Communities of Western Sudan between Pagan Residues and Islamic Influences: from the Fifth to the Ninth Hijri Centuries

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Abstract

Western Sudan is a geographical area where pagan culture interacted with Islamic influences. These lands had significant relations with Muslims, especially with the Muslim Maghreb countries, which politically, economically, and socially affected Western Sudan. Tribal and familial structures constitute the basis of society in Western Sudan, through which Islamic influences were conveyed to power and the state as a whole. They served as the primary conduit for receiving these influences, leading to the alteration of most customs, traditions in attire, mentalities, behaviors, and other aspects of civilization. This change encompassed components of these families, starting from women, then children, and the rest of the family members, as well as other political, social, and cultural structures. It is noteworthy that this change, in its essence, has produced a Sudanese Muslim society blending African and Arab cultures, demonstrating advanced civilizational aspects.

Keywords: Western Sudan, Islamic influences, tribal and familial structures, cultural blending, advanced civilization.

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Introduction

Muslims and pagans lived side by side in the same space within the Western Sudan region. This reality facilitated the emergence of a distinct culture as a result of coexistence, allowing for a unique human and cultural encounter that reflected the spirit of harmony, concordance, and fusion among its seemingly contradictory components. This led to the formation of a society bearing the characteristics of its civilization resulting from the interaction of Arab, Islamic, and African cultures. The question that arises is to what extent Islam and Muslims contributed to the cultural transformation of Western Sudanese society, and the degrees of change brought about by Islam in pagan societies in those areas.

1. Paganism and Islam in the Territories of Ghana's Capital, Koumbi Saleh, and the Forest from the Second Century to the Fourth Century

The society of the Ghana Empire was primitive and pagan before the second century of the eighth millennium. As part of the Western Sudanese society, paganism and Magianism were the dominant beliefs in the state of Ghana, as affirmed by Al-Bakri, who stated, "They are the ones who practice their religion and beliefs there." This does not mean that Islam was not a belief in the empire, as

Islam existed in this empire from an early period. However, Muslims were a minority until Islam became the character of the state only after the conquest by the Almoravids. The historical facts confirm that this country was subjected to Islamic conquest since the time of Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri in 55 AH/672 CE (1), which was the Islamic expansion into the Arab Maghreb. Uqba ibn Nafi entered the Western Sudanese lands and conquered the territories of Takrur and Ghana (2), where human groups crossed the desert southward and settled among the region's peoples, forming important communities (3). Accordingly, we recall the army dispatched by the Umayyads to spread Islam in Ghana, where they settled permanently and were distinguished from the people of Sudan during Al-Bakri's era, as he wrote about them: "And in the land of Ghana, there are people called al-Hanayhin from the lineage of the army that the Umayyads rescued to Ghana in the early days of Islam..." (4)

The Kingdom of Ghana, whether in the two parts of its capital (the forest or Koumbi Saleh), during the geographical era of Abu Ubaid Allah Al-Bakri, lived under the influence of pagan traditions more than Islamic ones. The Soninke tribes referred to the Ghana Empire as the Kingdom of Wagadou, and the term "Wagadou" was the title given to each of their ancient kings. Al-Bakri called them "Tinkamennin," while the term "Oukar" was used for the country ruled by Tinkamennin (5). At the same time, the primary name of their chief deity was Wagadou Bida, the snake god who protected their tribes and guarded their treasures and wealth (6). However, the emergence of Islamic teachings in Koumbi Saleh signaled profound transformations across the entirety of Western Sudanese society. It is certain that the onset of Islam in the kingdom affected its urban residents, while rural areas remained largely untouched by Islamic influence, as attested by the Andalusian geographer Al-Bakri and others (7).

Religious and social transformations occurred throughout the Sudanese territories, with the Kingdom of Ghana serving as the historical gateway for this urban change in Western Sudan (8). In terms of religion, the Ghanaians, including the Mandinka tribal society with its Soninke elements from the Wolof and Takrur, were inherently pagan, like the majority of other African societies. Al-Bakri expressed this reality when he mentioned that the general population were pagans who worshiped "Dakakir." (9)

Paganism, as is well known, revolves around the veneration of forces in nature, such as venerating large trees, rivers, and animals. Africans believed these to be supernatural forces and sources of fear that must be acknowledged, or at least approached, in the belief that seeking their favor would provide protection against their potential dangers and ward off harm. Thus, sacred groves were established, serving as the locations for ceremonies and rituals of local religion and beliefs. These groves were places of sanctity surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery, guarded by priests day and night, with entry permitted only by special permission and for a single occasion throughout one's life. Even the king himself would enter the sacred grove only once, on the day of his coronation and ascension to the throne. The Soninke tribes believed that the supreme god, Wagadou Bida, lived in a sacred, dark cave within the forest (10).

The pagan society in the Kingdom of Ghana in Western Sudan revered the Great Snake and offered sacrifices to it annually in the form of girls. Here, Al-Bakri provides some observations in those lands, mentioning the common myth of a young man who attempted to save his fiancée

from this tragic fate, resulting in calamity befalling the city of Ghana. Al-Bakri adds in the same context that snakes celebrated the coronation of the new king by emerging from their lairs (11).

This snake, known among some people of Western Sudan as "Zafgu," was worshiped as a deity with a recognizable form, with its tail resembling the head of a lizard. It resided in a cave in Al-Mufazah, and at the mouth of the cave, the locals erected a tent and stones, making it their abode as a form of worship and reverence for the serpent. They hung garments and placed their belongings on the tent, abstaining from offering it food, clothing, or drink (12).

Al-Bakri describes the religious situation of the people of Jaw, referring to them as "Al-Bazarkanin." He states that their capital was divided into two parts: one inhabited by the king and the other by Muslims. Despite being a Muslim, their king from the Zagh lineage resided in the city of "Al-Kafar," dressing like the Sudanese in turbans and leather garments, according to each individual's capability. Among them, the non-Muslims worshiped "Dakakir" (idols). When the king sat down, drums were beaten, and women danced with enthusiasm. No one was allowed to move in the city until the king finished eating, then whatever remained of his food was thrown into the river while people shouted to inform others that he had finished his meal (13).

Islamic traces were found in the city of Sin, about four miles from the capital of Jaw, during recent excavations. These traces include several royal tombstones inscribed in Arabic, one of which reads, "Here lies the tomb of the king who upheld the religion of Allah and glorified it, Abi Abdullah Muhammad." The text adds that he died in the year 494 AH. This evidence indicates that Islam spread early in Jaw and its surroundings, leading to the spread of Islamic culture and Arab customs (14).

These were the prevailing rituals among the people of Western Sudan, forming part of the customs and traditions known before the introduction of Islam. Muslims had their own sector in the capital, equipped with mosques, imams, muezzins, jurists, and scholars. This Islamic part was more civilized than the pagan one, demonstrating the respect and status Muslims enjoyed in Ghana despite the pagan governance. The Muslim population grew to such an extent that they established their own lands (15). The Kingdom of Ghana, during the time of Al-Bakri, had extensive relations with Muslims and was prosperous. Its king was influential in the region and hired Muslims as scribes and officials due to their expertise and efficiency (16).

2. The Ruling Class in Western Sudan During the Pagan Era and Their Relations with Muslims

It is important to note that the societies of Sudan in general, and the Empire of Ghana in particular, were divided into two prominent classes: the affluent and privileged, residing in cities, especially Kumbi Saleh and the forest, and the needy, who were widespread in the rural areas. This division is justified by the term "Ghana," which is associated with wealth, money, and gold and is not linked to any tribe or other social significance related to lineage or belonging. Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between urban and rural residents, given the vast difference in lifestyle, including aspects of drinking, dressing, eating, housing, and traditions. Islam's influence in changing these life patterns, whether in terms of the extent, manner, or timing of change, must be considered. Al-Bakri provides many descriptions of the social life in Ghana during his visit in 1067, noting their

clothing of veils and leather among other items that varied with their wealth, and mentioned that only Muslims could become rulers of Gao (17).

In another context, Al-Bakri describes the King of Ghana in his assembly and the procession that surrounds and accompanies him in his outings: "The king, while in his procession, was adorned with earrings and necklaces and wore embroidered hats imported from the Maghreb. The sons of princes and kings, residing in the palace as hostages, ensured the king's allegiance from the provinces. The guards surrounded the king in a large tent, guarded by dogs adorned with jewels. In a tent, the king listened to the system of the people (18)." The notables who enjoyed favor in the royal court wore luxurious clothes decorated with gold, whereas the princes each had their linen placed between their shoulders. As for the jurists, they wore turbans, leaving a part of them hanging on their backs. To indicate the category of notables and who they are, Al-Bakri notes that this category included provincial governors and tribal leaders whom the king relied upon in his reign (19)(20).

The sultan in Western Sudan during the Mali Kingdom era wore a gold hat secured with a gold band that had edges like thin knives, its length more than a span, and his most worn garment was a red, furry robe. He also wore a uniquely tailored, large pair of trousers that no one else wore, marking his exclusivity (21). Al-Bakri touches on some of the Ghanaian societal customs and traditions, including dress codes, saying: "None but the king, his heir, and his nephew wore stitched garments (22). The king adorned himself with women's jewelry on the neck and arms and wore cotton turbans over his gilded helmets." (23)

Regarding the special funeral traditions for burying the king, which the Ghanaian pagan society followed, they would build a great dome of saba wood at the site of his grave. They brought the king's body on his bed into this dome, burying it with his jewelry, weapons, and vessels for eating and drinking, filled with his favorite foods and drinks. Then, they placed inside the dome the men who served him in life, in his food and drink, closing the door of the dome on them, and placed possessions and armaments above the dome. The people then gathered and buried the dome under the earth until it rose like mountains, then they slaughtered sacrifices for the deceased and offered them along with liquors.

An important aspect that cannot be overlooked is that the rulers of Ghana were known for their great tolerance, justice, and respect for Muslims. The king of Ghana allowed meetings with Muslims and sitting with them, and he permitted them to greet him by clapping their hands, unlike the rest of his people of his religion who, upon seeing him and being close to him, would kneel on their knees and throw dirt on their heads. The prominent Islamic features in Ghana's history during the pagan governance were due to the Muslims' abundance, importance, and culture, whether they were native Soninke or immigrants from the Maghreb, Arabs, and Berbers. They were clearly respected by the pagan kings. Al-Bakri mentioned that the king's translators and most of his ministers, as well as the keeper of his treasury, were Muslims. Furthermore, most of the king's soldiers were Muslims, which gave Islam an influence on political power. Muslims refrained from bowing before the king, in contrast to the pagans. In this regard, Al-Bakri said: "The king's coreligionists, when they drew near to him, would kneel on their knees and scatter dirt on their heads as their greeting. Whereas Muslims greeted him by clapping their hands." (24)

As a result of their integration with the Soninke rulers and their intermingling, which led to an acquaintance with the experiences and cultures of Muslims, they began to rely on them for managing their administrative affairs or as consultants. The pagan king found it appropriate to benefit from the Muslim minority in various matters, ranging from using them in tax collection to diplomatic affairs, including incorporating them into the ranks of the royal guard. They proved their worth due to their lack of local ties and their expertise, which was sometimes superior to that of the Sudanese, and at the very least, it became common for some pagan kings to adorn their courts with some Muslim men. Al-Bakri mentioned: "The king's translators were Muslims, as well as the keeper of his treasury and most of his ministers." (25)

Overall, Islam coexisted side by side with paganism in Ghana, but this did not stop Islam, which was advancing rapidly in the Ghana Empire until the Almoravid conquest. The masses turned towards Islam, and it became the hallmark of this empire. The year 469 AH/1076 CE was a decisive year in the history of Ghana; under the influence of the Almoravid movement, the inhabitants of Ghana, including the Soninke king and his court, converted to Islam, marking Ghana's political affiliation with the Islamic world (26).

3. Clothing and Some Social Customs of the People of Western Sudan Under Paganism and the Influence of Muslims on Them:

Regarding clothing and dress, it is noted that nudity was prevalent among the pagans in the Kingdom of Ghana before their conversion to Islam, with some walking naked "… and among their shameful acts is that a girl does not cover her private parts as long as she is a virgin, even if she reaches fifty years of age, she goes out without covering, and she remains so until she gets married…" Others covered their bodies with skins, but under the influence of the region and its subjugation to Islamic Arab influences, they began to imitate the newcomers in their attire. In the eras of the Mali and Songhai Islamic kingdoms, the people of Sudan wore cotton and embroidered clothes with bright colors, especially from the Islamic West and Egypt (27). Islam had a significant impact on the transformation of clothing forms, as clothing and its traditions in Western Sudan are among the social phenomena.

Little information has reached us about the clothing in the Takrur region, located in the far west of Western Sudan, adjacent to the homeland of the Sanhaja Jadala tribe in the south, but we mention it in the attire of the people of Takrur (28): they wore woolen jubbahs and placed woolen caps on their heads. In contrast, the clothing of kings and nobles was more evolved and luxurious, characterized by wearing cotton clothes and aprons. The people of Takrur also wore skins, and if someone was shy, they wore tanned leather. Meanwhile, the pagan nomads in Mali were naked and did not cover themselves, whereas Muslims covered their privates with bones or skins. The Islamic influence also appeared in the attire of the people of the Mali Kingdom through wearing turbans like the Arabs, predominantly white made from local cotton, as well as wearing jubbahs and darari' (long, loose garments) (29).

Travelers' books mention that the peoples of Western Sudan are characterized by the mixing of men and women, where a man is found with a woman in every place, as their men possess no jealousy, and their women are neither modest nor do they veil themselves from foreign men. Friends and companions, as well as men having female friends, would enter one's home to find his

wife with his friend without any objection. This mixing has led to the committing of indecencies and the spread of corruption among societal groups, leading to the professionalization of adultery, as Al-Bakri points out by saying, "Adultery among them is permissible." (30)

Magic was among the social ills and pagan behaviors widespread in Sudanese society, with the people of the Mali Kingdom believing in its effectiveness, which they thought could lead to a person's death. Often, they would take their disputes over it to their king, who would rule with retribution against the murderer, who was the sorcerer. It's astounding to see the profound influence of superstition, as most Negroes adhere to paganism and completely reject the Islamic creed, believing in charms and amulets (31). Indeed, all the people of these lands in these regions consider writing to be associated with magic and not part of the Prophet's tradition (peace be upon him) but rather the work of sorcerers (32).

An ancient tradition is their strong inclination towards joy, dancing, playing flutes, musical instruments, drums, and singing throughout the night. Men and women participate in dancing together, despite its prohibition in Islam, as it is one of their ancient traditions shared with newcomers. The poor among them walk in public places in the summer, barefoot and naked, covering their privates with a small loincloth. They also have a great inclination towards magic, marvels, and belief in myths, with some of their sorcerers claiming to know everything of the unseen through sand divination or jinn tales. Their sorcerers, as previously mentioned, dwell in the forest, light fires, and drink blood. Some groups are known for tattooing their faces and bodies, wearing bracelets and jewelry by men, and their belief in sorcery, superstitions, and divination. They adhere to tribal affiliation, sharing these traditions with Arab tribes. The rich and the luxurious in the city, who have servants, are accustomed to staying up late into the night, and it's common to find people sitting on sidewalks deep into the night. However, those engaged in work, like farmers and craftsmen, did not have enough time for such activities, as the night was their time for rest (33).

Al-Bakri makes another reference that highlights the clear difference between Muslims and pagans from Western Sudan in his discourse on the women of Oudghast, mentioning: "There, beautiful women of fair complexion and sturdy builds..." The Negroes formed only a minority of the population, as the inhabitants of Oudghast owned a considerable number of black slaves used for domestic service (34). Several geographers and travelers agree that the peoples of Western Sudan have dark skin and are scantily knowledgeable, living naked, men and women alike, some covering themselves with animal skins, including those of the plentiful tigers among them (35).

After the spread of Islam in the lands of Sudan, every individual became aware of their rights and duties, with women gaining numerous privileges and rights. They were expected to maintain their honor and chastity by avoiding flamboyance and being cautious of adultery and companionship, highlighting the extent of women's freedom under paganism. They lacked the sanctity and dignity granted by Islam, which elevated their status, regulating relations between them and men. As Islam calls for modesty, it also emphasizes cleanliness, making women equal to men. They began to dress elegantly after cleaning their clothes and bathing regularly, as Islamic law stresses purity, a foundation of the religion. In terms of women's work, they started contributing alongside their husbands and brothers in various fields, in a manner different from that in paganism, with work suited to their femininity and energy, varying by the region's nature. The clothing of most

inhabitants of Western Sudan included cotton, silk, and brocade garments of various types, with travelers' books recording that men shaved their beards, and women shaved their heads...(36)

Al-Bakri, writing at the time, specifically described aspects of life in Oudghast (37), where women were known to be skilled cooks, especially in making various sweets. Women also engaged in cooking, flour milling, cotton and wool sewing, and drawing water from wells (38).

In the Muslim kingdom of Mali, specifically during the reign of Mansa Sulayman in Timbuktu, the city's women wore hijabs, as was the case in other Islamic states (39). The concubines were adorned in beautiful clothes, with gold and silver headbands (40), including gold and silver keys, and their jewelry was made of brass, beads, and glass strings...(41)

The conversion of the people of Western Sudan to Islam was peaceful; they were not forced to abandon their pagan beliefs but instead underwent this religious transformation flexibly, influenced by their surrounding circumstances. Generally, they were not educated, and despite their adherence to prayer and the practice of Islamic rituals, old customs remained prevalent among them (42).

4. Family Ties Under Paganism and Islamic Influences

In the realm of paganism, kinship was based on an important objective: organizing the hierarchical structure of traditional family operations in Western Sudan, especially in social life. For example, the extended family, consisting of a man, his wife or wives, his dependent children, his married sons, their wives, and their children, lived in a compound, usually near courtyards of other similar families linked by kinship. They relied on patrilineal descent or kinship through the father, whereas some groups in Western Sudan, especially those in the forest regions, valued matrilineal descent, unlike the residents of Kumbi Saleh who recognized patrilineal descent. Regardless, the authority of the male family head was and remains strong in Western Sudan, both in organizing activities within the family circle and in the broader social life of the community.

The social organization in Western Sudan was based on other principles, such as age and degree of kinship, which evolved into class-based social systems based on the distinction among people according to their wealth. This evolution resulted from a person's familial position in terms of genealogical authenticity and belonging to a family engaged in religious rituals or political activity, rather than based on wealth or economic capacity. The political systems were built on respecting genealogical authenticity and familial status, organizing family life accordingly. On the other hand, religion in Western Sudan was influenced by family organization, with ancestor worship and the sanctification of forefathers' spirits becoming part of their ideological system, believing these practices protected them from all harm. Living family members strive to maintain harmonious and singular relations with the spirits of their ancestors through offerings and sacrifices to their protective forefathers (43).

In pagan Africa, it wasn't only the pagan states that treated the king as sacred; some of the renowned Islamic states shared this view (44).

Among the inherited traditions that remained prevalent was the veneration of their tribal elders and sultans, showing them extreme submission. They greeted their sultans with "tatreeb," meaning

one would place dirt on his head upon seeing the sultan as a salute. Al-Bakri noted, "And when the people of his religion approached him, they would kneel on their knees and scatter dirt on their heads."(45)

It's essential to recognize that the essence of Western Sudan's civilization is medieval, and its social organization does not materially differ from any other society of slaves or serfs. At the top of society sits the ruler, who is considered the Commander of the Faithful in Muslim Africa, and the king's persona is closely associated with magic (46).

When Islam stipulated the necessity of gender segregation, it also defined who is permissible or forbidden to marry. While pagan traditions broadened the circle of individuals prohibited for marriage—not only forbidding marriage between direct ascendants and descendants, who are closely related, but also extending the prohibition to include the clan to which the mother belongs—in such cases, it is not permissible for a man to marry a woman from his mother's clan (47).

In some Sudanese societies, women had the right to request a divorce if they felt they were not being treated equally with the other wives, a right that ensured men always considered their wives' rights. Some tribes in the Takrur region maintained some of their ancient customs, where women had equal rights to men in ending a marriage (48). Among the Kanuri, women had the right to end a marriage without consulting anyone (49). Naturally, this divorce custom contradicts Islamic law. However, the recent conversion of the region's inhabitants to Islam, the lack of deep penetration of its teachings, and their attachment to ancient pagan traditions led them to resort to this type of divorce (50), where a man did not have the right to demand his wife's obedience, unlike in other Islamic countries. The matter of children's lineage was significant for Sudanese women, with the transition of lineage from the mother to the father being a form of honor. This transition meant that fathers took on the responsibility of raising and supporting the children (51). Previously, a child carried their mother's name or her tribe's name; under Islam, a child's name is associated with their father's (52).

The residents of Gao city fought against adultery, believing it warranted punishment (53). They attributed their suffering at the hands of (Sonni Ali) (54) to the rape of a woman taken forcibly from her husband in 737 AH/1336 CE (55). They imposed the death penalty on adulterous women, executed by her brother rather than her husband if she was married, as her brother was responsible for avenging her in such cases. This phenomenon gradually disappeared with the spread of Islam in the region and the application of Islamic Sharia law to adulterers (56). Therefore, scholars attribute the entrance of Maghrebi into Songhai to the commitment of sins (57).

5. Trade Through Oudghast: A Window for the Transmission of Islamic Influences to the Pagan Kingdom of Ghana

It's noticeable that the customs and traditions of the Mali Kingdom's society varied and differed according to the environment in which they lived, whether desert or urban. For example, in the city of Oudghast, where trade activity prevailed, its people amassed enormous wealth that enabled them to live in ease and luxury and foster arts and civilization. Al-Bakri described (58) this, saying: "It has fine buildings and lofty homes."(59)

This is evident from the high standard of living and economic status of the people of Oudghast. Another indication of the luxurious life led by the inhabitants of Oudghast is their use of black people for domestic service in their homes. Al-Bakri mentioned this, stating (60): "There are skilled black female cooks who are sold for one hundred mithqals or more, proficient in making delicious foods from chicken and fruits, various sweets, and more." (61)

Trade Through Oudghast: A Gateway for Islamic Influences to the Pagan Kingdom of Ghana. It's important to note that Oudghast served as the primary portal for the introduction of Islamic influences into the Sudan region. Initially, it was the capital of the Sanhaja of the veil during the 4th century Hijri, later overtaken by the pagan Kingdom of Ghana. However, the veiled ones managed to reclaim it during the first Almoravid movement led by Sheikh Abdullah ibn Yasin. From there, waves of Almoravid preachers spread into the Sudan region. Its excellent location as a major trade station for desert caravans played a significant role in disseminating the ideas and cultures brought by traders, scholars, and students across the desert. Al-Bakri, contemporary to the Almoravid movement, described it as a bustling city inhabited by Arabs, Berbers, and Sudanese (62).

Oudghast was one of the first significant cultural centers playing a vital role in spreading Islam and Arabic culture in the Western Sudan region. Al-Bakri mentioned: "...it houses a grand mosque and many mosques full of Quran teachers...," indicating the existence of an Islamic teaching system and schools for children (63).

Given that trade was a crucial factor in the transfer of Islamic influences, Al-Bakri also notes Ghana's practice of trade, stating: "The people of Ghana not only learned trade but also practiced its arts and established tax and customs rules. For example, the government imposed a gold dinar tax on every donkey load of salt entering the city," highlighting Ghana's significant trading expertise (64). This facilitated the connection between the people of Maghreb and Western Sudan, especially the Kingdom of Ghana, through trade (65).

Social change in customs primarily came from Maghrebi traders, who played a significant role in sparking this transformation in Western Sudan. The Muslim trader, upon entering a pagan village, quickly attracted attention with his cleanliness, an appealing aspect of human nature. The practice of Islamic duties by traders, such as charity, prayer, and fasting, caught the Africans' attention. This strengthened the relationship between traders and their associates, creating an attraction and making them realize a divine power stronger than humans, prompting them to explore this power. Meanwhile, traders showed willingness and desire to share the benefits of this religion. Muslim traders left their wives in their homelands, taking wives in their new locations, making their home a significant Islamic service center for religion and treatment. This connection resulted in the settlement of Muslim traders in African cities, establishing their neighborhoods with schools and mosques for Quran teaching and building zawiyas to spread Islam. Some traders combined trade and teaching, enhancing commercial activity through Islam (66).

As traders frequented commercial centers in Western Sudan, they interacted with the Sudanese during their stays, influencing them. Some traders built schools and mosques, portraying the correct image of Islam to the Western Sudanese society and spreading the Arabic language, the language of the Quran, essential for anyone wishing to embrace Islam. The intermingling of

Muslims with the native population through marriage was among the most effective factors for successful influence, leading to social, mental, and behavioral transformations. Additionally, the rulers' policies played a significant role in spreading Islam, facilitated by their interaction with incoming traders, along with human migration from or to Sudanese lands, considered one of the main channels influencing society's behavior in all fields, urban or rural. Preachers also contributed to its widespread dissemination, evidenced by the abundance of mosques and scholars.

6. Islam and Civilizational Transformation in Western Sudan Society

Islam entered the Kingdom of Ghana in the latter half of the first century Hijri, and by the year 60 Hijri, twelve mosques were built in the city of Kumbi Saleh, the capital of Ghana, in the part inhabited by Muslims. The city had jurists, imams, scholars, and bearers of knowledge. The people of Ghana embraced Islam early during the Islamic conquest, including King Tunka Manin of Ghana, making Ghana a Muslim kingdom from that time, both governmentally and among its people (67). Thus, Ghana became one of the most important kingdoms in the Western Sudan region to fall under Islamic leadership, with its people embracing Islam (68).

In terms of the religious, social, and political influence Islam introduced, clear indications mentioned by Al-Bakri suggest the status and role of the Muslim community in governance and politics in the Kingdom of Ghana: "...In the city of the king, there is a mosque where Muslims who visit him pray, located near the king's council..." (69)

Al-Bakri notes that Islam's spread in Takrur dates back to the reign of their king, War Jabi ibn Rabis, and it seems reasonable that Islam had spread before War Jabi's era, as Islam had virtually encompassed the region. Takrur began jihadist movements from the beginning of the 5th century Hijri and allied with the Almoravids during their wars in the Sahara in 448 Hijri. They even joined Yusuf ibn Tashfin in Andalusia for jihad. Since the Takrur were early converts to Islam, even their kings, they extended Islam to the inner regions beyond the Kingdom of Ghana. They did not stop there; Al-Bakri mentioned that they also fought the polytheists within the borders of the Kingdom of Ghana, as King Saleh did (70).

The spread of Islam in Western Sudan during the 4th century Hijri/10th century CE represented the first cultural contact of this geographic space with the outside world. Maghebi traders played a role in spreading the message of Islam through their commercial voyages to the region. Then, the Almoravids contributed to establishing Islam during the 4th/5th - 10th/11th centuries, through conquests and sending preachers. Thus, Islam paved its way, initially to the tribes residing in the Senegal Basin from Takrur, promoting the call to Islam up to the Niger River, and later allied with the Fulbe tribes in the 17th century for spreading this call (71).

By the end of the 5th century Hijri, Muslims had established a distinct community in Gao, dividing the city into a Muslim section and a pagan section, as was the case in Kumbi Saleh, the Islamic capital of Ghana. Gradually, all of Gao converted to Islam, and it spread throughout the Songhai lands alongside the conquests undertaken by the Muslim kings of Songhai (72).

In addition to those influences, we also find them in the culturally flourishing city of Timbuktu, enriched by intellectual and civilizational currents from the Maghreb and Egypt, particularly between the 6th and 9th Hijri centuries. These influences provided political support for Islam

through their jihad, leading to the downfall of the Ghana Kingdom in 469 AH/1076 CE after it encountered the Almoravid call. Despite Muslims enjoying a prestigious economic and social status in the pagan State of Ghana, their efforts to spread Islam and Arab culture were limited or slow, lacking broader religious freedom until the Islamic Mali Kingdom era, which from its inception worked on supporting and spreading Islam. Additionally, the Qadiriyya order entered Western Sudan in the 9th century Hijri through migrants from the city of Tuat, who made the city of Walata their base, and then moved to Timbuktu. This helped spread Islam among the pagan tribes in Mali, especially after groups from Madar, Tripoli, Cairo, Fez, and Kairouan embraced Islam. Due to the scientific prosperity in Timbuktu, it became a magnet for scholars and jurists, and a source of pride for its inhabitants, with Timbuktu maintaining its cultural significance throughout the Mali and Songhai periods. Eminent scholars like Judge Mahmoud Kati, author of Tarikh al-Fattash, who proudly stated he was born in Timbuktu, emerged there (73).

Regarding the sultans influenced by Islamic customs, we outline some changes observed in the people of Western Sudan:

The Mali sultans celebrated Ramadan with wisdom, attended by the qadi, jurists, princes, and Laylat al-Qadr, which was greatly revered and glorified. On this night, money was distributed among the attendees, referred to as zakat. Ibn Battuta experienced Laylat al-Qadr during Ramadan 753 AH in the court of Mansa Sulayman, who gave him thirty-three and a third mithqals of gold (74).

A tradition among the ruling class in Mali was for the sultan to sit on "the bani" during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha after Asr prayer. The guards with unique weapons, part of the king's procession, would come, and "Douga," the interpreter, brought the guards and women, praising the sultan who then ordered the distribution of 200 mithqals of gold (75).

As an expression of the rulers' love for Islam and their influence by its teachings, the Mali sultans also declared their intense love for the Prophet's family and claimed noble lineage from them, starting from the mid-6th century Hijri. This phenomenon was widespread in the Maghreb and the East. For example, the ruler of Takrur claimed descent from Abdullah ibn Salih ibn Hasan ibn Ali ibn Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib (76).

Interestingly, despite inheriting Muslim customs, they remained attached to some of their ancient practices. One such tradition was that if someone sneezed in the king's assembly, they would be painfully beaten, with no one forgiven for such an act. If a sneeze caught someone off guard, they would prostrate on the ground and sneeze quietly so as not to be noticed. When the king sneezed, those present would strike their chests with their hands. Mansa Musa, while in Egypt, ate alone, a tradition of Mali kings (77).

During the reign of Mansa Sulayman, it was customary to swear by his name. When summoned by him, the summoned individual would remove his clothes, don worn garments, remove his turban, make his clothes dirty, and enter, striking the ground hard with his elbow. When speaking to the sultan and receiving a response, he would uncover his back, throw dirt on his head and back as one does when washing with water (78).

Islam inherited customs and traditions related to the general society in the Mali Kingdom due to their adherence to the Islamic faith. They were keen on performing all Sharia rulings from the Quran and Sunnah, evident in their readiness to perform Friday prayers, wearing clean white clothes, and if one did not have a new shirt, he washed and cleaned his and attended Friday prayers (79). They were diligent in praying on time, as taught in the early days of Islam's spread in the region, becoming strict in applying some of its rulings. For example, punishment for missing the congregational prayer was twenty lashes, and missing one Rak'ah was five lashes, a tradition inherited from Abdullah bin Yasin (80).

In memorizing the Quran, they were strict with their children, applying constraints if they fell short, not releasing them until they memorized it. Ibn Battuta recounts entering the qadi's house on Eid to find his children bound, asking if he would release them, to which he replied he would not until they memorized the Quran (81).

Islam was present in the Kingdom of Ghana, exerting a strong influence on various aspects, making us categorize this kingdom within the Islamic sphere of influence in Western Sudan. The Ghanaians recognized the cultural superiority of Arab Muslims, requesting their participation in governance with their extensive expertise (82). Al-Bakri tells us that many of the king's ministers were Muslims, introducing a system of in-kind taxes on exported and imported goods due to the absence of minted currency (83).

The use of Sudan as a stronghold for magic was so widespread that myths circulated about the Pharaohs obtaining their sorcerers from Gao. Contact with Islam led to a reduction in magical practices rather than their elimination because embracing Islam was more of a social than a religious indicator, serving as a means to gain status and value. For rulers of Sudan, embracing Islam was hoped to integrate them into the Muslim community (84). Muslims in Ghana organized financial matters due to their expertise and the trust the pagan king felt towards them. Once the kings converted to Islam, they adopted Islamic traditions that required the ruler to patrol the city streets to personally oversee the affairs of his kingdom. Among other practices, Islam ended tribal conflicts among the populace and tribes that embraced it (85).

Throughout various stages, Muslim traders represented a link between Western Sudan and Islamic nations, with their movement being active and starting early due to the long distances they traveled and the goods they sold. This highlights the esteemed status of traders known for their noble character, good dealings, extensive knowledge, and genuine Islam. Moreover, the geographical proximity between the Maghreb and Western Sudan naturally affected the relations between the two regions due to their mingling (86). Maghrebi traders frequented various commercial centers in Western Sudan, such as Walata, Gao, Timbuktu, among others, interacting with the Sudanese during their stays. This led to the spread of Islam and its influence on the Sudanese, with some traders constructing schools and mosques. They embodied the image of Islam in Western Sudan and spread the Arabic language, the language of the Quran, prompting new Muslims to eagerly learn it for understanding the Quran and its sciences. Furthermore, the mixing of Muslims with the indigenous population through marriage facilitated the spread of Islam and influenced the lifestyle, mentality, and behaviors of those societies, transitioning them from primitive life to a more refined existence, enhancing the African identity on multiple levels. The policies of Western Sudanese rulers also played a significant role in spreading Islam due to their interaction with

incoming traders, in addition to the impact of human migration from within Sudan or group migrations, considered among the most important channels for spreading Islam in rural and urban areas. Preachers also contributed to its spread, evidenced by the abundance of mosques, scholars, and jurists, with Oudghast being one of the significant cultural centers that played a major role in spreading Islam and Arabic culture in the Sudan region. Al-Bakri described it as having "many populated mosques with Quran teachers, the Sunnah, and Islamic teachings, and numerous schools for children's education." (87)

The Songhai Kingdom was among the most important kingdoms to embrace Islam in West Africa, especially when the Askia assumed power, transforming some cities into scientific centers. Scholars played a significant role in spreading Arabic Islamic culture through mosques, schools, and royal scientific councils. These centers were distinguished by their educational curricula, study materials, degrees, and diplomas awarded to students of knowledge, leading to the proliferation of books and libraries, significantly impacting the spread of Arabic Islamic culture (88). The cultural life in Western Sudan, truly centered around Timbuktu, was the heart of the active intellectual movement in the region, whose scientific radiance reached Kanem, Senegal, Niger, due to the influx of scholars and traders from Arabs, Maghrebis, Andalusians, Egyptians, Ghadames, Tripolitans, and others from North Africa and contemporary Islamic countries. Scholars found encouragement from the people of Timbuktu and its kings, who generously supported them, leading to the development of a scientific and literary movement unparalleled in Western Sudan, with the cultural life in Timbuktu flourishing, influenced by intellectual and civilizational currents from the Maghreb and Egypt (89).

When Timbuktu became a significant stronghold of Islam in Western Sudan and a beacon of knowledge and culture, its scholars and jurists played a crucial role in the jihad for the sake of Allah, allowing Islam to spread among the pagan tribes. The mosques of Timbuktu held a religious and scholarly place in people's hearts, establishing its spiritual status in Western Sudan and making it the capital of the region. Timbuktu thrived culturally, commercially, and became a hub for scientific, cultural, and religious prominence (90). It played a notable cultural role, becoming a destination for scholars and students who came from within and outside the city, making it a unique scientific center in the region at the time. It was also famed for its prestigious university, producing scholars who led in various fields of knowledge (91).

The establishment movement for schools, mosques, and institutes in the city of Gao saw rulers and the wealthy endow many waqfs (charitable endowments) to mosques and imams. The cultural activity in Gao included holding scientific councils, particularly for Quranic interpretation and Hadith. The marketplace in Gao offered books among its goods, supported by a large number of scribes, with libraries playing a vital role in the scientific activity (92), reflecting the intellectual trends and cultural level of that era. Among the notable scholars who resided in Gao was Imam Al-Maghili, who traveled to the land of Takrur, engaging in teaching and authoring works. Gao, like Jenne, became one of the key scientific centers in Western Sudan, with its inhabitants and king, named Kanbur, embracing Islam in the 6th century Hijri/12th century CE. Kanbur's conversion, alongside 4,200 scholars, led to the transformation of the royal palace into a mosque dedicated to Allah and another residence for him next to the mosque. Following Islam's spread, Jenne became known for its flourishing markets of knowledge and became a destination for people

from everywhere, as mentioned by Al-Saadi, who noted the influx of scholars and righteous individuals from various tribes and lands, leading to the construction of mosques and accommodations for students, generously supported by the community and its kings, making Jenne a significant cultural center after Timbuktu (93).

Conclusion

Our study on the spread of Islam and its role in political, social, and cultural transformations in Western Sudanese societies has led to several key findings and conclusions:

- The adoption of Islam by rulers in Western Sudan through Muslim preachers expanded its reach among the populace, thereby broadening its influence in the region. As a result, the call to Islam reached all societal segments, whether ruling or governed, making Islam a part of the civilization's aspects in the kingdoms of Western Sudan. Al-Bakri mentioned the king was influential to Muslims, with a mosque in his city for visiting Muslims.

- The spread of Islam in Western Sudan led to the emergence of Islamic kingdoms and empires. Given that trade was a fundamental support for Islam through trade routes and caravans, which were lifelines for Western Sudan, Islamic influence, represented by the Maghrebies in the Ghana Empire, surrounded themselves with ministers and advisors from Muslims, followed by the Islamic Empire of Mali, as Maghrebies brought Islam to ancient Ghana.

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