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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN WEST AFRICA UNTIL 11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CE

Wan Mohd Amirol Ashraf Wan Mohd Badruddin<sup>1</sup>, Ezad Azraai Jamsari<sup>1</sup>, Mohamad Zulfazdlee Abul Hassan Ashari<sup>1</sup>, Izziah Suryani Mat Resad<sup>1</sup> and Mohd Hafiz Safiai<sup>2</sup>

1. Research Centre for Arabic Language and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.
2. Research Centre for Sharia, Faculty of Islamic Studies & Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

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#### Abstract

Islam spread in the African continent in phases and in different ages. The process occurred through either expansion of Muslim power as in North Africa, or trading as happened in West Africa. Falola argued that the process of spreading Islam in West Africa generally occurred peacefully through trading and preaching. In that regard, the purpose of this article is to examine the process of spreading Islam in West Africa until the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. On the whole, this article is a qualitative research using historical study and content analysis to gather and analyse information from relevant primary and secondary sources. Research findings argue that initial contact of Muslims with the West African region began since the century 1H/7CE. From this contact, Islam began to be introduced to the inhabitants of West Africa through trade from the 2H/8CE century. This research finds that at the end of 4H/10CE and early 5H/11CE centuries, Islam was accepted by the ruling class of West African kingdoms, such as the conversion of rulers of Kanem, Songhay, Takrur and Malal. However, there were also West African rulers who did not embrace Islam such as the ruler of Ghana. Nevertheless, Muslims who resided in their territories were well-treated. Later on, this helped to spread Islam in these territories.

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#### Introduction:-

Falola (2001) stated that the expansion of Muslim power in North Africa paved the way for the spread of Islam in West Africa. According to Salvaing (2020), Islam entered the Sahara and West African region through two routes. The first route was through Tarabulus (Tripoli) and the second route through Sus region in al-Maghrib. Both routes were pioneered by military movement and expedition in the centuries 7 to 8 CE. The expeditions were led by 'Uqbah ibn Nafi' and 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib ibn Abi 'Ubaydah (al-Baladhuri 1987). Around the year 50H/670CE, 'Uqbah ibn Nafi' led a military expedition south of Tarabulus (Tripoli), entered Fizzan region (south-western Libya) through Waddan oasis, reaching Kawar oasis located in Kanem kingdom (Mones 1988). This expedition was the earliest contact between Muslims and West Africa.

**Corresponding Author:- Mohamad Zulfazdlee Abul Hassan Ashari**

Address:- Research Centre for Arabic Language and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

A second expedition by 'Uqbah ibn Nafi' took place around the year 63H/683CE. It was initially aimed at dominating al-Maghrib region. In that expedition, 'Uqbah detoured when he and his troops pursued the Masmudah Berber troops who retreated to Wadi Dar'ah, and defeated them there. After that, he and his troops continued their expedition to dominate the entire al-Maghrib region. This second expedition did not enter West Africa but it, however, pioneered the route for a future expedition by 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib ibn Abi 'Ubaydah.

During the era of Caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (106-125H/724-743CE), he appointed 'Abd Allah ibn Habhab as Governor of al-Maghrib. 'Abd Allah ibn Habhab in turn appointed 'Abd Rahman ibn Habib ibn Abi 'Ubaydah to head a military expedition to the region of Sus (or Sous, in south-western Morocco) and Bilad al-Sudan (Land of the Blacks) (Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam 2004). This expedition used the route pioneered by 'Uqbah ibn Nafi' some decades ago. With this expedition, 'Abd Rahman ibn Habib ibn Abi 'Ubaydah (al-Baladhuri 1916) succeeded in opening a trade route to the southern region of West Sahara and Bilad al-Sudan. About the year 129H/747CE, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib was appointed as governor of al-Maghrib. He ordered the construction of wells along the trade route linking al-Maghrib and West Africa, from Tamdult city (in south Morocco) to Awdaghust city (in Western Sahara) (Devisse 2001).

### **Entry of Islam into West Africa**

Clarke (1982), Falola (2001) and Sliwoski (2007) similarly stated that the spread of Islam in West Africa generally occurred peacefully through trade. Muslim merchants from North Africa carried out trading in West Africa since the 2H/8 CE century (Levtzion 1980). Traders from North Africa comprised of Arabs and Berbers. The Berber society as a whole accepted Islam in stages and this process occurred since the era of expansion of Muslim power and territory in North Africa until the beginning of 2H/8 CE century.

At the end of Umayyad rule, there were a series of rebellions orchestrated by the Khawarij (meaning renegade or those who left) movement in North Africa. The Khawarij movement began to receive support from among the Berber society who took issue with some policies of Umayyad rule. There were two Khawarij schools of thought accepted by Berber society, namely, Sufriyya dan Ibadiyya. At the end of the 2H/8CE Century, the followers of Sufriyyah and Ibadiyyah movements succeeded in forming their own governments in al-Maghrib. Sufriyyah Thought infiltrated among Miknasa tribe of the Berber society and they ruled through their Midrarid (Banu Midrar) kingdom (140-365H/757-976M) centred at the city of Sijilmasa. Earlier, major Berbers tribes, of Zenata in western Tripolitania, and of Huwara around Tripoli and in the Nafusa mountains, accepted Ibadiyya school of thought and formed the Rustamid kingdom (160-296H/777-909CE) with its capital at Tahirt city. Besides that, Ibadiyya followers were scattered around the region of Fizzan. These kingdoms were responsible for carrying out trade in West Africa.

The Ibadiyya movement clearly influenced the relationship between trade and the spread of Islam in West Africa. This is so because it controlled the important trade centres such as Tahirt, Sijilmasa and Fizzan region (Hassan 1981). It was these economic centres which linked North Africa with West Africa. Even so, other Islamic schools of jurisprudence were also accepted by the society in West Africa, as Sunni traders and scholars, especially from the Maliki Madhab frequently visited the region. Some of these visitors later chose to reside in these transit cities along the trade routes. This indirectly helped the spread of Islam in the Sahara and West African region.

However, some in the Berber society, such as the Sanhaja tribe, did not accept Khawarij ideology. They resided in southern Sahara bordering with the kingdom of Ghana in West Africa. They first began to embrace Islam around the year 103H/721CE during the era of Caliph Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik (Ibn Khaldun 2001). However, their understanding and practice of Islam was more superficial. This began to change when al-Murabitun (the Almoravids) movement erupted in the century 5H/11CE. According to Hussein (2001) and Suarez (2016), before al-Murabitun kingdom, the Sanhaja tribe once established their Anbiya' kingdom (153-380H/770-990CE). This kingdom seized control of Awdaghust city from the kingdom of Ghana around the year 154H/770CE. Following this, the Sanhaja tribe forged trading relationship with the kingdoms of Takrur and Ghana. This assuaged a little the tension between the Sanhaja and the kingdom of Ghana. The city of Awdaghust under the administration of the Sanhaja continued to grow into an important Trans-Sahara trading hub. However, the Sanhaja could not sustain their control over the city when the kingdom of Ghana succeeded in recapturing the city from their hands around the year 380H/990CE (Hussein 2001).

Djedje (2008) stated that in the century 4H/10CE, Muslim traders from North Africa were the main driving force in trade relations between North Africa and West Africa. This gave a big advantage for their efforts to spread Islam in West Africa (Schulz 2012). Muslim traders from North Africa maintained a good relationship with rulers in West Africa. This indirectly increased their influence in the region, and more or less helped in spreading Islam in the region in the century 5H/11CE (Azzumah 2014).

Trade between North Africa and West Africa was carried through some trading routes known as Trans-Sahara routes. Davidson (1985) gave four examples of trade routes linking al-Maghrib with West Africa. The first route began in Cairo through Murzuq, Ghat, Gao, ending at Timbuktu. The second route began in Tarabulus, continuing through Ghadamis (Ghadames), Tuwat (Touat), Awdaghust, ending at Kumbi Saleh. The third route began in Fas (Fez) city, through the cities of Sijilmasa, Taghaza (Teghaza), Walatah (Oualata), ending at Kumbi Saleh. The fourth route began at Marrakish (Marakech) city, carrying on to Wadan (Oudane) city, extending to Awdaghust, ending at Kumbi Saleh city. Tisseron (2014) added another route linking Tahirt with Gao, which was used since the middle of 2H/8CE century.

Davidson (1985) stated that the West African region may be divided horizontally into three main parts, namely, eastern part, central part and western part of West Africa. He asserted that this division is merely to facilitate describing the process of spreading Islam in West Africa based on geographical location (not an actual geographical division), beginning with: (a) the eastern part of West Africa represented by the kingdom of Kanem; (b) the process of spreading Islam in the central part represented by the kingdom of Songhay; and (c) the process of spreading Islam in the western part represented by the kingdoms of Ghana, Takrur and Malal.

### **1. The Spread of Islam in Kanem (Kanim) Kingdom**

The Kanem kingdom was the earliest the Muslims had contact with in West Africa, through the military expeditions led by 'Uqbah ibn Nafi' in 1H/7CE. However, the Islamization process there took a long time and the Kanem ruling class only converted around the century 5H/11CE. Kanem was located near Lake Chad and inhabited by the Zaghawa and Kanimbu tribes. Around the century 4H/10CE, the area of Manan was the centre of administration. At the time, the society of Kanem had not yet converted, although trading with Muslim territories in North Africa was already going on. Kanem was originally known as Zaghawa kingdom and later began to be known as Kanem around 5H/11CE. Previously, the name Kanem was only referring to its geographical term, Kanem (meaning south in Teda and Kanuri languages). Before accepting Islam, the society worshipped their king. Kanem survived as Bornu Empire, right up to the year 1900.

The conversion process of the Kanem ruler began with preaching to the Sayfawa dynasty, from the lineage of Sayf ibn Dhu Yazan (Levtzion 1978). Mai (or King) Hummay was the first of the Sayfawa dynasty to officially convert to Muslim. He ruled Kanem around the year 479H/1086CE until 490H/1097CE (Davidson 1985). El-Fasi and Hrbek (1988) explained that proselyting efforts were made to some generations of the ruling Sayfawa dynasty before Mai Hummay. However, the rulers of Kanem before Mai Hummay had not explicitly disclosed their conversion.

Mai Hummay was said to have studied Islam from a scholar by the name of Muhammad ibn Mani (El-Fasi & Hrbek 1988). His official conversion enabled Islam to be formally propagated to the entire subjects, the majority of whom converted. After his demise, his successor, Mai Dunama, ruled around the years 490-545H/1097-1150CE. Mai Dunama was said to be a devout and committed Muslim. He also endeavoured to expand the kingdom to areas around Kanem. He was reported as having gone on pilgrimage to Mecca and passed away while on a second or third trip to Mecca.

### **2. The Spread of Islam in Songhay**

Islam was spread in Songhay kingdom due to its trade relations with the Rustamid kingdom, centred in Tahirt city, and Ibadiyya traders from Fizzan kingdom. The relationship between the two kingdoms began since early 2H/8CE century. Trading that took place between the two kingdoms increased the importance of Songhay's administrative centre, Gao, in Trans-Sahara trade. However, before Gao became the capital of Songhay kingdom, the administrative centre was Kukiya. Relating to this matter, Willard (1999) and Kintiba (2018) described that the change in capital city took place when Dia Kossoi ruled Songhay in early 5H/11CE century. This move enabled Songhay kingdom to control trade between the two kingdoms and increased Songhay's revenue.

Through trading and social interaction with Muslim traders, the ruler and subjects of Songhay began to accept Islamic influence in stages. Hussein (2001) stated that some early records, such as writings by al-Muhallabi (2006), show Islamization process of Songhay kingdom started around the end of 4H/10M. Islam was well received by the ruler and part of the local population. In fact, within Gao city itself, there was a mosque where the ruler and his people prayed. However, in spite of their conversion, the local people continued to practise some local beliefs contradictory to Islamic tenets.

According to al-Sa'di (1981), Dia Kossou was the first Songhay ruler to embrace Islam. It was said that he converted around the year 401H/1010CE (5H/11CE century), many decades later than recorded by al-Muhallabi (2006). This research finds a discrepancy regarding the date of Islamization process in Songhay kingdom. Hussein (2001) also commented that some historians disputed al-Sa'di's opinion two grounds. First, al-Sa'di's writings refer to the official process of Islamization in Songhay, whereas in their view, Islam was accepted much earlier as stated by al-Muhallabi. Second, acceptance of Islam before Dia Kossou's reign was due to Ibadiyya influence and thus most probably considered as deviating from the true Islamic faith. Thus, it is possible that al-Sa'di's records show acceptance of Islam in Songhay as beginning later, with the official conversion of Dia Kossou in the century 5H/11CE.

Davidson (1985) and Lass (1987) stated that Dia Kossou's conversion was most probably motivated to maintain Songhay's economic importance to Muslim traders because Gao was entering a rapid phase of economic growth during Dia Kossou's reign. Gao was also one of the economic centres along Trans-Sahara routes for North African Muslim traders.

### **3. The Spread of Islam in Ghana**

The kingdom of Ghana's early relation with Muslims is mostly seen through the expedition of 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib ibn Abi 'Ubaydah in the 2H/8CE century. Through this first contact, the trade relation between the al-Maghrib and Ghana was forged at the end phase of Umayyad rule. The trade relation with the kingdom of Ghana was thereafter continued by small al-Maghrib kingdoms such as the Midrarid (Banu Midrar) and Rustamid kingdoms. Hussein (2001) explained that the kingdom of Ghana was located between Senegal river and upstream of Niger river. This kingdom had a mighty army estimated to be 200,000 strong (Munnik 1987). In the century 4H/10CE, the kingdom was vast with 18 cities in its dominion. Its influence was not limited to military and political, Ghana also witnessed considerable economic influence from monopoly of trade, especially in trading of gold. The kingdom of Ghana also controlled some significant trade centres along the Trans-Sahara route, such as the cities of Kumbi Saleh and Awdaghust.

During the time the rulers of Ghana had not yet accepted Islam, but their trade relation with Muslim traders was good. Due to this relationship, Islam also thrived in the kingdom. Asante (2019), for example, submitted his statement that the Ghana ruler was kind to Muslim traders who entered Ghana by giving them privileges, one of which was permission granted to build their own settlement near to the capital city (Freund 2006). Levtzion (1980) and Davidson (1985) stated that among the rulers who granted this permission were King Bassi (1040-1062CE) and King Tunka Manin (1062-1076CE). This clearly proved the close trade relation established between the ruler of Ghana and Muslim traders. The Muslim settlement built accommodated Muslim Arab and Berber traders, as well as people from dominant West African tribes, Soninke and Malinke. They later embraced Islam following transactions with Arab and Berber traders (Levtzion 1978).

The Ghana kingdom also appointed Muslims in the administration such as interpreters, treasury officers and other administrative positions. In order to facilitate their worship rituals, the ruler also allowed the Muslims to build a mosque in the capital city of the kingdom. Besides that, the ruler did not force Muslims to pay the customary respect to the ruler according to the usual tradition of Ghana, by kneeling and sprinkling dust over the head. Muslims, were only required to clap their hands as a sign of respect for the ruler of Ghana (Levtzion 1978). The privileges granted to the Muslim society were very helpful to the process of spreading Islam in the kingdom of Ghana. Hussein (2001) stated that many small vassal kingdoms of Ghana embraced Islam, and it was said that they also helped in the spread of Islam.

### **4. The Spread of Islam in Takrur**

Takrur was a kingdom situated near the Senegal river. It was not ascertained when the initial relationship of Takrur kingdom with Islam occurred. The first contact probably happened in the century 2H/8CE, through relations with

the Sanhaja (Berber tribal confederation in the Sahara) or even earlier. The first Takrur ruler who embraced Islam was War Jabi, who died about the year 431H/1040CE. As such, this research concludes that he converted much earlier than the said date. His conversion was most probably caused by his relationship with the Sanhaja society. The Takrur kingdom had a good relationship with the Sanhaja peoples before the founding of al-Murabitun kingdom (Levtzion 1978). After conversion, War Jabi commanded his subjects to accept Islam and obey its laws. This made the spread of Islam in Takrur in the century 5H/11CE apply to all levels of society. This situation differed with other West African kingdoms whereby only the ruler and his close family accepted Islam, whereas most of the subjects had yet to embrace Islam.

The good relationship between the Takrur and al-Murabitun kingdoms is considered as continuing the legacy, the relationship forged since before the year 413H/1040CE. This good relationship between them could be proven through some events, such as the event when 'Abd Allah ibn Yasin requested for help and protection from the Takrur kingdom after his preaching was rejected by the Sanhaja society. Besides that, there were other events that showed the cooperation between Takrur and al-Murabitun, such as the event of the opposition of Judalah tribe against the al-Murabitun movement. In that event, Labi ibn War Jabi, the ruler at the time, helped to confront the opposition of Judalah tribe at Lamtuna Hill (al-Naqar 1969). The Takrur kingdom also cooperated with al-Murabitun kingdom in their efforts to capture Kumbi Saleh city from Ghana kingdom (Davidson 1985).

### 5. The Spread of Islam in Malal (Malel)

The process of spreading Islam in the Malal kingdom was recorded by Al-Bakri (1992), who described the conversion of the Malal (Malel) ruler. The ruler was the chief of a Malinke tribe, and known as Musulmani (Levtzion 1980). The date of his conversion could not be ascertained, but the event was said to take place before the year 460H/1068CE, before the writing of the book *al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* by al-Bakri. The ruler's conversion followed a drought crisis in Malal. The people of Malal had performed various sacrificial rites for rainfall in the country, but to no avail.

As a last resort, the ruler Musulmani went to see a Muslim trader who was in Malal at the time. His name could not be ascertained as al-Bakri did not state his name. It was said that the trader was well-versed in knowledge of al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah. Musulmani told him about the region being exposed to severe drought, a crisis that hurt his people. Then the trader taught Musulmani about Islam and invited him to embrace Islam. He went on to teach Musulmani the method of Islamic prayer and supplication to Allah SWT for abundant rain to fall on Malal's land (Levtzion 2000). Both of them proceeded to pray together and supplicate Almighty Allah for rainfall. In answer to their humble appeal, copious rain miraculously began to fall and soak Malal's dry earth. This act of God made Musulmani become more convinced about Islam, so he then commanded that all sorcerers or shamans be evicted from Malal and statues of idols destroyed (al-Bakri 1992). In 7H/13CE century, Malal kingdom became part of the Mali kingdom.

### Conclusion:-

In conclusion, the Islamization process in West Africa occurred in stages. It began with expansion of Muslim power in North Africa, through military expeditions which successfully entered kingdoms in West Africa. In the next stage, Islam spread in the kingdoms through trade relations with them. The end of 4H/10CE and early 5H/11CE centuries witnessed the religious conversion among West African rulers of Kanem, Songhay, Takrur as well as Malal kingdoms. This directly became the main factor in building a glorious Islamic civilization in the region in the centuries following. Cities such as Timbuktu, Gao and Niani, for example, became centres for seeking knowledge, trading and civilization in the Muslim world

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