

**Literacy And  
Scholarship  
In Muslim  
West Africa  
In The  
Pre-colonial Period**

BY J. O. HUNWICK

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**LITERACY AND SCHOLARSHIP IN MUSLIM WEST AFRICA  
IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD**

*(Two Public Lectures delivered at the Institute of African Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, on 22nd and 23rd March, 1972).*

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The published version of these lectures is dedicated with his gracious  
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*to*

H. H. ALHAJI ADO BAYERO,

*Chancellor, University of Nigeria.*

*Emir of Kano*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is pleased to 'launch' yet another publication geared towards the dissemination of knowledge.

In the series, the lectures of eminent scholars delivered under the auspices of the Institute, would be published as "Occasional Papers". The first in the series begins with "Literacy and Scholarship in Muslim West Africa in the Pre-Colonial Period", by Professor John O. Hunwick of the Department of History, University of Ghana.

Professor Hunwick, in his own right an outstanding authority in Islamic Studies, has attempted to prove that contrary to earlier befogged views, the Muslims of West Africa until quite recently generally constituted the educated elite. In his usual scholarly approach, he has furthermore examined the role of literacy in the history of West African Muslim Societies. In the second lecture, Professor Hunwick has systematically analysed the trends in Islamic Scholarship in its West African environment.

Although as expected we might not all share his views, there is no doubt that the author has ably thrown some light into the rich and ancient Islamic Culture and Civilization and also opened new grounds for research into Islamic Scholarship.

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## FOREWORD

In preparing these two lectures for the press at the request of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, which sponsored them, I felt it would be useful to add one or two brief notes, chiefly to identify more accurately the sources of quotations and to clarify further a few small points.

I have also added a brief list of some of the more readily available secondary works which were found helpful in preparing the lectures, as a guide to those who wish to read further in topics I could only sketch broadly in the compass of a lecture. My indebtedness to other sources, both primary and secondary, and to discussions with valued colleagues over the years, is too great to be acknowledged here. Needless to say, however, I take full responsibility for the personal views put forward in these lectures.

J. O. HUNWICK

Legon, April 1972.

## THE RÔLE OF LITERACY IN WEST AFRICAN MUSLIM SOCIETY IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

It is one of the curious ironies of history that in modern times, the Muslim peoples of West Africa have often been labelled by their Christian countrymen as 'backward', 'uneducated' and even 'illiterate'. It may be explained that these terms are not to be understood in an absolute sense and indeed, the implicit assumption behind such remarks is that the Muslims are 'backward' in regard to European-inspired technology and science, that they are 'uneducated' in terms of a school system and curriculum derived from European models and 'illiterate' in regard to the ability to read and write a European language expressed in the Roman alphabet. These same people, however, may be able to read and write Arabic with ease and perhaps also express their mother tongue with the help of Arabic characters and may have been receiving instruction since childhood in a system which had its origins in Fez or Cairo a thousand years ago. Such persons belong to an intellectual tradition in West Africa which studied Logic and Prosody as well as the legal and theological sciences in 16th century Timbuktu; a tradition to which belonged a man such as Muhammad Bello who thanked the first European visitor to his court profusely for the gift of a copy of Euclid, since his own had recently been destroyed in a fire.<sup>1</sup> Until the turn of this century, the Muslims of West Africa represented, in general, the educated elite, for though, in terms of scientific and industrial advancement they were far behind the Europeans whose technology was advancing inland from the coasts, Muslim societies possessed and had possessed for centuries a technological instrument which gave them an advantage over other neighbouring societies and which these non-Muslim societies were often anxious to share—the technology of writing. In the first of these two lectures, I want to examine the origins of this technology in the West African context and the role which literacy has played in the history of West African Muslim societies.

The first question we should, perhaps, look at is the relationship between literacy and religion. In Christianity, for example, the relationship is not very explicit. The focus of the Christian religion is a man — Christ, but the focus of Islam is a book, *The Book*, the Qur'an, despite the misleading impression created by the European label of Muhammadanism. The Muslims believe the Qur'an to be a verbatim revelation from God of His External Word and to represent the summation of the divine will for mankind. It is for this reason that the Qur'an has been held to be, *ipso facto* untranslatable. The New Testament makes no such claims for itself, nor are such claims made on its behalf.

It is acknowledged to be a record of the sayings and deeds of Jesus, his disciples and his apostles. As such, it is more closely paralleled by the *hadith* literature of Islam. The central and dominant position of a book, a sacred scripture, in Islam may in some way help to explain why the Muslims, on the one hand, produced a vast literature both creative and scholastic in the first five hundred years of the religion's existence, whereas Christianity produced relatively little over a comparable period.

The emphasis on reading and writing is evident right from the birth of Islam, even though the Arabs of the early sixth century constituted a basically pre-literate society and Muhammad himself was apparently illiterate. The first verses of the Qur'an proclaimed by Muhammad were the divine command:

Read! In the name of thy Lord who created,  
Who created man from a drop of blood.  
Read! For thy Lord is most Generous,  
Who taught by the pen,  
Taught man what he knew not.<sup>2</sup>

A later commentator on the Qur'an (Al-Zamakhshari, d. 1143) remarked, concerning these verses: 'God taught human beings that which they did not know.....and made them aware of the inestimable blessings of the knowledge of writing, for great benefits accrue therefrom which God alone encompasses. For without the knowledge of writing no other knowledge could be comprehended, nor the sciences placed within bounds, nor the history of the ancients be acquired and their sayings recorded, nor the revealed books be written.'

There are a number of other references to writing in the Qur'an, but the two most important ones are those which raise writing under certain circumstances to the level of a religious obligation. In the second chapter, for example (2:282), after verses prohibiting usury, there comes the command:

O you who believe, if you contract a debt for a fixed term, then record it and let a scribe write it down before you in equity. No scribe should refuse to write, in accordance with what God has taught him, and let him who has contracted the debt dictate.

In another passage on the freeing of slaves (24:33) the master is instructed to draw up a written document of manumission.

In the society in which Muhammad lived and worked, there were few persons who could read and write and writing materials

were scarce. The primitive 'constitution' of the nascent Islamic state in Madina was committed to writing since it involved many different groups of persons, including Jews and pagans, and we know that Muhammad dictated some letters to scribes and had a written version made of his treaty with the Meccans in 629. Some of the revelations which together came to form the Qur'an were also written down, though in the main, the Arabs preferred to trust to their memories as they had done for generations and as they continued to do long after the art of writing became fairly wide-spread.<sup>3</sup>

But that Islam gave a profound impetus to a movement of literacy and subsequently of scholarship which spread out as the borders of the lands of Islam expanded cannot be doubted. In the first place, written communication was essential for the purely utilitarian purpose of accurate communication over the wide empire which sprang up within a decade of the Prophet's death. By the close of the 7th century, this empire stretched from Morocco to India and though, at first, day-to-day administration of the former provinces of the Byzantine and Sasanid empires was carried on in Coptic, Greek, Aramiac or Persian, a series of orthographical reforms made possible the use of Arabic for these purposes. A standard form of written Arabic, based on that of the Qur'an — which was, by definition as the Word of God, perfect Arabic — came to be accepted. Having become thus unchangeable, the written form of Arabic — already somewhat artificial in the Prophet's day — came to be a purely formal mode of expression divorced from the common speech. Since this kind of Arabic, i.e. Qur'anic Arabic, was only used for written purposes, its teaching had to be through a written method; it was not possible to 'pick up' this form of the language simply by the normal processes of contact with Arabic speakers. The spread of Islam thus came to involve the spread of literacy in Arabic, in order to be able to understand the Divine Word and the law which was based directly upon it. Qur'anic Arabic thus became the literary, diplomatic and business medium not only in areas where Arabs settled in large numbers, but also very often in areas where few Arabs penetrated and no significant number settled: Indonesia, Malaya, India, Central Asia, Persia and Turkey to a great extent, and in West Africa in those areas generally known as the Western and Central Sudan.

The Arab conquest of North Africa belongs essentially to the last quarter of the 7th century and forms part of the second wave of expansion of the domains of Islam. The first wave, which was separated from the second by a period of civil war and communal strife, occurred at a period when the majority of the invaders were illiterate nomads. By the time of the second wave, nearly half a century later, the art of writing was much more wide-spread and the arabicisation

of the administration was beginning to get under way.<sup>4</sup> These conquests which assumed a more permanent character with the foundation of Qairawan in the centre of what is now Tunisia, in 670, brought the Muslim armies (now reinforced with Berbers) to a point where they were able to embark on the conquest of Spain by 711. Their conquering energies were thus turned north-wards into Europe rather than south-wards across the Sahara. There were two attempts to lead military expeditions across the Sahara, if our sources are to be believed: the first in 668 (under 'Uqba ibn Nafi') raided the Fezzan area of central Libya and made a probe as far south as the Bilma oasis half way across to Lake Chad. The second, in 739, was a temporary extension of military activity into the western Sahara, chiefly, it is said, to obtain slaves, but it may not be unconnected with a search for gold which the Arabs would have learnt was obtained from across the Sahara. But these two raids could have been of no material consequence for the introduction of either the Islamic religion or Arabic literacy to West Africa.<sup>5</sup> It is to the peaceful processes of trade that we must look for the origins of both these phenomena.

By the end of the 8th century, a number of important Muslim centres had grown up in North Africa: Tripoli, which had been formerly a Roman city, Qairawan (founded 670), Tahert in central Algeria, (founded 778), Tlemcen, once a Roman camp (Pomaria) re-established c.790, Fez, founded also about the same time, and Sijilmasa, an oasis area on the Saharan side of the Great Atlas and centre of a small state from 757. All of these towns were important centres of trade, and Qairawan, Tlemcen and Fez soon grew into centres of learning as well. For the trans-Saharan trade, the centres of Sijilmasa, Tahert and Tripoli were of prime importance. Sijilmasa was the northern terminus of the route to Awdaghast and thence to Ancient Ghana. From Tahert in the 9th century an important route led to Warghla in the northern Sahara where it was joined by a route from Qairawan, and from Warghla a single route led across the Sahara to Tadmekkat and thence to Gao on the Niger Bend. The most easterly route led across from Tripoli through the Fezzan to Bilma and thence to Kanem. A cross-route from Egypt south-westwards to the Niger Bend and thence to Ancient Ghana existed also in the 9th century.

Given this pattern of trans-Saharan trade routes, it is no surprise to find that the earliest references to Muslim communities and conversions of chiefs to Islam come from those areas of sub-Saharan Africa to which these routes led: the ruler of Takrur (modern Futa Toro in Senegal) was converted before 1040 and there were Muslim communities along the upper Senegal river before 1068: before this date too a ruler of Malel (a Manding chief) had been converted and a ruler at Gao was allegedly a Muslim though his people were not;

before 1100 a ruler of Kanem had accepted Islam. The introduction of Islam into West Africa, then, was closely associated with the activities of Muslim traders, and this pattern is also very much in evidence in the internal diffusion of Islam within West Africa.

The connection between trade and the spread of Islam has been noticed by many writers. Trade had been the mainstay of the Meccan economy in which Islam was nurtured and under Islam, it was considered an honourable livelihood. The subject is treated of extensively in the sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) and the law books go into minute detail on the processes of buying and selling, contracts, debts and the other facets of the commercial life. Trade was not, therefore, confined to the hands of the worldly-minded among the Muslims, but was also an activity in which pious and even learned men might engage. To take but a single and now well-documented example, though from a much later period: in the eighteenth century, Mukhtar al-Kunti, the saintly and learned leader of the Qadiriyya Order in the southern Sahara, gained a substantial livelihood from trading, particularly in Saharan salt, using the funds acquired to feed and house his pupils and in the propagation of the teachings of the Qadiriyya.

Long-distance trade, particularly in such primary items as gold, salt, horses and kola-nuts and secondary products such as cloth, beads, cowries and manufactured wares, became a monopoly of the Muslim merchants.<sup>6</sup> There were a number of reasons why international trade, whether the trans-Saharan conducted by Arabs and Berbers or the internal West African conducted first by Dyula and later by Hausa merchants, became largely a Muslim monopoly. Firstly, adherence to Islam gave the trader a supra-tribal identity; his highest loyalty was always to the universal Islamic state under the caliph, no matter how notional this system became. This gave the Muslim trader a respectable guise of neutrality as he passed from the area of authority of one chief to another, for certainly no self-respecting Muslim could have a first loyalty (or perhaps any loyalty at all) to a pagan chief. This neutral aspect of the Muslim trader was remarked on by many of the early European traders on the West African coast.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, this supra-tribal identity meant that Muslims would be inclined to co-operate among themselves within the bond of the faith rather than of ethnic relationships, to the exclusion of non-Muslims. Very often, of course, it happened that religion and ethnic origin coincided (though not, of course, vice-versa), but this was certainly not the case at those points where the North African merchants' sphere of activity gave way to the sphere of the West African merchants along the transitional belt from the Sahara to the savannah.

Merchants of the same religion who thereby shared a common adherence, to a mutually acknowledged system of law, knew the basis upon which they transacted their business with each other and how appeal could be made in cases of dispute.

The third important factor was literacy. It is doubtful if a complex long-distance trading enterprise could be carried on without the advantages which literacy gives. It was essential, for example, to be able to record who had contributed what goods or what capital sum when a caravan was being despatched, and thus to be able to compute each man's share in the profits on its return, for these caravans were invariably joint-stock enterprises. Information on prices at both ends of a route and also at intermediate points, on the state of the markets and for future travellers, the state of the route, needed to be recorded. Arabic geography in fact owes its origins largely to the need for accurate publicly available information about the physical and political conditions of the 'routes and kingdoms' (*al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*) through which merchants travelled. The fullest account we have of Ancient Ghana, for example, comes from the 'Book of Routes and Kingdoms' of the Spanish-Arab geographer Al-Bakri (writing in 1068) who provides this and such other information about the Western Sudan as he was able to gather in connection with routes leading southwards from Sijilmasa and Qairawan.

Two well-known early examples of literacy in the service of trade are, perhaps, worth quoting. The first dates from about the year 951 when the geographer Ibn Hawqal remarked with some considerable surprise, on a debit note for 42,000 dinars (equivalent to about 1/4 ton of gold) which he says he saw in Awdaghast, made out by a man of Sijilmasa against a merchant of Awdaghast.<sup>8</sup> The second concerns the Maqqari family trading combine in the 13th century. Five brothers operated from a base at Tlemcen in western Algeria where two of them stayed. Two others were based in Walata, the southern Saharan caravan terminal which rose to prominence after the decline of Ancient Ghana; there they bought gold dust, hides, ivory and kola-nuts. The fifth brother stayed in Sijilmasa where he could be fed with information on prices, qualities and demands from both ends of the network for onward transmission to the opposite number, thus ensuring minimum wastage and maximum profits. Such specialised and highly confidential information could only be sent by means of letters.

Islam, and the literacy to which it gave access, was a valuable — one might say well-nigh-indispensable — asset for the trader. Was the same true as far as the rulers were concerned? The advantages to a ruler of adopting Islam seem to be rather less obvious. If a ruler were directly

involved in trade, the adoption of Islam might enable him to get better terms, or perhaps to obtain 'strategic' commodities — swords, chain-mail, horses, etc. — which it would be unlawful for a Muslim trader to supply to a non-Muslim. Trade of any sort with unbelievers was not looked upon very favourably, though the Islamic maxim 'Necessity makes lawful what is normally forbidden' (*al-darura tubih al-mahzurat*) could always be pleaded; nevertheless, on grounds of public as well as private principle, the traders would have felt happier if they could convert the rulers with whom they had to deal. As we shall see, being a Muslim ruler did not necessarily open wide the doors to supplies of strategic goods. And on the other hand, the ruler's non-acceptance of Islam did not debar his state from fruitful contact with the Islamic trading network or, in several known cases, from at least some of the advantages of Arabic literacy.

The most obvious case of the latter state of affairs is that of Ancient Ghana described by Al-Bakri. There the ruler was a non-Muslim, though apparently well-disposed towards Muslims. He allowed the Muslim merchants to establish a town of their own near his capital (a forerunner of the modern Zongos and Sabon Garis) and he employed Muslims in the most important state posts as ministers, including one who was in charge of finances, and as 'interpreters', who presumably handled the diplomatic side of foreign affairs. Such persons were clearly employed because they possessed certain skills which were not available to those who were of the king's religion. These were first and foremost literacy and following on this some accounting knowledge and familiarity with the financial and diplomatic usages of Ghana's northern Muslim neighbours. The earliest firm piece of evidence we possess for state correspondence from Africa south of the Sahara, in fact, is the mention of a letter from the ruler of Ghana to the leader of the Almoravid movement, evidently written before the foundation of Marrakesh in 1070.<sup>9</sup>

Literacy was, of course, essential for any state that wished to maintain relations with states to the north of the Sahara, as Mali did in the 14th century, Songhay in the 16th century and Kanem-Bornu from the 12th right through to the 19th century. In the late 16th century under Mai Idris Aloma, for example, Bornu could establish diplomatic contact with the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople to discuss the security of its merchants travelling in Libya and their right of possession of a fortress bordering Ottoman-held Fezzan, just as two centuries earlier it had written to the Mamluk sultan of Egypt to protest against the enslavement of its Muslim citizens by predatory Arab nomads. In the same letter to the Ottoman sultan, Mai Idris asked for military aid which met with an official refusal. Undismayed, the Mai turned to the Ottoman's chief rival in Africa, the Sa'dian sultan of Morocco

and a correspondence ensued which ultimately led to Bornu's ruler signing a written document of allegiance (1583), the text of which has been preserved. I have also recently published a piece of correspondence between Morocco and Kebbi dating from the last decade of the 16th century.<sup>10</sup>

Literacy could also be a valuable asset in inter-state communication within West Africa. In the 19th century, both Ashanti and Oyo found it useful to employ Muslim scribes who could draft Arabic correspondence for them, though the rulers of these states and the whole ethos of the two states were distinctly non-Muslim. But Ashanti found it desirable to be in touch with the rulers of Gonja and Dagomba and later with Samori, and Oyo would have found contact with Sokoto (and one may suspect, Bornu) necessary. Between one Muslim state and another we have plenty of examples in the nineteenth century. The best known is undoubtedly the debate between Muhammad Bello and the Shehu of Bornu Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi, which the former made public in his book *Infaq al-Maisur*.<sup>11</sup> There was also important correspondence between the Sokoto jihad leaders and Seku Ahmadu of Masina and between Al-Hajj 'Umar and Ahmad al-Bakka'i of Timbuktu.

Within a single state, literacy could also be a considerable advantage, especially if the state were large in territorial extent and embraced people of diverse ethnic origins and languages. In this connection, one thinks particularly of Mali in the 14th and Songhay in the 16th centuries and in the modern period of the jihadist states, especially 19th century Sokoto and Masina. In a far-flung empire, it was essential for the ruler to keep in close touch with his provincial governors, his revenue collectors, his military commanders when in the field and, in any state which was being run along Islamic lines, with the judges and the legal and theological scholars who gave him political and moral advice.

The virtues of maintaining communication with these groups of persons by written rather than by oral means are numerous. Firstly, a letter bearing the ruler's seal would constitute a sure authority both in the eyes of the recipient and in the eyes of anyone who might attempt to molest the messenger. This would also mean that any person could be delegated to carry a royal message, and might travel securely. Obviously too, the accuracy of the message delivered is guaranteed by writing it and the ruler could keep a copy in his archives. These two factors become important when long distances, taking a month or more to cover, are involved and when, as a consequence, the time elapsed between the message being sent and the reply being received might be up to three months. Another potential advantage is that the secrecy of a message may be better guaranteed when it is written, assuming

the bearer is unable to read and the general level of literacy in the society is rather low. Clearly, too, there were disadvantages to written communication. It is only workable if the sender and the recipient possess roughly equivalent skills in the language used. On one occasion, for example, Bornu ran into some difficulty in expressing itself to the Moroccans during the exchanges of 1584 alluded to above and the Sa'dian sultan was quick to make capital out of this. A written message might be totally lost en route, or stolen and if the messenger had not been informed of the contents a break-down in communications would result. What is committed to writing can also be fairly easily forged. Sultan al-Mansur of Morocco, for example, was not above forging a letter purporting to come from a brother of Askia Ishaq II prior to his invasion of Songhay in 1591. In the 19th century, Mahdist proclamations were freely forged and Seku Ahmadu of Masina circulated copies of a forged chapter of a 16th century book (the *Ta'rikh al-Fattash*) allegedly containing contemporary prophecies about himself.

There were other state uses of literacy besides the sending of letters. The use of writing made possible the issue of grants of privilege, the drawing up of deeds of endowment, peace treaties and allied documents such as the act of allegiance referred to above, and the issue of public proclamations and announcements. Examples of all these usages could be cited from West Africa in the pre-colonial period. In times of upheaval and uncertainty, the dissemination of official information could be very important in counteracting wild rumour and maintaining order and security, or, on the other hand, in mobilising public opinion and propagandising on behalf of the central government. Such was certainly the case in the Sokoto caliphate in the early 19th century. The call to *jihad* was made in a widely circulated proclamation and thereafter addresses and exhortations to the Muslim community were sent out to the various provinces to be read at Friday prayers. William Brown, in a recent thesis on the Masina caliphate of the 1820s, has noted that Seku Ahmadu's government 'circulated pronouncements, homilies to be read out at Friday prayer, instructions and important state documents such as reports of military engagements and letters from external authorities (including replies) at least to the regional level, whence they trickled down to the village *amir* or *imam*'.<sup>12</sup>

One usage of literacy at the state level is surprisingly absent from West Africa in general. That is the use of writing for inscriptions on royal tombstones, or on public monuments such as mosques erected with royal largesse and on coinage. I know of only one example of inscribed tombstones recording the deaths of rulers; those found near Gao recording some 12th century princes of whom nothing further is really known. There never seems to have been a tradition of inscribing coinage, in spite of the fact that this symbolizes in the Islamic world

the authority and independence of the ruler. Both the 11th century writer Al-Bakri and the 16th century traveller Leo Africanus remarked on the absence of inscriptions from the local gold coins in circulation in the area of the Niger Bend. Absence of inscriptions on buildings may be explained by the fact that most buildings were made of baked clay (and have for that reason perished), but it may be that archaeology, which for the Islamic areas of Africa in particular remains a very under-exploited tool of historical research, will later reveal inscribed plaques, tombstones, coins and other artefacts.

The increasing use made of the new technology of literacy in West Africa, both at the official and private levels, led to the growth of a literate class equipped with the necessary skills. For long the arts of reading and writing could only be acquired through the acquisition of a complex and very formalised foreign language—Arabic. It was perhaps not until the 17th century that some African languages were being written in the Arabic script and it is most likely that persons who became literate in their own languages in this way would have first become literate in the Arabic language itself. Beyond this basic skill were others which men engaged in specialised tasks would have to acquire. The treasurer had to know the principles of mathematics (a subject regularly taught in Islamic colleges); the secretary had to be acquainted with the formulae for addressing various classes of persons according to their rank and, because of his closeness to the ruler, he was expected to advise on matters of diplomatic protocol and often on the history and present political state of countries with whose sovereigns his patron was corresponding. Judges were often scholars in their own right, particularly in the bigger centres and, because of the sacred nature of Islamic law, they had to be versed not only in legal theory and case-law (*fatawi*), but also in theology and dogmatics.

On a less exalted level, though with a job of great practical importance, was the copyist. It should not be forgotten that the first Arabic printing press on the African continent was one which Napoleon brought with him to Egypt in 1798. In North Africa, a few books were lithographed at Fez before this date, but the flow of multiple copies of books from either source is basically a phenomenon of the second half of the 19th century. Until very recent times, West African Muslims have been wholly dependent on the labours of copyists for their prayer-books, catechisms, Qura'ns and books in all fields of knowledge, both sacred and secular. Indeed, the copyist's art is not yet a dead one.

The copyist himself had to be acquainted not merely with how to write, but also to a reasonable degree with the Arabic language to prevent errors and enable him to detect omissions. He also had to acquire a professional knowledge of the art of calligraphy. In particular,

the copying of the Qur'an called for a high degree of skill and patient labour. This was not only because every single vowel-mark and orthographic sign had to be inserted (unlike most ordinary texts), but because a minute error in transcribing the sacred text leads to the perversion of God's word and perhaps to a heretical statement. Bornu was especially celebrated for its calligraphy which derived its style from an early Tunisian form. In the early 19th century, Bornu exported hand-written Qur'ans to Tripoli and Egypt. Nor was this a case of 'carrying coals to Newcastle'! The copies were sold in these Arabic-speaking lands for forty or fifty dollars a piece. In 16th century Timbuktu, there were skilled copyists for all types of book who were paid in gold according to the volume of material copied and the text was (in the case of a dictionary I have examined) vowelled and corrected by a second person who received half the remuneration of the first.

There must have been many other openings for the literate man, but unfortunately our sources—or those so far known—give little information and the vast majority of documents written before the 20th century have perished. What remains of them can only be the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, we may infer the existence of, for example, librarians who would doubtless also act as copyists. In 16th century Songhay, the ruler, Askia Dawud (1549—82), is credited with setting up libraries. At the same period in Timbuktu, there were very considerable private libraries. The scholar Ahmad Baba (d.1627) alone possessed 1,600 books at the time of his deportation to Morocco in 1591, and he remarked that he had the smallest library among his colleagues in Timbuktu. Even at the present time, at least one private library there contains close on 1,000 books for which the late owner produced a catalogue which is partly by way of being a guide to West African Arabic literature. There must also have been a class of public letter-writers as well as clerks retained by local government officials and merchants, at least in the bigger centres such as Jenne, Timbuktu, Kano and Katsina. There would also be clerks attached to judges to record cases and sentences. This is also known to have happened in at least one non-Muslim state in the 19th century; in Ashanti, a Muslim secretary who had formerly been at the court of the Alafin of Oyo, kept records of political events and court proceedings were reported (by him or another — it is not clear) in Arabic. In the same state, war casualties were also recorded in Arabic.

We come finally to what is, perhaps, the most widespread use to which the art of writing was put in West Africa, since it required little more than a rudimentary literacy: the writing of charms and talismans. The popularity of amulets enclosing a piece of paper with Arabic writing on it seems to have been almost equal among Muslims and among non-Muslims who were in any way in contact with things

Islamic. Indeed, it is probably true that the purveying of Arabic amulets, domestic talismans and magico-medical prescriptions played an important part in predisposing people towards Islam as a religion and way of life, thus eventually engendering a complete break (at least formally) with animist or ancestral cults. That Islam could cater for these 'basic' needs and, on a higher plane, was able to replace ancestor cults, sacrifices, oracles, etc., with parallel but Islamic forms, is surely one of the fundamental causes of its popularity in Africa. Unlike Christianity, it had a complete and satisfyingly rationalised system of law and social conduct to replace, little by little, the indigenous systems and thus was able to avoid the creation of a cultural vacuum, or at best a cultural ambivalence, which has generally been consequent upon the adoption of Christianity in Africa.

The important role of the amulets which the Muslims made is attributable to the fact that they contain writing and to their exclusive nature as products of another culture unable to be imitated. Jack Goody, the Cambridge anthropologist, has summed up the significance of the Muslim charm in a non-Muslim environment in his description of the house of a LoDagaa chief at Birifi (N. Ghana) who had talismans hanging from the rafters of his house. The chief was no Muslim, but 'he saw in the Muslim's capacity to write, a more effective means of supernatural communication..... the very fact that writing enables a man to communicate over space and time makes it more effective as a way of getting in touch with distant deities.'<sup>13</sup> The strong belief in the efficacy of Muslim amulets has been emphasised by many European travellers in West Africa from Barbot (1732) and Park (1799) to Marty in the 1920s. Indeed, the emphasis they place on the charm-writing activities of literate Muslims has served to create the false impression that the Muslims were mainly charlatans and pedlars of magic and the non-Muslims credulous fools. But the trade in talismans brought benefit to both parties. In early 19th century Ashanti, for example, the Muslims supplied large numbers of protective talismans for the warriors in the Asantehene's army. On the Ashanti side, this gave the soldiers a courage and confidence in battle that often led to victory. On the Muslim side, it led to the Muslim leaders enjoying a rare degree of confidence from the rulers and hence trading advantages and permission to proselytise. At one point, their activities almost led to the adoption of Islam by a ruler.

Finally, I come back to a point I began with: the relationship between literacy and religion. On the one hand, conversion to Islam may (and indeed ideally *should*) lead to the acquisition of a degree of literacy—at least sufficient to enable the convert to read the Qur'an. But the existence of schools for teaching the rudiments of Arabic and Qur'anic recitation to Muslim children attracted also those who did

not, on entry, share the faith. Like their counterparts in the forest and coast lands who, willy-nilly, acquired Christianity along with European education, the children of the savannah lands became Muslims by the acculturation process inherent in the Islamic educational system; for the Islamic educational system was intimately linked to the requirements of religion.

Non-Muslims did not, of course, send their children to school with conversion in mind—though this seems to have been almost inevitable—but rather with their improvement which would lead to the improvement of the whole family. Mungo Park observed that most of the seventeen male pupils at a village school at Kamaliyya (modern Mali) were sons of pagans, and he adds: 'Their parents therefore could have no predilection for the doctrines of Mahomet. Their aim was their children's improvement'.<sup>14</sup> This attitude is well illustrated in the actions of the Asantehene Osei Tutu who sent some members of his household to study at the Muslim school in Kumasi and would have sent others to the English school at Cape Coast had he not been restrained by pressure from his chiefs.

In the 1880s, the Frenchman, Binger, remarked on the relationship of education to conversion in the Kong-Bobo-Dyulassou area where the Muslims of Kong had embarked on a policy of settling Muslim families in all the villages along the road between these two towns.

Each of these immigrants organised a school, asked some of the inhabitants to send their children there, then, little by little, through their relations with Kong and other commercial centres, they were able to render service to the pagan king of the area, to gain his confidence and gradually to take part in his affairs. If difficulty arises, it is always a Muslim who is appealed to. Even if he be quite alone in the country, the king will empower him to negotiate, because he is usually able to read and write and has the reputation of being a good and holy man.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of skills arising from literacy and beyond that, the role of education in the conversion process, is highlighted by Le Chatelier writing at the close of the 19th century about the activities of the Qadiriyya order along the northern borders of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia:

These initiates formed centres of Islamic influence in the midst of the pagan populations among whom they are welcomed as public scribes, legists, writers of amulets and schoolmasters; gradually they would acquire influence over their new surroundings and isolated cases of conversion would soon grow into a little band

of converts, the most promising of whom would be sent to complete their studies at the chief centre of the order; here they might remain for several years, until they had perfected their theological studies and would then return to their native place, fully equipped for the work of spreading the faith among their fellow-countrymen.<sup>16</sup>

These, then, are some of the effects of literacy and the consequences which knowledge of the art of writing and the acquisition of this knowledge had on societies in West Africa in the pre-colonial period. In my second lecture, I shall be looking at the higher stages of the literate process, scholarship, and the effects which access to the ideas of men, distant in both space and time had on the minds and actions of the Muslims of West Africa.

#### Notes

1. The visitor was Captain Clapperton who gave Bello the copy of Euclid on his second visit (1826). During his first visit (1824) he had been astonished at his host's knowledge of early Christian sects.
2. Surat al-'Alaq (96) vv. 1-5.
3. An 'authorised' text of the Qur'an was compiled in the caliphate of 'Uthman (644-56) and written copies sent to the leading centres of the Islamic empire. But, till today, the title *hafiz*—one who has memorized the entire Qur'an—remains a very cherished one.
4. The first 'wave' of expansion belongs chiefly to the caliphate of 'Umar (634-44), the second to the period 670-710, though there was no complete standstill in the intervening period.
5. Lewicki (*Studia Islamica* xxii, 203-14) believes that the islamisation of the veiled Sanhaja of the Western Sahara began at this time, but the positive effects of this on West Africa still belong to a later period.
6. Slaves were also sent northwards from the early Islamic period and perhaps before.
7. e.g. Jobson (*The Golden Trade*, London, 1623, p.99), who wrote: 'One chief reason to encourage their travel, we have learned, which is, that they have free recourse through all places, so that howsoever the kings and countries are at warres, and up in arms, the one against the other, yet still the Mary-bucke (i.e. marabout-literate Muslim) is a privileged person, and may follow his trade or course of travelling, without any let or interruption of either side.'
8. I do not share the scepticism of Levzion (*J. African History* ix (1968), 223-34) on the question of Ibn Hawqal's visit to Awdaghost.
9. See the anonymous late 12th century *Kitab al-Istibsar*, *Alexandria*, 1968, p. 219.
10. I have discussed Mai Idris Aloma's relations with the Ottomans and the Sa'dians in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.) *History of West Africa*, i (London, 1971), 209-12. The Morocco-Kebbi correspondence appears in *J. Hist. Soc. of Nigeria* v, 4(1971), 575-81.
11. The best English version available of the key letters in this correspondence is to be found in T. L. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives* (London, 1960), 198-205.
12. W. A. Brown, 'The Caliphate of Hamdullahi ca. 1834-1864: a study in African history and tradition', Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969, pp. 6-7.
13. See his *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), 201.
14. *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (London, 1816) i, 471.
15. English translation quoted from E. D. Morel, *Affairs of West Africa* (London, 1902), 221.
16. English translation quoted from E. D. Morel, op. cit., 220.

## ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN ITS WEST AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

IN my first lecture, I referred to the central place held in Islam by a book—the Qur'an—and the emphasis thereby laid upon the ability to read and write. But these very arts of reading and writing open the door to the acquisition of knowledge of all types, including knowledge derived from the scholarship of other literate cultures. Islam itself is a religion of 'knowledge' (*'ilm*). One of the names of God frequently mentioned in the Qur'an is *al-'Alim*, the Knower (or the Omniscient) and there are frequent exhortations to the Believers to 'consider', 'reflect upon' or take a 'lesson' (*'ibra*) from one or other of the wonders of nature or from the stories of former prophets and earlier civilisations. The Prophet Muhammad himself is credited with such sayings as 'Seek knowledge, even from (as far away as) China' and 'The ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr'. Even if the literal authenticity of such sayings may be called into question, they undeniably reflect the attitudes and aspirations of early Islamic society.

During the lifetime of Muhammad, there were, for the Muslims, two fundamental sources of knowledge: firstly, the Qur'an whose authority was absolute and final since it was the very word of God; and secondly, the words of Muhammad which, though human, fallible and subject to debate, were undoubtedly regarded with great respect. After Muhammad's death, these two sources of knowledge and guidance remained central to all Muslim thinking. But problems arose immediately concerning these sources and it was these problems which gave rise to the development of all of the branches of the Islamic sciences, properly so-called, and encouraged the development of the other more 'secular' sciences pursued by the Muslims.

Even at the time when the Qur'an was proclaimed to the Arabs of Madina and Mecca, there were difficulties in understanding it. Stylistically, its expression was often terse and syntactically complex, its vocabulary sometimes obscure (and more so to Arabs from beyond Western Arabia) and even if it could be understood literally, there always remained problems of interpretation. While the Prophet was alive, he could elucidate. When he was no more and when the religion began to encompass non-Arabs as well as Arabs, the difficulties became more severe. In any case, the language used was, even in the Prophet's day, a stilted formal one and as time passed, the common speech became more and more remote from it. It was chiefly in order to overcome such problems as these that there grew up the sciences of grammar, philology, phonetics and rhetoric, and the more all-embracing field of exegesis

which drew upon the above-mentioned branches of knowledge, and upon history, theology and the traditions of the Prophet to give coherent explanations of every word and every phrase of the sacred text.

Whereas in the case of the Qur'an there was an authorized text established within twenty years of the Prophet's death, in the case of the sayings and reported doings of Muhammad, no such body of material existed in formally accepted compilations until a century and half later. These compilations came into existence to fulfil certain needs; the greatest of these was for a classified body of authoritative material for legal purposes to supplement the teachings of the Qur'an where these were not explicit enough and to provide a corpus of example for the Muslims. In this way, the sayings of Muhammad were accorded probably more authority by subsequent generations than they would have been allowed by his contemporaries. It was also known to be the case that during the first century and a half of Islam, countless sayings of the Prophet and accounts of actions attributed to him had been fabricated (often for 'pious' motives) to support differing sectarian viewpoints. The need to sift the genuine from the false gave rise to a whole series of specialised disciplines (*'ulum al-hadith*). Criticism of the authenticity of a *hadith* invariably revolved round the chain of transmitters who claimed to have handed it on from one to the other, ultimately from the Prophet. To investigate this Islamic oral tradition, it became necessary to know something of the lives of the transmitters of *hadith*, particularly whether or not they were pious, trustworthy men who were contemporaries and who had met or had the chance of meeting each other. It was out of the need for this information that the Islamic biographical sciences evolved. They in turn were a catalyst for the development of the broader sciences of history which were also stirred by the desire to learn about the history of the earlier prophets, such as Moses and Jesus, or such Qur'anic figures as 'Pharoah' and Alexander the Great.

In the 9th and 10th centuries when Greek (and to a lesser extent Indian) works began to be translated into Arabic, new sciences were added to the evolving Arabic and Islamic disciplines. Important among these 'foreign' sciences were philosophy, logic, medicine, astronomy and mathematics. The Islamic sciences—those which were the core of any aspiring student's curriculum and which were the recognised disciplines of the medieval and post-medieval colleges—were Theology (*tawhid*), Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*), Exegesis of the Qur'an (*tafsir*), Arabic Language (*'arabiyya*) and Stylistics (*bayan*). To these might be added Prosody (*'arud*), important when the versification of scholarly works became popular, Logic (*mantiq*) which was the most widely approved of the foreign sciences since it could be used in the service of theology, and elementary mathe-

matics which was useful in calculating the inheritance shares laid down by Qur'anic prescription. Philosophy never formed part of the Islamic curriculum and came to be regarded with increasing suspicion by the stricter scholars since its speculative nature might lead those who studied it into error or heresy. In between the Islamic sciences as such and the 'foreign' sciences were subjects such as History, Geography, Poetry (*shū'r*) and Belles-Lettres (*adab*), a knowledge of which would be among the accomplishments of any well-educated man, but which were not among the formally transmitted disciplines.

The case of poetry, however, is an interesting one. Here I use the word poetry for the creative art-form and as a translation of the Arabic word *shū'r*, as distinct from the term 'versification' (*manzuma* — a work of versification) reserved for works in the various Islamic sciences put into verse chiefly for pedagogical purposes. Poetry had been the chief (one might virtually say the sole) art form among the Arabs before Islam; drama, painting and sculpture (except for a few cult objects) were unknown forms in Arabia. This situation remained true under Islam, especially since the religion frowned on representational art. The attitude towards poetry was bound to be ambivalent. On the one hand, the poets in Muhammad's day represented in their works all the values of the pagan age and for this they were condemned both by the Qur'an and the Prophet. On the other hand, it was impossible to kill this art which lay at the very heart of the Arab personality and furthermore, poetry could be used in the service of Islam, as the abundant panegyrics of the Prophet and mystical poetry of a later age testify. But quite early on in Islam, there was undertaken the collection and study of the pre-Islamic poetry, which had been until this time (mid-8th—mid 9th cents.) a purely oral art. Ostensibly, this poetry was collected and studied for purely linguistic reasons, since in it were to be found words and usages no longer current which could throw light on the meaning of expressions in the Qur'an. For the pious, its sentiments were to be deplored, but its language was idealised. It is for this reason that even till today one invariably finds in the library of any Muslim scholar of any status in West Africa, one or more of the most celebrated anthologies of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry.

The high period of what may be called 'creative' scholarship in the Islamic world is to be found between the eighth and the eleventh centuries A.D. During this period, all the major issues in theology and law were being debated from first principles in such great centres of Islamic learning as Baghdad, Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Tunis, Qairawan, Fez and Cordova. During this period, fundamental notions could be challenged and recourse made to the primary sources, Qur'an and Traditions, to work out solutions to the theological and juridical problems *ab initio*. By the end of this period, a majority creed had been

agreed upon and those who held to it were called the Sunnis. Among them, from the legal stand-point, four schools of thought were accepted as being of equal orthodox status and were known by the names of the great scholars upon whose teachings they were founded. After the eleventh century, there was little scope for fresh approaches to fundamental problems and it became the unwritten rule to restrict one's efforts to elucidating and elaborating the ideas of the earlier acceptable scholars. There were, of course, exceptions to this general rule, but few new approaches outlived their creators.<sup>1</sup>

There have been many attempts to explain this re-channelling of the scholarly effort from the creative into the imitative. The process, which was certainly a long one and which had no other sanction than the general opinion of the scholars (*ijma' al-'ulama'*) is generally referred to as 'the closing of the door of independent judgement' (*bab al-ijtihad*); and the analogy of the door is itself illuminating. A door is shut in order to keep within what is already there and to keep out whatever is outside. It also assumes that what is inside is in the most desirable state in the eyes of those within and in need of nothing further from outside. When this ceases to be the situation, those inside will open the door. To see how this applies in the case of the Islamic sciences is to ask what was the purpose of those sciences and what were the consequences to those scholars who accepted that the door be closed upon them inside.

It has been suggested that the decline of creative scholarship (and the concomitant decline of creative literature) is a reflection of the steady eclipse of the caliphate which ended in the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, and the consequent social and economic disarray into which the central Islamic world was plunged. This argument certainly has its weight, but another reason for the re-channelling of scholarly efforts is to be found within the system itself. The Islamic view of life is that it is essentially a preparation for a life to come. While on earth, however, it is man's duty to strive to create a society which functions in even its minutest aspects in accordance with the laws of God. God's laws are known through the prophets sent by Him, the last of whom was Muhammad. The message he was given through the revelation of the Qur'an was the final summation of the Divine Law and the ultimate expression of the Divine Will for man. It follows therefore, that in the realm of scholarship, the final aim must be to understand, in as complete a fashion as possible, the divine plan for mankind and how, in its terrestrial stage, this may be given practical expression. Thus, if a point is reached at which this is thought to have been achieved at the theoretical level, then the need for further effort in this direction becomes at best superfluous and, at worst, borders on dangerous innovation. In the Islamic system there can be no innovation for innovation's sake; indeed the very word 'innovation' (*bid'a*) came to be regarded as a term of severe

reproach. The watchword became rather 'imitation' (*taqlid*)—adherence to the dogmas and legal norms laid down by the earlier generations of scholars whose closer historical proximity to the days of the Prophet lent their views greater authority. The turbulence of the 12th–13th centuries and the political impotence of the caliphs also served to nourish the myth of a former 'golden age.'

In this situation, then, the scholars of the post-12th century period saw their role chiefly as guardians and transmitters of the earlier body of knowledge. It is a remarkable feature of Islamic civilisation that, in the absence of any official body for the determination of the norms of religious orthodoxy or any state-controlled institutions of learning, the scholars were able to maintain themselves within the increasing stuffy room whose 'door of independent judgement' they refused to open again.<sup>2</sup> Their efforts during this 'middle period' of Islam (c.1200–1850) were directed towards consolidating the work of earlier generations, in compiling lexicons and encyclopaedic works, in writing commentaries on the works of earlier masters, or in abridging or versifying them for the use of students and then, having made them almost incomprehensible through such compression, again writing commentaries to elucidate their terseness. In the literary field too, there was an increasing tendency towards obscurantism. Poetry echoed the themes of by-gone ages through archaic language and always within the strait jacket imposed upon it by the harsh strictures of prosody and monorhyme. In belles-lettres meaning was almost wholly sacrificed on the altar of florid style. Geography as a science was dead, though an interesting travelogue literature (*rihla*) grew up with Ibn Battuta as its chief exponent. History alone showed some signs of growth as a science with the fundamental work of the great 14th century thinker, Ibn Khaldun, and in the 16th century al-Sakhawi's spirited defence of the discipline. But by the 18th century, history too had virtually suffocated and its biographical arm had chiefly metamorphosed itself into hagiography (*manaqib*).<sup>3</sup>

This, then, is the background against which we should view the activities and achievements of the Muslim scholars of West Africa and against which it is also useful to look at the plight of contemporary Muslim education in non-Arab Africa. It is important to remember that at the time when we first hear of conversions of Muslim rulers south of the Sahara, in the 11th century, we are already passing from the period of creative scholarship in the central lands of Islam to the period of consolidation and imitation, the era commonly labelled in Arabic '*asr al-jumud*—the age of stagnation. By the time Islamic scholarship is firmly established in some of the major towns and the scholars are advising the rulers, in the 16th century, we are well into this period of decadence. By the time 'Uthman dan Fodio is preparing both physi-

cally and intellectually for his *jihad* in the late 18th century, the Islamic lands of North Africa and the Middle East have become so drowsy from the stuffiness of their closed intellectual room that they can be said to be asleep to all intents and purposes. Given this situation, the achievement of the West African Muslims is not nearly so meagre as it would appear to be if it is unjustly set alongside the earlier high period of Islamic scholarship, or even less justly beside the intellectual achievements of Western Europe over the same period.

To illustrate the differing roles and reactions of the scholars and to examine their achievements, I shall look at two different areas and periods and attempt some comparisons and contrasts. The first is the area of the Niger Bend in the 16th century: Islam and Islamic scholarship in the settled conditions of a great empire—Songhay—with the scholars as advisers to Muslim rulers of varying degrees of religious zeal. The second is Hausaland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: scholarship emerging out of nomadic or semi-nomadic conditions with the scholars, unable to impose Islamic norms on the rulers, taking over the government and themselves becoming the rulers in pursuit of the creation of the ideal state. By way of introduction, I shall first say a few words about the organisation and methodology of Islamic education with particular reference to the situation in 16th century Timbuktu.

The first important point to note is that Islamic education is not and never had been institutionalised. The process of acquiring knowledge revolves exclusively around the pupil-teacher relationship. Just as there was never, until modern times, a certificate from an institution conferring a title or diploma on a student, so, by definition, there was no such thing as a self-taught man. Only the individual scholar could grant the licence to a student to teach a particular book or books which he, the teacher, had taught the student. The value of this licence (*ijaza*) was proportional to the fame of the one who granted it. Students would spend months and sometimes years with a particular teacher until they had acquired from him all the licences he could give or all that the student was interested in obtaining from him. The student would then move on to another teacher of his choice to study other works. This process often involved travel for the student who wanted to obtain the very best instruction possible. A student from Fez, for example, would think nothing of spending five or ten years sitting at the feet of various teachers in Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad or Mecca. This process only ended when the individual student was satisfied that he had acquired all he needed or all he could absorb and he might then take up some post which required the knowledge he had obtained—imam, preacher, judge, *mufti* (giver of legal decisions)—or settle down himself to teach the next generation. This process is aptly summed up in the

Arabic terms used: the student is a 'seeker' (*talib*) and the process of acquiring education the 'quest for knowledge' (*talab al-'ilm*).

The scholars, then, were the repositories of knowledge and its custodians. They guaranteed the handing on of knowledge from the original scholar who compiled such-and-such a work, through a chain (*sanad* or *silsila*) of transmitters and teachers of that work down to the last student who received it.<sup>4</sup> This again is reflected in the kinds of Arabic terminology used: 'taking' a book from a teacher (*akhdh*) or the 'handing over' of a work by a teacher to a student (*munawala*). Because of the highly personal nature of the educational process in the Islamic world, there was no pressing need for special buildings, or indeed really for any buildings at all. This explains why it was possible in West Africa for the Islamic sciences to flourish under the nomadic or semi-nomadic conditions of the Kunta Arab encampments in the desert areas to the north of the Niger Bend (Azawad) and among the non-town-dwelling Fulani of the Gobir-Kebbi borders.

Towns naturally tended to attract scholars to them, however. Settled and prosperous conditions meant that men had more time for the pursuit of learning (which might not always be a full-time pre-occupation) and the requirements of a city, in terms of educated men, were always greater than those of the village or desert encampment. In urban centres, the mosques were often used as places where teachers sat, surrounded by a circle of students, such as the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez, the Zaituna in Tunis and the Azhar mosque in Cairo. Teachers might also hold their classes in their own houses. From the eleventh century onward, we see also the growth of an institution called the *madrassa* in large centres. This was often a pious endowment set up partly as a hostel for students and partly as a teaching centre—often for the views of a particular sect or law school. As early as the mid-13th century, for example, a *madrassa* was set up in Cairo to house students who came from Fānām to study Maliki law.<sup>5</sup> This fact alone speaks much for the standard of learning in Kanem at that early date.

In 16th century Timbuktu, during the relatively settled and evidently prosperous period of the Askias of Songhay, there was an important concentration of scholars, most of whom inhabited the north-easterly quarter of the town around the famous Sankore mosque.<sup>6</sup> The most celebrated family of scholars of this period was the Aqit family of Sanhaja Berber stock who may have been descended from one of the leaders of the great Almoravid *jihad* movement of the eleventh century. The first of this family to settle in Timbuktu was Muhammad Aqit who took up residence there during the period of Tuareg domination between 1433 and 1468. His descendants were to produce numerous scholars over the following century and a half, and

a veritable dynasty of judges. The most illustrious scion of this family, Ahmad Baba (d.1627), was to gain wide fame throughout north-west Africa as a result of his deportation there in 1594 and he numbered many celebrated Moroccan scholars among his pupils. There were also a number of learned men of Fulani origin and some of Arab extraction. The Manding Dyula, whose members pioneered trade and Islamic teaching southwards from the Niger Bend into the Ivory Coast and modern Ghana, were represented in 16th century Timbuktu by the Baghayogho family who moved there from Jenne in the 1530s.

A member of this latter family, Muhammad ibn Mahmud Baghayogho, was the most important and influential of Ahmad Baba's teachers and the grateful pupil has left us a biographical sketch of his master which is worth summarising here for the picture it gives us of the scholarly life of that age. Ahmad Baba attended this man's teaching for over ten years, acquiring from him knowledge of Qur'anic Exegesis, Traditions of the Prophet, Jurisprudence, the Sources of Law (*al-usul*), the Arabic language, Stylistics (*bayan*), Prosody, Logic and some elementary Astronomy. One of the works of jurisprudence he went over eight times with his master, while another work on grammar was studied over a period of three years. The method of study was dictation and recitation in the first stage; the master dictated and the student read back the work correcting errors in his copy. Then would follow further readings to explain the precise meaning of each word and then to discuss in detail the substance of the text, the student annotating his own authorised copy. Further critical or comparative studies might follow, or a specialised aspect be studied, as in the case of Traditions where the higher stages involved studying the chains of transmission of the *hadiths* and the lives of the transmitters. At the end of studies, the master would grant his licence to a student he was satisfied with. In the case under examination, Ahmad Baba received a licence from his master to teach all those works for which the master had received a licence and all those for which he gave his own.

In his biography of Muhammad Baghayogho, Ahmad Baba presents a picture of a model scholar and teacher; devoted to his pupils and patient almost to a fault with even the dullest, this learned and pious man devoted himself to teaching from shortly after the morning prayer (i.e. around dawn) until the time of the evening prayer (about an hour after sunset), breaking off only to take his meals and perform the obligatory prayers. Generous, again almost to a fault, towards other scholars and students, he almost completely dispersed his own library, freely lending books and never demanding their return. Disputes were brought to him for settlement and he performed the duties of judge at Timbuktu in the interval between the death of one judge and the appointment of another. He was offered the post of official preacher at

Gao by the Askia in 1566, but he respectfully declined. He also declined the post of imam at the Sankore mosque. The final accolade which Ahmad Baba was able to bestow on his master was to name him in a poem as the 'reviver of religion in Timbuktu' for that century.

But the scholars of Timbuktu were not wholly wrapped up in their theoretical studies and the preservation and handing on of knowledge, important as this was. We cannot accuse them of ivory-towerism. In the first place, they themselves travelled and others travelled to Timbuktu to meet them. Many went on pilgrimage to Mecca and while there, took the opportunity to hold discussions with, or acquire knowledge from scholars from other parts of the Muslim world. On the way home, some stopped in Egypt and studied under the leading scholars in Cairo. Some also visited other African towns in the course of their travels, such as Kano, Katsina, Takedda and Walata, studying if they found teachers, and teaching if they found pupils.

Over and above this, however, the Muslim scholars did not shirk their obligations towards the cherished ideal of creating, both at the governmental and the popular level, the Islamic society which they believed accorded with the Divine Will. Being removed from the centre of political affairs which lay at Gao, the Aqit judges of Timbuktu were able to maintain a rare independence of judgment and did not hesitate to make their views known to the Askias, even if they thereby courted their displeasure. Their moral authority thus remained very strong and the Askias respected it. Mahmud ibn 'Umar, a great-uncle of Ahmad Baba who was judge of Timbuktu from 1498 to 1548 'feared the reproach of no man before God. The sultans and those under them held him in awe and used to visit him in his house, but he did not stand up for them nor turn towards them'. His son and second successor in office, al-'Aqib (judge from 1565 to 1583) was described as 'of stout heart, bold in the mighty affairs that others steer clear of, courageous in dealing with the ruler and those under him. He had many conflicts with them and they used to be submissive and obedient to him in every matter. If he saw something he considered reprehensible, he would suspend his activities as judge and keep aloof. Then they would conciliate him until he retracted'.<sup>7</sup> While the scholars could work from within the system to change it in accordance with the laws and precepts of Islam, there was no need to attempt a take-over of the machinery of government — even supposing that the Timbuktu scholars could have mustered the necessary force. When the Moroccan expeditionary force composed largely of Andalusian renegades and mercenaries occupied Timbuktu in 1591, even though in the name of an alleged descendant of the Prophet, the position was immediately changed. An attempt at revolt, which perhaps had the character of a *jihad*, led to the deportation of the leading members of the Aqit

family to Morocco and with them disappeared the hope of an Islamic state in the Niger Bend.

Between this date and Dan Fodio's call to take up arms in a *jihad* against the Hausa rulers lie a little more than two centuries. This period has generally been characterised as one in which Islam lost ground, scholarship disappeared and the 'forces of unbelief' gained the upper hand. Typical of the representatives of this view is Trimingham who in his *History of Islam in West Africa* gives the title 'Islamic stagnation and Pagan reaction' to his chapter on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This view has largely been formed by over concentrating attention on the political situation of Islam in this period and the extinction of the large and Islamically oriented Songhay empire. Islam certainly suffered a set-back in terms of the attempt to create a state or states governed in accordance with the Shari'a — the 'canon law' of Islam — though even in this sphere our remarks should be qualified; there were, after all, the *jihad* movements of Nasir al-Din in southern Mauretania in the 1670s, of Karamoko Alfa in Futa Jalon in the 1740s and that of 'Abd al-Qadir in Futa Toro in the 1770s and 1780s. But it was perhaps this very loss of political influence by the learned classes — to put the matter in very broad terms — which created the challenge which led to revolutions in which these scholarly repositories of the divine law became the rulers. The best documented of these revolutions, since its leaders were able coherently to express their principles and precepts in a vast outpouring of books and pamphlets, was the movement led by Dan Fodio in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was also the most successful and has the added interest, in our present context, of having its intellectual antecedents in the 16th century tradition of scholarship in Timbuktu.

The precise nature of the Islamic influence of the Fulani before the 19th century is, like much else about their early history, still far from clear. Among the rather better established facts is the immigration of some Fulani clans into north-western Hausaland in the mid-15th century, bringing with them books on Islamic theology and the Arabic language. They evidently came from Futa Toro in Senegal which had been one of the earliest areas of Islamic influence south of the Sahara. From then on until the middle of the 18th century, we have virtually no clear information about their activities in Hausaland. These Muslim Fulani, some groups of whom had inter-married with Arab or Manding stock, were semi-nomadic, generally staying only a moderate distance from the Hausa settlements. Their non-Muslim counterparts, the Bororoje, were fully nomadic, endogamous and kept as far from the settled areas as possible.

These Muslim Fulani, generally called the Torodbe, came to Hausaland with an already established tradition of learning. This they evidently kept alive, for in the second half of the 18th century, we find 'Abdullah, Dan Fodio's brother, listing a number of his maternal and paternal uncles as well as his own mother and grandmother among his teachers. The subjects which both 'Uthman and 'Abdullah studied are precisely paralleled by those studied by Ahmad Baba in the 16th century, except for elementary astronomy which seems to have been replaced by the less scientific numerology. Many of the books studied were also the same, though the curriculum of these two scholars included a number of works of the 16th century and later, including two works of Fulani authorship. ('Uthman held the view that every age and place should write its own text books, since its people knew best their own needs). Some works from the Niger Bend area of the 16th century were known and used, though none was used as a basic teaching text.<sup>8</sup> The famous history of the Western Sudan by al-Sa'di (the *Ta'rikh al-Sudan*) was known to the Fulani scholars; the first copy to reach Europe was brought back by Barth from Gwandu. Ahmad Baba's treatise on the Muslim and non-Muslim populations of West Africa (i.e. those known to him) was used as an authority in this field by 'Uthman dan Fodio — rather unfairly, it should be added, since conditions had changed over two centuries. Very important also was the work of Al-Maghili (d.1504), a North African scholar who wrote a series of replies to questions on Islamic government put to him by Askia al-hajj Muhammad I (reg. 1493-1528). This provided argumentation and example from a local West African context in support of Dan Fodio's *jihad*. Some of the works of the great Mukhtar al-Kunti, whose clan constituted the 'bearers of knowledge' (*hamalat al-'ilm*) — to borrow an Islamic phrase — in the area of the Niger Bend in the 17th-18th centuries, were known to Dan Fodio and his circle.

Among the most important subjects studied by the Fulani scholars was the Arabic language, for only through an intimate acquaintance with its wide vocabulary and the subtleties of its syntax could the student master the complexities of law and theology. 'Abdullah dan Fodio, for example, studied ten works on grammar and four on rhetoric and improved his command of style by a study of the works of six pre-Islamic poets and the 12th century *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, generally regarded as the greatest *tour de force* in Arabic *belles-lettres*. But the key subject, as in 16th century Timbuktu, was jurisprudence, for it was only through a detailed study of this subject that the regulations governing the correct and divinely-willed way of life, both public and private, could be known. The *shari'a*, as this corpus of knowledge is generally known, aims at drawing up laws and principles to govern all the major aspects of the believer's life; it deals, on the one hand with religious ritual, on another with legal relationships, as in marriage,

divorce, inheritance, debts, contracts and the like, and on another level with the administration of justice, the conduct of state and the waging of war — whether against rebels or robber bands or against the unbelievers. Dan Fodio's works, whether in defence of the grounds on which the *jihad* was waged, or in the detailed structure of government and administration he planned to establish, show an unusually high degree of mastery of an extensive range of works in the field of Islamic jurisprudence according to the Maliki school.

Having acquired this academic armoury, Dan Fodio endeavoured to bring about reform in the Gobir state from within by discussing and negotiating with its successive rulers. A careful reading of the source materials suggest that he was most reluctant to move from this stage to the ultimate stage of armed conflict aimed at gaining control of the state. His reluctance sprang not, I believe, from any fear either for his person or for the movement as a whole. On the one hand, it is known that whoever dies while fighting a *jihad* will be considered by God as a martyr; on the other, the law forbids the launching of a *jihad* unless one's forces are equal or greater in strength than the enemy, since it is a sin wilfully to expose one's fellow-Muslims to senseless slaughter. The reluctance was rather the natural shrinking of a pious man, both from bloodshed and from the terrible burden of responsibilities implicit in leadership of such a movement — responsibilities for which one would be accountable before God on the Day of Judgment. There was, one might add, a lively expectation at this period that the end of the world was not far distant.

That Dan Fodio was successful in the military struggle where peaceful persuasion had failed is well-known, even though he overreached himself in attempting to tar Bornu with the same brush as the Hausa states. His movement has variously been described as reactionary and revolutionary and, in a curious and quite Islamic way, it was both at the same time. For, if it is held that a formula for a perfect society in harmony with the divine has already been worked out by former scholars, then looking back to that blueprint for society and attempting to give it practical expression constitutes a revolution. Even in less theoretical terms, the *jihad* constituted a political and social revolution in the context of northern Nigeria by providing a unified system of government where smaller antagonistic units had previously existed and a unified fixed code of law where systems peculiar to localities or personalities had existed before. Dan Fodio, for all his horror of innovation (which, as far as he was concerned, was anti-utopianism), nevertheless displayed in some of his later writings an inclination towards views which, in the terms of our earlier metaphor, would constitute at least the insertion of a key into the locked 'door' of independent judgment. Normally, every Muslim belongs to a

particular school of law; in all Africa, except lower Egypt, the Horn and East Africa, this is the Maliki school. This adherence to the teachings of a particular school is to the exclusion of those of another school, though a Muslim may change his rite from one school to another. Dan Fodio argued in favour of being able to select views from schools other than one's own, since all, he argued, were considered of equal validity and only God knew which approach was superior. In this view, he anticipates by almost a century, the technique of 'patching together' (*talfiq*) which was used in Egypt and other Arab Muslim lands in trying to frame state laws which neither apparently flew in the face of the *shari'a*, nor yet allowed there to exist states of affair which might be repugnant to 'modern' (i.e. Europeanised) thinking.

In drawing together the loose ends of this ragged and somewhat rambling discussion of Islamic scholarship in its West African environment, perhaps we should look very briefly at the legacy of this cultural tradition — leaving aside the political repercussions of scholarship which I have already alluded to. I will draw attention to only three aspects of this question which arise directly out of the Islamic attitude towards the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. The first is the creation of a class of literate persons where none existed before, at the top of which was a necessarily small group of academically-minded individuals who could think abstractly. The two segments of this group were very circumscribed before the 19th century, but one effect of movements such as Dan Fodio's (and other similar ones which followed it) was to increase the actual number of educated persons (at however low a level) and also to spread the process more widely — if more thinly — on the ground. Knowledge of the written word immediately gave access to the ideas of persons distant in both space and time, thus creating, for the man who could read, new mental dimensions, with both historical and geographical depth. The very pursuit of knowledge itself at the higher levels might involve travel to distant lands, and study of the life of the Prophet or the caliphs gave the Muslim student an historical perspective on the culture of which he had become part.

Secondly, a point I have referred to in passing, but without developing it. That is the growth of written literatures in African languages, using modified forms of the Arabic script to record them. The earliest known example of an African language being expressed in Arabic characters comes from a mid-17th century copy of the Qur'an in which marginal glosses on words and phrases are given in Kanembu. But this is scarcely likely to be the first example of this. One hundred and fifty years earlier, a West African inquirer had received a positive reply to a question he put to the great Egyptian scholar Al-Suyuti on the lawfulness of using local languages for formal 'praise of the

Prophet'. This certainly constitutes a landmark in the Africanisation of Islamic literary forms and it seems most likely that such poems in praise of the Prophet would have been written down. Dan Fodio and his associates made extensive use of their own language, Fulfulde, for writing mostly poetry, though we also know that prose works of a scholarly nature were composed in that tongue. The extent of this literature bespeaks some considerable development of the form. After the *jihad*, some of these works were translated into Hausa, which may mark the beginnings of written Hausa which was to grow in importance during the 19th century. There is strong evidence for the writing of other African languages in the Arabic script in the 19th century and I am inclined to think that in any area where Islamic scholarship had found a home over any period, the local language was being written in this way by or during the 19th century.

The last point concerns a particular type of scholarly writing, history. An important tradition of historical writing developed in Timbuktu in the 16th century, inspired by the powerful Islamically-oriented Songhay state and modelling itself on the historiographical traditions of North Africa and Egypt, still very much alive at that date. This is not the place in which to explore this vast and little-studied field. Suffice it to say that its importance lies in the successive chronicles of the 16th-18th centuries which were written in Timbuktu and which comprise the main body of our knowledge of the Niger Bend in this period and contain significant information on the earlier states of the Western Sudan. It was that lively tradition which was disseminated from Timbuktu into all other centres of learning in Muslim West Africa to produce the copious body of local and dynastic histories which provide a solid underlay for modern historical studies of these areas. It was this sense of history and the steadying hand of the scholarly tradition, its eye ever fixed on a social and political ideal to be attained, which has stood the Muslims of West Africa in good stead in the many crises their communities have passed through and may yet sustain them again.

#### Notes

1. Outstanding among the exceptions was Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328), whose doctrines had a continuing influence and provided the ideological basis of Wahhabism in 18th century Arabia.
2. These remarks, of course, apply only to the Sunni majority. The Shi'a have always claimed for their imams the right to *ijtihad*.
3. The decline of creativity in literature and the sciences cannot be wholly explained in the same way as that in theology and law, though the prevailing inclination towards *taqlid* was undoubtedly encouraged by the outlook discussed above.
4. The transmission process was, in fact, modelled upon the *isnad* technique of *hadith*, which was the touchstone of their authenticity.
5. On the other hand, the *madrasa* does not seem to have been established as an institution in West Africa, though with the spread of Sufi orders, the *zawiya* fulfilled some of its functions.

6. The 'university' of Timbuktu was an informal assemblage of individual scholars and, organisationally at any rate, bore little resemblance to European universities contemporary to it. George Makdisi makes some useful comparisons and contrasts between *madrasa* and university in his paper cited at the end of these lectures.
7. The source of the quotations concerning Mahmud ibn 'Umar and Al-'Aqib can be found in my article 'Ahmad Baba and the Moroccan invasion of the Sudan (1591)' in the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, ii, 3(1962), 311-28.
8. That is to say, none is mentioned among the basic texts studied by 'Uthman and 'Abdullah as students.
9. This point is well brought out by F. H. Elmasri in his introduction to Dan Fodio's *Bayan wujub al-hijra 'ala 'l-'ibad* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, 1968). I owe a number of other points concerning Dan Fodio's views to the same source; my indebtedness will be clear to anyone who has read the thesis.

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