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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MILITARY CAMPAIGNS OF THE ALMORAVIDS IN AL-MAGHRIB (NORTH AFRICA) AND BILAD AL-SUDAN (WEST AFRICA) IN THE 11TH CENTURY

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Abstract

The Almoravid Kingdom played an important role in the course of history of Morocco (al-Maghrib) and the Bilad al-Sudan circa the 11th century A.D. Bennison argued that the Almoravid Kingdom originated from an Islamic reformation movement among the Sanhajah society. Through this movement, the Sanhajah communities were unified, forging a military alliance among them. The movement had a mission of spreading the true teachings of Islam through jihad. It is therefore the objective of this study to analyse the process of jihadi movement of the Almoravids in al-Maghrib and the Sudan in the 11th century A.D. In general, this article is a qualitative study, using a historical study and content analysis method in accumulating and analysing information available from relevant primary and secondary sources. Results of this study argued that the Almoravid Kingdom began with a reform movement led by 'Abd Allah ibn Yasin among the Sanhajahs. The movement evolved into a kingdom after seizing control important territories throughout al-Maghrib. This kingdom became more powerful under the leadership of Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar and Yusuf ibn Tashfin.

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Introduction:-

Levtzion (1973) and Bennison (2016) explained that the Almoravid Kingdom was a kingdom founded by the Sanhajah. The Sanhajah people consisted of a number of tribes like the Lamtunah, Massufah, Judalah, Lamta and Jazzulah. Circa the end of the 9th century A.D., they spread around the western region of Sahara. The Lamtunah tribe dwelled in the Tagant and Adrar territories which are presently in Mauritania. They also controlled Awdaghust which was an important trade centre during that time. The Judalah tribe, meanwhile, resided in an area close to the coast of Atlantic and they controlled Awlil salt mines. The Lamta and Jazzulah tribes lived in the northern part of the Sahara near the areas of Wadi al-Sus and Wadi Dar'ah. The Massufah tribe controlled the trade route from Sijilmasah to Awdaghust and down to Ghana, mostly earning their living by becoming guide to the trade caravans who traded along the trade route (Levtzion 1973).

Salvaing (2020) stated that the Sanhajah, via the Almoravid Kingdom, played an important role in the spread of Islam and fortified Islamic control over al-Maghrib and West Africa regions. The Sanhajah clans formed a federation among themselves thereby controlling a number of trade transit points in the two regions (Warner 1990).

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The Sanhajah were reported to accept Islam in stages, a process which started circa the 4th Hijri century or the 10th century A.D. when some of the people in the community embraced Islam. After that, around the 5th A.H./11th A.D. century, an Islamic reformation movement occurred, which is famously known as the Almoravids among the tribes of Sanhajah. The impact of this movement was that the Almoravid Kingdom was established which encompassed the regions of al-Maghrib, West Africa and Andalucía. Besides, the movement also become an external factor to the downfall of the Kingdom of Ghana in West Africa (Curtin 1971).

Founder of the Almoravid Movement

The Almoravid movement was started by figures such as ‘Abd Allah ibn Yasin, Yahya ibn Ibrahim, Yahya ibn ‘Umar, Abu Bakr ibn ‘Umar and Yusuf ibn Tashfin. Circa the year 426A.H./1035A.D., Yahya ibn Ibrahim who was the tribal chief of the Judalah performed the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (Warner 1990). In his return journey from Mecca, he and his entourage stopped in al-Qayrawan and met an Islamic scholar named Abu ‘Imran al-Fasi (Buresi 2018). Ibn Ibrahim requested Abu ‘Imran al-Fasi to appoint a tutor capable of teaching the Sanhajah community in their territory in the Sahara. Abu ‘Imran al-Fasi then asked him to meet with his former student whose name was Wajaj ibn Zalu in Sus al-Aqsa (Dandash 1988). Yahya ibn Ibrahim together with his entourage headed for Susal-Aqsa in order to meet with Wajaj ibn Zalu. To fulfil Yahya ibn Ibrahim’s request, Wajaj ibn Zalu introduced to Yahya ibn Ibrahim his student, ‘Abd Allah ibn Yasin (Pennel 2003).

Ibn Yasin gave his commitment to teach the Sanhajah and joined the caravan of Yahya ibn Ibrahim to the territory of the Judalah tribe (Fisher 1970). With the support given by Yahya ibn Ibrahim, Ibn Yasin commenced on reforming Islam among the Judalah. Pennel (2003) stated that the reformation brought about by Ibn Yasin made the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence central. His call to reformation refuted any form of thinking which was deemed astray and deviating from the mainstream thoughts of Islam. His hard stance in carrying out the call to Islam began to invite anger and dissatisfaction among the Judalah. However, due to the strong support from Yahya ibn Ibrahim, they were afraid to question Ibn Yasin’s authority. After the death of Yahya ibn Ibrahim, the Judalah tribe began to reject the call of Ibn Yasin (Levtzion 1978).

After being snubbed by the Judalah, Ibn Yasin asked for help from the tribal chief of Lamtunah, Yahya ibn ‘Umar. Endorsed with the new support from Yahya ibn ‘Umar and his brother Abu Bakr ibn Umar, da’wah and reformation introduced by Ibn Yasin began to disseminate to all the tribes of Sanhajah either by peaceful means or through jihad. Also, through this Almoravid movement, the Sanhajah, comprising the tribes of Lamtunah, Judalah, Massufah, Lamta and Jazula, was unified on the foundation of the interest of the Islamic religion. In addition to that, political and economic interests reinforced the federation established among them. The unification began to transform the Almoravid movement into a political entity which consequently established a rule and government. The synergy between Yahya ibn ‘Umar’s leadership as the first Ameer of the Almoravids and his spiritual advisor Ibn Yasin began to increase the political influence of the Almoravid Kingdom (Hrbek & Devisse 1988).

Military Campaigns of the Almoravid Kingdom

The Almoravid Kingdom began to focus military endeavour to seize territorial control over important cities and forts in al-Maghrib. At that moment, al-Maghrib was ruled by the Zanatah made up by two factions; the Maghrawah and Banu Ifran. Maghrawah ruled over the city of Fez, Sijilmasah, and Aghmat. Banu Ifran controlled Tilmisan, Sala, and Tadlah territory. Hrbek dan Devisse (1988) explained that confrontation between the Almoravid Kingdom and the Zanatah side occurred due to political and religious factors. Prior to the establishment of the Almoravid Kingdom, the Sanhajah dan Zanatah had political conflicts, ones which were won by the Zanatah. Moreover, most people among the Zanatah communities were Khawarij. Both factors made the Zanatah target for territorial expansion of the Almoravid Kingdom.

Hrbek dan Devisse (1988) also stated that the Almoravid Kingdom managed to break Zanatah’s rule over al-Maghrib within a period of five years through military campaigns carried out from 446AH/1054AD until 451AH/1059AD. The first campaign to a region controlled by the Zanatah side was an attack to the Dar’ah or Draa Valley. This was followed by a military campaign to take over the fort of Sijilmasah after Ibn Yasin had received a complaint from its residents on the despotic rule of its ruler named Mas’ud ibn Wanudin.

Ibn ‘Idhari (2013) stated that before the Almoravids launch a strike upon Sijilmasah, they have offered the ruler a peaceful solution to abandon Khawarij teachings. The offer was, however, declined by Mas’ud, and he chose to

fight. Hence, Ibn Yasin directed a team launch an attack on Sijilmasah which ended up with the city being taken over in 446AH/1054AD (Bennison 2016).

According to Hrbek dan Devisse (1988), after having captured Sijilmasah, the Almoravid Kingdom commenced efforts to seize control of Awdaghost. However, preparation for that was disturbed by rebellion in Sijilmasah. Levztzion (1973) and Asante (2019), on the other hand, stated that the city was attacked by a Zanatah army. This study concluded that most probably both rebellion and the attack occurred simultaneously. The attack and the rebellion caused deaths among the Almoravid army which was tasked with guarding the fort city. In retaliation to the attack, Almoravid troops were deployed heading for Sijilmasah. Ibn 'Idhari (2013) explained that while the move was made, the Judalah rebelled and pulled out its strength from the Almoravid army, retreating to Sahil or Sahel. To prevent that from happening, Yahya ibn 'Umar was tasked to stop them. In a clash between the two teams, Yahya ibn 'Umar died. After the death of Yahya ibn 'Umar, the leadership was helmed by Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar as the second Ameer. He deployed his troops to Sijilmasah and successfully defeated the Zanatah (Levtzion 1978).

Hrbek dan Devisse (1988) stated a number of successful conquest of territory through diplomatic efforts and treaties. Among them was the political alliance agreement signed with the Masmudah tribe. The Almoravid Kingdom managed to avoid a confrontation with the Masmudah Berbers who lived in the mountainous region of the Atlas. A diplomatic wisdom possessed by Ibn Yasin successfully convinced the Masmudah sides to form an alliance or federation with the Almoravid Kingdom. Circa the year of 448AH/1056AD, the Kingdom succeeded in wresting control over Aghmat after defeating the Zanatah army which was led by Laqqut ibn Yusuf. Levztzion (1978) and Bennison (2016) described that the Almoravid Kingdom succeeded in taking control of the city fortress of Aghmat following a blockade onto the city. The defeat suffered by Laqqut ibn Yusuf forced him to retreat to the Tadlah territory.

Ibn 'Idhari (2013) and Bennison (2016) also gave details that circa 451AH/1059AD, the Almoravids furthered their march into the region of Tamasna which was dominated by the Barghawatah tribes. Ibn Yasin summoned them to return to the true Islamic teachings but they rejected the da'wah of Ibn Yasin. Their rejection meant that a clash between the two sides was inevitable. The battle between the two sides ended with a defeat on the Almoravid side while Ibn Yasin himself was killed in the battle. Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar then directed another military campaign to Tamasnah to avenge Ibn Yasin's death. This second campaign finally succeeded in subjugating the Barghawatah tribe (Ibn 'Idhari 2013).

After the death of Ibn Yasin, the Almoravid leadership was succeeded by Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar and Yusuf ibn Tashfin (Levtzion 1978). Yusuf ibn Tashfin deployed a team under his command to face whoever remained of the Zanatah fighters. The team headed for a territory further to the north in their effort to conquer Sala (Sale), Miknas (Meknes), Fas (Fez), and Tilmisan (Tlemcen). Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar meanwhile concentrated his efforts to overcome the remaining opposition of the Zanatah Maghrawah tribe which retreated to Tadlah (Tadla). The province of Tadlah witnessed a fierce battle between the two sides which ended with a victory to the Almoravid side. In the fight, Maghrawah leader Laqqut ibn Yusuf was killed. Ibn 'Umar later married Laqqut's widow named Zaynab bint Ishaq al-Nafzawiyyah (Bennison 2016).

Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar and Yusuf ibn Tashfin Leadership

Bennison (2016) recorded that Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar made the city of Aghmat as the administrative centre of the Almoravids, an action which turn the city into a crowded one. To solve this issue, he gave directives to build a new residential area which is known as Marrakush which later became the capital of the Almoravid Kingdom. In 462AH/1070AD, a conflict occurred between the tribes of Lamtunah and Massufah in the Sahara region which threatened Almoravid's interest in the region. According to Ibn 'Idhari (2013), Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar deployed his army to the region circa 463AH/1071AD to resolve the conflict. Before departure, he appointed Yusuf ibn Tashfin as his deputy and divorced his wife Zaynab. He further requested Zaynab to marry Yusuf as soon as the 'iddah period ended.

Levtzion (1978), Hrbek and Devisse (1988) as well as Bennison (2016) all noted that Ibn Tashfin made a reshuffle of line-up of the Almoravid administration, a move which was financed by his wife, Zaynab bint Ishaq al-Nafzawiyyah. Ibn Tashfin created governmental departments (dawawin), recruited a new army which was more formalised and increase the number of soldiers. These increased his influence and stronghold within the Almoravid administration. Around 464AH/1072AD, Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar returned to Aghmat after restoring stability in the

Sahara territories. His return caused unease to Yusuf ibn Tashfin, fearing that he would have to return the leadership to Abu Bakr. Ibn Tashfin and Abu Bakr later on met and discussed to resolve the issue. In order to avoid a larger conflict, Abu Bakr agreed to surrender the Almoravid ruling authority in the al-Maghrib territory to Ibn Tashfin. Abu Bakr on the other hand would take care of the administration in the Sahara. In return for such goodwill and sacrifice, Ibn Tashfin gave the order to forge the name of al-Amir Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar on dinar gold coins. Only after the death of Abu Bakr in 480AH/1087AD that Yusuf ibn Tashfin's name was forged onto dinar gold coins issued by the Almoravid Kingdom.

The Almoravid Movement in Bilad al-Sudan

Relation between the Almoravids and Bilad al-Sudan can be traced back beginning from the era of Ibn Yasin. When his da'wah was rejected by the Judalah tribe, Ibn Yasin asked for aids and protection from the ruler of Takrur, namely War Dyabe. Later on, during the time of Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar, the Almoravids wrest control of Awdaghust from the Kingdom of Ghana with the assistance provided by the Takrur Kingdom (Davidson 1985). Levzion (1973) and Bennison (2016) both stated that Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar was one of the figures of the Almoravids to put the efforts to conquer the regions of West Africa or Bilad al-Sudan. Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar made Azukki (Azougui) his administrative capital. Flanking him during his rule were a number of Maliki ulema such as Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Muradi al-Hadrami who became his advisor.

Ibn Khaldun (2001) and al-Zuhri (2008) in their written works stated that the Almoravid movement led by Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar succeeded in seizing Ghana, noting that the residents of Ghana had been under Islamisation process since the time of Yahya ibn Abu Bakr. Davidson (1985), however, wrote that the Almoravids under Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar did not dominate the whole of Ghana. Nonetheless, they managed to take control of the administrative centre and a few territories only. The capital of the Kingdom of Ghana, Kumbi Saleh was finally captured by Abu Bakr circa 469AH/1076AD. The Almoravid reign over Kumbi Saleh and several territories of the Kingdom of Ghana faced opposition from the local residents. In fact, Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar himself was said to be killed in his quest to quell the local uprising in 480AH/1087AD (Asante 2019).

Conclusion:-

The process of territorial expansion carried out by the Almoravid kingdom had tremendous implications to the region of al-Maghrib and the Sudan. Among them was the unification of major cities of importance in the region of al-Maghrib under a single rule. In fact, military campaigns by the Almoravids also managed to obliterate the deviant teachings of Khawarij while at the same time secure the Maliki school of thoughts a place in al-Maghrib. Military operations in the Bilad al-Sudan led to the demise of the Kingdom of Ghana. The fall of Ghanaian kingdom paved a way to the rise of Islamic rules in the territories of Bilad al-Sudan such as that of the Kingdom of Mali.

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