

INFLUENCE OF ISLAM ON AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate the influence of Islam's culture on African culture. Islam was introduced to the African continent as early as the 7th century. Islam is not just a religion but rather a comprehensive way of life. The people of Africa embraced Islam due to the superiority of its culture to African culture. They embraced Islam because it is a religion of peace, religion of monotheism and literacy that enabled rulers to build larger kingdoms and empires. Islam promoted a more efficient administration in some of the states of Western Sudan since it enabled the rulers to employ educated Muslims as secretaries, judges, administrators and diplomats. The rulers of Western Sudan established strong diplomatic relations with other Muslim rulers abroad as Mansa Musa and Idris Alooma did. The paper also explains the twin concept of Islamic culture and African culture and then proffers some recommendations. Some of the recommendations are that African Muslims should endeavour to maintain the culture of Islam without allowing the African culture to adversely affect their practice of Islam. They should shun tribalism and racial discrimination, but rather embrace the Islamic brotherhood which is all-encompassing and beneficial all.

Keywords: *African Culture, Islamic Brotherhood, Islamic Culture.*

Introduction

Africa is one of the most interesting and diverse continents on the surface of earth. It is the home of an incredible variety of people, animals, climates and spectacular places. It is a country famous for its beautiful colourful clothing, incredible works of arts, rich in culture and civilization. Africa is the home of the world's first great civilization, Egypt which dates back to 3300 B.C. The longest river in the world, the Nile; the world's largest desert, the Sahara; Victoria Falls, Kilimanjaro Mountain and Madagascar Island are some of its wonderful features.

The African continent has the second largest population in the world about one billion people, speaking over one thousand languages. The religion which has the largest population in Africa, is Islam, followed by Christianity. Africa was the first continent that Islam spread to from Arabia in the early 7th century.

According to Rahim (1987), the persecution of the Quraysh made Prophet Muhammad take a momentous decision to save the new Muslims from the inhuman treatment of idolaters. He sent in the fifth year of his mission, 615 C.E a batch of sixteen Muslims, men and women, to seek asylum in Abyssinia. The Abyssinia Emperor, Negus warmly received those emigrants to his country. Abyssinia at that time is the present Ethiopia of Africa. When Islam was introduced to Africa, it came with its own culture which it eventually impacted on the African culture. Almost one-third of the world's Muslim population resides today in the continent. Islam has a large presence in North Africa, West Africa, the horn of Africa, the Southeast and among the minority but significant immigrant population in South Africa.

Concept of Islamic culture

Hornby (2010) defines culture as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group”. According to the Wikipedia, culture is “the means by which a people express itself through language, traditional wisdom, politics, religion, architecture, music, tools, greetings, symbols, festivals, ethics, values and collective identity”. Invariably, Islamic culture refers to cultural practices common to historically Islamic people. The early forms of Islamic culture from the Orthodox Caliphate to early Umayyad period were predominantly Arabian, Byzantine, Persian and Levantine.

With the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire, Islamic culture has influenced and assimilated much from the Persian, Egyptian, Caucasian, Turkic, Mongol, South Asian, Malay, Somali, Berber, Indonesian and Moro cultures. Islamic culture generally includes all the practices which have developed around the religion of Islam. There are variations in the application of Islamic beliefs in different cultures and traditions.

Islamic culture includes the language of the Muslims especially Arabic. Islamic culture is varied in forms. For instance, Islamic architecture is part of Islamic culture. It is the range of architectural styles of buildings associated with Islam. It encompasses both secular and religious styles from the early history of Islam to the present day. Richard (1965) established that early Islamic architecture was influenced by Roman, Byzantine, Persian and other lands which the Muslims conquered in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Banister (n.d.) also buttressed this point in his book titled: *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. Further East, it was also influenced by Chinese and Indian architecture as Islam spread to the Southeast Asia. Later, it developed distinct characteristics in the form of buildings and decoration of surfaces with Islamic calligraphy and geometric interlace patterned ornament. The principal Islamic architectural types for large and public buildings are the mosque, the tomb, the palace and the fort.

Many Muslims are very familiar to poetry. The classic heartland of Islam is Arabia as well as other parts of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. Because Islam is a multi-cultural religion, the poetical expression of its adherents is diverse. For instance, the Sufis, brotherhoods of Muslim mystics spread their poetry far and wide. Other poetry include Arabic classical poetry, religious poetry in Iran, Hindustani classical poetry, Qawwali poetry etc.

Islamic culture includes Islamic naming ceremony, Islamic marriage, Islamic funeral services, Islamic etiquette and diet. This includes greeting others with the statement: *As-Salam alaykum* (Peace be unto you.), saying: Bismillah (In the name of God.) before meals and using only the right hand for eating and drinking. Islamic hygienic practices mainly fall into the category of personal cleanliness and health. Circumcision of male offspring is also practiced in Islam. Islamic burial rituals include performing Salat al-Janazah (Funeral Prayer) over the bathed and enshrouded body and burying it. Muslims are restricted in their diet.

Prohibited foods include pork products, blood, carrion and alcohol. The meat must come from herbivorous animal slaughtered with the name of God by a Muslim, Jew or Christian with the exception of game that one has hunted or fished for oneself. Food permissible for Muslims is known as *halal* food.

Many forms of poetic arts are practiced in Muslim culture, both in religious and secular contexts such as folk and tribal dances, court dances, dances of celebration during weddings and festivals etc.

Concept of African Culture

African culture is expressed in its arts and crafts, folklore and religion, clothing, cuisine, dance, music and languages. It is a product of the diverse populations that today inhabit the continent of Africa. Africa is a home of different tribes and races speaking various languages and dialects. Likewise, their cultures are diverse. Africa is very rich in culture. Egypt where civilization began in the world, is in Africa.

Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Africans were traditional worshippers, worshipping different idols and gods. They believed in one Supreme Being called God. God is called different names known in different languages of the different tribes constituting the African people. In Africa, each people has a local name for God. Invariably, there are other names besides the principal name. According to Idowu (1991), “emphatically, the name for the Supreme Deity is uniquely His, and no part of it is shared by any other being”. Idowu made his statement clear when he said that where the divinities share the basic generic name with Deity, it only serves to emphasize the fact that the divinities derive their being and nature from Him .

Adeoye (1979) established that Yoruba people, a principal tribe in Nigeria, are very cultured, brave, enterprising and organized. According to him, Yoruba people are typical African people, and they are civilized; even before the advent of Islam and Christianity. Their traditions and customs are unique. Some of the African countries who are also rich in culture include Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Republic of Zaire, United Republic of Tanzania, Senegal and Kenya.

African people are very enterprising and brave. They engage in different occupations, arts and crafts such as farming, fishing, sculpture, pottery, painting, wicker-work, architecture, weaving, hunting, trading etc. to get their livelihood. African women too, are not left out to make their own contribution to the economy. Apart from taking care of home and being responsible for proper children up-bringing, they also engage in dyeing clothes, hair plaiting, pot making, trading etc.

Many African states are organized and civilized. Both men and women cooperate to build and administer their states. Many African towns and cities had kings and chiefs for proper administration of their kingdoms and empires even before the advent of the white people who came to colonize them e.g. Oyo Empire, Ghana Empire, Shongai Empire, Borno Empire, Mali Empire etc. African people are cultured. Before and after the advent of Islam and Christianity, they engage in naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, funeral ceremony, festivals, different types of greetings etc. Their customs and traditions are varied.

Bokongo (1976) established that in pre-colonial Africa, art possessed a purely utilitarian character; an object that was made had to serve some need of daily life. This leads to another fundamental aspect of traditional African art – the influence of the spiritual. Carver or dancer, painter or singer, the African artist works for a primarily ritual purpose. His art is bound to his beliefs and religion, and from there he draws all his strength. After fashioning an ancestor-image, a chief's staff, a drum or some other object of use in practical life, the artisan seeks to decorate it in order to beautify it and make it attractive to the eye and heart, and thus artist and artisan become one and the same.

Islam's Influence on African Culture

Islam had a great impact on the people and states of Africa. Islam is not just a religion or a mass of doctrines or beliefs and rituals, but rather a complete way of life and a civilization. Abdul (1976) defined Islam as “a religion of peace; it means peace; and it enjoins peaceful co-existence among different creatures”. To make peace with God, one has to give absolute

submission to His will; and to make peace with man, one has to do good and behave well always, and do to others as one would want them to do to one.

Islam cuts across family, clan and ethnic ties and loyalties and it emphasizes unity and brotherhood. It enabled rulers to build larger kingdoms and empires embracing different peoples and linguistic groups. For instance, many of the rulers of Western Sudan such as Mansa Musa of Mali, Askia Muhammad the Great of Songhai and Idris Alooma of Borno did attempt to use Islam to generate a feeling of unity and as a basis of their authority.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to mention and explain some aspects where Islam impacted on African culture:

(a) Administration:

Most of the Muslim rulers of Western Sudan adopted the Muslim system of justice and taxation. Thus, Islam promoted a more efficient administration in some of the states of Western Sudan since it enabled the rulers to employ educated Muslims as secretaries, administrators, judges and diplomats, and also to engage in correspondences with provincial rulers and administrators. It is significant that even non-Muslim rulers such as those of Ancient Ghana before the 11th century employed some Muslims in their administration.

(b) Establishment of Diplomatic Relations:

The rulers of Western Sudan established strong diplomatic relations with other Muslim rulers abroad as Mansa Musa and Idris Alooma did with those of Egypt and Tunis respectively. Other diplomatic relations were with the Ottoman Empire and Andalus in Southern Spain. This diplomatic relationships exist till today.

(c) Army:

The holy pilgrimage to Makkah brought pilgrims into contact with technology and scholarship at the centre of the Muslim world which were often adopted and introduced when the pilgrims returned home. For instance, Idris Alooma of Borno brought back from his pilgrimage musketeers and Turkish military instructors and created musketeer corps in his army which enabled him to extend the frontiers of his state relatively with ease.

(d) Religious Effects of Pilgrimage to Makkah:

The holy pilgrimage (Hajj) contributed in many ways to the growth and strength of some of the states. The Muslims who embarked on the holy pilgrimage became *Al-Hajj*, and more importantly earned the spiritual power which a pious pilgrim acquired during the *hajj* period. This power was of great importance especially for the rulers, since it greatly increased their reputation and religious standing among their subjects.

(e) The Pillars of Islam:

There was the replacement of the worship of the traditional gods with the worship of one God called Allahu. Converts seriously observed the five pillars of Islam, namely: the belief in only one God, upholding five daily obligatory prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, payment of Zakat and embarking on holy pilgrimage to Makkah (Hajj).

(f) Social Effects of Islamic Literacy:

Islam introduced literacy as well as Islamic education into West Africa. Great scholars were produced. Literacy made it possible for scholars to preserve the history and oral traditions of some of the states in books. Through literacy, people in Africa had access to the valuable Islamic literature, sciences and philosophy which broadened their knowledge and widened their horizon.

(g) Establishment of Schools:

As Islam continued to spread in West Africa, schools and educational centres were established in large towns and cities of Western Sudan. Such towns include Jenne, Timbuktu, Gao and Katsina. Consequently, great scholars were produced in Western Sudanese states and West Africa as a whole. Notable among them were: Mahmud Kati (1468 – 1593) a Soninke scholar who wrote the *Tarikh al-Fettash* (The Chronicle of the Seeker). The second author was Abdur-Rahman as-Sadi, a government secretary and diplomat who wrote the *Tarikh al-Sudan* (The Chronicle of Sudan). The third one was Ahmad Baba, the author of fifty works on law and a biographical dictionary. Thirteen of his writings were known. He was also the owner of an important library.

(h) Change in Culture:

There was a change in cultural life of the African people as a result of the introduction of Islam in Africa. Muslim wives of prominent men were required to live in purdah and to veil their faces whenever they went out. Men converts to Islam changed to wearing dresses like their Muslim brothers in other parts of the world. Many of them most especially scholars and elite who went on Hajj also put on turbans and Makkah wears.

Economic Effects of Architecture and Trade:

Islam helped in the introduction of burnt brick. For instance, Ibrahim As-Sadi designed a magnificent brick mosque in Gao, Timbuktu, and a stone palace in Mali for Mansa Musa. Islam promoted trade between West Africa and the Mediterranean. The religion developed and widened the trans-Saharan caravan trade. The trade enriched the West African and the Muslim traders. Muslims from North Africa came in their numbers and settled in the commercial centres. This helped in the development of cities such as Timbuktu, Kumbi Saleh, Gao, Jenne and Kano.

Abdul (1971) established that various teachings of Islam acted as a check to some laxity in the society. For example, the teachings such as obedience to parents, wife's obedience to her husband, abstention from fornication and adultery, alms-giving and Zakat and support of relatives, all these, apart from occupying a place in the African sense of virtue, also serve as a check to moral laxity in the community. After all, social harmony involves the stressing of positive virtues such as benevolence, humility, truthfulness, the care of the orphans and condemnation of envy, hatred, dishonesty and the like. These are part of the constant teachings of Islam to the community.

Clarke (n.d.) in his work: *West Africa and Islam*, quoted Al-Bakri describing the situation of Islam and its influence on the people of old Ghana Empire in 1067 – 1068 C.E when he wrote:

The capital of Ghana is made up of two towns, one of which is inhabited by the Muslims. This Muslim town is a big town with twelve mosques, one of which is for public prayers on Fridays... One finds there are also Muslim lawyers and academics... The other town, the royal town where Muslim delegations pray. The king chooses his interpreters, his treasurer and most of his Ministers from among the Muslims.

Another fact to show the influence of Islam on African culture was that many Africans became Muslims despite the fact that originally they were traditional worshippers. Abubakre (2004) established some historical facts to support the idea that many Yorubas had been Muslims before the Afonja's revolt at Ilorin in 1807. For instance, the alliance formed by Afonja with the Fulani, 'Alimi, was purely political. No records to show that Afonja was a Muslim but he obtained the support of Yoruba Muslims under Solagberu, who was of Kanuri extraction and then a Yoruba Muslim Chief at Oke Suna in Ilorin.

According to Abubakre, Muslim scholars settled down at Ibadan even during the reign of its first ruler, Oluyedun, who was the first son of Afonja. Scholars like Ahmad Qifu and Uthman bn Abu Bakr, a learned scholar from Katsina came to Ibadan during his reign and his successor, Oluyole. Johnson (1921) established that Muslim names also appeared in many places within the rank and file of the Yoruba princes, commanders and dignitaries of the 19th century Yorubaland. Yesufu (Yusuf) for example, was an uncle to Atiba, the first Alaafin of the new Oyo. The same Alaafin was also known to have had as a companion one Adekidero (Kanuri) and a Lemomu (corruption of Imam, leader at Muslim prayers). It may be deduced from foregoing that the first advance of Arabic and Islam to Yorubaland was through socio-political and commercial contact of the Yorubas with their Islamised Northern neighbours on the one hand, and through contact with emigrants and traders from various parts of Africa on the other hand. In the similar manner, Islam spread to other parts of Africa.

In Nigeria, especially in Yorubaland, there is evidence with regard to language to show that Islam has influence on African culture. The Yoruba language has been so much influenced by Arabic through heavy linguistic borrowings. An instance of this is illustrated in the literature of Ifa poetry, the theme of which is about Orunmila and al-Qadi (Yoruba: Alikaali), a judge of the *Shari`ah* court. In the poem, Alikaali (Al-Qadi) was an antagonist in conflict with Orunmila. A part of the poem is as follows as quoted by Abubakre (2004):

Igbanwo mejeeji o see gbe'ru sa'ja,
O dia fun alikaali, omo Aala.
The two elbows cannot lift a load to the ceiling,
Cast Ifa for Alikaali, the son of Allah.

It may be observed that the Arabic term for God – Allah appeared in the poem after it has gone the process of naturalization in Yoruba and it becomes Aala. Examples of such words borrowed from Arabic language are formed in the table below:

ARABIC	YORUBA	MEANING
Al-akhbar	Labari	News
Al-'adab	Ladabi	Etiquette
Na`ib	Naibi	Deputy
Al-qabr	Kabari	Grave
Halaka	Halaka	(He) perished
Al-barakah	Alubarika	Blessings
Al-basal	Alubosa	Onion
'Anfa`nii	Anfaani	Advantage (the entry for Arabic means it is of advantage to me).
Al-jinn	Alujannu	Jinn
Al-'ayb	Aleebu	Blame or shortcoming
Al-wudu`	Aluwaala	Ritual ablution
Wa`z	Waasi	Preaching
Al-`afiyah	Alaafia	Health
Hisab	Isabi	Arithmetic or divination through sand cutting
Tasbih	Tesubaha	Rosary
Waqt	Wakati	Hour or time

Conclusion:

The spread of Islam to Africa was not due to the use of force, but rather where the force was used by Jihadists, was defensive and for the purpose of reforms. The spread of Islam was by means of peaceful settlement of Muslim merchants and scholars in the urban centres. Traders exchanged articles of trade from North Africa like cloth, beads, utensils and the like for those of West Africa like gold, kolanuts and slaves. Some of the merchants and scholars settled along communicating lines. They also exchanged ideas, and in this way they passed their faith and Islamic culture to the natives who considered it superior to theirs. Islam with its impressive culture of prayers, fasting and ritual slaughter of animals, and above all, its holy book, the Qur'an and the *Hajj* (the holy Pilgrimage to Makkah) served as admiration to the local inhabitants.

Recommendations:

The study suggested the following recommendations to serve as solutions to the problems that might arise from the practice of mixing the Islamic culture with the African culture:

- *African Muslims should understand that Islam is a practical religion and a comprehensive way of life.
- *African Muslims should be educated in both Islamic education and Western education.
- *African Muslims should endeavour to maintain the culture of Islam.
- *African Muslims should practice Islam well and carefully without allowing the African culture to adversely affect their practice of Islam.
- *African Muslims should shun tribalism and racial discrimination. On the contrary, they should embrace the Islamic brotherhood which is all-encompassing.
- *African Muslims should be proud of their religion and learn to emulate their past leaders who had achieved and contributed much to Islam.
- *African Muslims should be dynamic and pragmatic. They should go about their businesses with the fear of Allah. They should be found active and productive in all fields of human endeavour such as politics, Islamic finance, security, education, art and craft, etc.
- *African Muslims should contribute meaningfully to the economy. Muslim graduates should not rely on white-collar jobs. They should set up micro-finance businesses like the people of Malaysia. Government and well-to-do people in the society should assist them financially. It is hoped that if these steps are taken, Africa could be better developed and benefits greatly from the contact and practice of Islam.

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