



Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, 800–1900

Bernard Salvaing

Some basic elements explain the spatial distribution of Islam and Christianity in Africa.¹ Before the invention of the caravel in the fifteenth century, which made possible traveling in unfavorable conditions, the trade winds that blow steadily from the northeast to the southwest of the Atlantic coast of Africa prevented any contact with Christian Europe. However, the seasonal alternation of monsoons and trade winds in the Indian Ocean allowed Arab merchants to reach the eastern coast of the continent at the beginning of the Islamic conquests. The Nile Valley was also another natural route to the interior of the African continent. As for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, it connected to the rest of the world only across the Sahara desert. Thus, the earliest Arab expeditions in North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries penetrated into the Sahara in two directions, the one from Tripoli toward Fezzan and the other from the Sus in southern Morocco.² Even though the Sahara was a hurdle for the armies, it would not stop the merchants and the caravans that took those routes. Consequently, two poles of political and Islamizing power emerged: the medieval West African empires and the Bornu kingdom. Thus, Islam developed in the zones that long-distance commerce opened. This chapter examines the patterns of conversion to Islam among the different social strata in Africa from the 800s to the 1900s. It also offers insights into the content of African Islamic culture and literature (Fig. 2.1).³

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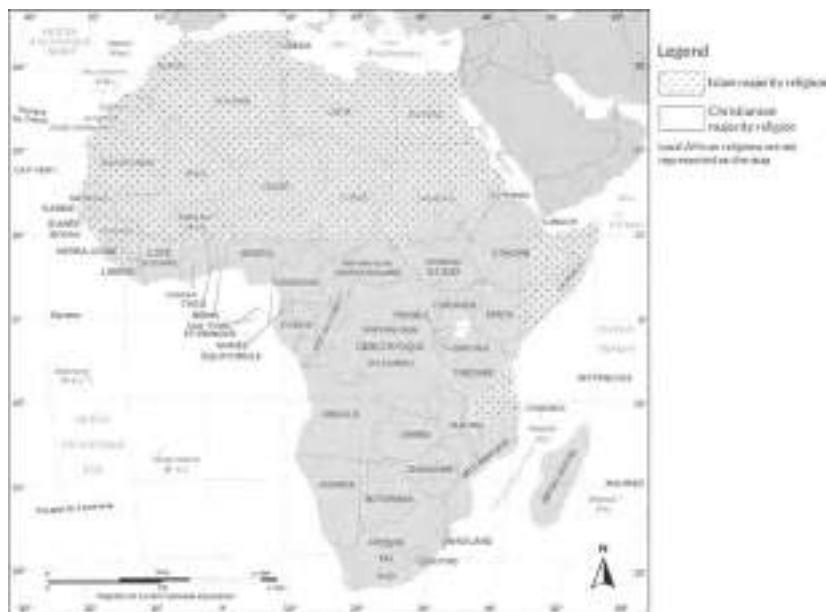


Fig. 2.1 Islam and Christianity in Africa Credit: Jean Salvaing

FROM THE SEVENTH TO THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The spread of Islam in Africa from the seventh to the fifteenth century was a process in which rulers, merchants, and clerks were the main actors. Clerks accompanied Muslim expatriate merchants. The latter also brought teachers for the education of their children. The local rulers entrusted their children to these teachers, and progressively adopted Islam, which would trickle down to the other social categories (Fig. 2.2).

THE HORN OF AFRICA

The Christian kingdoms between Coptic Egypt and Ethiopia took long to surrender because the Nubian archers stopped the Arab conquest in 641. The Nubian kingdom and the Arab armies reached a truce in 652. In return for the respect of its sovereignty, the kingdom paid a yearly tribute and accepted the construction of a mosque in its capital, Dongola. This *status quo* lasted for six hundred years during which Islam penetrated the neighboring regions in the desert and the north of Nubia because of Arab immigration and the presence of Arab traders. The spread of Islam continued after the fall of the Fatimids in Egypt. The kingdom of Nubia was conquered in 1317, and that

latter progressively adopted Islam, as well. Occasionally present in the islands such as Lamu, Islam took root around the tenth century before reaching the coast in the thirteenth century. In 1313, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited Mogadishu and Kilwa, expressed his admiration for the elite of the east coast of Africa because of their piety. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth century, when many Arabs from the Hadhramaut (Arabic: *Ḥaḍramawt*, a southern Arabian Peninsula region) migrated to the area during this period of prosperity, Islam became the religion of the majority of the population.

CENTRAL AFRICA

Many nomads from the north settled among the populations of the Chad region between 550 and 800. The state of Kanem emerged from this encounter. The settlers managed to take control of the central power; the Sayfawa family reigned over the Kanem-Bornu until 1846.⁴ King Hummay embraced Islam in the eleventh century. During this period, trade between Kanem and Northern Africa via the Fezzan that had started in the ninth century amplified. The kings who succeeded each other on the throne completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. After two centuries of internal crises due to struggles between dynasties and the drying of Lake Chad, around the thirteenth and fifteenth century, the Kanem State rejuvenated in the Bornu province. In 1480, it took the name of the latter province and made N'Gazargamu its capital. The erudite Islamic culture of the State attracted scholars from North Africa, Timbuktu, and Walata.

Further West, the trading elites in the commercial Hausa cities (today's northern Nigeria), which were connected to the trans-Saharan trade routes, became Islamized in the fourteenth century as they came in contact with the Wangara (the learned Jula traders from Mali). More influential than Kano, the city of Katsina became the Islamic cultural center where learned Fula from Mali converged between 1452 and 1463.⁵ These cities also received the influence of Islam from the Bornu.

WEST AFRICA

Around 1050, the western part of the continent experienced a sudden Islamic wave due to the *jihād* of the Almoravids led by Ibn Yāsīn, a Ṣanhāja Berber from southern Algeria.⁶ Today, we know that his impact in the Islamization process has been more significant than initially thought—the Berber elites who settled in Mauritania have turned the zone into a permanent platform for the spread of Islam. Thus, West Africa, which had until then been in contact with Ibāḍī⁷ merchants from the Maghreb, adopted the Mālikī school of Islamic jurisprudence (Fig. 2.3).⁸

However, the spread of Islam throughout the medieval era has been mainly through the trans-Saharan trade (of slaves and gold) that connected

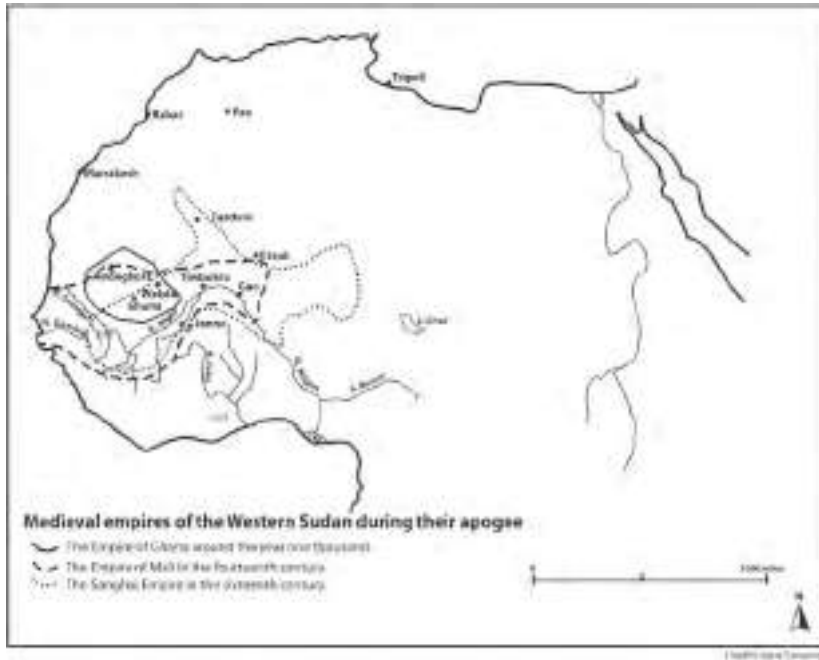


Fig. 2.3 Medieval Empires of the Western Sudan during their Apogee Credit: Jean Salvaing

the Islamic world (mainly Morocco) and trading cities such as Walata⁹ and Timbuktu along the Sahara.¹⁰ Those cities were part of the medieval West African empires that dominated the area located between the eleventh and seventeenth-degree northern latitude. Farther down south, the forest constituted the borders of those empires; the tsetse flies would have decimated their cavalries. In the fifteenth century, the gold and kola traders managed to reach the forest.

Another way of examining the Islamization of West Africa is to look at the evolution of the ancient West African empires.¹¹ At the time of its apogee in the tenth century, the Ghana Empire was exporting gold from Bambuk and Bure to the North. According to Al-Bakrī's travel narrative, there was in Ghana, near the royal palace in the capital, a Muslim city inhabited by Arab-Berber merchants.¹² The king and the general population maintained their ancestral faith, but there were Muslim ministers and secretaries. The Muslim expatriates, while maintaining strong ties with local communities, kept their identities because they wanted to preserve their faith but also because their foreign status gave them protection. A similar framework was found in the Gao Empire in its beginnings.

On the contrary, we know little about the beginning of the Islamization of the Mali Empire founded in 1235 by Sunjata Keita, near the Bure gold mines between Mali and Guinea. Later, however, Mansa Mūsā became famous for his lavish pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He brought back with him scholars such as Al-Sāḥilī, the architect who designed the Sudanese styled mosque of Djinguereber in Timbuktu, and manuscripts. Nevertheless, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa found some of their practices “un-Islamic” when he visited Mali in 1352. He wrote:

What I found bad in the ways of the Blacks: The slaves, males and females, and young girls appear stark naked in public. Women do not cover their bodies when they appear to the Sultan, and his daughters do the same. On the last day of Ramadan, I saw a hundred naked girls coming out of the royal palace with food. Two of the Sultan’s daughters accompanied them.

What I found good in the ways of the Blacks: They pray regularly, and do so strictly at the mosque. If their children are unwilling to pray, they resort to whips to force them to pray.¹³

As for the Songhay Empire, the Timbuktu chronicles celebrate Askiya Muḥammad (1493–1528) who relied on the educated elite of Timbuktu, contrary to Sonni ‘Alī (1464–1492) and made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1496–7 where he was made Caliph of the Takrūr.¹⁴ His Islamization policy was also a means of gaining political legitimacy because he was a usurper of the throne. Islam would still be limited to urban centers, the royal court, hence the name “court Islam,” and to notables and merchants.

A pattern developed that would later inspire the nineteenth-century West African Islamic “revolutions.” Muslim reformist rulers who are reputed for their piety were the ones who, with varying degrees of success, fought ancient forms of local spiritualities. In Gao, Askiya Muḥammad, advised by Algerian theologian Al-Maghīlī (d. 1504), advocated a rigorous form of Islam.¹⁵ In other States located farther east, ‘Alī Gaji in Bornu and Rumfa in Kano, also advised by Al-Maghīlī, pursued similar political agendas. The Kano chronicles indicate that Al-Maghīlī “ordered Rumfa, the king of Kano, to cut the sacred tree under which the original mosque had been built and which symbolized the symbiosis of Islam and the remnants of the traditional religion.”¹⁶ However, such radical measures were not enforced, especially given the fact that other theologians such as Al-Suyūṭī, whom Askiya Muḥammad met in Cairo, advocated for moderate positions.

In sum, the Islamization of West Africa progressed slowly compared to other regions that were closer to the Muslim world. However, the processes were similar. Islam spread through trade, mostly because the latter opens up to new horizons and influences in addition to the direct action of merchants. Islamization followed a top-down model, with its diffusion being the action of either merchants or rulers who use the new religion as a tool for nation building. Islam cohabited with traditional religious practices, about which Ibn Baṭṭūṭa expressed perplexity wherever he went as was the case in Mali.

FROM THE SIXTEENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

During this period, Islamization processes strengthened in this context marked by two significant changes: the destruction of the Songhay Empire in 1591 by the Moroccans and the development of navigation technologies that connected the African coast with Europe. The Portuguese presence in East Africa created a struggle between Christianity and a form of Islam that became more and more political.

NORTHEAST AFRICA

The Funj kingdom on the Blue Nile, with Sennar as its capital, is considered a “Black Sultanate” even though its rulers claimed Arab roots (Umayyad precisely), a strategy of legitimization that was common in Africa. The spread of Islam in the kingdom that started earlier with traders and Arab nomads accelerated with the consolidation of the State in the sixteenth century. The rulers encouraged the immigration of Muslim teachers trained in Egypt. At the same time, connections formed with Muslim societies in the west, including Bornu. The Darfur Sultanate that started to Islamize under the Tunjur dynasty (about 1400–1600) became a Muslim state in the mid-seventeenth century. The State of Sudan was conquered in the nineteenth century by Egyptian armies led by Muḥammad ‘Alī (in the 1820s) and Ismā‘īl (who annexed Darfur in 1867). As a reaction and due to the British presence, a religious nationalist movement developed. Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh declared himself the Mahdī¹⁷ and took control of Sudan in 1885 before the British conquered it in 1898. Only Ethiopia remained a Christian polity. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, the Sultan of Harar, occupied a significant portion of its territory between 1529 and 1545. However, Ethiopia managed to push back against this occupation thanks to the help of a Portuguese contingent.

THE EAST COAST

The Portuguese, who had been present since Vasco da Gama, reigned over the Indian Ocean and the east coast for an extended period. Many conflicts arose between Muslims and Christians. These tensions lessened only in the second half of the seventeenth century when the links between the region and the Arab world strengthened. The Muslim and Arab–Swahili civilization, mainly of merchants and city dwellers, continued to prosper with the development of a written literature in Kiswahili. The city of Lamu became the main center of Islamic learning out of many competing Swahili cities.¹⁸

A significant change occurred in the nineteenth century when Sa‘īd, the Sultan of Oman transferred his capital to Zanzibar in 1840, thus leading many merchants and intellectuals from the Arab world to move to the East African city. Zanzibar’s hegemony therefore extended to the entire coast. However, the Ibādī Omani rulers had a limited religious influence among

the Sunnī and Shāfiʿī Swahili people even though the society as a whole became Islamized. There was a significant Arabization of the Swahili language, a prevalence of Islamic law over customary law, and alignment of the status of local women in the upper segments of society with prevailing norms in Arab societies. Islam reached rural areas around 1850 when Muslims began erecting trading posts in the countryside. David Sperling and Jose Kagabo noted that “as Muslims settled to live and farm closer to non-Muslims, the two came to reside so near to each other, indeed often interspersed, that their lives intermingled and they shared the same concerns of daily life. In this way, Islam came to have a direct presence and particularly strong influence among non-Muslim rural peoples.”¹⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, Sufi orders such as the Qādiriyya and Shādhiliyya developed and became the popular modes of practicing Islam.

THE INTERIOR

The Arab–Swahili merchants of Zanzibar took over the trade that local populations had until then controlled and entered the continent in search of ivory and slaves. Nevertheless, the development of caravan routes and trading posts, in Tabora or in Ujiji along Lake Tanganyika on the Congo basin, did not go hand-in-hand with proselytizing. Only the immediate collaborators of the merchants would embrace Islam. In contrast, Islam spread in Buganda with the help of Muslim merchants.²⁰ King Mutesa (d. 1877) fostered the spread of Islam even though Christianity would become a serious rival after the king’s death. Deadly rivalries between the ruling elites of both religions broke out. Meanwhile, in the south, in Mozambique, Islam started to take root.

CENTRAL AFRICA

After its rebirth in the sixteenth century, the Bornu kingdom dominated the region until the end of the nineteenth century. It maintained trade relations with Tripoli via the Fezzan which was a territory under its control, and via Air and Ghadamis, which were also connecting routes to North Africa. The Bornu kingdom relied on the trade of slaves captured during raids south of Lake Chad or sent by its principalities. In return, the kingdom received silk, luxurious cotton products, firearms, and paper. Regional commercial networks in which natron and cotton products circulated also developed between Hausa cities. From the south, came forest products such as the kola of Nupe.

The Bornu kingdom reached its apogee under King Idris b. ‘Alī Alaoma (1564–1596) whose story is most known through Aḥmad b. Furtu’s chronicle. King Alaoma brought military techniques and arms from Egypt and maintained strong diplomatic ties with faraway states. N’Gazargamu,

the capital of Bornu, became an important cultural center of the epoch as illustrated by the impressive architecture of its mosques in bricks, King Aloama's ties with Egypt and his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he founded a hotel for the citizens of Bornu. The Sayfawa were given the nickname of "dynasty of the twenty Hājī"²¹ (Devière 2017, 220) for "in Bornu, more than anywhere else, this religious obligation is closely associated with state power and its functioning."²² The king who successively ruled Bornu, especially Alaoma, imposed Islamic law without succeeding to implement it in the periphery of the kingdom or in principalities.

Other kingdoms developed in central Africa. In the East, there was the Wadai Kingdom whose rulers were Tunjur Arabs, non-Muslims, who came from Darfur in the fifteenth century. A revolt led by Black and Arab Muslims in the seventeenth century brought 'Abd al-Karīm to the throne. He developed a rigorous Islamization policy. In that period, the Wadai Kingdom maintained strong ties with foreign powers through the pilgrimage to Mecca and strengthened its position as a transit zone of copper from Darfur to Kano. South of Lake Chad, the Bagirmi Kingdom became Islamized after having been a provider of slaves for an extended period.

TIMBUKTU AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND CULTURE

After the Moroccan conquest during the time of the great learned intellectual Aḥmad Bābā (1556–1627), the teachers of Timbuktu continued to teach at the Sankore mosque.²³ The seventeenth-century marks the production of seminal chronicles such as *Ta'riḫ al-Sūdān* by Maḥmūd Ka'ti,²⁴ a text discovered in Gwandu by Heinrich Barth, in 1853. What follows is an overview of the Islamic education of Timbuktu, which is largely representative of sub-Saharan Africa.

Schooling starts at around the age of seven. Pupils study the Qur'ān using wooden boards, one verse at a time while learning to read and write. Students memorize the verses without understanding their meaning, a phase that can last for years. Each learner is monitored by the master, but students live, learn, and study religious practices together. In rural areas, they cultivate the teacher's farm. Various ceremonies punctuate the process of memorizing the Qur'ān—the most important of them being the graduation ceremony that also marks the learner's entry into the world of adults. This type of education is primarily reserved for boys, and exceptionally open to captives. Upon memorizing the Qur'ān, a minority of students—based on intellectual capacities and financial means—engage in the study of the meaning of Qur'ānic verses. This is called *tafṣīr* and is offered in local languages along with other subjects of Islamic culture that are taught through reading and commentary of a set of books. Once a student masters a given subject, he receives an authorization to teach (*ijāza*) and goes on to study another subject under a new master.

The manuscripts of Timbuktu give an idea of the nature of African Islamic culture as a whole.²⁵ About 50% of the texts are religious and deal with issues such as Islamic theology (*tawhīd*), sources of legal rules (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), jurisprudence, (*fiqh*), commentaries of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr*), reports of words and deeds of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*), Sufism and Islamic mysticism (*al-taṣawwuf*), and esoteric sciences (*'ilm al-asrār*). The remaining manuscripts address secular issues but are not unrelated to religion. Thus, some manuscripts are chronicles on the spread of Islam, biographies of and notes on renowned personalities and scholars, while others are poetry on various subjects ranging from praises to the Prophet, recommendations, to threnodies. Others are official correspondences, *fatwas* (legal opinions), and bills of sale. These are invaluable sources of information about economic and social life.²⁶ Finally, a portion of the manuscripts is scientific documents about medicine, arithmetic, astronomy, and calendars.²⁷

OTHER AGENTS OF ISLAMIZATION IN WEST AFRICA

The learned Berbers maintained in Mauritania *zāwiyas* and a vibrant scholarly culture that attracted learned men from across West Africa. They inherited this religious role as descendants of the Ḥassān who founded the Trarza, Brakna, Tagant, and Hodh emirates in the eighteenth century. Some nomad sub-Saharan lineages gained a reputation for their Islamic erudition. This is the case of the Kunta, who are of Moor origin and renowned for their education and sainthood. They contributed to the spread of the Qādiriyya Sufi order, the most renown of them being Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī.²⁸ They also controlled the trade of salt and tobacco.²⁹

Farther south of West Africa, Islam spread through merchant networks. The *Jula*, a subgroup of the Mande ethnolinguistic group, embraced Islam when they met with North African merchants with whom they traded gold in Ancient Ghana.³⁰ The *Jula* later became major actors in intercontinental trade networks and used the religious city of Djenné (or Jenne) as their base from where they went south in search of forest products.³¹ The Mande merchants were also involved in the trade of slaves captured during the *jihād* in Fuuta Jalon in Guinea. In the southern savannah as well as in the forest, belonging to a network of Muslim traders became an advantage for merchants circulating between isolated societies. Thus, the *Jula* played a significant role in the expansion of Islam to the north of today's Ivory Coast (Kong, Bonduku), Northern Ghana (Begho, Gonja) and Guinea (Kankan). Some *Jula* warriors even created states.

Like the *Jula*, the *Jakhanke*—who are of Soninke origin—spread toward the West and lived in autonomous village communities. They specialized in agriculture, commerce, and learning.³² Similar to the *Jula*, the *Jakhanke* claimed to be intellectual heirs of Al-Ḥājj Salim Suwari. Suwari maintained that Islam must not be spread through armed *jihād* but rather through

exemplary behavior during everyday contacts with non-Muslim populations. Most importantly, he argued that the spread of Islam followed a process dictated by Allāh. Following Ivor Wilks, the historians call this ideology the “Suwarian tradition.”³³ Such a philosophy allowed merchants to overcome a crucial legal issue because the theologians of the Muslim empires maintained that trade with non-Muslims was lawful only if Muslims lived in majority non-Muslim polities and not in independent territories.³⁴ Jula living among non-Muslims ended up integrating non-Muslim elements in their practice of Islam and in some cases abandoned the faith.

THE JIHĀDS

A series of armed *jihād* led to the formation of reformist states that expanded Islam toward the south.³⁵ First, in 1727 in Fuuta Jalon, a Muslim coalition of Fulbe (Fulani) from the Masina and Fuuta Tooro, as well as Malinke, took over power from the Jalonke farmers who were of Mande origin and the first to inhabit the area.³⁶ Second, an armed *jihād* led by the learned *Tooroobe*³⁷ in the 1770s put an end to the rule of the non-Muslim Denyankooŋe in Fuuta Tooro.³⁸ Third, the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the nineteenth century by ‘Uthmān ḍan Fodio, who was of *Tooroŋo* origin, removed from power the kings of the Hausa merchant cities whose Islam ḍan Fodio saw as too compromised.³⁹ Thus, he founded a vast empire expanding from today’s northern Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon. The expansion of his empire also led to wars against the Bornu. ‘Uthmān ḍan Fodio believed this war against other Muslims was justified because he saw their State as un-Islamic. However, Al-Kānemī, a religious scholar from Bornu whose family replaced the Sayfawa dynasty in 1846, saved the Bornu kingdom.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the effects of the Islamist wave were felt up to the north of the Yoruba cities leading to the creation of the Ilorin Caliphate in 1820.⁴¹ Finally, Seku Aḥmadu Lobbo created a state in Masina in 1818, near the Niger River bend and annexed the cities of Djenné (Jenne) and Timbuktu.⁴²

Those four states had many things in common. First, they imposed a stringent Islamic law. Second, they had class societies in which a person’s rank depended on their degree of Islamization. Third, they developed a local Islamic literature made up of Arabic texts as well as a written corpus in African languages (‘*Ajamī*): Fulfulde and Hausa in Sokoto⁴³ and Fula in Fuuta Jalon. In Fuuta Jalon, Cerno Samba Mombeyaa was an advocate of the use of Fula ‘*Ajamī*.⁴⁴ On its use in religious texts, Mombeyaa said:

I will cite the Authentic [sources] in Fula
To facilitate comprehension. On hearing them, accept them
Indeed, only through their mother tongue
Can everyone understand the essence of the Authentic [sources].
Many Fula Speaking people do not grasp what is taught to them
In Arabic, and thus remain in the dark.⁴⁵

Fourth, the captives, who were perhaps about half of the population of those states, were only marginally the target of Islamization. In Fuuta Jalon as well as in Sokoto, leaders regularly fought armed *jihād* in which captives were used as a local workforce or sold across the Atlantic or to the North. Aḥmad Bābā of Timbuktu had formulated in the seventeenth century the dominant view on slavery among African scholars.⁴⁶ Contrary to learned Arabs, Bābā maintained that Black Africans were not essentially meant for slavery because those who voluntarily embraced Islam could not be turned into slaves. However, the inhabitants of non-Muslim states could legitimately be used as slaves.

Tooroobe or Fulani scholars led the armed *jihād*, but other ethnic groups supported them. This was the case of the Hausa in Sokoto and the Maninka in Guinea. The armed *jihād* translated the desire of their leaders, especially those of Fuuta Tooro, to build states capable of countering the slave trade.⁴⁷ Other interpretations of the *jihād* stressed the political and economic calculations of the elites. In Fuuta Jalon for example, the increasing significance, both in numbers and in power, of the Muslims—wealthy Maninka traders and Fula—might have allowed them to free themselves from the rule of the non-Muslim Jalonke who first inhabited the kingdom.⁴⁸ The connection between these *jihāds* and the failed one led by Nāṣir al-Dīn in Mauritania in the 1670s is documented. However, the status of Bundu as a Muslim State, founded in Mālik Si, who came from Fuuta Tooro, is controversial.⁴⁹ Finally, these holy wars were reactions of rural areas—where eighteenth-century religious leaders had created several enclaves almost everywhere, just like in other regions of Africa—to a form of Islam they viewed as too accommodating and which urban elites promoted. Recent historiography shows that slaves were also active participants in those wars. Nevertheless, the states born out of those holy wars remained class-based societies and active actors in the slave trade.⁵⁰

In the 1850s and 60s, Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Taal, a *Tooroodo cleric* from Fuuta Tooro, fought a *jihād* in the name of the Tijāniyya Sufi order upon his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca.⁵¹ Starting from Dinguiray in Guinea, he conquered the kingdoms east of Senegal and west of Mali. In 1862, Taal invaded the Masina accusing the rulers of this Muslim state as well as Al-Bakkā’ī al-Kuntī of Timbuktu of supporting the king of Segu. For Taal, the conversion to Islam of the latter was not sincere. Around the same period, Samori Tuure (also known as Samory Touré in French), originally a Jula merchant, created an empire whose center was Kankan in Guinea.⁵² During his conquests in the 1860s, he embraced Islam, took the title of Almaami (from Arabic: Al-imām), and ruled over an empire united under the banner of Islam (Fig. 2.4).⁵³



Fig. 2.4 Islamic States in Western and Central Africa Credit: Jean Salvaing

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown the merits of viewing the Islamization of sub-Saharan Africa as multiphased. Following a model proposed by John Trimingham based on West Africa, it appears that Islamization slowly started with merchant minority communities, then the faith became the religion of state leaders without being imposed on the masses.⁵⁴ After that, it turned into an official state religion, usually following an armed *jihād*. Of course, this broad picture does not account for local specificities. Consequently, it is possible to propose the following model that accounts for Islamization in sub-Saharan Africa. This model is both explanatory and chronological.

First, rulers welcomed Muslim clerics without embracing Islam. However, they sought to profit from the esoteric knowledge of the clerics. For example, the correspondences of the Jula clerics of Gonja (today's northern Ghana) in the nineteenth century show that their counterparts who lived near the royal court of the Ashanti emperor helped the latter with their mystical knowledge in the fight against malaria and the sterility of women.⁵⁵ This did not lead the emperor to consider converting to Islam. Second, in the case in which initial contact between clerics and non-Muslims led to a real Islamization, the scholar is regarded as a *faqīh*, a Muslim jurist whose knowledge of Islamic texts regulates social norms and religious practices. This was the case of “court Islam” in the empires of Mali and Songhay.

At the individual level, the cleric is a means for the faithful to be close to God. He is considered a *malī* (Someone close to God, a friend of God), who is endowed with divine grace and *baraka*. This has been significant in the early spread of Sufism from Egypt or Morocco. Thus, Sufi reference is present

as early as the sixteenth century in the writing of Aḥmad Bābā who is most known for his role as a jurist. We also found the inscription “Al-Ghazālī” on a fifteenth-century tombstone in the region of Gao.⁵⁶ However, the Sufi orders did not have a significant impact, expressed through popular religiosity, until the eighteenth century.⁵⁷ For example, the Tijāniyya influences on the *jihād* of Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Taal are well established. However, there is no significant historical evidence of Sufi influence in the holy wars of Fuuta Tooro, Fuuta Jalon, and to a certain extent that of Masina. By the end of the nineteenth century, the old Sufi orders spread widely while new ones appeared. This was the case of Sanūsiyya, which the students of Ibn Idrīs spread in East and Central Africa.

The expansion of Islam also encountered opposition, especially when rulers disturbed the equilibrium between the Muslim faith and African religions. For example, King ‘Alī of Segu was assassinated after he decided to impose Islam and forbid other religious cultures in 1757. In Senegal, the aristocratic and warrior class of the *Ceddo* of the Wolof kingdom opposed the spread of Islam in the eighteenth century.

However, Islam progressively took root in Africa through a multi-century process through which it has influenced local realities and adapted to them without losing its essence. The influence of Islam in various African traditions is perceptible in the way some Islamic concepts have become part of local religions and cosmologies.⁵⁸ One other example of this Islamic influence is noticeable in the legend of Sunjata.⁵⁹ According to the legend, Sunjata “enjoyed listening to the story of Djoulou Kara Naïni, the great king of gold and silver.”⁶⁰ The latter is Alexander the Great, who appears in local Arabic texts as a Muslim emperor. It would even appear that Islam has erased from memory some preexisting traditions. For example, archeologists have documented the existence of the pre-Islamic city of Jenne-Jeno, near present-day Jenne, that had an ancient urban civilization until then unknown.⁶¹ In addition, the development of writing and vulgarization of the Arabic language has created the conditions for the emergence of a common culture among learned people. However, the vast literature produced locally in Arabic was a “restricted literacy” as Jack Goody termed it.⁶² In other words, it was an elite domain dealing with a limited number of subjects even though there was a desire to reach the masses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This led to the emergence of ‘*Ajamī*’ literary traditions.⁶³

Finally, after having feared the intrusion of Christian power in *dār al-Islām* (the land of Islam) and having resisted fiercely to European colonization, Islamic circles in the colonial era saw the “divine surprise” of an unprecedented expansion of Islam that reached all components of the population, including captives. Could it be that modernity favored universalist religions over local cosmologies? In such contexts, especially in territories where it had an extended presence, could it be that Islam would have the edge over Christianity, which spread in areas distant from the centers with a historical Muslim presence?

NOTES

1. For a good overview of the Islamization of sub-Saharan Africa, see the various chapters in Nehemia Levtzion and Randal Pouwels, eds. *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).
2. See Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, “Introduction,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, 63.
3. This chapter was translated from French by Gana Ndiaye a doctoral student in the department of Anthropology at Boston University. Ndiaye holds an M. Sc. in Intercultural Mediation and Migrations Studies as well as an MA in French.
4. Dierk Lange, *Le Diwan des Sultans du (Kanem-) Bornu* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977); Vincent Hiribarren, *A History of Borno: Trans-Saharan Empire to Failing Nigerian State* (London: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2017).
5. Herbert R. Palmer, “The Kano Chronicle,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 38 (1908).
6. Nehemia Levtzion, “‘Abd Allāh b. Yāsīn and the Almoravids,” in *Studies in West African Islamic History, volume 1*, edited by John Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1979).
7. Ibādīsm is a branch of khārījism that spread in North Africa in the eighth century and persisted in the Mزاب (Algeria), East Africa and in Tripolinia (Western Libya). The Khārījites, the partisan of ‘Alī, were those who dissented against the ruling Mu‘āwīyya.
8. One of the four Sunnī school of Islamic jurisprudence founded by Mālik b. Anas (716–796). It dominates in West Africa and the Maghreb.
9. Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walata* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002).
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12. Nehemia Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80.
13. Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 296.
14. An ancient Senegalese kingdom, by extension the West African region.
15. John Hunwick, *Shari‘a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
16. Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 83.
17. Messianic redeemer who, according to some Muslim traditions, will come before the end of time.
18. Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East Africa Coast, 1800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World History, 1994).

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21. Rémi Devière, *Du Lac Tchad à La Mecque, le Sultanat du Bornou et son Monde, XVI^e-XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2017), 220.
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23. Michel Abitbol, *Tombouctou et les Arma* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1979); Mahmoud Zouber *Ahmad Bâbâ de Tombouctou* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977).
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38. David Robinson, *Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa Toro, 1853–1891* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and Shaykh Muusa Kamara, *Florilège au Jardin de l'Histoire des Noirs, Zubûr al Basâtin* (v. 1925). 1. *L'Aristocratie Peule et la Révolution des Clercs Musulmans (Vallée du Sénégal)*, trans. Saïd Bousbina, ed. Jean Schmitz (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1998).
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The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa

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ISBN 978-3-030-45758-7 ISBN 978-3-030-45759-4 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45759-4>

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