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INTRODUCTION

Writers on the arts of sub-Saharan Africa have either ignored the influence of Islam or have treated the theme inaccurately. That they should ignore it is surprising, since Islam has for many centuries been one of the most pervasive factors affecting the arts and culture of West Africa. Many art historians, though they lament the paucity of historical documents and objects available to them in their attempts to reconstruct the history of African art, have avoided altogether this potentially valuable avenue of research. Others have presumed that Islam would be bent on the destruction of the masking and figurative traditions so integral to the indigenous cultures and have described the relationship between the religion and the arts as one that is invariably negative.

Typical of their commentary are the recent statements of several noted writers on the arts of sub-Saharan Africa. According to Trowell, "As far as sculpture was concerned, Moslem influence was merely negative, for the religion forbade the making of graven images."[1] Fagg, less given to sweeping generalities, is nevertheless equally pessimistic about the chances for the survival of tribal art in the face of Islamic expansion. Pointing to the early western Sudanic empires, he stresses the importance of Islam in this region and concludes that

> These were not the conditions, material or philosophical, in which what we know as tribal or "primitive" sculpture can exist. Islam, of which iconoclasm is an essential tenet, is overtly inimical to representational art . . .[2]

For Bascom, many cultures that had artistic traditions in the past no longer retain them, because of the encroachments of Islam and its uncompromising iconoclastic stance:

> Islam takes literally the prohibition of the First Commandment: "Thou shalt not carve thyself images, or fashion the likeness of anything in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the waters at the root of the earth". . .[3]

[1] Margaret Trowell and Hans Nevermann, *African and Oceanic Art*, p. 13. Trowell's cliché-ridden comment lacks even the slightest evidence.

[2] Eliot Elisofon and W. B. Fagg, *The Sculpture of Africa*, p. 27. Fagg clearly overestimates the impact of Islam on the western Sudan, which causes him to overstate his case concerning the effects of the religion on the arts.

[3] William Russell Bascom, *African Arts*, p. 7. Although Bascom carried out extensive field work among the Yoruba, he seems not to have taken notice of the fact that artistic traditions have continued to flourish in northern Yorubaland, especially in Ilorin province, where Islam is very strong. Estimates in 1954 for Ilorin province indicate that

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Even when accusations of the intolerance of Islam towards traditional art have been tempered, writers have tended to base their judgments about the impact of Islam on the arts on unproven assumptions. A notable example of such an assumption can be seen in Fagg's conjectures regarding the influence of the religion on the art styles of the western Sudan. According to Fagg, the non-Muslim populations of this region

> accept or imitate some elements of the material culture of their Muslim neighbours, including, in the case of some pagan chiefs, their formal dress; and, in a more subtle way, their sculpture and its associated ritual seem to be modified (and often also concealed) in a way that might render them less objectionable to orthodox Mohammedans . . . It is difficult to say what may have been the motives behind this tempering of the outward forms of paganism – whether it was intended to render easier [the] necessary commercial contacts with Muslims, or to avoid provoking holy wars, or was simply partial imitation, more or less conscious, of the abstraction favoured by Islam, or indeed whether it is attributable to Muslim influence at all rather than to coincidence or to a common culture . . . It is suggested here that historical influences such as these may have had a greater part in determining the abstract tendencies in the art styles of the Sudanese pagans than is appreciated by those writers who are content to explain them solely in terms of the fashionable jargon of psychology.[4]

When Fagg refers to "this tempering of the outward forms of paganism" he fails to provide any evidence that there has in fact been tempering. He says only that "their sculpture and its associated ritual *seem* to be modified" (emphasis mine). "Abstract tendencies" are in fact apparent in Sudanese sculpture – that is, if one is willing to accept the terminology of twentieth-century Western art criticism; but these might well have been due to the very nature of the materials employed (e.g., soft woods, which invariably lend themselves to more schematic forms) or to deeply rooted stylistic traditions that pre-dated Muslim influence, rather than to the inroads of Islam. Certainly in the forest region of West Africa the majority of art traditions do not demonstrate such "abstract tendencies" as a result of the spread of Islam.

Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange have gone so far as to state that "the tenets of [the Islamic] faith have tended to prevent the making of anthropomorphic images [in the West African savannah]," but this clearly belies the countless examples of such forms from this region of Islamic penetration.[5]

Total indictments as well as more mildly couched negative assessments have been leveled repeatedly, but they have been based on only the barest

about 75 percent of the population is Muslim (J. Spencer Trimingham, *History of Islam in West Africa*, p. 230, note 2).

[4] Elisofon and Fagg, *The Sculpture of Africa*, p. 28.

[5] *African Art*, trans. by Michael Ross, p. 113.

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shreds of evidence. René Gardi, in his very recent work *African Crafts and Craftsmen*, begins by decrying the forces of Westernization that have undermined African societies and their arts. He then shifts his attention to Islam, remarking that the spread of the faith and its attendant "iconoclasm . . . destroyed the postulates for the representation of holy pictures."[6] Although he specifically refers to "holy pictures," it seems clear that Gardi is condemning the influence of Islam on traditional figurative art in general. Curiously enough, however, his survey of the crafts in West Africa includes illustrations of figurative work by several artisans who are surely Muslim. In discussing the brass-casters and wood-carvers of Korhogo, he describes the work of Brahim and Sengi Kulibary and of Foley Kulibaly,[7] and his photographs reveal that these men are producing cast face masks, cast figurative containers, and what appears to be a female *dèblè*, a Senufo figurative type used by the Poro, a socio-religious control association. Gardi does not mention the ethnic origin of these artisans, but their family names strongly suggest they are members of two Mande clans.[8] The Mande in this area, as elsewhere, are almost totally Islamized. The Arabic first name of Brahim Kulibary is characteristic of many Islamized Mande, and the facial scarification pattern seen in the photograph of this artist is likewise typically Mande.[9] It is thus highly likely that Gardi was in fact interviewing Muslim artisans.

Only Frank Willett, in his recently published survey, *African Art*, has cast a more favorable light on the subject of Islamic influence on African art.[10] Although aware of the fact that Islam may discourage representational forms, his own research in Nigeria revealed that Islamization does not categorically mean the demise of figurative art. In Nupeland, for example, he notes that, "doors, although essentially ornamental, often include animals, while masked dancers are still alive . . ."[11] Furthermore, he goes on to relate that yet other Islamized peoples in West Africa have masquerades, but this statement unfortunately stands unsupported. Although clearly more sensitive and open to the apparent relationship of Islam and traditional art, he does not develop this idea with any real conviction. Willett, however, is the exception. All others have continued to decry the actions of this faith with respect to traditional life and the arts. Through constant reiteration, such comments as those already noted have

[6] p. 7.
[7] Ibid., pp. 63–5, 125–6.
[8] Quite probably they are members of the same clan. Gardi may well have recorded the same name with variant orthography as a result of hearing the semi-vowel imprecisely.
[9] Plate 42, p. 62.
[10] A panel devoted to the subject of Islamic influence on the arts was a part of the African Studies Association meeting in New York City in the fall of 1967. Exploratory papers clearly revealing a number of associations between Islam and indigenous art traditions were presented by Roy Sieber, Arnold Rubin, and La-Belle Prussin, but these works have not been published.
[11] p. 241.

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come to constitute the "evidence" presented by scholars seeking to explain the relationship between Islam and the visual arts in Africa.

My field research on the visual arts in the regions of the Cercle de Bondoukou (Ivory Coast) and west central Ghana emphatically revealed that these pessimistic assumptions are not necessarily correct. In this heavily Islamized area – deeply influenced by the Muslim Mande Dyula, Ligbi, and Hwela since at least the seventeenth century – traditional life and the arts continue to flourish. Local cults, shrines, and rituals have not been attacked by the Mande, nor have the associated art forms been uprooted and destroyed. Quite the contrary: the Islamized Mande generally accept such aspects of "paganism" without question and in many instances even support and cooperate with their neighbors to ensure that these traditions remain vital and in full operation. Even more unusual, however, is the occurrence of two masquerades – the Gbain and the Do – controlled by the Dyula, Ligbi and Hwela. These cults, concerned with witchcraft and protection, are clearly Muslim, as will be described later. The entire situation here defies the dictum that Islam and "paganism" are incompatible and that the confrontation of Muslims and non-Muslims invariably results in conflict and the demise of the arts.

Was this simply an exception to the rule – a highly anomalous situation? Research on the secondary-source level indicates that it definitely is not exceptional. Comparative evidence for other parts of West Africa, found in historical and anthropological accounts, travel literature, social and historical studies of Islam, and Arabic documents suggests similar situations elsewhere. It is obvious that the entire issue of the relationship of Islam to the arts needs to be reassessed.

The reassessment will require examination of a number of deep-seated negative attitudes held about the relationship of Islam to traditional culture. Has Islam in fact been negative in effect, invariably weakening and undermining the foundations of tribal life? For many, the aniconic attitudes espoused by Islam (specifically those relating to representational imagery) are clearly responsible for the apparent scarcity or demise of the visual arts in areas of West Africa influenced by the faith. But did such elements of Islamic dogma actually have any appreciable impact on Muslims in West Africa? If so, where and how were they applied? In addition, Islam as a religion and culture in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically West Africa, has been held to be intolerant and uncompromising with respect to traditional societies. Universalistic in its orientation, it was and is fundamentally opposed to animism and tribalism. Could Islam, however, have succeeded in influencing such large portions of West Africa if this opposition had been strongly manifested? To account for the impressive gains made by the religion, we must assume that Muslims interacted with traditional societies in a very different manner.

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A necessary first step in treating the relationship of Islam and traditional art is a reconsideration of Islam itself, based on a review of sources generally overlooked or ignored by art historians and museologists. The history of Islam in West Africa and the avenues by which the faith touched and affected indigenous societies must be restudied. The potential and actual influence of Islamic tenets concerning representational art must be evaluated. Particularly crucial are the questions of the nature of Islam in West Africa and the manner in which Muslims have interacted with non-Muslim cultures. So-called classical cases of Muslim destruction of tribal traditions must be reconsidered. It is also necessary to establish that Islam and local art traditions can be compatible, which I shall demonstrate by considering a variety of secondary sources and the masking traditions among the Mande elite of the fourteenth-century empire of Mali and among the present-day Mande Sanu of Bobo-Dioulasso (Upper Volta) and the Muslim Mande of Gonja (Ghana).

With the positive relations between Islam and such art forms established on a broad level, it becomes possible to treat this theme more intensively as it applies to the Islamized Mande Dyula, Ligbi and Hwela of the Cercle de Bondoukou and west central Ghana. This region clearly demonstrates the high degree of interaction which can exist among Muslims, non-Muslims, and traditional art forms. Such interchange is most dramatically expressed in the relationship of the Muslim Mande to the Bedu, Gbain, and Do masquerades, and I shall describe these in detail in order to underscore the extent to which Islam and traditional life can co-exist.

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CHAPTER I

THE ISLAMIZATION OF WEST AFRICA

To deal with the subject of Muslim influence on the arts, one must begin at the beginning. It is necessary to look at the ways in which Islam succeeded in influencing such large portions of West Africa. I shall examine the process of Islamization by briefly considering the various channels or methods by which Islam has penetrated and affected West African societies. Long-held ideas of Islamic history suffer from two essentially negative (and usually mistaken) beliefs: that Islam has been unmerciful and unbending in its relationship to traditional cultures and that traditional societies were and are helpless in the face of such a monolithic and presumed "higher" force. These ideas must be refuted in order to demonstrate that the expansion of the faith was characterized by tolerance and a highly pragmatic approach to the problems associated with culture contact and change. The picture that emerges reveals that Islam interacted with traditional life in a highly positive and mutually beneficial manner.

A broad look at the historical currents of Islam in West Africa reveals a number of basic features governing the expansion of the faith. Certainly the oldest and most persistent feature was the continual operation of Muslim traders over vast sectors of West Africa. It was through the agency of individual merchants, small mercantile family groups, and highly dispersed trading corporations that the religion was first introduced into the western Sudan (probably as early as the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.), extended into the southern savannah and Guinea Coast forest, and diffused throughout northern and central Nigeria. Muslim North Africans and Berbers carried the religion into the Sudan, and subsequently Islamized West African trading groups pushed the limits of the faith further south. Indeed, prior to the jihāds (holy wars) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Muslim merchants were invariably responsible for introducing the religion into "pagan" territories. As Trimingham has noted, "Not only does Islam cast a long shadow before it, but also in order to be accepted in a free situation the ground must be prepared."[1] The role of preparing the ground fell to the trader, the first representative of Islam to cast the shadow of the faith into new regions. Everywhere in West Africa, it has been the Muslim

[1] J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa*, p. 28.

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trader who has served as the advance agent of the faith, and it has been his lot to condition the new environment for deeper and more permanent religious and cultural penetration.

In a very real sense, this economic class could be described as a group of "merchant-clerics," for many of its members clearly served in a dual capacity. In general, their aims were twofold: the control of regional and interregional trade routes, especially to monopolize the distribution of luxury goods and necessary products that could not be obtained locally; and the introduction of superficial and material elements of Islamic culture to individuals or groups.

Though the trader has not always been given his due in the historical and ethnographic literature on West Africa, especially in acculturation studies, he can be neither slighted nor ignored when dealing with the phenomenon of Islam.[2] In villages and towns throughout this area, Muslim commercial activities were not sporadic but had a permanence established by centuries of contact. The vitality and growth of commercial emporia in the Sudan – for example, Ghāna, Takrūr, Jenne, Timbuktu, Gao – are directly attributable to the activities of Muslim traders. The opening up of the Senegambia, the Voltaic zone, and northern Nigeria to Islam was due to the movement of Malinke, Soninke, Tukulor, and other Islamized traders of the Mande family – such as the Dyula and Ligbi – who followed either pre-Islamic arteries of trade or new ones created by their own industry.

Yet this was not simply the commercial canvassing of broad regions by peripatetic merchants, for many of these traders created numerous settlements in the form of either independent communities or "stranger" quarters in predominantly non-Muslim towns along all the major trade routes they traversed. These settlements served primarily as local markets of exchange and stopping points for itinerant traders, but many quickly developed into important urban centers that were to attract other merchants and ultimately clerical families. The establishment or rapid growth of such impressive towns as Boron, Kong, Odienné, Bondoukou, Bouna, Bobo-Dioulasso, Salaga, Yendi, Kano, and many others, was directly due to the arrival of enterprising Muslim trading families.[3] Although constituting only

[2] The study of interregional, regional, and local trade patterns has not received the attention it deserves. Future research, however, should reveal the dimensions of this dynamic aspect of West African history. For a remarkable pioneering work on this subject, see Raymond Mauny, *Tableau Géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Age*.

[3] Despite the importance of these Muslim commercial communities, relatively little study has been devoted to them. To date the best studies have focussed their attention on Kong, Bondoukou, and Salaga. For Kong, see Louis-Gustave Binger, *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée*, vol. I, ch. 6, and Edmond Bernus, "Kong et sa région." For Bondoukou, see Louis Tauxier, *Le Noir de Bondoukou*, and R. Austin Freeman, *Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman*. For Salaga, see Nehemiah Levtzion, "Salaga: A Nineteenth-Century Trading Town in Ghana," and J. A. Braimah and J. R. Goody, *Salaga: The Struggle for Power*.

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a small minority, these families were to have a substantial impact on the communities. This is clearly revealed by Ivor Wilks's studies of Ashanti, where a small but influential Muslim population played an important role in the political and economic life of this major forest state in the early nineteenth century.[4] The wide-ranging effects of Muslim commercial penetration have been assessed nicely by Lewis:

> By establishing trading colonies, and sometimes later states, these Muslim merchants created a wide-flung supra-tribal network of trade . . . Through their organization in dispersed corporations, or guilds, they were able to wield considerable economic influence within the various states and communities in which they operated. Thus, an eighteenth-century Dyula merchant in Timbuktu might well employ agents buying gold in Ashanti in the south, and others selling it in Fez in North Africa.[5]

An example of the way in which the pivotal role played by the Muslim traders has been seriously underrated can be seen in Trimingham's survey *History of Islam in West Africa*. As Wilks has observed elsewhere, Trimingham dismisses those regions which lie outside the Sudan, saying "The Guinea states in the south lie outside our sphere [the Sudanic zone, which is the focus of his survey of Islam in this book], since they were not in contact with the Sudan[ic] states and were uninfluenced by Islam."[6] Initially published in 1962 and then reprinted in 1963 and 1965, this statement has not been modified to take in the realities of Muslim trading enterprises. The evidence is plain that virtually all forest states came under the influence of Islam through the agency of traders. Their movements resulted not only in the creation of complex and active systems of trade but also in the continual advancement of Islam in West Africa.

There were yet other important avenues by which Islam succeeded in spreading across West Africa. The diffusion of the religion occurred through migrations or dispersals of large groups of Muslims, smaller family units, occupational classes, and individuals. Periods of conflict and decline, such as the gradual demise of the medieval Sudanic kingdoms of Ghāna, Mali, and Songhay, or the fall in the fortunes in the eighteenth century of market towns like Begho and "Old Bima," on the fringes of the forest in west central Ghana, led to the movement of Muslim urban dwellers and a variety of specialist groups.[7] The defeat of Bouna in the early nineteenth century

[4] *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* and "The Position of Muslims in Metropolitan Ashanti in the Early Nineteenth Century."

[5] I. M. Lewis, ed., *Islam in Tropical Africa*, p. 25.

[6] Ivor Wilks, "The Growth of Islamic Learning in Ghana," p. 410. The reference is to Trimingham's *History of Islam in West Africa*, p. 7.

[7] For a discussion of the migrations from Begho, see Tauxier, *Le Noir de Bondoukou*, and Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History*, part 1: Begho and Mande. For "Old Bima," see René A. Bravmann and R. D. Mathewson, "A Note on the History and Archaeology of 'Old Bima.'"

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by Adinkra, the king of Gyaman, led to the movement of the sizable Muslim Dyula population of that town to Kong, further west, and elsewhere.[8] Family disputes also prompted the dispersal of members over a wide area of West Africa. An instance of this sort of movement comes from the autobiography of Abū Bakr al-Siddiq, when he describes the history of his family in the late eighteenth century:

> After [my grandfather's] death, there was dissension between them and their families, and they separated and went into different countries of the Sudan. Idrīs went to the country of Massina, where he dwelt in Diawara, and married a daughter of *Mār, al-qa'id* Abū Bakr: her name was Ummuyu. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān travelled as far as the land of Kong. He married the daughter of Abū Thaūmā Alī . . ., lord of that country, and dwelt there. The name of his wife was Sārah. Mahmūd travelled to the city of Bouna, and settled there . . . His wife's name was Zuhrā. Abū Bakr remained at Timbuktu with the rest of the family. He was not married at the time I left our country.
>
> Before all these things happened, my father used to travel about. He went into the land of Katsina and Bornu. There he married my mother, and then returned to Timbuktu, to which place my mother followed him.[9]

But it is not necessary to see such mobility as the result of familial dissension or conflict between states, for it was characteristic of Muslim populations to be mobile. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the peaceful expansion of Islam can be seen in the movements of the Fulani, who originated in the Futa Toro of Senegal and between the thirteenth and late fifteenth centuries gradually migrated across the Sudanic region and into northern and eastern Nigeria, where they had a considerable impact upon the future of Islam.[10]

A particularly important feature of Islamic expansion is seen in the roles played by individual scholars and clerical families. Ivor Wilks has recently reconstructed the impressive range of the Saghanughu, a Mande clerical family, whose religious training and teaching abilities formed generations of students throughout the western Sudan.[11] The origins of this family can be traced back to the sixteenth century (and Wilks points out that there is fragmentary evidence for the existence of the Saghanughu dating back to the apogee of Mali in the fourteenth century and possibly earlier), and to the area of Kangaba on the Upper Niger.[12] From this base, successive generations of Saghanughu scholars and their students established Qur'ānic schools throughout the savannah regions of Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, and Ghana, many of which are still active today.

[8] Wilks, "Abū Bakr al-Siddiq of Timbuktu," pp. 161–2.
[9] Ibid., p. 158.
[10] For the most recent and thorough study of Islamic movements into Nigeria, see Muḥammad Al-Ḥājj, "A Seventeenth-Century Chronicle on the Origins and Missionary Activities of the Wangarawa."
[11] "The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan," pp. 162–97.
[12] Ibid., p. 177.

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The Aqīt of Timbuktu, a prominent medieval scholarly family, appear to have played a similar role in the transmission of Islamic knowledge.[13] Much of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature from both Nigeria and Ghana demonstrates a strong intellectual connection with the writings of this school.[14]

Individual scholars (marabouts) were also responsible for the dissemination of Islam. The life of Al-Maghīlī is a remarkable example of the influence of a single Muslim scholar and reformer. His periods of residence in Takedda, Gao, and Katsina were to leave an impress on the quality of Muslim life in these areas.[15] Scholars from the western Sudan making the pilgrimage to Mecca often stopped in Hausaland and Bornu to visit teachers and rulers.

> Aïda-Aḥmad al-Tāzakhtī, a pupil of Al-Maghīlī, for example, settled at Katsina and taught, was made *qāḍī* and remained there for fifteen years until his death in 1529. Another scholar, Makhlūf al-Bilbālī (d. 1533), also taught for a while in Kano and Katsina. Aḥmad Bābā's own grandfather, Aḥmad b. 'Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt, had also taught in Kano on his return from the pilgrimage around 1487 A.D.[16]

Such movements of scholars have been a constant factor in Islam in West Africa, ensuring the circulation of ideas and the availability of Islamic religious education.

The continual advance of Islam was also encouraged by its literate character, for as a religion with a book, it demanded a basic level of literacy from its adherents. Thus, as Hunwick observes,

> wherever Islam spread, encouragement was given to the learning of Arabic and to the foundation of both small schools for teaching the reading of the Koran and higher schools for deeper study of the Arabic language and the literature of Muslim peoples – more especially the theological and legal literature which was to form the basis of both the spiritual and temporal life of the new converts. Once established in an area as the language of religion, Arabic was soon put to other more worldly ends, for purposes of trade, politics and dynastic and family records.[17]

The importance of Arabic in the medieval Sudanic states, for example, was undeniable, for the records and dispatches kept by Muslims who served as court secretaries and advisors were instrumental in the consolidation and

[13] John O. Hunwick, "A New Source for the Biography of Ahmad Bāba al-Tinbuktī (1556–1627)."
[14] For two generalized accounts of the impact of the Aqīt family and the Timbuktu school on scholars in Ghana and Nigeria, see Thomas Hodgkin, "The Islamic Literary Tradition in Ghana," and Hunwick, "The Influence of Arabic in West Africa."
[15] Hunwick, "The Influence of Arabic," pp. 28–9.
[16] Ibid., p. 31.
[17] Ibid., p. 24.

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