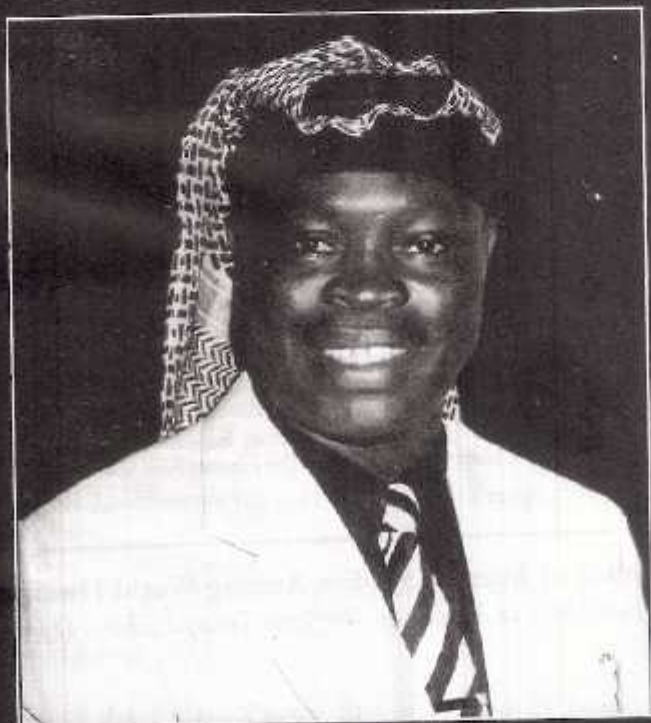


**DYNAMICS OF ISLAMIC STUDIES  
AMONG WORLD DISCIPLINES:**



**A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF  
PROFESSOR  
ISHAQ LAKIN AKINTOLA**

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### Dynamics of Islamic Studies Among World Disciplines: *A Festschrift in honour of Professor Isbaq Lakin Akintola*

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# 5

## Critical Appraisal of the Advent and Impact of Islam in West African States

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### Abstract

Islam as one of the world religions from the oriental parts of the world is a branch of Abrahamic faith. Its spread to every nook and cranny of the world is systematic in nature and its impact on people is highly remarkable. It is on this note that the paper aims at examining the critical appraisal of the advent and impact of Islam in West African States. By this, the paper highlights some factors responsible for the easier spread of Islam in the region. It discusses the advent of Islam in some West African States. It then moves forward to examine some of Islamic reformative activities in some localities in West Africa and motives. The paper finally examines the various impacts of Islam in West African States.

### 1.0 Introduction

Islam literally means an act of total submission or surrendering to the Will of Allah. Historically, the origin of Islam hanged on two theories namely conservative and modern theories. In the conservative theory, the origin of Islam could be traced to the time of Prophet Adam and his wife, Hawwa' (Eve) who were the first created mankind on earth. This theory propounded that Islam started when mankind were conscious of the existence of a Supreme Being Who is Allah and they submit themselves to His Will. The modern theory claims that Islam started in 610 C.E when Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was called to prophethood in the Makkah City and was commanded to spread the message of Islam. (Olatunbosun;1981:26)

The first contact of Islam in West Africa (*Biladus-Sudan*) came up in the eight century of the Christian Era when the religion began to walk its way across the trans-Sahara trade route from North Africa to West Africa. Not long after the Arab Muslim conquerors had over-run the whole North Africa, they began to organize military expedition into the southern region of Morocco and as far south as the boundaries of ancient Ghana. This expedition was spear-headed by the then governor of *Ifriqiyyah*, Ubaydullah Ibn 'abīb. This expedition returned to North Africa with large number of slaves and large quantities of gold.(Clarke;1982:12) It was this slave and gold supplies that prompted the governor to find ways and means of getting more of this precious commodities from West Africa. To this effect, the then Umayyad Caliph of Islamic empire, Caliph 'Abdur-Ra mān ordered the governor of *Ifriqiyyah* in 745 C.E. to do well along the trade routes leading from southern Morocco across the western Sahara to West Africa.

The next contact of Islam in West Africa came up through the vehicle of Berber Muslim merchants who came to various cities in West Africa purposely to buy and sell their materials to the people. These Berber merchants showed their interest in trading with West Africans as they were attracted with plentiful supplies of commodities such as gold, slaves and food stuffs in return for cloth, salt and horses. Among the commercial centres which sprang up along these trade routes from the eighth century onwards were Tahert in Algeria, Sijilmasa in Morocco, Wangara, Takedda and Awdaghost in ancient Ghana. Apart from this, West African merchants were also in contact with both the Sanhaja and the Muslim merchants from North Africa by the late ninth and tenth century. Some of the West Africans had begun to establish Muslim *quarters* in the capitals of West African states of Gao, Ancient Ghana and Tekrur. (Clarke;1982:10)

It could be rightly pointed out at this juncture that the realization of North African Berber merchants that West Africa was a land of gold and commercial centres attracted large numbers of Muslim merchants and consequently spread the religion of Islam among the West Africans. Since the advent of Islam in West African States, the Muslims in these regions have been labouring in establishing an Islamic state modelled on that first Islamic state in Madīnah by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 C.E. Having given this background, what factors then are responsible for the advancement of Islam in West Africa.

## **2.0 Factors Responsible for the Spread of Islam in West Africa**

### **2.1 Spirit of Brotherhood among Muslims**

Islam in many ways is attractive to the West African people because of certain privileges it conferred on its adherents such as fraternal brotherhood, full citizenship, freedom and exemption from taxes and tributes. It is an abomination for Muslim soldiers to either raid or enslave fellow Muslims irrespective of their race, colour, language and cultural background.

### **2.2 Islam's Tolerance of some Social Institutions in West Africa**

Islam did not condemn or eradicate some social institutions in West African milieu such as polygamy and family bonds. Rather, it encouraged and modified them where the situation call for amendment and adjustment.(Olatunbosun;1981:78) The Muslim missionaries in West Africa maintained cordial and good relationship with their followers. They did not only profess equality before Allah but also practiced and demonstrated it in their clothing, diet, social norms and housing. Apart from this, the Muslim missionaries had practical solutions to the spiritual and physical problems confronting their followers. They used to give their followers concrete materials which have extra-ordinary power and could neutralize any evil forces.

### **2.3 Missionary Activities of Muslims in West Africa**

Missionary activities in Islam are popularly known as *Dāwah*. The zeal for missionary activities in Islam lies in the religion of Islam herself. Unlike other religions, there is no priesthood and papacy in Islam, every Muslim irrespective of his or her age, sex, colour, race or profession is charged up to carry the message of Islam to others within or outside his or her locality. As a result of this, wherever the Muslims go, they go with their religion. The war of expansion embarked upon by some of these Muslim missionaries who were soldiers between eighth and nineteenth century of Christian era for the purpose of spreading, propagating and reforming Islam in West Africa also assisted in the spread of Islam. (Doi;1984:7-8)

## **2.4 Political Tendency of Islam**

Islam has special appeal and respect for the post of rulership and leadership in any human society, of course, West African states are not in exception. This is the main reason why majority of these African rulers and leaders popularized Islam and made it a state religion in their domains. They even went to the extent of appointing some Islamic clerics as administrators, judges, counselors, viziers and secretaries in the royal courts. (Doi;1984:13)

## **2.5 Introduction of Oriental Civilization into West Africa**

Islam was associated with several achievements and civilization in West African cities when it was introduced. It was associated with the trans-sahara trade, introduction of oriental schooling and education, introduction of fire-arms, the introduction of oriental architecture and civilization, the oriental mode of dressing and pilgrimage *et.cetera*.(Hunwick;1967:115)

## **3.0 Advent of Islam in some Ancient West African States**

### **Ghana**

Islam got to ancient Ghana Empire in the eleventh century through the Muslim merchants from Awdaghost, which serves as an entry port of trans-Saharan trade to Ghana. Awdaghost which was formerly under the rule of Sanhaja Berbers was conquered by Ghana Empire and annexed to her domain and this assisted the spread of Islam in the empire. The peak of the matter was the conquest of Ghana Empire by the militant Muslim group popularly known as the Almoravids in 1076 A.D.(Nooris;1967:256)

### **Mali**

Islam came to Mali Empire in the eleventh century. It was reported that the then ruler of Mali, Sundiata got converted to Islam after the prayer of some Muslim clerics that put an end to the prolonged drought in Mali empire. Islam spread more during the reign of Mansa Musa between 1312 and 1332. His pilgrimage to Makkah in 1324 boosted Islam as it offered Mali Empire the opportunity to open diplomatic relations with the states of North Africa. Apart from this, it attracted to Mali more traders and Muslim scholars who contributed to the economic, social and cultural development of the empire. (Olatunbosun;1981:26)

### **Songhai**

Islam had been in Songhai in the ninth century but it was not popular until fifteenth century during the reign of Muhammad Toure known as Askia, The Great between 1493 and 1528. His pilgrimage to Makkah in 1495 also boosted the spread of Islam in Songhai as he was made the head of the Muslims in West Africa by the then Caliph of Cairo. He conquered several territories for Islam and established diplomatic relations with some North African states. He compiled Islamic code of laws and trained Muslim judges to interpret the new code.

### **Kanem Borno**

Islam got to old Kanem-Borno Empire in the eleventh century during the reign of Mai Umme Jilmi between 1085 and 1097. He himself became a Muslim and declared Islam as an official religion of



the empire. Islam was boosted in the sixteenth century during the reign of Mai Idris Alooma.(Adegoke;2006:160)

## **Hausaland**

Islam later got to Hausaland through old Kanem Borno empire in the fourteenth century, and by the fifteenth century, various traditional rulers of Hausaland had begun to apply Islamic principles in the administration of their states. Out of his enthusiasm to reform and revive Islam from syncretism, Uthmān Ibn Fūdī, popularly known as Usman Dan Fodio led the 1804 *Jihad* in the whole Hausaland. From Hausaland, Islam spread to the Yorubaland in the sixteenth century of the Christian era. (Adegoke;2006:160)

### **4.0 Islamic Reformative Activities in West Africa**

In the nineteenth century of the Christian era, various attempts were made by different Islamic Scholars to purify Islam from pagan indigenous traditional religions of West African people. These attempts are known as Islamic reformative activities (*Jihad*) in Islamic theology. Prior to these reformative activities in some West African states, Islamic ideology had been mixed with paganism that it was hardly difficult to distinguish Islam from pagan traditional faith of the people. This adverse development extended to the various traditional rulers in some West African states whose powers and authorities were exercised on the people through the full participation in the pagan rites and ceremonies.(Clarke;1982:49) Out of these Islamic reformative activities in West Africa, three of them are notable and will be briefly highlighted in this study.;

#### **4.1 Fulani *Jihad* of Uthmān Ibn Fūdī**

The Fulani *Jihad* was spear-headed by Uthmān Ibn Fūdī who was born in Maratta in 1754. This *Jihad* came up in 1804. The zeal for the *Jihad* was motivated by one of the teachers of Uthman Ibn Fudi in person of Mukhtar A-Kunti. As an Islamic Scholar, he started his career as an itinerant teacher and preacher in Zamfara, Kebbi, Degel and some places in Hausaland. The primary aim of his embarking on *Jihad* in Hausaland was to reform and purify Islam from being mixed with paganism. Uthmān Ibn Fūdī took it upon himself to establish the way of life according to the Islamic law, *Shari'ah* which regulates the social, political, economic and religious aspects of a Muslim. Within a decade of this Fulani *Jihad*, it had spread its tentacles to the nooks and crannies of the Hausaland. Despite the fact that the Fulani *Jihad* was said to have been motivated by various reasons examined below, it was a successful enterprise since the remnant of this *Jihad* is still surviving till this contemporary time which is the Sokoto Caliphate and headship of Nigerian Muslims. (Olatunbosun;1981:139)

#### **4.2 Jihad of Shehu Ahmad of Masina**

This *Jihad* was spear-headed by Shehu Ahmad who was born in Masina in 1775 from the clan of Sangare. He received his Islamic education in his home town at Masina. He left Masina and traveled to Hausaland where he became one of the lieutenants of Uthmān Ibn Fūdī in 1805. He later settled at Jenne where he started his career as preacher and teacher. But he could not stay there for long before he was expelled from Jenne as a result of his strict position against syncretism. He fled to Sebera where he gathered a large group of devout followers who assisted him in his *Jihad* activities against paganism and syncretism. He died in 1844.(Olatunbosun;1981:150)

### 4.3 *Jihād* of Al-*hajj* ‘Umar

This *Jihād* was spear-headed by ‘Umar Ibn Sa‘īd Tal who was born in Futa Toro in 1794. He went to Makkah for *hajj* rites between 1820 and 1838. He later settled at Futa Jallon where he made preparations for his *Jihād*. He fled to Dinguiray where it was reported that he received the divine call to declare *Jihād* in 1848. He belonged to *Tijāniyyah* brotherhood. The main purpose of his *Jihād* was to impose his doctrines and litanies (*Anrād* sing. *Wird*) on the people. He subjected his conquered towns to the ideology of *Tijāniyyah* before he was killed in 1864 while waging war against the *Qādiriyyah* brotherhood in Masina. (Olatunbosun;1981:151)

## 5.0 Motives Behind the Islamic Reformative Activities in West African States

There are several motives behind the Islamic reformation in West African states as could be gleaned below:

### 5.1 Religious Motive

Islamic reformation in West Africa was religiously moved by some sincerely committed Islamic reformers who aimed to purify Islam from pagan practices. With this aim, the Islamic reformers who had better understanding of Islam decided to embark on reformation so as to bring the Muslims back to pristine Islamic tradition as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) in the early seventh century. Some of these reformers were erudite Islamic scholars of high repute and were known for their inspiring sermons and writings in the various fields of Islamic sciences. As a result of this development, the reformers established an Islamic law, *Shari‘ah* to govern the way of life of the people. In addition, some of the reformers believed that it had been predicted by the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) that every century would bring up new religious reformer who would reform Islam among the various peoples of the world. This outstanding Islamic tradition made the followers of the reformers to regard them as sincere charismatic leaders of the Muslim world.(Olatunbosun;1981:141)

### 5.2 Political Motive

Islamic reformation could also be said to be politically motivated as some of the reformers embarked upon the reformation so as to gain political power and authority from some West African states. The undisputed fact to support this assertion was the sack and attack of some of the then Muslim states such as Borno and Zamfara by some Fulani *Jihadists*. It should be noted that Islam got to Hausaland through the Kanem-Borno as previously stated in this work. The unwavering support of Zamfara at the initial stage of the Islamic reformation could not be underrated in the history of Fulani *Jihād*. Apart from this fact, all the conquered West African states were subjected to become vassal states under Fulani sovereignty. (Olatunbosun;1981:141)

### 5.3 Ethnic Motive

Furthermore, Islamic reformation could be said to be ethnic motivated as some of the followers of the reformers joined them not because they saw them as religious leaders but out of sympathy that some of them were victims of the jealousy of some West African traditional rulers who did not want to see them in their domain due to their religious inclinations. This was considered as tribal insult by the people from their own tribe who critically assessed the incident as a tribal harassment. As a result of this, they rallied around some of these reformers out of tribal zeal. (Olatunbosun;1981:141)

#### **5.4 Economic Motive**

The Islamic reformation could also be linked to the economic motive of some West African rulers which subjected them to abject poverty and human assault due to the over-taxation. Some of the aggrieved people regarded the *Jihād* as an opportunity for reform and social change, which were long over-due. Apart from this, some of the centres of this Islamic reformation became business centres in West African states such as Sokoto, Masina, Jenne and Futa Jallon.(Olatunbosun;1981:143)

#### **6.0 Impacts of Islam on West African States**

Advent of Islam in West Africa cannot be over-emphasized in term of the notable impacts that it makes in the sub-region. Some of the impacts are as follows

##### **6.1 Religious Impact**

African Traditional Religion (ATR) was the religion of West African people before the advent of Islam in West Africa. African Traditional religion is the sum total of the ways of life of the African people. It is the indigenous religion of African forefathers.(Fabarebo;2005:75) Their forms of worship include: worship of divinities, ancestors, spirits, gods and goddesses. Islam eradicated all the primitive religious practices in some areas while they were minimized in other areas in West African milieu. As soon as Islam got to West Africa, it wielded its adherents together under one God and single universal brotherhood in the continent. Islam was declared as a state religion in some West African states and it regulates their ways of life according to Islamic law (*Sharī'ah*). (Doi;1984;4)

##### **6.2 Social and Cultural Impact**

The advent of Islam in West Africa made a notable landmark in the social life of the West African people. Prior to the advent of Islam in West Africa, people had their own comprehensive way of life such as human inter-relations (family and tribal ties), festivities and ceremonies (marriage, naming, burial rite and festivals). Islam eradicated and modified some of these social ways of life as they are coloured and nurtured with Islamic principles. This is highly notable in the marriage, naming and burial rites in some West African states. Culturally, Islam introduced new form of dressing and greeting and architectural design into West African states which have now become traditional in the continent. For instance, white robes, long *kaftan* and turban are worn freely by Muslims in the West African states. Similarly, the features of Arabian architecture appear in many building such as mosques and palaces of Emirs till today.(Olatunbosun;1981:155)

##### **6.3 Economic Impact**

Islam was brought to West African states through commercial activities between North African Berbers and West African Indigenes. As a result of this development, Islam was peacefully spread at various commercial centres in West Africa between the West African buyers and North African sellers in Jenne, Timbuktu, Sankore, Awdaghast, Kanem-Borno, Kano *et cetera*. Consequently, Islam contributed to the economic growth of some West African states since it came to them through commerce transaction between the West Africans and North Africans. (Doi;1984:4)

## 6.4 Political Impact

Islam made a lot of impacts on the political structure of West African states and this is the main reason why the spread of Islam in some West African states were spear-headed by some rulers and kings. For instance, Mansa Mūsā of Mali empire, Askia Muhammad Toure of Songhai empire and Umme Jilmi and Idrīs Aloomo of Kanem-Borno empire. Some of these rulers appointed the Muslim scholars as their secretaries, judges, political advisers and clerics. Several Islamic titles were borrowed and used freely among the political officers and functionaries in some West African states. Such titles include *Emir*, *Alklī*, *akimī*, *Shebu*, *Wazīr*, *Al-Qādī*, *akīm*, *Shaykh* and *Sulān* respectively. (Adegoke;2006:16)

## 6.5 Educational Impact

Educational impact is the most notable impact made by the advent of Islam in West African states. Islam introduced the art of reading and writing into West African states which eventually led to the emergence of institutions of higher learning such as colleges and universities in Jenne and Sankore where various Islamic sciences and physical sciences were learnt. It should be rightly mentioned here that some of the academic proceedings and output of the higher institutions of learning (template) were transported to some European universities to train their students before they produced their own. Arabic was used as a medium of instruction in the class, this made it possible for West African people to keep records of events in their domain. Not only that, it also made Arabic language to become official and mother tongue of some West African states.(Hitti;1984:82)

## 7.0 Conclusion

This study explored the advent of Islam in West Africa in which it examined the origin and contact of Islam in West Africa. It went on to analyse the advent of Islam in some ancient states in West Africa and Islamic reformation and motives behind the reformative activities. It also highlighted the remarkable impacts of Islam on the West African people. At this juncture, it is found out in the study that:

- (i) Islam spread to West African states peacefully through trade transaction and mutual human inter-relationship;
- (ii) Islam was not spread by the sword as Islam does neither encourage nor tolerate any act of terrorism.
- (iii) in some places in the West African states where there were Islamic reformative activities known as *Jihād*, it was not primarily instigated against the non-Muslims but the Muslims who were mixing Islam with paganism.
- (iv) Islam made a lot of remarkable developments to the rapid growth and fast civilization of the West African states

Based on these findings, the study recommends that:

- (i) Any act of terrorism against non-Muslims should be discouraged by the Muslim Clerics and Leaders.
- (ii) Muslim should spread Islam with the extension of good behaviour to the people of other faiths.

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