



Trade and Expansion of Islam in West Africa

Sofiane Bouhdiba holds a degree in Economy from the Institut des Hautes Etudes Commerciales de Carthage, Tunisia and a Ph.D. in Demography. Since 1999 he is a professor for demography in the Human and Social Sciences Faculty of Tunis. His most recent publication has the title: "L'ennemi invisible. Histoire de la mortalité des soldats sur le champ de bataille" (Paris 2015).

Islam reached sub-Saharan Africa relatively late, centuries after the early territorial conquest of the first Muslim warriors. The first sub-Saharan African town becoming in majority Muslim was Gao, in Mali, around 990. Senegal followed by 1040, then West Mali, Guinea and Ghana, where Soninke people became Muslims by 1076.

The Arab merchants penetrated Sub Saharan Africa crossing both the Sahara and the Indian Ocean; they dominated the Sub Saharan African markets until the appearance of the Portuguese traders in the XVth century.

Muslim traders crossed the Sahara into West Africa for trade, and were the ones who introduced Islam in Sub Saharan Africa, all along the Niger River, down to its Delta. The presence of Muslim communities, both Arab and Berbers, linked to the trans-Saharan trade is reported since the XIth century by Al-Bakri¹.

The facility with which Arabs crossed the Sahara was due to their acute sense of orientation², their experience of the desert, but also to the extraordinary physical capacity of both horses and camels³. They managed to settle trading outposts in many strategic areas in Africa.

The Arab Trading Outposts

The most famous African trade routes linked the kingdom of Ghana to major trade centres as Timbuktu (Mali), Tripoli and Tunis. Under the influence of the Muslim merchants and in particular Fulani, Sanhaja and Berber, many African cities have been created as trade centres all along these routes.

The two main functions of such cities were

the *matjar* (commercial fair) and the *matrah* (warehouse). In East Africa, cities located near the sea (Mombassa for example) had also the function of commercial harbours, as Arab traders were able to cross medium distances, navigating from the Arabian peninsula to East Africa.

In a second stage, many trade centres became famous centres of Islamic learning and civilization. Since its foundation by Tuareg as a trading outpost, Timbuktu grew and developed thanks to local and regional trade and started attracting scholars from throughout the Muslim world⁴. After the fall of Songhay⁵, the big West African kingdoms, such as Timbuktu, disappeared progressively.

In the XVIIIth century, Arab traders contributed to the foundation of coastal trading centres in Eastern Africa, such as Lamu, Malindi, Mombassa, Kilwa⁶ and Dar-Es-Salaam. They also settled in the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, transforming them little by little into major commercial centers.

But the influence of Islam stayed near the shores, and did not spread into the interior lands. In fact, Arabs used to trade with the interior of East Africa through trading partners established in the interior. That was a tripartite trade, as Arab traders used to import clothes and glassware from Arabia and South Asia, exchanging them with gold and ivory brought from the interior by the African intermediaries. There was not a direct contact between the Arabs settled in the trade posts and the interior inhabitants.

This situation changed in the late XVIIIth and XIXth century, when Arabs developed slave trade in the East African region.

¹Andalusian geographer.

²It was of paramount importance for Muslims to know at any time and anywhere the direction of Al-Qibla, so they have developed astronomic skills and were able to navigate in the sea or in the desert by observing the position of the stars.

³Thanks to the camel, an Arab caravan can go at around 5km/h during 12 hours per day.

⁴The cosmopolitan population of Timbuktu increased from 10 000 in 1325 to 50 000 in the XVIth century.

⁵Songhay Empire ended when Morocco conquered it in 1591.

⁶Tanzania.



Slave Trade

Arab merchants trading in Eastern Africa became soon very rich, and invested their profits in the acquisition of coconut, sugar and spice plantations all along the shores. They needed men for this extensive agriculture, and the only solution for them was to bring slaves from the interior of the land.

Their traditional trading partners refused to provide them with slaves, as this was contrary to their philosophy and habits. Arab traders then saw themselves obliged to raid for slaves in the interior of the forest, going deeper than ever before inside the country. They also found themselves in the obligation of negotiating directly with the local kings, spreading Islam deeper into the interior of the African Continent.

Let me cite here the remark of Steve Muhlberger: "So if you were a small-time trader, the owner of a single canoe in Zanzibar, or if you were a small-time prince in West Africa, and wanted access to the big time - what was the logical step? Conversion to Islam would make life so much easier"⁷. In fact, little by little, the Arab merchants and slavers became ambassadors of their religion in this part of Africa.

The Muslim Merchants-Scholars

Contrary to Christianity, there does not exist any sacerdotal class or priesthood in Islam, but it is an obligation for any Muslim to try to convert the polytheists. As there is not a clear separation between clergy and laity, a fervent Muslim, a *sufi* or a *âlim* for example, could be at the same time a merchant.

In fact, most Muslim merchants were fervent men of religion, and they were very active in teaching the precepts of Islam to the African populations they were in contact with. Actually, they were offended by meeting animist people, and felt the mission to converse them. The Koran states that "And who

is better in speech than one who calls to Allah and does righteousness and says, Indeed, I am of the Muslims"⁸.

Arab merchants managed to converse their providers and clients by showing them their way of living and treating the others. They were very close to the principle stated in the Koran: "O you who believe! Why do you say that which you do not do? Most hateful it is with Allah that you say that which you do not do"⁹.

During the Xth century, Muslim traders continued to spread Islam down the Eastern coast, towards Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. Little by little, between the Xth and XVth centuries, an Arab-Swahili Moslem community formed all along the Eastern coast. Swahili, which means "coastal" in Arabic, is today the language spoken in the region, and is a mix of Arabic and local African languages.

Still, Muslim traders will soon be confronted with a terrible enemy, who will ultimately prevent them from exploring Africa and spreading Islam further down the East: the tsetse fly.

References

- Bado, Jean-Paul, 1966: Médecine coloniale et grandes Endémies en Afrique 1900-1960, Karthala, Paris;
- Bovill, E. W., 1968: The Golden Trade of the Moors, Oxford University Press, London;
- Davies, J. N. P., 1979: Pestilence and Disease in the History of Africa, Johannesburg Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg;
- Delafosse, M., 1972: Haut-Sénégal Niger, tome II, Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris;
- Sabben-Clare, E. E., Bradley, D. J. and Kirkwood K., 1980: Health in Tropical Africa during the Colonial Period, Clarendon press, Oxford.

⁸Koran 41:33

⁹Koran 61:2-3

⁷Steve Muhlberger, *The Spread of Islam*, Nipissing University.