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Origins of the Islamic Scholarly Tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa

The growth of literacy in Arabic and *ajami* in sub-Saharan Africa is closely linked to the expansion of Islam and the trans-Saharan trade, which was the main vector of Islamic expansion. Islam began to penetrate West Africa in the ninth century. But it was around the eleventh century that the elites of many urban chiefdoms and empires in West African Sahel became Islamized through contact with North African and Saharan traders (Hunwick 1997:5; Triaud 1998:10 and 6, Hiskett 1985:19-42).

The growth of the trans-Saharan trade and the expansion of Islam brought about a transformation of the West African societies that were subjected to their influence. The process was reinforced by a new form of state that developed in West Africa from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. It was described by Bathily (1994:44-51) as the military-merchant state. In contrast to stateless societies (Horton 1985:911 et seq., 113 et seq.) which were based on agriculture and, to a lesser extent, on livestock, and the traditional African state based on agricultural, pastoral and agro-pastoral activities, the political economy of the military-merchant state was based mainly on the tertiary sector (Bathily 1994:44) and its expansion was a critical period in the growth of literacy in Arabic. The military-merchant state was dominated by three types of elite: military, commercial and religious, each of which carried out a vital function for its development. The military aristocracy, often originating from the political elite of the old traditional states, specialized in weaponry and was responsible for security. The commercial elite, which operated along the trans-Saharan trade routes and kept constant contact with the great commercial and cultural centres of North Africa – in Qayrawan, Gadames, Tripoli – produced the wealth necessary for the development of the state. The religious elite ensured its legitimization, while taking over the production, reproduction and distribution of spiritual goods.

Gradually, in various ways and through the action of different groups, a tradition of learning developed. Five groups played an important role in its development: the Sanhaja Berbers, the Djula Wangara, the Ineslemen Zawaya, the Fulani and the Shurafa (Hiskett 1985:44 et seq.).

The Sanhaja Berbers

Superficially Islamized up until the eleventh century, the Sanhaja Berbers became rooted in 'Islamic orthodoxy' by adopting the Maliki school of law spread by the Almoravid reform movement led by one of them, 'Abdallah b. Yasin, who died in 1059. A deformation of the Arab *al-murabit* (plural *al-murabitun*), which finally acquired the meaning of a Muslim militant or reformer, the derived Almoravid word is *ribat*, which gives the idea of a centre of teaching and propaganda. The Arabs had created a large number of *ribat*, from which they pursued the holy war against the Byzantines and the Berbers (Hiskett 1985:7). During the eleventh century, the Almoravid movement split into two wings: the northern wing which conquered North Africa and part of Andalusia and a southern wing that invaded a large part of the Sahara. The Sanhaja Berbers, who supplied most of the troops of the Almoravid movement, were the principal messengers and teachers of medieval Islam in Africa. Ardent proselytizers, they contributed, also in the post-Almoravid period, to the dissemination of Islam and Maliki jurisprudence in the regions of the Sahara and Western Sudan. Many sources show the intellectual influence of the Sanhaja Berbers in the medieval Saharan towns of Walata, Takedda and Timbuktu. The intellectual development of Timbuktu, and notably the establishment of the Sankoré College, is credited to Sanhaja Berber scholars (Hunwick 1997:7).

The Djula Wangara

Another group that is known for having contributed to the spread of the Arab intellectual tradition is called Wangara in the central Sudan, and Jakhanke in Senegambia (Last 1885:2). Current historians locate Wangaraland in the upper basin of the Senegal and Niger rivers. The first mention of this country in the written sources on the history of West Africa was made by Al-Idrissi in the twelfth century, who described it as an Eldorado (Al-Hajj 1968:1). The Djula, who were mainly trading communities were Islamized before the non-trading groups (Hiskett 1985:45). Among them sprang up literary groups. During the sixteenth century, the decline of the Mali empire, which was torn by dynastic struggles, caused large numbers of the population to move towards the central Sudan. Seeking a more secure way of life, but also inspired by their proselytization and teaching vocation, the Djula Wangara also moved towards the Central Sudan. An anonymous chronicle dated 1650, discovered in Nigeria by the Sudanese

historian M. A. al-Hajj, reports the massive entry of Wangara missionaries into Kano in the middle of the seventeenth century. Very soon, the Wangara had made a decisive contribution to the Islamization of Kano. When they arrived in Kano under the leadership of Abdarrahaman Zagaité, the situation of Islam was similar to that of most of the Saharan and Sahelian kingdoms and urban centres: it was only practised by the political and commercial elites who traded with the Arabs.

The Wangara missionaries succeeded, in spite of strong opposition from the population who were mostly pagan, to have *imams* and *qadis* appointed (Al-Hajj 1968:2). The Wangara also set up an Islamic educational system identical to that practised elsewhere in the Muslim world. The Madabo mosque which was established in Kano in the sixteenth century became a college in the medieval sense of the term, attracting teachers and students from the Central Sudan (Uba Adamu n.d.:3). The Wangara made two major contributions to sub-Saharan Islam. On the one hand, they strove to spread Maliki jurisprudence in the region (following the example of the Sanhaja Berbers), mainly through the teaching of the two fundamental Maliki texts: the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil and the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (see Annexure). On the other hand they introduced the first Sufi influences that were inspired by the Qadiriyya. As Sufism and the Maliki school of law are two fundamental characteristics of Islam in West Africa, the impact of the Wangara on this Islam was far from negligible.

The Zawaya

The contribution of the Zawaya to the spread of Islamic knowledge was also decisive. These tribes, of whom Abdel Weddoud Ould Cheikh (1985:51-59) listed more than a hundred in Mauritania alone, are different from warrior Berber tribes in that they specialized in religious activities and the transmission of knowledge. In the libraries and collections of manuscripts in the region (Kane 1994), there is a large number of works by all kinds of Zawaya authors. Their intellectual influence on the Western Sudan is reflected by the popularity of their Islamic teaching. Many Islamic teaching centres in West Africa call on members of the Zawaya tribes to teach the Koran. The other aspect of their intellectual influence in sub-Saharan Africa is the introduction of Sufism. The Zawaya tribes initiated black Africans to the two dominant Sufi brotherhoods of sub-Saharan Africa, the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya. Most chains of transmission of the Tijaniyya can be traced to Muhammad al-Hafiz (1759/60-1830) and his tribe, the Idaw^cali, while those of the Qadiriyya go back mostly to the Kunta, another maraboutic tribe whose two most important figures, Shaykh Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti al-Kabir (1729-1811) and his son Sidi Muhammad (who died in 1826), were the authors of numerous works.

The Fulbe

Known as the Fulani by the Hausa of the Northern Region of Nigeria, Peul by the French and Fellata in Borno and Nilotic Sudan (Hunwick 1997:14), the Fulbe have also played an important role in propagating Islam and spreading literacy in Arabic and *ajami*. One of the largest linguistic groups in black Africa, they are to be found everywhere in the Sudano-Sahalien belt. They originated from the Senegal River Valley and speak a language belonging to the Niger-Congo group. Between the eleventh and the nineteenth century, they spread throughout the whole West African Savannah (Horton 1985:113). The Fulbe are now present from Senegal to Nilotic Sudan and there is a strong concentration of them in northern Nigeria. Although they converted to Islam after the Wangara, they became no less ardent proselytizers and teachers. As from the fifteenth century, many Fulbe specialized in scholarship, leading movements of religious reform in the western and central Sudan and creating theocratic states.

The Shurafa

The word *Shurafa* is the plural of *sharif*, which means noble in Arabic. In the Islamic tradition, the term refers to the descendants of the Prophet. There are many groups in the Muslim world who claim this title but it has been difficult to authenticate their claims because of the 'principle of genealogical sophistication'. This consists, for the groups having acquired a reputation for knowledge, piety and holiness, of trying to consolidate this reputation by claiming an Arab or *sharifian* descent. Many who make such claims are scholars. However, unlike ulama whose legitimacy rests on the sole knowledge of texts, the legitimacy of *shurafa* is based basically on the assumption that their Sharifian origin gives them supernatural powers to harm their adversaries, to cure the sick, to predict the future and to bestow good luck and happiness on those who venerate them.

These five groups have contributed decisively to the Islamic scholarly tradition in black Africa. The Arabophones, like the Zawaya, have written essentially in Arabic, while the others wrote in Arabic and in *ajami*.