become tributary and accept Islam. And in the course of the 11th century the royal houses of other Negro African States in the western and central Sudan, of Gao, for example, and Kanem-Bornu in the region of Lake Chad, were also converted to Islam, though without, apparently, the military struggle which occurred in the case of the Ghana dynasty. (This process of peaceful conversion is perfectly intelligible when one remembers that, in all the West African cities involved in the trans-Saharan trade, there were already Moslem merchants and wandering scholars from North Africa installed.)

The spread of Islam in West Africa from the 11th century on took the form of a series of shocks, followed by periods of recession, more or less correlated with the rise and decline of successive powerful, proselytizing dynasties. One such shock occurred during the 14th century, when the (still surviving) Keita family ruled the Empire of Mali, extending from Senegal in the West to the Hausa States (in what is now northern Nigeria) in the East, with its capital near modern Bamako. This was the dynasty to which Mansa Musa belonged, the Emperor who became a heroic figure in Europe and appears in 14th and early 15th century European maps as 'Rex Melly', who, in 1324-6, paid his famous State visit to Cairo (where he is said to have inflated the currency by his lavish gifts of gold) on his way to Mecca—returning from the pilgrimage with the Grenada poet and architect, Es-Saheli, who designed the new mosques at Gao and Timbuktu. It was during this period, too, that scholars and preachers from Mali introduced Islam into Hausaland. Another comparable Islamizing wave flowed through the western Sudan in the 16th century, the period of the ascendancy of the Empire of Gao under the Askia dynasty, whose founder, Askia the Great, combined a policy of religious orthodoxy and a close alliance with the Moslem intelligentsia (the '*Ulema*') with the organization of an efficient system of imperial administration. It was under the Askias that Timbuktu enjoyed its greatest influence as an international commercial and intellectual centre; and, among the Hausa States, Katsina in particular developed as a centre of Moslem learning, fertilized from Timbuktu—a tradition renewed in modern times, since it was at Katsina Middle School that many of the present generation of Northern Nigerian political leaders were educated.

The last great theocratic dynasties belong to the 19th century, on the eve of European penetration into the western Sudan. Othman dan Fodio, who inspired, organized, and led the holy war that brought the Hausa States and some of their neighbours (e.g., Ilorin, Adamawa) into the framework of a new Fulani Empire, was himself a puritan revolutionary, in the tradition of the Almoravids, and, in its initial phases at least, the dominant impulse behind the Fulani revolt seems to have been religious revivalism rather than a sheer drive for territorial power. A generation later a somewhat similar eruption occurred in the region of the Upper Niger (in what is now the French Sudan). Here Hajj Omar at-Tall, a Toucouleur who had studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo and was linked by ties of friendship, marriage, and political-religious outlook with Sultan Mohammed Bello of Sokoto, organized an extensive though short-lived Moslem Empire, whose power was eventually broken by the French, moving in from Senegal.

In addition to the proselytizing dynasties, the Sufi Orders have taken an increasing part in the process of Islamization. These Orders, which combine an esoteric ritual and discipline with a strong sense of brotherhood within the community, a hierarchical organization, and an emphasis upon allegiance to a particular religious leader, or 'Holy Man', operate almost throughout the Moslem world. In West Africa two Orders have played a dominant part: the older (12th century), more loosely organized, more conservative, *Qadiriyya*, which originated in Bagdad; and the more recent (late 18th century), more tightly knit, more dynamic, *Tijaniyya*, with its spiritual centre in Fez, which is still a growing force, especially in Northern Nigeria.

Naturally the culture of the western Sudan has been profoundly influenced by these nine centuries of Moslem impact. This is evident in the externals of life—names, dress, household equipment, architectural styles, festivals, ceremonial, and the like. But what is more important—and difficult—is to try to assess the more fundamental difference which Islam has made to West African civilizations. It is common to talk of Islam in contemporary West Africa as a 'conservative force'. Yet historically it is clear that the general effect of Islam, in those areas of West Africa in which it has become dominant, has been to stimulate far-reaching changes in ideas and institutions, not to conserve them.

Probably the most important single development, which

underlies all the others, was the opening up of communications between the western Sudan and other regions of the Moslem world, especially North Africa and the Middle East. Of course there was contact between the peoples of West Africa and the Mediterranean peoples in Roman and pre-Roman times, and the introduction of the camel, in about the 3rd century A.D., was a technical advance which led to a great improvement in trans-Saharan communications. But the spread of Islam transformed the western Sudan into a peripheral area of the Moslem world, within which an enterprising traveller could (like Ibn Battuta in the 14th century) move relatively freely, from Mali to China, without passports, and without ever losing touch with people who shared his metaphysical assumptions. (Even when Ibn Battuta found himself shocked by certain aspects of the behaviour of West African Moslems—their more tolerant attitude to relations between the sexes, for example—Islam still provided a common standard of criticism.)

From the early 12th century on, West African rulers began to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, usually by the Egyptian route. A 13th century Sultan, Kashim-Biri, built a *medersa* in Cairo for visiting pilgrims and scholars from Kanem-Bornu. And as the friendship between King Mansa Musa and Es-Saheli, the Grenada architect and poet, makes clear, the *hajj* served (as in part it serves to-day) as a great international reunion, where West African Moslems and their rulers could establish new relationships and acquire new ideas. These channels of communication helped to stimulate technical progress. It is recorded of Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu, roughly a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth of England, that—

“Among the benefits which God (Most High) of his bounty and beneficence, generosity, and constancy conferred upon the Sultan was the acquisition of Turkish musketeers and numerous household slaves who became skilled in firing muskets.”

At least the governing classes of Moslem West Africa—Princes, merchants, and intellectuals—came to be aware of the wider world to which they belonged, even if they interpreted it (as we all do) from their own particular standpoint. For example, Mahmud al-Kati, the 16th century Timbuktu historian of the western Sudan, explains that “the mass of our contemporaries hold that there are four Sultans, not counting the supreme Sultan (the Sultan of Constantinople), to wit, the Sultan of Bagdad, the Sultan of Cairo, the Sultan of Bornu, and the Sultan of Mali.” When in 1823, Sheikh Mohammed

al-Kanemi, the effective ruler of Bornu, had to write a letter of introduction to the governor of Kano, commending to him the British explorers, Denham, Clapperton, and Oudney (the first Europeans in modern times to visit his country), he stressed the long-standing friendship between the British and the Moslems and wrote of "the great assistance they gave to our nation when they delivered Egypt from the hands of the French" (a reference to the Battle of the Nile). The term 'our nation' means, of course, the Moslem community throughout the world, and expresses the sense of a certain underlying solidarity within Islam, in spite of conflicts and divisions—an attitude which remains valid to-day.

The effects of this opening-up of communications between West Africa and the Moslem world can be considered from various points of view—commercial, cultural, political, among others. With the development, from the 11th century onwards, of the trans-Saharan trade was associated the growth of the caravan cities of the western Sudan—Walata, Jenne, Timbuktu, Gao, Kano—whose wealth was derived from the trade, and whose merchants had their trading connections with the great commercial cities at the North African end of the route—Marrakesh, Fez, Tunis, Sfax, Tripoli. There was also a regular trade between West Africa and Egypt, via Agades and the Fezzan: Ibn Battuta describes the inhabitants of Walata (in what is now southern Mauretania) as dressed in Egyptian fabrics. Leo Africanus's account of 16th century Timbuktu and Gao is familiar: "The inhabitants (of Timbuktu) are very rich, especially the foreigners who have settled there—so much so that the king gave two of his daughters in marriage to two merchants who were brothers, on account of their great wealth." "The inhabitants (of Gao) are rich merchants, who reside on their farms, selling their merchandise and trading at large. A vast number of Negroes frequents this city, bringing gold in large quantities, to buy and take home with them goods imported from Barbary and Europe; but often they cannot find enough goods to buy with the large sums of money they have gained, so that they are obliged to go back to their own country, taking half or a third of their money with them." Among the imports from Barbary and Europe in common demand (at what he regards as inflated prices), Leo Africanus mentions cloth (including the best Venetian scarlet), horses, swords, spurs, bridles, fancy goods, and groceries.

As in the cities of mediaeval Europe, the growth of these merchant classes tended to make for urban self-government. Even when they were formally embodied in one or other of the great Empires (Mali in the 14th century, Gao in the 16th), and subject to a governor—a Timbuktu-koi or a Jenne-koi—appointed by the imperial government, local authority seems in practice to have been largely in the hands of the 'merchants and scholars', the bourgeois. In 16th century Jenne, for example, there was a city council, including certain lineage heads, leaders of the Moslem community (in particular the Qadi), and merchants. The periodic conflict between city and Emperor (e.g., under Sonni 'Ali, the late 15th century ruler of Gao) is one indication of the way in which cities succeeded in establishing themselves as independent centres of power.

The spread of Islam and the growth of cities helped to stimulate the intellectual life of the western Sudan. Moslems, like Christians and Jews, are 'People of the Book'; and the value attached within Islam to the ability to read, recite, and (in principle) understand the Koran, implied, in West Africa as elsewhere, the spread of literacy through Koranic schools. But the Koranic schools, in the form in which they still exist throughout Moslem Africa, were only basic units of the educational system. Above that there were opportunities for more advanced forms of study—in Theology, Moslem Law, Grammar, Philosophy, History, Poetry, and the like. Sometimes these were provided in a relatively unorganized way, through the system whereby students would travel from place to place, settling down for a period—it might be several years—with a particular master who could instruct them in the field of study, or in the works of the author, in which they were especially interested. At the same time, as in early mediaeval Europe, certain more or less permanent centres came to be established in connection with particular mosques, where masters and students gathered together for continuing instruction, study, and research—taking on the character of embryonic universities. In West Africa the best known of these centres of higher education was the University of Sankoré at Timbuktu, which seems to have existed in some form from the 14th century, but enjoyed its greatest influence and reputation in the 16th.

Scholars from Timbuktu enjoyed the kind of mobility that is characteristic of modern university life in the West. They were in the habit of visiting, and lecturing at, the universities

of Fez, Tunis, and Cairo (on which Timbuktu was clearly modelled). And there was a reciprocal movement of scholars from North Africa and the Arab world. (This circulation of scholars still, of course, occurs within the Moslem world: Abdur-rahman al-Ifriqi, whose home is in Gao, holds, or recently held, a lectureship at Medina.)

Leo Africanus makes clear how much the flourishing state of Timbuktu university in his day was due to the practical support which it received from the Askia dynasty:

“The king holds men of learning in great regard. That is why books in manuscript are imported from Barbary, which fetch high prices—so much so that larger profits are made from the book trade than from any other line of business. There are (in Timbuktu) many clerics and doctors, all of whom are paid very reasonable salaries by the king. . . .”

Thus one consequence of the interaction between West Africa and the Moslem world was the spread of respect—veneration even—for learning, and for learned men. No doubt ‘learning’ as understood in Moslem West Africa was—and still in part is—scholastic, pre-scientific, having certain obvious analogies with the learning of mediaeval Europe (another offshoot from the same classical stem). But how far, one sometimes wonders, does this kind of scholasticism differ from the modern scholasticism of the linguistic philosophers or the methodologists? In any case, there was clearly a continuing tradition of intellectual standards and disciplines (even at times when political insecurity was at its worst), to which successive generations of African students could refer. The representatives of this tradition produced their historical works, their biographical and autobiographical writings, their legal treatises, their theological commentaries, their poetry. While much of the earlier material has perished, as a result of attacks from without and revolutions within, a good deal of 19th century material still exists, and more is gradually coming to light. One illustration of the continuing force of the tradition is the fact that so many outstanding figures in the 19th century history of the western Sudan—Othman dan Fodio, Mohammed Bello, Mohammed al-Kanemi, Hajj Omar at-Tall—were scholars before they became political leaders.

It is difficult to distinguish what was pre-Islamic from what was derived from contact with other Moslem States in the political systems of the western Sudan. The pre-Islamic Empire of Ghana clearly had characteristics in common with the later Moslem Empires of Mali, Gao, and Kanem-Bornu: the idea of

the sanctity of kingship; the magnificence of the court and the complication of its rituals; the hierarchy of palace officials; the imperial guard; an administrative system through which taxes were collected and public order maintained. But the fact that these Moslem West African governments were in diplomatic relationship with the governments of Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt (the Manual of the Mamluk Chancellery explained the correct style and title to be used in communications to the Emperor of Mali), as well as personal contacts between intellectuals on both sides of the Sahara, undoubtedly meant some cross-fertilization in the field of political ideas. (On the strictly legal side Islamization meant, of course, the partial substitution of the Maliki form of Shari'a Law, administered by Qadis, for pre-Islamic customary law.) But how far particular West African States were influenced by particular schools of political thought within Islam is so far obscure.

In a more general way, Moslem influence seems to have contributed to the strengthening of centralized dynastic power. Certainly some of the more successful West African dynasties (judged from the standpoint of the scale of the Empires which they controlled, and the effectiveness of the central government)—the Askias in Gao, the Majumi in Kanem-Bornu (who lasted for approximately a thousand years), and the descendants of Othman dan Fodio in Sokoto—were also the most thoroughly Islamized. The following quotation from *The Obligations of Princes*, composed at the end of the 15th century by that somewhat Machiavellian character, Sheikh Mohammed al-Maghili of Tlemcen (in Algeria), and addressed to Mohammed Rimfa, Amir of Kano, is one illustration of the kind of political advice which Moslem clerics offered to African Princes:

"The sojourn of a prince in the city breeds all manner of trouble and harm. . . . Kingdoms are held by the sword, not by delays. Can fear be thrust back except by causing fear? Allow only the nearest of your friends to bring you food and drink and bed and clothes. Do not part with your coat of mail and weapons and let no one approach you save men of trust and virtue. Never sleep in a place of peril. Have near to guard you at all times a band of faithful and gallant men, sentries, bowmen, horse and foot. Times of alarm are not like times of safety. Conceal your secrets from other people until you are master of your undertaking."

Al-Maghili admittedly represented a particularly rigid, intolerant school of thought within North African Islam. Before settling in the western Sudan he had been obliged to leave Tuat on account of his responsibility for a massacre of the Jews there, which he attempted to justify on theological grounds. But for all that, the seven questions about which Askia, as a

devout ruler, sought his professional advice, give an indication of the kind of administrative problems with which the new dynasty was preoccupied: "the regulation of commercial transactions; the suppression of fraud; the establishment of the tax on land; the tithes upon newly conquered countries; the question of inheritance; and the measures to be taken to ensure morality and good manners among the Sudanese."

No doubt—like Christianity in some of its phases—mediaeval Islam provided an ideological framework within which intolerance, brutal forms of punishment, holy wars, and the enslavement of unbelievers, could be justified. At the same time the influence of Islam, and especially of the *'Ulema*, on the States of the western Sudan contributed to the development of the system of internal security ('so that even the unaccompanied traveller has nothing to fear from brigands or thieves'), and respect for justice beyond the limits of the local or ethnic group, which Ibn Battuta lists among the more admirable characteristics of the mid-14th century Empire of Mali.

The spread of Islam in West Africa and the opening up of communications with the Moslem world helped to transform the social life of the region in at least three ways: through the growth of commercial cities, linked with the trans-Saharan trade; through the diffusion of learning; and through the stimulus given to the development of centralized States. But why—it is natural to ask—did the flourishing civilizations associated with these mediaeval empires of the western Sudan apparently decline during the period between 1600 and the beginning of the 19th century, when direct contact with Europe was established through the journeys of Laing, Caillié, Hornemann, Denham and Clapperton, and others? Why, during a period when, from a scientific, technological, and economic point of view, there was remarkable and rapid 'progress' (using the word without any ethical implications) in Western Europe, was there not merely no advance, but even 'regress' (in certain respects) in the western Sudan? Allowing for the difference between the Moslem and the Christian intellectual climates, a citizen of 14th century Timbuktu would have found himself reasonably at home in 14th century Oxford. In the 16th century he would still have found many points in common between the two university cities. By the 19th century the gulf had grown very deep.

This is the kind of large historical question which can only

be answered here by mentioning certain factors in the situation, without trying to assess their relative importance. One major event was the invasion which the Moroccan Sultan, Abu'l-Abbas Ahmad al-Mansur, launched against the Empire of Gao in 1590, with the object of securing control of the gold supplies of the western Sudan. The disastrous effects and after-effects of this act of aggression for the civilization based upon Gao are vividly described in Thucydidean language by Es-Sadi, the West African author of the *Tarikh es-Sudan*, who himself lived through the 17th century time of troubles:

"From that moment everything changed. Danger took the place of security; poverty of wealth. Peace gave way to distress, disasters, and violence. Everywhere man preyed upon man. Robbery in all its forms was universal. War spared neither life, property, nor rank. Disorder was general, penetrating everywhere, reaching the extreme pitch of intensity."

But, apart from the immediate consequences of the overthrow of the Empire of Gao and the Askia dynasty, how far were there also other longer-term causes at work? To what extent was the civilization of the mediaeval western Sudan based upon what is nowadays called a 'fragile economy', excessively dependent upon the export of gold and slaves? How far did the deep division between king, court, ruling oligarchy, and the mass of producers—to which Leo Africanus refers—contribute to political disruption? ("The king treats the people in such a way as their stupidity and gross ignorance deserves, leaving them so little that they have great difficulty in gaining a livelihood, on account of the heavy taxes which he imposes on them.") How much importance is to be attached to geographical factors—the difficulty of maintaining large centralized multi-national States dependent upon an inadequate system of communications, in this open savannah region, exposed to attacks from both sides—from the northern desert, and from the southern forest? Above all, how far should the disintegration of the State system of the Moslem western Sudan after 1600 be regarded as simply an episode in the general history of western Islam, which—after the brief renaissance of the early Ottoman period—ceased to provide the stimulus which West Africa had enjoyed during the preceding five centuries, and where a period of 'degeneration' coincided with a period of 'exuberance' in Western Europe. These are questions which are particularly worth considering at a time when it seems possible that a period of degeneration in Western Europe may coincide with a period of exuberance in Moslem Africa.