

The Spread of Islam in the Niger and Senegal Valleys before the Rise of Almoravids

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Abstract: This study traces the early contacts of the middle and upper Niger and Senegal Rivers with the Muslims in the first five centuries after hijrah and shows the spread of Islam and the rise of states long before the emergence of Almoravids. It analyses the early Muslim expansion in the Western Sahara, the role of the Ibādiyyah in central Sahara and the efforts of the Sanhadja in the Western Sahara which resulted in the spread of Islam and rise of Islamic kingdoms in the Niger and the Senegal Valleys before the 5th century AH.

The Great African Sahara which connects the Niger and Senegal rivers with North Africa and the Mediterranean world was not dry like its present state. In the 7th century C.E., when Islam began to spread outside Arabia, the Sahara was comparatively wet; there was sufficient amount of rainfall throughout the desert between the Nile valley in the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the west. These water resources in several places in the desert were sufficient to support large human settlements and rich animal and plant life.¹

The inhabitants of the desert, before the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.), developed their social, political and economic institutions and established famous kingdoms in the heart of the desert, like the Kingdom of Garama (present day Fezzan), south of Libya. It extended its influence in the east and central parts of the desert between Lake Chad and the Niger River in the south until the northern ends of the Sahara. Another great kingdom was the Kingdom of Ghana (present day Mauritania), whose influence stretched from the Senegal River in the south till the end of the Sahara in the north.

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These two kingdoms developed and flourished mainly because of their trade activities between the Mediterranean world and West Africa. They were involved in these activities several hundred years before the rise of Islam. When the Muslims entered North Africa, in the second decade of the 1st century A.H. (7th century C.E.), contacts and relations between the North and West Africa were already well established through the Trans-Saharan trade routes in the eastern and western parts of the Sahara.

Spread of Islam in the Great Desert

The advent of Islam in the Great Desert followed the entrance of Islam in North Africa since the beginning of the third decade of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.). However, the process of spreading Islam and forming Muslim settlements in the whole of North Africa took more than five decades.

The first part of the desert that established contacts with the Muslims was the eastern part, the region of the Libyan oases. After the Muslims had entered Egypt in the year 21 A.H. (641-642 C.E.), they sent two armies to the west, one along the coast to the present day Libya and the other under the leadership of 'Uqba b. Nāfir' to the Libyan desert south of the present day Benghazi. 'Uqba succeeded in joining the oases between Zawila in the south, and Benghazi in the north, to the Muslim territories. Zawila became the first Muslim settlement in the Sahara and it also became the residence of the ruler and the capital of Fezzan.² Islam began to spread in these oases and their *zakāt* (alms tax) was sent to Egypt.³

The expansion of Islamic influence in the eastern part of the desert took place in the year 49 A.H. (669 C.E.). Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam stated that 'Uqba b. Nāfir' also led expeditions against other castles and centers of the Libyan Desert.⁴ He entered Garama, the capital of the Garamantese Kingdom in the southern territories of the Libyan Desert, and then went south through the desert (in the present day Chad) until he reached Kawar, the capital of the region. The king of Kawar was subdued and he recognized the authority of the Muslims. Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam stated that the location of Kawar was about a 15-day journey to the south of Garama.⁵ If we consider the comparatively wet weather during that time, in addition to the fact that the Lake Chad basin extended further to the north than the present day boundaries, we can assume that the kingdom of Kawar was situated in the northern ends of the Lake Chad region. These were the territories where the Muslims made their contacts and settlements from the middle of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.).

Al-Idrīsī's accounts concerning the area between Kawar and Lake Chad supports our assumption. He mentioned that the route goes south through the valley of Kawar, where there were three big centers. The first center was the capital of Kawar, the second was Qasr Ummi ʿĪsā, which was two days to the south of the capital, then after a distance of 40 miles was the town of Ankalas. From there, the route was divided into two ways, one goes towards the capital of Kanem and the other goes to Kaw Kaw, on the Niger River.⁶

In the parts of North Africa to the west of Libya, Islam spread late. Muslims began to settle in the present day Tunisia in the middle of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.). Then it took them about two decades to settle in other parts to the west of Tunisia. That was why the spread of Islam in the central and west regions of the desert was late compared to the eastern parts.

There are some early records about the spread of Islam among the Saharan tribes in the central and western parts of the desert in the Algerian oases. In the first half of the first century A.H. (7th Century C.E.), Ibn Azara (d. 7 A.H.) stated that the head of the big and strong Saharan tribe, Zanata, embraced Islam.⁷ In the Far West, the strong tribe of Lamtuna embraced Islam toward the end of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.).⁸ Lamtuna was one of the biggest parts of the Sanhadja tribal group that dominated the Western Sahara.

When the Muslims established themselves in the western parts of North Africa and Andalusia from the end of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.), Islam began to spread widely among the tribes of the Sahara. In the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.), some important changes took place in that area, particularly in the central and western parts of the Sahara. The Ibāḍiyyah sect established itself in North Africa, in the present-day Algeria, and began to spread its influences and teachings widely among the tribes of the Sahara.⁹

The Ibāḍiyyah were very active in the Trans-Saharan trade, they established contacts with West Africa through the Sahara very early. They were also very active in the spread of Islam throughout the area, from the beginning of the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.).¹⁰ Among the famous trade and cultural Ibāḍiyyah centers in the Sahara were Zawila and Wargala. These centers led the activities of the Ibāḍiyyah in trade and the spread of Islam from the middle of the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.).¹¹ After the rise of the Rustumid state, in present day Algeria in 160

A.H. (776 C.E.), the Ibādiyyah intensified their activities in the Sahara and West Africa.

The western part of the Sahara was under the influence of the Kingdom of Ghana. Their territories extended throughout the territories of the present day Mauritania and the Western Sahara. The Kingdom of Ghana, from its strategic geographical location, led the trade activities across the Sahara and linked the Senegal region to the Mediterranean Sea, before the rise of Islam.

The capital of Ghana was Awdaghust (19.8 N. 11.10 E.).¹² It was described by al-Bakrī, in the fifth century A.H. (11th century C.E.), as a fertile land with rich water sources.¹³

From the beginning of the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.), Muslims in North Africa paid great attention to the Trans-Saharan trade. The governor of al-Maghrib (all the territory that lies to the west of Egypt) dug some wells along the western Saharan trade route and sent a military expedition to punish the Saharan tribes that threatened the safety of the caravans.¹⁴ The participation of the tribes of the Sahara in trade activities increased. New trade centers emerged in the desert such as Sijilmasa in the northern borders of the Kingdom of Ghana. Some Berbers, like the Sanhadja, began to threaten the northern borders of the Kingdom of Ghana.

In about 154 A.H. (770 C.E.), a coalition of Sanhadja tribes succeeded in defeating the Kingdom of Ghana and occupied its capital Awdaghust.¹⁵ Ghana retreated to the south where they founded a new capital to the east of the Senegal River. The coalition of Sanhadja established the state of Anbiyā', whose territories extended between the Senegal River in the south and Sijilmasa in the north.

The state of Anbiyā' played an important role in the Trans-Saharan trade; they controlled all western Saharan trade between Sijilmasa in the north and the Senegal River in the south. Apparently their relations with the Kingdom of Ghana improved because of the Trans-Saharan trade. The western Trans-Saharan trade route, via Awdaghust, became very famous throughout the Muslim world as the 'Gate of Gold' because of the large quantities of gold that the merchants brought from the upper Senegal and Niger Rivers.

The markets of Awdaghust were very big, and as described by al-Bakrī, crowded throughout the year, and there were merchants from different parts of the Muslim world.¹⁶ Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 367 A.H.), who visited Awdaghust, wrote about the flourishing trade businesses in the town and he also talked about how the people were very rich. He stated that he saw a *suk* (cheque),

signed by two people, whose value was 42,000 golden dinars, which was to be paid by a merchant from Awdaghust.¹⁷

Awdaghust also became a famous cultural center in the heart of the desert. People generally followed the Sunnī sect, but the Ibādiyyah teachings and the tolerant Shī'ah teachings of the Idrisids also had some followers. Education in schools and mosques prospered, scholars from North African centers made frequent visits and taught in Awdaghust. Islam spread widely and was accepted by the tribes of the Sahara, and some of them like Zanata, Hawwara and Sanhadja neighboured the northern borders of West Africa.¹⁸

There were strong and continuous contacts between the people along the Niger and Senegal Valleys. In addition to that, merchants and scholars from other parts of the Muslim world and North Africa came through the Trans-Saharan trade routes to the Niger and Senegal Valleys and some of them settled in the newly developing trade centers in West Africa.

Islam in the Mid-Niger Valley

Islam in the mid-Niger valley came mainly through contacts with the tribes of the Sahara such as Hawwara and Zanata. These two tribes embraced Islam in the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.), then they intensified their contacts with the mid-Niger valley from their centers in the Libyan Desert through the eastern Trans-Saharan trade route and from the Algerian desert and the middle Trans-Saharan trade route.

The eastern route is considered as the first route used by Muslims in their contacts with Lake Chad and the mid-Niger regions.¹⁹ This opinion is credible because, as stated earlier, the first Muslim settlement emerged in the beginning of the third decade of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.) in the Libyan oases. This route was used by 'Uqba b. Nāfir in his expedition to Kavar. In addition to this, the Ibādiyyah settled very early in Zawila, the Libyan oasis where they established their state in the middle of the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.).²⁰ From there, they led active trade contacts with the mid-Niger Valley through Kavar.²¹

Trade activities, south of the Libyan oases, developed the relations between the Muslims and the tribes of the Sahara in areas like Zaghawa and Kanimbu. Both tribes embraced Islam, developed their economic and political institutions and founded the first Islamic Kingdom in the region of Lake Chad, along the eastern borders of the mid-Niger Valley. It was called the Kingdom of Kanem. The Arabic sources did not mention the time of the rise of Kanem, but there were some accounts about the spread of Islam in

those places by the efforts of the Ummayyads before and after the fall of their state.²² The earliest account about the spread of Islam in the Kingdom of Kanem was mentioned by al-Faqīh (d. 3rd century A.H.). He stated that: "The city of Kawar lies about 15 Marhalah to the south of Zawilah. There is a large number of Muslims in Kawar, the majority of them belong to Berber tribes."²³ Some scholars believe that the Islamic Kingdom of Kanem emerged in the 2nd century A.H. (8th century C.E.).²⁴

On the other hand, the Ibādiyyah, from the Algerian oases, led their trade activities through the central Trans-Saharan trade route to the middle of the Niger valley. Local tribes of the mid-Niger River and other Saharan tribes along the southern ends of the desert played important roles on these trade activities in territories of the mid-Niger River, which lies at the end of this trade route. These active trade contacts led to the rise of a new trade center to the north of the bend of the Niger River, it was known as Tadmekka. It developed very quickly, extended its territories, and organized and supervised the trade in that area. It was described, in the 4th century, as "a strong kingdom, its kings were Sudan with white skin."²⁵ This description indicates that the population of Tadmekka was a mixture of local and Saharan tribes.

It is obvious that the contacts of the Muslim tribes of the Sahara and the Muslim merchants from North Africa through the eastern and central Trans-Saharan trade routes led to the rapid changes in the life of the people to the North of the mid-Niger River. New settlements emerged, urban life developed and the population increased. Muslim geographers wrote about the region between Lake Chad in the east and the mid-Niger River in the west as a densely populated urban center. The area between the Kingdom of Ghana in the west and Tadmekka in the east was described to be "about a fifty-day journey and on the way there were several towns and urban centers inhabited by Berber and Sudanese tribes."²⁶ The area between Tadmekka in the west and Lake Chad was also described as "heavily populated territory with several towns."²⁷

The Kingdom of Kaw Kaw

Apparently, the settlements of the tribes of the Sahara, besides the local Sudanese tribes, along the mid-Niger River led to the cooperation between them to run the affairs of the trade. Small markets and centers emerged to receive the Trans-Saharan caravans. The arrangement and supervision of their business led to the growth of these markets and centers. At the same time, this business resulted in the development of the political institutions of some of these centers. It

also resulted in the rise of strong rulers who extended their area of influence over other markets and centers. Thus, the territories of some centers expanded and founded the early kingdoms of the region.

One of these trade centers was founded on the bend of the Niger River by a Saharan tribe called Lamta. This tribe settled among the local population in the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.), and gradually they developed their business and administration and extended their territories over the area that became known as Kaw Kaw in early Islamic sources. It was the first kingdom to emerge in the mid-Niger Valley. It was suggested that this kingdom emerged during the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.).²⁸

The Kingdom of Kaw Kaw developed rapidly, probably during the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.) when the Trans-Saharan trade developed through the eastern and central Trans-Saharan routes. Muslim geographers, such as al-Bakrī, al-Muhallabī, al-Idrīsī, Ibn Saʿīd and Ibn Baṭūṭa,²⁹ believed Kaw Kaw to be located on the bend of the Niger River in the place where, later on, the famous capital of Songhay emerged. Kaw Kaw developed its relations and contacts with trade centers of the Sahara and the states of North Africa. It was closely connected to the Ibāḍiyyah trade centers in the Libyan and Algerian deserts. Ibn Khaldūn stated that some people from the Libyan tribe Hawwara (who were the first to introduce the camel in the Sahara) settled along the borders of Kaw Kaw.³⁰ Muslim geographers recorded active trade activities from North Africa through different Saharan routes to the mid-Niger Valley.³¹

The Kingdom of Kaw Kaw developed relations with North African states, particularly with the Ibāḍiyyah Rustumid state in Algeria. The Rustumids were very keen on developing their Trans-Saharan relations, mainly for trade. As we have seen, they were the pioneers of Trans-Saharan trade toward the mid-Niger Valley. Even their *imāms* (head of states) were involved in trade and had their own trade business across the Sahara.³² The Ibāḍiyyah continued their strong relations and contacts with the Kingdom of Kaw Kaw even after the fall of their state in Algeria (298 A.H./910 C.E.). They carried on with their activities from the Algerian oases. These oases continued to play their role in trade and are still famous as centers for Ibāḍiyyah settlements. Some of the Ibāḍiyyah stayed in Kaw Kaw and intermarried with the local people. The famous Ibādī leader, Abʿ

Yazīd, who revolted against the Fatimid state in North Africa (in the 4th century A.H./10th C.E.), was born in Kaw Kaw to a Sudanese woman.³³

The Kingdom of Kaw Kaw developed to be one of the greatest kingdoms of the Sudan. Its capital, which was also known as Kaw Kaw, was described in the third century A.H. (9th century C.E.), as “a big rich town, where there was a large number of merchants.”³⁴ Muslim scholars considered the kingdom of Kaw Kaw as one of the greatest Sudanese kingdoms. Its territories were very large and its king subdued other Sudanese kings. Some Muslim scholars look at the kingdom of Kaw Kaw as being greater than the Kingdom of Ghana.³⁵

The strong and continuous relations between the Kingdom of Kaw Kaw and the Muslims resulted in the spread of Islam in the mid-Niger Valley in the early centuries. The earliest reference that we have about this matter is from al-Muhallabī (d. 380 A.H.). He stated that “the king of Kaw Kaw pretended to be Muslim and the majority of the people of his court pretended to be Muslim.”³⁶ He also stated that “there was a mosque in the city of the king, where the king prayed. Congregational prayers were performed in the mosque between the two cities....And all of them are Muslim.”³⁷ In other places al-Muhallabī stated that the people of Kaw Kaw were Muslim.³⁸ These texts show that Islam spread widely in the Kingdom of Kaw Kaw. The people of Kaw Kaw, during the fourth century A.H. (10th century C.E.), were all Muslims.

The capital of the kingdom was divided into two parts, as was done in the kingdom of Ghana. There was a mosque in the royal part of the city. Apparently, there were other mosques in the other part of the city; however, the biggest mosque was situated between the two parts. This was where the king attended the congregational prayers.

The question is why al-Muhallabī described the king as “pretending to be Muslim” when he regularly performed his prayers? Was he a Muslim? In Islam, any person who says the *shahādah* (*Lā ilāha illa Allāh, Mu‘ammad rasūl Allāh*/I bear witness that there is no *Ilāh* (god) but Allah and that Prophet Muḥammad is his messenger) is considered a Muslim, even if he does not pray. According to this, the king of Kaw Kaw was a Muslim. Apparently, the king, although he was a Muslim, still practiced some of his local beliefs. Therefore, he was seen by the sources of al-Muhallabī as being non-Muslim but

pretending to be Muslim. There is another text about the conversion of the king of Kaw Kaw written by a Sudanese Historian al-Saʿdī (d. 1096 A.H.). He stated that the king embraced Islam in 400 A.H. (1009 C.E.).³⁹ However, apparently, the account of al-Muhallabī has more support than the account of al-Saʿdī. Firstly, al-Muhallabī's account is the earliest about Islam in Kaw Kaw and his informants and sources were closer to the time of conversion of the kings and the spread of Islam in the mid-Niger Valley. Al-Muhallabī, who wrote about the prayers of the kings, died 30 years before the date mentioned by al-Saʿdī as the time of conversion of the King of Kaw Kaw. Several historians did not accept the accounts of al-Saʿdī. They said that his accounts could only indicate the time when Islam spread widely and became the official religion of the kingdom.⁴⁰

Secondly, it seems that Islam spread in many parts of West Africa because of the efforts of the Ibāḍiyyah and most of the people, including the people of Kaw Kaw, and their kings might have followed the Ibāḍiyyah *madhhab*. This *madhhab* was popular and strong in the Niger and Senegal valleys until the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.). The Ibāḍiyyah were considered, particularly by sunnī followers, as *khawārij*. Most of the *khawārij* subdivisions were fanatic and considered as non-Muslims. Some Muslim scholars described the Ibāḍiyyah of the Algerian oases as non-Muslims.⁴¹

After the rise of Almoravids in the 5th Century A.H. (11th century C.E.) in West Africa, the Mālīkī sunnī *madhhab* spread in West Africa perhaps mainly on the accounts of the Ibāḍiyyah *madhhab*. The Mālīkī sunnī *madhhab* is still the dominant *madhhab* in West Africa.

It is quite possible that the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.) marked the weakness and the end of the Ibāḍiyyah *madhhab*. The Mālīkī followers and other sunnī historians and geographers did not favour it. These sunnī scholars, since the third century A.H. (9th century C.E.), did not write about the efforts of the Ibāḍiyyah in the spread of Islam in West Africa. That was why the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.) was considered, among most of the early Muslim scholars, as the beginning of the spread of Islam in West Africa. This concept was accepted until the time of al-Saʿdī (11th Century A.H./17th century C.E.) and the accounts of the conversion of the king in 400 A.H. could be a reflection of this concept. The fifth century, most

probably, witnessed the beginning of the spread of the sunni Islam in West Africa.

Islam in the Senegal and the Upper Niger Region

Senegal and the upper Niger Valley were famous because of their rich gold resources. Most of the gold in the Mediterranean and the Muslim world, at that time, came from this region. That was why the Muslims strengthened their trade contact with this region from the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.) through the state of Sanhadja and the Kingdom of Ghana. These continuous contacts before and after Islam led to the development of this region, the establishment of several trade centers and the rise of small and big kingdoms, the famous among which were the Kingdoms of Ghana and Mali.

The Kingdom of Ghana

According to the early Muslim scholars, the name Ghana was the title of the kings.⁴² In his message to the ruler of Almoravids the king of Ghana addressed him saying: "To the *Amīr* of Aghmat, Ghana said....".⁴³ They referred to the kingdom as Awkar and sometimes they referred to the capital of the kingdom as Awkar.⁴⁴ But in general almost all early Muslim scholars used 'Ghana' in reference to the kingdom and 'City of Ghana' for the capital.

The kingdom of Ghana, after it moved to the south leaving the northern territories to Sanhadja state, built its power and extended its territories between the Senegal and the upper Niger Rivers. According to al-Bakrī, there were 18 city-states under the rule of the king of Ghana. Some of the kings of these states had the power to compete with the king of Ghana.⁴⁵

The kingdom reached its greatest level of power in the 4th century A.H. (10th century C.E.) when they defeated the state of Sanhadja and recaptured Awdaghust in 380 A.H. (990 century C.E.).⁴⁶ The total number of the soldiers of the king of Ghana was estimated by al-Bakrī to be about 200,000.⁴⁷ Ibn Khaldūn described the capital of Ghana as "one of the greatest cities of the world and the most populated one."⁴⁸ Outside the heavily populated capital, the rest of the territories, as described by al-Bakrī, also had several urban centers. We have already mentioned that the kingdom consisted of 18 city-states.

Al-Bakrī also stated that urban settlements stretched about twenty-day's journey from the capital of Ghana to the west and about

eighteen-day's journey from the capital of Ghana to the south. The territories, which lie to the east of the capital of Ghana, were also described as inhabited by Sudanese tribes.⁴⁹

To the north of the Kingdom of Ghana lies the state of Sanhadja. The territories of this state, as was described by early Muslim historians, under the rule of Theolutan (172-222 A.H./ 793-836 C.E.), "was about a two-months journey from the north to the south and a two-month journey from the east to the west."⁵⁰ So the dry deserted desert area that now lies in the territories of Mauritania and northwest Mali was heavily populated under the rule of the state of Sanhadja and the Kingdom of Ghana where people lived a comparatively civilized life with developed socio-economic and political institutions. Islam played an important role in that development.

The Kingdom of Ghana was not an Islamic kingdom because its kings were not Muslims, but due to its strong and continuous contacts with Muslims, Islam spread widely throughout its territories.⁵¹ Contacts of Ghana with the Muslims started from the first stage of its history, when its capital was Awdaghust in the middle of the western desert. In the second half of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.), 'Uqba b. Nāfi' and Mūsā Ibn Nuṣayr entered *Wādī Dar'a* and *al-Sūs al-Aqṣā*.⁵² Muslims from that time on got into direct contacts with the northern borders of Ghana. Some early Muslim scholars stated that the people of Ghana became Muslims since that time.⁵³

The earliest and detailed account about Islam in the Kingdom of Ghana was written by al-Bakrī. He wrote his book in Andalusia in the year 460 A.H. (1067 C.E.). That was two years before the fall of Ghana to the Almoravids in 458 A.H. (1065 C.E.).

Al-Bakrī wrote his account before the coming of Almoravids to Andalusia and relied much on two historians regarding his material on West Africa. They were al-Rāzī (d. 344 A.H./ 955 C.E.) and Mu'ammad b. Yūsuf (d. 362 A.H. /973 C.E.). Both of them lived in the western part of North Africa, but their books were lost. So we assume that the material of al-Bakrī about Islam in Ghana taken from those two historians could go back to the 4th century A.H. (10th century C.E.).

Al-Bakrī stated that the capital of Ghana consisted of two parts: one for the king, where there was a mosque, and the other part had twelve mosques with several scholars and students.⁵⁴ He also stated that the king of Ghana, Tinkamin, who became king in 445 A.H. (1063 C.E.), respected the Muslims and treated them kindly. His translators, his minister of treasury and most of his other ministers were Muslim.⁵⁵ Outside the capital, Islam spread in several city-states. Some of the rulers of these states were Muslims and they participated in the spread of Islam in other non-Muslim areas.⁵⁶

On the lower part of the Senegal River, a famous kingdom emerged from the beginning of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.). This was the kingdom of Takrūr. It extended its territories to the north and established good relations with the Sanhadja in the desert.⁵⁷

Available material about Islam in Takrūr also came from al-Bakrī. He stated that the Kingdom of Takrūr was a strong Islamic kingdom. Its kings were very active in spreading Islam in the neighboring territories. Among the famous kings was Wardjābī b. Rabīs, who implemented Islamic laws in his kingdom. He died in 432 A.H. (1040 C.E.). The Kingdom of Takrūr established good relations with Almoravids and helped them in their *jihād*. 4,000 Takrūri soldiers joined the army of Yūsuf b. Tashfin who went to help the Muslims in Andalusia.⁵⁸

The Kingdom of Mali

Far in the south, on the upper Niger valley, another ancient Sudanese kingdom emerged. This was the kingdom of Mali. Early Arabic sources referred to it as the Kingdom of Mallal and Mali. The word Mallal was used in Arabic and Fulani language for the Mandi speaking people on the upper Senegal and Niger Rivers.

Early stages of the rise of the Kingdom of Mali are not exactly known. The earliest text about the kingdom came in the 3rd century A.H., (9th century C.E.) by al-Yaʿqūbī. He stated the kingdom of Mali among other Sudanese kingdoms.⁵⁹ So Mali, in the third century A.H., was a big kingdom like the kingdoms of Kaw Kaw and Ghana.

Early traditions in Mali connected the last stages of the rise of the kingdom to the ruling family of Kita. It says that the founder of this family, Latāl Kalabī, was one of the descendants of Bilāl b. Rabāh, a

companion of the Prophet (SAS). Kalabī had two sons: one of them became a king while the other worked in the field of trade.⁶⁰

According to this tradition, the founder of the family of Kita was a Muslim, and his descendants established their trade activities with the north and developed their kingdoms. Apparently, the rise of the family of Kita was connected to the time when trade flourished in the region, after the rise of Sanhadja state and the movements of the kings of Ghana to the south in the middle of the second century A.H. (8th century C.E.).⁶¹

Arabic sources did not help in tracing that early period of the history of Mali. Some would consider the people of Mali as among the first who embraced Islam in the area. Ibn Khaldūn stated that early members of this family, before the rise of Mali as a big empire in the 7th century A.H. (13th C.E.), were famous in the Mali traditions for the performance of *hajj*.⁶²

These texts and narrations referred to the spread of Islam in the early periods without giving a precise date. Al-Ya'qūbī, who wrote in the third century A.H. (9th century C.E.) about the kingdom of Mali, did not mention anything about the spread of Islam.

Al-Bakrī, in the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.), mentioned a story about the spread of Islam in Mali. He wrote about how the king, his people and some other states under his rule converted to Islam.⁶³ The same story was also repeated in early Ibāḍiyyah sources.⁶⁴ The story stated that the conversion of the king and his people was due to the efforts of an Ibāḍī *faqīh* (jurist). This indicates that Mali became an Islamic state before the middle of the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.). If we compare the text of al-Bakrī to other texts mentioned in Ibāḍiyyah sources, it is possible to suggest that the conversion of the Kingdom of Mali to Islam took place in the fourth century A.H. (10th century C.E.) or may be even before that.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Contacts between the Muslims, the Libyan Sahara, the Lake Chad region and the mid-Niger valley started from the middle of the first century A.H. (7th century C.E.). In the middle of the 2nd century A.H. (8th century C.E.), Islam spread widely in the desert and the Islamic kingdoms of Sanhadja (the state of Anbiyā') in the western part of the desert and the kingdom of Kanem in eastern part of the desert

emerged. In the Libyan and Algerian oases, Islamic centers of the Ibādiyyah developed.

These Islamic Saharan Kingdoms and trade centers, in addition to the active trade caravans from North Africa, led to intensive contacts with the mid-Niger and Senegal valleys. The Savanna belt of West Africa, since the 2nd century A.H. (8th century C.E.), got into close contacts with the Mediterranean Sea.

In the 3rd century A.H. (9th century C.E.), the mid-Niger and Senegal valleys became part of the cultural and trade activities in the Sahara and North Africa. Markets and trade centers developed. People from the surrounding areas began to move toward these markets and trade centers, the population of these places increased rapidly. Some of these trade centers grew, extended their territories and founded the early kingdoms in the area.

Muslim geographers, in the third century A.H. (9th century C.E.), described the kingdoms of the mid-Niger and Senegal valleys as large and strong kingdoms like the kingdoms of Kaw Kaw and Ghana. They wrote about the wide spread of Islam in the savanna belt and the emergence of several Muslim communities such as those that established the Islamic kingdom of Kanem. They also wrote about the Muslim communities in Kaw Kaw, and the Muslim communities in Ghana, who were big in number and very influential in political affairs.

Education was founded throughout the savanna belt with the spread of Islam and the establishment of several mosques in the towns and trade centers. These mosques contributed very much in the spread of knowledge because these mosques were educational institutions and regular schools where Muslims—children and adults—found good opportunities for learning. Although there is no material about the rise of schools outside mosques, there were schools such as those of Awdaghust and other trade centers of the Sahara. There are some accounts about famous visiting professors from the Ibādiyyah of North Africa to the different parts of mid-Niger and Senegal valleys. These professors did not only visit trade and cultural centers but they also visited the interior regions beyond the savanna belt.⁶⁶

In the 4th-5th centuries A.H. (10th-11th century C.E.), the mid-Niger and Senegal valleys became part of the Islamic world in the Sahara and North Africa. All the area between the Senegal region in the west

and Lake Chad region in the east (as was described by al-Bakrī) was an area occupied by several kingdoms, cities, villages and trade centers. A passenger travels from the capital of Ghana in the west, through urban settlements one after another on his journey till Lake Chad in the east.

The civilizational role of Islam became very obvious in the life of Sudanese communities before the rise of Almoravids in the 5th century A.H. (11th century C.E.). The Almoravids movement in the mid-Niger and Senegal valleys was a reformation movement that implemented sunnī teachings through the Mālikī *madhhab*.

Notes

1. Fabrizio Mori, *The Great Civilizations of the Ancient Sahara*. Trans. B. D. Philips (Rome: 'L'erma' di Bretschneider, 1998), 72-73.
2. Ibn Sa'īd (d. 673 A.H.), *Kitāb Baṣṭ al-Ard Fī al-Ṭūl Wa al-ʿArd* (Tetwan: Al Dār, 1958), 61; see Abī al-Fidāʾ (d. 732 A.H.), *Al-Mukhtaṣar Fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍah, 1325), 187.
3. Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūh Miṣr Wa al-Maghrib* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Bayān, 1961), 198.
4. *Ibid.*, 263 – 264.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Al-Idrīsī, *Ṣifāt Al-Maghrib Wa Arḍ al-Sūdān Wa Miṣr Wa al-Andalus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1864), 12.
7. Ibn ʿAzara al-Murrākūshī, *Al-Bayān al-Mughrib Fī Akhbār al-Andalus Wa al-Maghrib*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al- Kutub, 1948), 352.
8. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-ʿIbar*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Lubnānī, 1961), 371.
9. *Ibid.*, 286.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Abū Zakariyyāʾ al-Wargalānī (d. 5 A.H.), *Al-Siyar Wa Akhbār al-ʿAimmah*, Manuscript in Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al- Miṣriyya, 9030 (1), 42, 56.
12. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib Fī Zikr Bilād Ifriqiyyā Wa al-Maghrib* (Baghdād: Maktabat al-Muthanna, 1857), 168.
13. *Ibid.*, 158.
14. Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūh*, 292; see al-Raḥīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 5th century A.H.), *Tārīkh Ifriqiyyā Wa al-Maghrib*, vol. 1 (Tūnis: Al-Nahj, 1968), 108; see Ibn ʿAzarī al-Bayān, 51.
15. Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776 A.H.), *Aʿmāl al-ʿĀlām* (Beirut: Dār al-Bayḍāʾ: 1964), 225; see Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-ʿIbar*, 372.
16. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 159-168.
17. *Ibid.*, 99.

18. Ibn al-Khatīb, *Aḥmāl al-Aḥlām*, 225.
19. H. Murray, *Historical Account of Discoveries and Travels in Africa*. 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: University Press, 1818), 37; see B. G. Martin, "Kanem, Bornu and Fezzan, Notes on Political History of a Trade Route" *Journal of African History*, 1 (X) (1969): 10.
20. B. G. Martin, Kanem, Bornu and Fezzan, 18.
21. Al-Yaḥqūbī (d. 284 A.H.), *Kitāb al-Buldān*. In one volume with the book of Ibn Raṣṭā, *Al-Aḥlāq al-Nafīṣah*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1891), 345.
22. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 197; see al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār* (Manuscript in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya No. 2568 History), 495; Also, see Ahmed Elyas Hussein, *The Trans-Saharan Trade routes as Known to Arab Geographers till the beginning of the 16th century* (Master's thesis, Cairo University, 1977), 198.
23. Ibn al-Faqīh, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Buldān* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1302), 245.
24. Thomas Hodgkin, "Kingdom of the Sudan," in *The Dawn of African History*, ed. Roland Oliver (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 21; see Margaret Shinne, *Ancient African Kingdoms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 69.
25. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-Ard*, 105.
26. Anonymous, *Al-Iṣṭibṣār Fī ʿAjāʾib al-Aṣṣār* (Alexandria: University of Alexandria, 1958), 223.
27. Al-Maqrīzī, *Gany al-Azhar Fī al-Rawḍ al-Miṭtar* (Manuscript on microfilm in Cairo, Institute For Arabic Manuscripts No. 25 Geography), 2.
28. E. W. Bovill, "Niger and Songhay" *Journal of African History*, vol. XXV (1925-1926):138; see J. D. Fage, *An Introduction to the History of West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 27.
29. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 181; see al-Muhallabī, quoted by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-Buldān*, vol. 7 (Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍa, 1906), 301-302; see al-Idrīsī, *Ṣifāt al-Maghrib*, 11; see Ibn Saʿīd, *Kitāb Baṣṭ al-Ard*, 26; also, see Ibn Baṭūṭā, *Tuhfat al-Nuzzār Fī Gharāʾib al-Anṣār Wa ʿAjāʾib al-Asfār* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1964), 695.
30. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 286.
31. Al-Idrīsī, *Ṣifāt al-Maghrib*, 12; Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ibar*, 406.
32. Al-Shammakhī, *Siyar al-ʿIbādiyyah* (Manuscript in Tunis: Dār Al-Kutub al-Waṭaniyyah, No. 15349), 71.
33. Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī al-Tārīkh*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1966), 422; see Abū al-Fidāʾ, *Al-Mukhtaṣar*, 92.
34. Al-Yaḥqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yaḥqūbī*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Sādir, 1960), 193.
35. Ibid. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 183.
36. Al-Muhallabī, quoted by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam*, 302. Abū al-Ḥassan al-Muhallabī lived in Egypt. He wrote *Al-Masālik Wa al-Mamālik* and presented it to the Fatimid Caliph, al-ʿAzīz (265-386 A.H./ 878-996 C.E.).

- His book is lost but some of his material on West Africa was copied by later Muslim scholars such as Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, Abū al-Fidāʾ and al-Qalqashandī.
37. Ibid.
 38. Al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-Aʿshā*, vol. 5, 285.
 39. Al-Saʿdī, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*. (Anji: O. Hodas, 1898), 3.
 40. Fage, *An Introduction*, 27; see Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa 1849-1855*, vol. 3 (London: Longman, 1965), 657.
 41. Al-Idrīsī, *Ṣifāt*, 121.
 42. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 168.
 43. Ibid.
 44. Ibid. Al-Dimashqī, *Nukhbat al-Dahr Fī ʿAjāʾib al-Barr Wa al-Baḥr* (Leipzig: E.J. Brill, 1923), 110.
 45. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 179.
 46. Ibid., 164.
 47. Ibid., 177.
 48. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-ʿIbar*, 286.
 49. Ibid., 57, 176, 180.
 50. Ibid., 372; also, see Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl al-Aʿlām*, 225.
 51. Ahmed Elyas Hussein, "Islam in the Kingdom of Ghana as known to al-Bakrī," *Dirāsāt Ifriqiyyā*, No. 4 (March 1988): 12.
 52. M. El-Fasi and I. Herbek, "Stages in the development of Islam and its dissemination in Africa" in *General History of Africa. III Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh century* ed. M. El-Fasi (UNESCO, 1988), 68.
 53. Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, vol. 5, 284.
 54. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 174-175.
 55. Ibid.
 56. Ibid., 175.
 57. G. P. Murdock, *Africa, Its People and their Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1959), 415.
 58. Omar al-Nager, "Takrūr, the History of Aname" *Journal of African History*, 3, no. X (1969), 367.
 59. Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 193.
 60. N. Levetzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London: Methuen, 1980), 56.
 61. Ahmed Elyas Hussien, *The Ibadiyya and Islam in the Kingdom of Mali before the 7th century A.H. (13th C.E.)* (Muscat: Maktab al-Damiri n.d.), 12.
 62. Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-ʿIbar*, 403.
 63. Al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 178.
 64. Al-Durjīnī (d. 670 A.H.), *Ṭabaqāt al-Maṣḥāʾikh Bi al-Maghrib*, vol. 2 (Qustanṭīna: Maṭbaʿt al-Baʿth n. d.), 18; see al-Shammakhī, *Al-Siyār*, 32.
 65. Ahmed Elyas, *Ibādiyya*, 31-35.

66. T. Lewicks, "Quelque extraits inedits relative aux voyage du commereants de missionaries Ibadites Nord-Africains au pay de Soudan Occidental et Central au Mayon Age," *Folia Ôrinatala* Tome 2 (1960): 10, 19, 20.