CHAPTER 3

The Islamization of Africa

Obviously Islam was born outside of the continent. Its key institutions developed in the early centuries in areas that we call the Near or Middle East. But the faith spread into Africa – quickly into some regions and societies and more slowly into others. Today about half of the people living in the continent profess Islam, and almost 25 percent of the Muslims of the world live on the continent. This chapter deals with the spread and profession of faith in Africa, whereas the next chapter deals with the ways in which African societies have appropriated Islam.

I talk about islamization and africanization to suggest that at least two processes were at work: first, the extension of something that Africans and outsiders would recognize as Islam, and second, the “rooting” of that faith in Africa. In fact, as this book shows the processes were much more complex than that, because we are dealing with a 1,400-year period, a huge continent, and millions of people. For most of that time most of those people have not identified themselves as African, but by smaller names for regions or ethnic groups, such as Swahili, Mandinka, or Berber, or indeed entities much smaller than that.

Note that I use the term islamization, not arabization. Arabic was the language of revelation of God to Muhammad and consequently the language of the sacred book, the law, and prayer. After several centuries it became dominant in North Africa and much of the Sahara. Arabic words spread into the languages of many more African societies, especially to describe religion, government, warfare, and trade. But most African Muslims continued to speak their own languages, the
Swahili, Mandinka, and various Berber tongues, for example, that had long been native to their regions. Male and female teachers in these societies soon developed ways of transmitting the faith, the Quran, and the prayers into their vernaculars.

The main commentators about the islamization process have cast it as “penetration” that advanced by regions and stages (see Map 1). In North Africa, from Egypt to Morocco, the initial process was conquest, when Arab or Arab-led armies took over the main cities and agricultural areas that stretched along the Mediterranean. But these forces neither moved into the mountains above the plain, nor attempted to go south into the Sahara desert.

In looking at the south, or Sub-Saharan Africa, the commentators have postulated a process in three stages. The first presence came from merchants involved in the Transsaharan trade. These entrepreneurs and their families lived principally in the towns, often in quarters that were labeled “Muslim.” They lived as minorities within “pagan” or non-Muslim majorities. This phase is often called “minority” or “quarantine” Islam. The second phase often goes by the name “court” Islam, because it features the adoption of Islam by the rulers and members of the ruling classes of states, in addition to the merchants. No significant effort was made to change local religious practices, especially outside of the towns. The third phase can be called “majority” Islam, whereby the faith spread beyond the merchants and ruling classes to the countryside where most people were living (see Map 2).

The three phases are thus associated with a growth of Islam in quantity and quality. The numbers grow – from minority to majority status. The quality “improves” with an advance in “orthodoxy,” which is to say conformity to the main norms of Sunni Islam as outlined in Chapter 2. The third phase, the movement to the countryside and majority status, is often associated with two phenomena: Sufi orders and military revolution, specifically, Islamic revolutions labeled jihads in which the “privileged” practices of urban merchants and ruling classes were called into question by reformers. These reformers became increasingly radical, seeing themselves as following the example of Muhammad and declaring the “jihad of the sword” as he did upon his arrival in Medina. We examine celebrated cases in Chapters 10 and 12.

These frameworks have merit in many situations. They conform to what a number of African Muslims, especially reformers like Uthman dan Fodio, saw as the pattern of spread of Islam. But they do not begin to capture the complexity of Islamic practice in African history. They
do not get at the ways in which Islamic practice was useful and used, nor the particular classes and vocations with which it was associated, nor the different Sufi orders in which it was communicated. They do not illuminate the many patterns of conversion – fast and slow, individual and group – to the faith. Nor do they show the “africanization” of Islam: the ways in which African societies made Islam their own, as is shown in the next chapter.

In the rest of this chapter I take two “gateways” and two sets of people to suggest the complexity of Islamization and prepare for the discussion of the africanization of Islam. The two gateways are the Sahara desert and the Indian Ocean. The similarity between dry sand and wet ocean may not seem obvious at first glance, but a little imagination shows the comparability of these two environments. The Arabic word for coast, sahil, is applied to both. Sahil can be used for the coast of an ocean, what you might term the “normal” sense. The East African littoral is an example, and the people who live there came to be called Swahili, which literally means “those of the coast.” But because the desert is likened to a sea, the same word can be applied to its shores. Consequently the northern and southern edges of the Sahara are also sahil. Since the early 1970s, the whole southern edge, afflicted by drought and running across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, has been called the Sahel. Drought and famine have driven that word into dictionaries of the English language.

The East African and Swahili Gateway

I deal with the “normal” ocean gateway first. The first Muslims on the East African coast followed in the wake of a lot of other maritime travelers from the Middle East and South Asia. They used an old, well-tested technology of sailing in dhows (see Figure 2) close to the coast, down the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf, and along the Indian Ocean. Primarily Arab, they were interested in acquiring ivory, gold, other metals, leather goods, and some slaves. They interacted with the local fishing and agricultural peoples who spoke the language we call Swahili. Over time the Swahili language evolved to include a considerable Arabic vocabulary, in addition to some Malay and other infusions, within a basic Bantu language structure.

The language was the basis for a culture, and both were built around small towns along the ocean, running about 2,000 miles from
Mogadiscio in the north (in today’s Somalia) to Sofala in the south (in today’s Mozambique). Most of the towns were autonomous. We can call them city-states, confined essentially to islands or the coast, with very small hinterlands devoted to farming. The inhabitants of these city-states were committed to the vocations of agriculture, fishing, ship building, and trade. They practiced Islam, but in combination with earlier gods and customs, and they lived in the cosmopolitan world built around the Indian Ocean. The more wealthy Swahili began to use Islamic forms in the architecture of their homes, as well as for mosques and other public buildings, and to travel and trade alongside the Muslims of Arab origin. Many of them fulfilled the pilgrimage obligation, which was much easier to perform than from other parts of the African continent.

The most prosperous period for the Swahili city-states ran roughly from 1250 to 1500 C.E. We are fortunate to have an eyewitness account from that period by a Moroccan who spent a great portion of his life traveling around the vast Islamic world of the fourteenth century. In 1355 he visited the Mali Empire of West Africa. Some years earlier, in 1331, he came to the East African coast. Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Battuta, or Ibn Battuta as he is usually called, visited Mogadiscio and then set out for the south. He had this to say about the towns he visited:

Then I set off by sea... for the land of the Swahili and the town of Kilwa, which is in the land of Zanj. We arrived at Mombasa, a large island... quite separate from the mainland. It grows bananas, lemons, and oranges. The people also gather a fruit... which looks like an olive. It has a nut like an olive, but its taste is very sweet. The people do not engage in agriculture, but import grain from the Swahili [in the interior]. The greater part of their diet is bananas and fish. They follow the Shafiite rite [one of the four schools of law], and are devout, chaste, and virtuous.

Their mosques are very strongly constructed of wood. Beside the door of each mosque are one or two wells, one or two cubits deep. They draw water from them with a wooden vessel which is fixed on to the end of a thin stick, a cubit long. The earth round the mosque and the well is stamped flat. Anyone who wishes to enter the mosque first washes his feet; beside the door is a piece of heavy material for drying them. Anyone who wishes to perform the ritual ablutions takes the vessel between his thighs, pours water on his hands, and so makes his ablutions. Everyone here goes barefoot.
We spent a night on the island and then set sail for Kilwa, the principal town on the coast, the greater part of whose inhabitants are Zanj of very black complexion. Their faces are scarred. . . . A merchant told me that Sofala is half a month’s march from Kilwa, and that between Sofala and Yufi in the country of the Limin is a month’s march. Powdered gold is brought from Yufi to Sofala.

Kilwa is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world. The whole of it is elegantly built . . . .

Kilwa, like Mombasa, was an island, and it enjoyed the reputation as the most wealthy city-state during the period of prosperity (see Figure 3).

The main location of the Swahili language, culture, and people, and of the practice of Islam, was concentrated in the towns of the East African littoral until very recent times. Most of the Muslims were Sunni, but some belonged to the Kharijite persuasion through their connections with Oman, a small state at the southeastern end of the Arabian peninsula. The literate elite, and especially those that we could call “professional” Muslims, understood and wrote Arabic, but Islam was typically taught orally through Swahili explanations. Beginning about 300 years ago some scholars and writers began to adapt the Arabic alphabet to the language and thereby create a written literature alongside the older oral one. The written corpus contained the same stories, chronicles, and poetry as the one that had been transmitted orally down the generations.

The story that follows comes from the Swahili written tradition, but it was certainly transmitted, told, and retold much earlier in families and public settings. It shows the appropriation of Islam and the proximity of East Africans to the Holy Cities of the faith (Jerusalem as well as Mecca and Medina):

[Muhammad’s Ascension] One morning the Holy Prophet told his companions: “Last night the angel Jiburili [Gabriel] came to me and brought me greetings from the Almighty. He summoned me to come before His throne and receive His commission. I opened the door of the house, and there on the road, and also in the sky, thousands of angels were waiting for me. They all greeted me in chorus.”

. . . Muhammad continued: “I was then taken to the mosque [the Dome of the Rock built by the Umayyads] in Jerusalem. Suddenly I saw the great prophets of the past appear before me: Burahimu [Ibrahim or Abraham], Musa [Moses] and Isa [Jesus]. We exchanged greetings and prayed together. After the prayer, Jiburili led me outside, and there I saw
FIGURE 3 Kilwa, the most prominent of the Swahili cities in the early period. An artist’s reconstruction of the palace, Kilwa Island, Tanzania. Garlake, p. 101.

a golden ladder hanging down from the zenith of the sky to where I was standing. I could not see the top, although the whole ladder radiated like the moon in the night sky.

“As soon as I put my foot on the bottom rung, it soared up in the air with me, and before I knew what was happening we were flying through the clouds. I clung to the ladder, but Jiburili was flying beside me, keeping up with ease on his own huge wings.

“In a moment we were in Heaven, flying over a vast sea. I asked Jiburili what it was, and he told me: ‘That is the blue sky which mortals like you see from the earth.’

“The name of the first level of heaven is Rafiu; its width is 500 years. Jiburili knocked on the gate, and when the voice of an angel answered, ‘Who is it?’ Jiburili stated our business and our names. The angel, whose name was Sumaili, together with his 70,000 angels, bade me welcome. Inside there I saw two arched gateways, and between them there was a throne on which was seated our forefather Adam. We greeted one another with a salaam aleika [peace be upon you], after Jiburili had introduced us. Adam said he was happy that at last Allah had sent me to mankind with His final message of salvation, for many erring souls had been condemned to the Fire since he had first fallen into sin . . . .”

The story is testimony to the strong continuities in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the Abrahamic tradition.
The Swahili Muslims did not strive to spread Islam by preaching, colonization, or the military *jihad*. They were generally content to practice their faith, ply their trades, and interact with the people of the interior who were largely non-Muslim. The spread of Islam inland, and of the Swahili language and culture, did not begin until the eighteenth century.

The pattern of prosperity and autonomy changed dramatically around 1500. Portuguese explorers, using their new maritime technology, rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of the African continent, in their quest to know the world and monopolize the spice trade of Asia. Alongside their commercial goals they carried a very strong “Crusader” vocation, borne out of their experience of “reconquest” when they “wrested” and “wrestled” the Iberian peninsula from Muslim control (see Chapters 6 and 7) with the encouragement of the Pope.

Ever since the First Crusade in the late eleventh century, Rome had urged European Christians to move against Muslim societies and states. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, its efforts were directed particularly at the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans had established their capital at Istanbul, on the site of the “Christian” city of Constantinople, and made significant inroads into southeastern Europe, the area called the Balkans today. They also controlled the two holiest cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, as well as the city that was sacred to three faiths, Jerusalem. The Ottomans had some influence in the horn of Africa, but very little on the Swahili coast.

This detail was lost on the Portuguese explorers, who were animated by religious zeal as well as commercial ambition. They used their artillery and naval superiority to attack the most prosperous Swahili towns. Kilwa, in the Tanzania of today, was destroyed. Mombasa, the biggest city-state on the northern part of the coast, was captured. The period of great Swahili prosperity was over. The Muslim communities now thought of the military *jihad* as a way to defend themselves from non-Muslim attack in much the way that Muhammad began to think in Mecca before the *hijra*.

The Portuguese did not maintain control over the East African coast, but the Swahili did not regain their momentum and prosperity until the eighteenth century. At that time the Omani Arabs became more active along the coast, and in the nineteenth century actually transferred their capital to the island of Zanzibar. The Omani sultans controlled a significant portion of the Swahili region in what we today

call Tanzania and Kenya, primarily for commercial reasons. They continued the trade in ivory and gold, but now added a significant trade in slaves (see Chapter 5). Some were sent to the Middle East and South Asia, whereas others were used at the coast to produce cloves and grain for export. The Zanzibari system resulted in more active contact between coast and hinterland, and the spread of Islam and the Swahili culture to the towns of the interior (Map 3).

These networks laid the basis for the spread of Islam in East Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The main agents of islamization were merchants and teachers, not the reform-minded scholars who became so prominent in West Africa. The Omanis themselves were Kharijites, but most of the older Swahili communities as well as many of the slaves were Sunni. Relations across these doctrinal lines were not difficult. The tradition of military jihad remained a minor theme, except when it came to resistance to European domination. In
the late nineteenth century this threat came in the form of the Germans and British (see Chapters 6 and 11).

The Saharan Gateway and the Berbers

The desert was more of an obstacle than the Indian Ocean, but it could be crossed and it did connect the Sahel to the Mediterranean world. Its ships were the camels, and its sailors were the caravan guides and protectors who knew how to time the movement, find the oases, and ensure protection from raiding parties. Both guides and raiders, until the past few centuries, were Berbers, just like most of the other inhabitants of North Africa and the Sahara.

Their name came from the same Mediterranean lexicon as so many others; it was a version of the term barbarian used by the Greeks and Romans to describe the Others, people who lived outside of the orbit of “civilization.” The Berbers did not speak one language, like the Swahili, but a number of different tongues, distantly related to Arabic and other languages in the huge Afro-Asiatic family. They lived in a variety of different ways, in the desert, mountains, and plains of the continent, and they had a variety of reactions to the religion which the Arabs introduced in the seventh century.

Some of the Berber lived in cities and on farms in what we could call Mediterranean Tunisia and Algeria, and some of them were practicing Christians. The vast majority lived more mobile lives in the mountains and desert. In the early centuries of Islam, many Berbers became Muslim and Arab, whether by enlisting for the conquest of the Iberian peninsula, settling in as subjects of the early dynasties (as in Morocco, the subject of Chapter 7), or becoming merchants in the towns of the Sahara or the Sahel. Sometimes they adopted the new faith as a block: a whole class, town, region, or ethnic group. Most Berber Muslims became Sunni, but some adopted Kharijite forms of the faith. One group, the Fatimids, who dominated Tunisia and Egypt for two centuries, were Shia. Other Berber were resistant to all forms of the new faith.

In Sub-Saharan Africa Berber communities were the first practitioners of Islam, as merchants and guides of the camel caravans. In the states of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Kanem, the best known of the Sahelian states from 800 to 1600 C.E., they ran important networks of trade and added to the prosperity of their host societies. Even
rulers who were not Muslim sought to attract these communities to reinforce the wealth and strength of their dominions. Most of these Berbers kept their distance from the political arena, but one group provides the earliest example of military *jihad* in the western Sahel and Sahara.

The Lamtuna were a nomadic tribe who had adopted Islam in a fashion reminiscent of some of Muhammad’s early Bedouin followers: they “belonged” to the faith but knew very little about it. In the eleventh century their leader went on the pilgrimage to Mecca and returned with a learned Moroccan Muslim by the name of Ibn Yasin. This man became critical of local practice, “converted” the Lamtuna to “true” Islam with the support of the chief, and mobilized an army around his reform message. He then defeated other Berber groups on the northwestern side of Africa who stood in his way. In the process Ibn Yasin and his followers and successors weakened the Ghana Empire, established their sway over the desert, and conquered Morocco and Muslim Spain. They acquired the name of Almoravids, or *al-murabitun*, “those of the fortress,” which became “marabout” in local parlance. They became the prototype of militant Islamic practice for succeeding generations of Saharans and West Africans. The Almoravid heritage forms a kind of social charter for the ruling class of today’s Mauritania.

It is useful to quote one account of the mobilization of Ibn Yasin, because his example was often invoked by reformers of much later generations in Africa. It is also interesting to see the formulas that authors used to express the message of reform. In this case the quote comes from a writer in Fez, the intellectual capital of Morocco, in the early fourteenth century:

*He [Ibn Yasin] began to teach them the Book [Quran] and the Sunna, the ritual ablutions, the prayer, the almsgiving, and like obligations which God had imposed on them. When they had become versed in these matters, and had become numerous, he preached to them, admonished them, made them long for Paradise and fear Hell, ordered them to fear God, to command good and forbid evil, and told them of God’s reward and great recompense for these actions. Then he called upon them to make Holy War on the tribes of Sanhaja [the confederation dominating the western part of the Sahara] who opposed them, saying: “O Almoravids, you are a numerous body, the chiefs of your tribes and the heads of your clans. God has reformed you and led you to His straight path and put you under an obligation to be thankful for*
His grace and to command good and forbid evil and to fight the Holy War for His sake.”

They replied: “O blessed Shaikh, make what commands you will, you will find us obedient. Were you to order us to kill our parents we should do so.” “Go with God’s blessing,” said he. “Warn your people. Make them fearful of God’s punishment. Tell them of his proofs. If they repent, return to the truth, and abandon their ways, let them be. But if they refuse, continue in their error, and persist in their wrongheadedness, then we shall ask for God’s help against them and wage Holy War on them till God shall judge between us, for He is the Best of Judges.”

Both the merchants and the militant Almoravids held on to their Berber languages long after they became Muslim. The process of arabization was slow, and its vehicle was not the early armies who conquered the Mediterranean zones. It came later from Bedouins, desert nomads, who spread from the Arabian peninsula across North Africa and filtered down into the desert from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. In fact these nomads did not succeed in the central zones (the Saharan portions of today’s Algeria, Mali, and Niger), where the Tuareg people, their Berber language (tamasheq), and its ancient script (tifinagh) remain dominant.

Berber and Swahili Muslims lived at the two principal gateways into Sub-Saharan Africa and played critical roles in demonstrating the practice of Islam and making it available to other groups of people. The faith did not spread automatically, easily, or without significant adaptations. Africans might appropriate Islam in the more inclusive way of the Swahili tradition or in the more radical and exclusive form of the Almoravids. In the next chapter I look more closely at a whole range of appropriations.

Further Reading

The general histories of Islam mentioned in the introduction all deal with the conquest of North Africa and the drive into the Iberian peninsula to create the “Andalusian” or Spanish Muslim civilization; to a lesser degree they deal with the spread of Islam south of the Sahara. For an imaginative construction of what it might have meant to be Berber in the western extreme of North Africa at the time of the Arab conquests, see the novel of the Moroccan writer Driss Chraibi, Mother Spring (Three Continents Press, 1989, translation from the French version of 1982). The best synthesis on the Berbers of North Africa, including their resistance to and appropriation of Islam, is Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress’ The Berbers (Blackwell, 1996).
The three “phases” of Sub-Saharan islamization can be found in most books on Islam in Africa, including Levtzion and Pouwels’ *History of Islam*. They are especially prominent in the understanding of islamization in West Africa, beginning with the leading commentator on African Islam for many decades, J. Spencer Trimingham (see his *History of Islam in West Africa* and a variety of other works). They continue in two relatively recent syntheses, Mervyn Hiskett’s *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (Longman, 1984) and Peter Clarke’s *West Africa and Islam* (Edward Arnold, 1982).


The Almoravid movement can be pursued in Lapidus and in Levtzion’s article in the *History of Islam*. The passage comes from a work of translation by Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins’ *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), which is an invaluable source for the “medieval” history of West Africa and the processes of islamization. For a novel written by a Senegalese Muslim in the 1950s that reflects the strong reform tradition and is set in an area not far from the Almoravid domain, see Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* (Heinemann, 1971, translation from the French edition of 1962).

Ken Harrow has edited two very useful volumes on Islamic themes in African literature that I cited at the end of the introduction: *Faces of Islam in African Literature* and *The Marabout and the Muse*. 