ISLAM IN AFRICA: FRIEND OR FOE

by

J. O. HUNWICK
University of Ghana, Legon

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ISLAM AND AFRICA: FRIEND OR FOE

IT is not unusual in a public lecture for the speaker to make some *apologia* for the title he has chosen, or at least to clarify the nature of the problems he intends to explore, which may not be fully apparent from the inevitable terseness of a proposition intended both to stimulate curiosity and to inform. The title of my lecture would seem to set up a dichotomy between both Africa and Islam and between the two concepts of friend and foe. But the dichotomy, if in fact it exists at all in such a crude form, has two mutually interacting parts and I wish to discuss therefore, not only the impact of Islam on Africa, but also its mirror image—the impact of Africa on Islam.

I have been stimulated to draw together my thoughts on this topic not least by the persistent recurrence in both student essays and in formal and informal conversations with a wide range of persons during fifteen years of living and teaching in Africa, of two propositions. These are: firstly that Islam is a monolithic structure which has been propagated in Africa wholly or largely by violence and war and, secondly, that the appearance of Islam in an African community is a signal for the complete obliteration of all forms of indigenously African cultural and spiritual expression.

I would like, therefore, to re-examine some of the basic characteristics of that complex cultural phenomenon which we call Islam and the ways in which it has reacted with African ways of life and thought, using both historical and sociological perspectives. In doing so before an audience in Africa composed of both Muslims and non-Muslims, I am aware that I expose myself to criticism from all sides. I cannot expect when dealing with so sensitive a subject as religion that everyone will agree with all I say and, indeed, I would consider my lecture a failure if the members of my audience simply sat sagely nodding their heads in agreement with all the points I made. What I do hope, however, is that my remarks will not themselves seem to bear the stamp of one prejudice or the other and that they may serve to stimulate further consideration of the topic.

We must start with some definitions. Africa, as a geographical entity at any rate, is not hard to define, and my own definition of the boundaries of the continent would not be found to disagree with

that of the geographers. Nevertheless, given the vastness of the continent and the diversity of its peoples, I shall confine most of what I have to say to Sub-Saharan Africa and, within that zone, I shall pay more attention to the area with which I am most familiar—West Africa. Islam, on the other hand, is much less easy to define. We are all familiar with some of its more obvious outward manifestations—mosques, Qur'an-schools, turbans, veils and titles such as al-haji (*al-hajj*), *imam*, *mallam* and *shaykh*. It is also true that there is a large measure of conformity throughout the Muslim world from Senegal to Indonesia in the outward observance of such pillars of the faith as public prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. There also exists and has always existed, a great deal of diversity over some matters of faith and law and over many matters of custom and practice, which may even affect aspects of so central a ritual as the prayer.

Historically, there has been a great deal of tolerance in regard to such diversity and this arises from the origins and nature of Islam. It is also true that there have been attempts by various persons in different times and places to impose their own view of what is Islam and what is not on other fellow Muslims. To some of these we shall refer again, though their existence does not, in my view, detract from the general spirit of tolerance which has prevailed. Islam is not only a religion—that is a system of beliefs regarding the supernatural and man's relation to it in theory and practice—it has also seen itself as a complete way of life, regulating all man's political, social and even economic activities. In this respect, in the integration of the cosmic with the mundane, it has much in common with African world views. The all-embracing nature of Islam, at least as it has manifested itself historically down to the twentieth century, has been aptly expressed by Holt, who described it as ' a complex cultural synthesis, centred in a distinctive religious faith, and necessarily set in the framework of a continuing political life '.[1]

Historically, Islam has lacked a formalised religious hierarchy. It has been a proud boast that there is no priesthood in Islam and, formally, this is true. At the head of the political life of the Islamic *umma*, or ' community ', from the death of the Prophet in 632 right down to 1924, there has been the caliph, a title which means ' successor (to the Prophet)'. But, although one of his theoretical functions was to lead the community in prayer, he had no spiritual authority. He could not impose doctrines or create law, though his duty was to uphold both. He was not considered sinless (many were manifestly not sinless) or infallible. Only the minority Shi'a sect,

which still flourishes in Persia and parts of Iraq and India, considered its own successive heads, *imams,* to be sinless and infallible and able to create law.

Authority in dogma and law has always rested with the scholars. There was, of course, a diversity of views among the scholars in different times and places and there has never been any pan-Islamic body which could make authoritative pronouncements on the divergent views. True, there has been a certain binding force to what is termed the ' consensus of opinion ' (*ijma'*), but in the absence of any formalised method of establishing this consensus, such authority has had a somewhat nebulous character. The conflict between the need to find authoritative sanctions for action and the reality of divergent views, the greater authority of any one of which it was impossible and even undesirable to decide upon, is reflected in two sayings attributed to the Prophet. On the one hand he is credited with saying: ' My Community shall not agree upon error ' and on the other: ' Difference of opinion among my Community is a sign of divine mercy '.

Thus it was that, although no Muslim disputed the first fundamental article of faith: 'There is no god except Allah ', there was still much room for dispute as to His attributes and the range of views extended from the most frankly anthropomorphic to that of an amorphous numinous presence. Similarly, there was no dispute that what is contained in the Qur'an is the very literal Word of God revealed through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. But there was a long dispute as to whether the Qur'an was created or whether it had eternally existed with God. The latter view-point triumphed, but those who held the former, the Mu'tazilites, were not universally branded as infidels for their view.

Among the majority of Muslims, the Sunnis, sometimes— though this involves a doctrinal judgement—called the orthodox, considerable scope has been allowed for divergence of opinion in regard to the law (*al-shari'a*), which, since it embraces all aspects of the believer's life, is the backbone of Islam. In the early centuries of Islam there were many judges who formulated rules and made decisions according to differing criteria. The laws laid down in the Qur'an, so far as these went, were naturally paramount, but many passages could be interpreted differently and many circumstances were not provided for. Several schools of law grew up, though in the end only four survived and by common consent among Muslims (a valid example of *ijma'*) their different interpretations

of various points of law are all equally valid and orthodox. Islamic law has gone even farther than this. Each school of law has also built up its own body of case-law (*nawazil*) and recognition may be given to local practice (*'amal* in Morocco) and local custom (*'urf* or *'ada*). These brief illustrations may serve to show that, far from being a monolithic structure, even the formal theoretical Islam propounded by the scholars has always been tolerant of differing, even conflicting, views.

If we consider the actual practices of the Muslims and even their popular beliefs we shall see that a much greater catholicity exists even than this. Some practices and customs persist (and not only in Africa, of course) that are in *direct* conflict with both the spirit and law of Islam, but only the most stringent of reformers will go so far as to brand Muslims who perform these as unbelievers (*kuffar*). The case for tolerance, even with disapproval, in such cases was well put by the nineteenth-century Bornu leader Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi when refuting the arguments of the Sokoto leader Muhammad Bello for denouncing the people of Bornu as unbelievers:—

> Acts of immorality and disobedience without number have long been comitted in all countries. Egypt is like Bornu, or even worse. So also is Syria and all the cities of Islam..... No age and no country is free from its share of heresy and sin. If, thereby, they all become pagan, then surely their books are useless. So how can you construct arguments based on what they say who are infidel according to you? We seek refuge with God from confusion in religion and following erroneous opinion.[2]

Of a less clear cut nature are the many beliefs and practices of the masses of the Muslims, which, while they may be regarded by the strict scholars as reprehensible or even 'blameworthy innova tions', have become part and parcel of popular Muslim culture, accepted even by the less reformist scholars and generally held and practiced by the vast sub-stratum of 'men of religion'—mallams, fekis or marabouts as they are variously called. With these we shall be very much concerned in examining the popular acceptance of Islam in Africa. The strictest guardians of the purity of Islam have struggled to eliminate such beliefs and practices and their efforts have sometimes led to militancy, as in the Almoravid and Almohad movements in eleventh and twelfth century North Africa, or the *jihad* movement of Dan Fodio in nineteenth century Hausaland.

Modernist reformers, such as Muhammad 'Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in Egypt, Azad, Maududi and a host of others in India, have attempted similar reforms using the pen as their chief weapon, and rational argumentation as their ammunition. But the fact that this popular Islamic or pseudo-Islamic culture exists and is so largely tolerated, has been of very great importance in bringing many Africans within the general fold of Islam. Unlike Christianity, Islam has not in practice demanded from its converts an immediate and wholesale abandonment of long cherished ideas and customs. There are those who have seen this as a weakness of Islam, but it may, in fact, be one of its greatest strengths and among the important reasons for its widespread acceptance in Africa. This theme will be examined in greater detail at a later point.

Before this, however, we must examine briefly the ways in which Islam has been implanted in Africa. The great expansion of the Arab peoples from their Arabian homeland, which began as an unauthorised extention of campaigns to restore the authority of the *umma* within Arabia and crush rebellious tribes, soon took on the character of *ad hoc* empire building to which no limits were set. With the fall of Sassanian Persia and the two important Byzantine provinces of Syria and Egypt, the Arab armies began to push along the Mediterranean coast towards the Berber domains of North-west Africa. During the last three decades of the seventh century and the first decade of the eighth, military resistance of the Berbers was overcome, but instead of turning southwards across the inhospitable Sahara, the Arab armies turned north into Spain. Although these campaigns were strongly tinged with religious zeal, they may more justly be viewed as wars of imperial expansion rather than wars of religion. Even though the Berbers and Spaniards were forced to submit to the political authority of the Islamic *umma*, there is no record of their being forced *en masse* to profess the tenets of the faith or practice its rituals. Logistics forbids such a proposition. The occupying armies were confined to garrison cities which were the administrative centres and could not conceivably have undertaken programmes of forced conversion. What happened is what happened in the case of Christianity in the wake of European imperial expansion in other areas of Africa in the nineteenth century, the conquered people began to adopt the religion of their conquerors either by conviction or for convenience. In the case of the Berbers of North Africa, the conveniences offered by formal conversion to Islam were a lower rate of taxation (at least, in theory), the right

to serve in the Muslim armies, receive stipends and a share of booty and the ability to compete for administrative posts. In the present state of our knowledge about pre-Islamic Berber religious cults it is difficult to know how far their own systems may have predisposed them towards the tenets of Islam.

Later, in the ninth and tenth centuries a certain degree of Berber cultural nationalism was to make itself apparent in opposition to the Arab culture of their conquerors, a phenomenon which was also marked among the Persians after their general acceptance of Islam. Heterodox Islamic sects found a fertile ground for their propaganda in North Africa and we also hear of the emergence of one or two thoroughly syncretic movements, such as the Barghawata. Again, this may be paralleled in the history of Christianity in Africa by the appearance of such movements as those of Simon Kimbangu and other millenarian and prophet cults and the growth of separatist African Churches.

To judge from the evidence in Westermarck's *Ritual and Belief in Morocco,* many indigenous Berber beliefs seem to have survived into the twentieth century, some thinly Islamised, some still retaining a boldly non-Islamic character. To take a single example: the idea of *baraka,* the notion that certain persons through their saintly character and nearness to God, or through their genealogical connection with the Prophet, are possessed of a certain 'blessedness' which may be communicated to others, is so widespread in Muslim lands as to be generally accepted, rightly or wrongly, as being an authentic feature of the faith. In Morocco, not only is this dimension of it prevalent almost to the point of hagiolatry, but various animals and crops are thought to contain *baraka* and *baraka* is widely thought to be inherent in all natural sources of water, most especially the sea. Although I would exclude any mutual influence, it is interesting to remark in passing how similar this latter belief is to Akan ideas about the sacredness of lakes, rivers and natural water in general.

The passage of Islam into sub-Saharan Africa had an altogether different character. Although one or two exploratory probes were made into the Sahara, no Arab army ever crossed the desert. Due largely to their inhospitable character, no attempt was made to bring the Saharan regions within the effective orbit of the Muslim *umma.* Although in due time Islam spread among some of the Berber tribes of the Sahara, this did not lead to a militant expansion of the frontiers of Islam, except for the comparatively brief episode

of the Almoravids in the eleventh century, and their effect on North Africa and Spain was incomparably greater than it was on Black Africa. Muslim contact with Black Africa—and this was true in the East as well as the West—was undertaken for the pursuit of trade to feed the vast economic arteries of the Muslim world that reached out as far as the Baltic in the north and China in the east. This type of contact, though it eventually began to bring more believers to the fold of Islam was not always looked upon with approval. The tenth-century jurist Ibn Abi Zayd of Qayrawan in modern Tunisia sternly warned: 'Trading journeys to the land of the enemy and to the land of the Blacks are considered reprehensible.'[3] In spite of this, trading contacts between North Africans and the various polities of the Sahel zone from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Chad continued and we see, by the eleventh century, the emergence of indigenous Muslim communities in a number of towns and even the conversion of certain rulers, notably those of the state of Takrur on the Senegal river, Gao on the middle Niger and Kanem to the north of Lake Chad.

The subsequent efforts of some West African Muslim rulers to islamise the various peoples they ruled before the eighteenth century, while by no means negligible, are none the less of secondary importance when compared to the role of African Muslim traders and nomads with their accompanying holymen in slowly diffusing the faith along the paths to which their commerce or pastoralism directed them. Islam was thus gradually spread *to* Africans *by* Africans, largely by peaceful means. The incoming Muslims were tiny minorities in the midst of an environment that was at least potentially hostile. They were thus in no position to impose doctrines and stamp on un-Islamic practices. They could only encourage acceptance and turn a blind eye to the many irregularities they observed, hoping by their continued teaching and by the education of the converts eventually to strengthen the faith. Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were to be militant Islamic movements, which, it must also be said, were not free of economic, ethnic and imperial considerations. They took place in areas where there had long been large numbers, often an overwhelming majority, of Muslims. They are, in fact, inconceivable without a deep and generally learned tradition of Islam and although at times these *jihads* extended into territories which had not previously been affected by Islam and sometimes degenerated into mere slave-raiding, such movements as those of Dan Fodio, Seku Ahmadu

and to some extent that of Al-Hajj ' Umar were basically aimed at reforming societies that were already essentially Muslim. By 'reform', as conceived by the reformers, however, was meant the supression of practises and beliefs which the reformers considered contrary to the very scholarly interpretations of Islam which they held. How far they were able to obliterate this African dimension of the Islamic cultural complex and how far the older more tolerant and accommodationist tradition was able to survive, will now be examined with examples also drawn from other areas of the African continent.

We shall begin by looking at Muslim cosmological beliefs and the extent to which they have parallels in African beliefs. It is, of course, impossible to make any worthwhile generalisations about African religious beliefs in general. Nevertheless, some of the following features are to be found in many: belief in a supreme god, often a *deus otiosus* who created the world, but who thereafter took little part in the day-to-day running of it. This is the *Olorun* of the Yoruba, the *Irkoi* of the Songhay, the *Nyame* of the Akan, the *Waq* of the Somali and Galla, the *Soko* of the Nupe. More concerned in the affairs of men are various hierarchies of lesser spirits who watch over man, punishing him when he fails in his duties or breaks the taboos of the cult. Amends may be made to these spirits through the appropriate sacrifices, generally offered through the intermediary of priests devoted to the particular cult. In a similar way, the spirits' blessing and help may be obtained. Such spirits are the *orisa* of the Yoruba, the *obosom* of the Akan, the *iskoki* of the non-Muslim Hausa (the Maguzawa), the *zin* of the Songhay. Thirdly, there are the ancestors, whose spirits live on after death and whose guidance may be sought through libations and sacrifices. The more important of these are often the foundation of clan structures and of supra-clan or national political institutions. In some cases, the ancestors themselves are thought to originate from the spirit world and the individual may also be thought to possess in himself a spark of the divine which is instilled in him at birth and which returns to the creator on death. Such a crude account of some of the features which are common in one degree or another to some African religions does little justice to the richness and variety of African religious concepts, but the aim is to indicate certain features which are fairly widespread and which, though generally with quite different emphases or in different guises, are to be found either in the formal Islam of the scholars' books or in the popular beliefs of the Muslim masses with varying degrees of orthodox support.

First, and most obvious, of these is the Islamic belief in Allah, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, whose absolute might and power is shared with none other. His absolute uniqueness is emphasised in the powerful formula of the first article of faith *la ilaha illa Allah*— 'there is no god but Allah' in which His oneness is stressed by His being the single exception to a general rule. The idea of a supreme creator God is not foreign to many African religions, as I have pointed out and among the Yoruba, for example, Muslims will use the name Olorun as freely as the Arabic word Allah; the Mossi may use *Winam* in a similar way, and the Swahili, *Mungu*. This is not unique to Africa. In Persia, one of the first lands to receive Islam, the pre-Islamic name for God, *Khudai*, is still in common use.

The question of the lesser spirits is less straightforward as there are not only differences of opinion among the scholars, but there is also a powerful 'popular orthodoxy' and a wide range of popular heterodox beliefs. Among the creatures created by God, other than man, are the angels and belief in them is part of the creed. However, they dwell in Heaven and have little to do with the world of men, though holy men have claimed to see them in dreams and it was an angel, Gabriel, who vouchsafed God's revelation to Muhammad. Another type of being, which is far less easy to define, is the *jinn*. The word occurs a number of times in the Qur'an and there are said to be believing and unbelieving *jinn*. Some of the ancient Muslim scholars considered such references to be among the 'ambiguous' parts of the Qur'an and some believed that such passages were to be interpreted allegorically; this is also a tendency among modern rationalist interpreters of the Qur'an. But the majority of scholars and the mass of the Muslims throughout the ages have believed in the *jinn* as a reality of the spirit world.

The traditional view of the *jinn* is summed up by Edward Lane, the nineteenth century scholar, in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*:—

> The Ginn are said to be of pre-Adamite origin, and, in their general properties, an intermediate class of beings between angels and men, but inferior in dignity to both, created of fire, and capable of assuming the forms and material fabric of men, brutes, and monsters, and of becoming invisible at pleasure. They eat and drink, propagate their species (like, or in conjunction with, human beings), and are subject to death, though they generally live many centuries..... Some are believers in El-Islam: others are infidels; the latter are what are called

"Sheytans," or devils; of whom Iblees (that is, Satan, or *the* devil,) is the chief: for it is the general and best-supported opinion, that he (like the other devils) is a ginee, as he was created of fire; whereas the *angels* are created of light and are impeccable.[4]

In a long note on *jinn* in his translation of the *Arabian Nights* (in which *jinn* feature lavishly), Lane makes clear the reasons for the widespread popular interest in them. By the use of talismans and certain invocations it was believed that men could obtain the services of *jinn*—the story of Aladdin and the magic lamp is a well-known fictional example of this. Because of their ability to fly up to the lowest of the seven heavens, the jinn can listen to the conversation of the angels and hence obtain knowledge of the future which can be imparted to men. This last aspect of the popular belief would seem to be directly contrary to the Islamic belief as stated in the Qur'an that God alone knows the future and it was, of course, such attempts to obtain information about the future by magical or divinatory means that brought down the wrath, and even the anathemetising edicts, of the religious scholars.

It is not difficult to see, however, that such popular beliefs about *jinn*, which in part had perfectly respectable origins, could be of importance in the process of islamisation among African peoples who believed in such intermediate spirits as *iskoki, abosom, orisa* or *zin*—the latter word itself derived from the word *jinn*. Cults of spirit possession, such as the *bori* of the Hausa, the *holey* of the Songhay and the *zar* of the Ethiopians and Sudanese could also be accommodate in the popular mind within this conceptual framework as possession by hostile *jinns*. Thus, the widespread popular Muslim belief in *jinns* provided another avenue for the acceptance of Islam at one level among a number of African peoples.

We come now to the third feature which I mentioned as common to many African religions, the cult of the ancestors. Does this have any parallel in Islam, either formally or popularly? One's first reaction would be to say no and that this is, indeed, an abhorrent concept. There is certainly no hint of anything like this in the *Qur'an*, where, rather, the veneration of the ancestors and their customs—their *sunna*—is strongly condemned in numerous verses. Naturally these ancestors were 'unbelievers', 'idolators,' 'polytheists.' The so-called 'days of ignorance' were to be forgotten in the age of Islam, but after the death of Muhammad, his *sunna*, his customs and practices, were to be taken as the model for all good Muslims. In the spiritual sense, then, Muhammad may be regarded as the

ancestor of all the Muslims in all times and places. Muhammad's intercession with God may be hoped for by every Muslim when accounts are rendered on the Day of Judgement. Although prayer must be addressed to God alone, the Muslim may ask for the forgiveness of his sins through the grace and influence (*jah*) of Muhammad. The *sunna* of the first four caliphs, the successors to Muhammad's political office, is likewise regarded as a model for Muslim behaviour and Muslims throughout the ages, however distant from them in time and circumstance, have felt themselves very closely connected to these revered 'ancestors in the faith '.

To these early spiritual ancestors must be added a very large body of later ones, those mystics and ascetics who have been popularly accorded the status of *wali* or ' saint '. The word *wali* is used many times in the Qur'an with the meaning of ' friend ' and usually in reference to God as being the friend of the believers. There is also a verse which refers to the ' friends of God ' as those who believe and keep their duty to God, but this is still a far cry from the veritable cult of saints which developed in the Muslim world from the thirteenth century. This cult which grew with the development of organised mystical fraternities (some of which had the milder characteristics of secret societies) reached a point of near idolatry in some countries, such as Morocco, and the miracle-mongering and magic which were associated with it did much to degrade the mentality of Muslim peoples. In some cases pre-Islamic shrines continued to be revered, as saints were alleged to be buried in them. Besides the great founding saints of mystical orders, hosts of other purely local saints were recognised, to the point where, in Morocco, every village would have its own holy place, a mausoleum in which a saint was buried and at which prayers were offered by the local people and in some cases by pilgrims from farther afield.

In Africa the cult of saints has been most pronounced in the Berber lands of the north-west, in Egypt and the Sudan and in the Horn of Africa. The cult of the local saint has been of very little importance in West Africa except in a few localities open to Moroccan influence, such as Timbuktu. However, reverence for the founders of the two mystical orders found in West Africa (to one or other of which almost every Muslim there belongs), is very great and the names of Ahmad al-Tijani and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani are frequently invoked in private prayer and a vast number of poems in their praise and seeking their intercession have been composed by West African Muslims in Arabic and in local languages.

These two orders, the Qadiriyya first and, after its foundation in Morocco in the early nineteenth century, the Tijaniyya, have, in fact been very powerful agents in the diffusion of Islam in West Africa and the role of their spiritual ancestors in providing a human intermediary to whom the believers could relate and through whom they could channel their communication with God, has no doubt, been of great importance.

So much for the high god, the spirits and the ancestors. There are, in fact, many other facets of Islamic or pseudo-Islamic belief and culture which could find sympathetic echoes in certain African societies— just as there are many which cannot. There are societies which have adopted some facets of Muslim culture without formally adopting the faith. There are others which have formally adopted the faith but maintained customs which are in contradication to it. Above all, there are many which have adopted Islam and maintained many of their practices and beliefs while giving them an Islamic (in the broadest sense) colouring. It is to these various manifestations of the meeting of Africa with Islam that we now turn.

The first case we shall consider is that of societies which have remained faithful to their traditional religions but in which use is made of Muslim methods of manipulating nature and the spirit world. It is probably the efficacy which such Muslim methods were thought to possess that created the right psychological climate for later formal conversion. The Muslims were considered to be very skillful in making amulets for personal protection against all manner of misfortune, sickness, barrenness, injury or death in battle, poisoning and so forth and also for bringing good fortune to their wearer whether in love, business, hunting or any other sphere of human endeavour. Muslims were also in demand in non-Muslim societies on the borders of the Muslim world for preparing medicines, which might include the washed-off ink from a board on which Qur'anic verses had been written, and in bringing rain in drought-stricken areas. Such services of semi-literate holymen were also, of course, much in demand among the Muslims themselves.

The use of Muslim amulets by non-Muslims has been widely remarked on. The Scottish traveller Mungo Park moving through what is now the Gambia and Mali in the late eighteenth century observed:—

> .....notwithstanding that the majority of Negroes are Pagans and absolutely reject the doctrines of Mahomet, I did not meet with a man, whether a Bushreen (Muslim) or Kafir (non-

Muslim) who was not fully persuaded of the efficacy of these amulets. The truth is that all the natives of this part of Africa consider the art of writing as bordering on magic; and it is not in the doctrines of the prophet, but in the arts of the magician that their confidence is placed.[5]

The high degree of confidence placed by the Ashantis in the ability of Muslim amulets to protect them in war was remarked on with some astonishment by Bowdich who visited Kumasi in 1817:—

> The most surprising superstition of the Ashantees, is their confidence in the fetishes or saphies they purchase so extravagantly from the Moors, believing firmly that they make them invulnerable and invincible in war, paralyse the hand of the enemy, shiver their weapons, divert the course of balls, render both sexes prolific, and avert all evils but sickness (which they can only assuage,) and natural death.[6]

Some of the over-confident soldiers even volonteered to let Bowdich fire at them (a temptation he fortunately resisted) to prove the power of their talismans.

The making of Qur'anic amulets and the use of Qur'anic verses in healing is approved by almost all Muslim authorities and is considered to have been sanctioned by the Prophet. Some even allow the use of material not derived from the Qur'an and even in languages other than Arabic and all such amulets may be worn by non-Muslims (and even by animals) provided the text is wrapped up and hidden from view. The overall importance of literacy, as demonstrated in amulets and in the ability of Muslims to have direct access to the Divine Will by reading the Qur'an, in impressing upon non-Muslims the beneficent power of Islam, has been ably investi gated in Jack Goody's essay ' Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana' where a wealth of examples are given.[7]

Many African societies, especially in areas of only moderate rainfall, have specialised rain makers to conjure the elements. Nevertheless, when indigenous resources have failed, it has sometimes been thought prudent to call in a Muslim holyman to offer prayers. There is, in fact, an orthodox ceremony of pluvial rogation, the *salat al-istisqa,* a special public prayer, but in more isolated circumstances more *ad hoc* procedures may be adopted. Thus a Manding ruler in the eleventh century, having almost decimated local stocks of cattle in rain-making sacrifices, called on a visiting Muslim for help. The result of the Muslim's prayers was not only that copious rain fell, but that the ruler himself was converted to Islam.

The final example of the incorporation of Muslim elements by non-Muslim societies is taken from the Hausa of northern Nigeria. Generally, one thinks of the Hausa as being an entirely Muslim people, so much so that among the non-Muslim populations of coastal West Africa the phrase ' those Hausa people ' may be applied indiscriminately to all Muslims from farther north. But there are still among the Nigerian Hausa small groups of people who have, inspite of *jihads,* stuck to their ancestral beliefs in the rural areas. These Maguzawa do, in fact recognise the existence of a supreme god and even use the name Allah for Him, though they have no cult of His worship. Their essential cult centres round an unknown number of spirits, *iskoki,* which however, perform their work by the permission of Allah. Certain of these are known by name and have definite personalities and powers ascribed to them. They are found everywhere, in the sky the forest, the hills, in bodies of water and in the cities of men. Those which are known and have a definite cult generally have a favourite tree or other locale at which sacrifices appropriate to the particular spirit are offered. The spirits sometimes reveal themselves to their worshippers through the medium of human beings they have selected. Such people are then possessed by them and the spirits are only excorcised through a *bori* ceremony in which the spirit speaks through the possessed person to a cult member, announcing its wishes and indicating the sacrifice to be made.

While this cult appears to be thoroughly indigenous, it has absorbed a number of the popular Muslim *jinn* notions and, in one form or another, is also practised among the Muslim Hausa, though it is greatly disapproved of by the orthodox. The most important of all the *iskoki* is, in fact called *sarkin aljan*—'king of the *jinn',* who has his chief minister, *waziri,* another *iska.* Among the other important spirits is Malam al-haji, represented as a pilgrim dressed in white, who causes cough. One possessed by him performs ablutions and counts a rosary and his sacrifice is a white cock or a white sheep. He has a son, Dan Galadima, who causes wanderlust and another called Nakada ' the striker ' who causes a form of madness. This latter association is particularly interesting as the Arabic word for ' mad ', *majnun,* means literally ' possessed by a *jinn* '.

The word *jinn* is freely used by the Maguzawa as a synonym for *iska* and they divide the *iskoki* into the white, which are Muslim and city-dwelling and the black which are non-Muslim and bush-dwelling. Greenberg, on whose work *The Influence of Islam on a*

Sudanese Religion I am dependent for these details, also shows how, among the Muslim Hausa, the *iskoki* continue to be recognised, but are explained in Muslim terms. The mallams consider the *iskoki* to be unbelieving *jinn* native to the Hausa country and, as such, they are identified with the practice of black magic which is unlawful.

> Hence (says Greenberg), though all phases of the rites of the *iskoki* are condemned by the malams as being *cafi* (*tsafi*— 'black magic'), no doubt is thrown on the actual existence of the *iskoki* nor is the reality of the effects they produce doubted. Pagan religious practices, like black magic, are not held unefficacious, they are simply contrary to religion and hence reprehensible.[8]

This attitude is perfectly in accordance with the widespread view of the mediaeval Muslim scholars. Even such a towering intellect as the historian Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) did not doubt the reality of black magic:—

> It should be known that no intelligent person doubts the existence of sorcery, because of the influence..... which sorcery exercises. The Qur'an refers to it. It says: '..... but the devils were unbelievers, teaching the people sorcery and that which had been revealed in Babel to the two angels, Harut and Marut..... ' The Messenger of God, according to (the sound tradition of) the *Sahih*. was put under a magic spell, so that he imagined that he was doing a thing while, in fact, he was not doing it.[9]

He goes on to a long and learned discussion about the various types of magic, geomancy, cabbalistic talismans and the evil eye and, while recognising the efficacy of most of them, he indicates scepticism of some and concludes that all are forbidden on the grounds of religious law. As we shall see, however, such practices have been widespread among Muslims, and not only in Africa.

We pass now a stage further along the process to the point where Islam and an African religion blend so much that a hybrid form is produced. This is a much rarer phenomenon, but two examples, one historical and one contemporary spring to mind. The historical one has already been alluded to, the Barghawata religion of a group of Berbers in tenth-century Morocco and along with this we may also mention a similar movement which is named after its founder Hamim (a positively Qur'anic name) which existed at about the same time in northern Morocco. The would-be prophets who led these movements both claimed to have received revelations, which

appear as poor imitations of Qur'anic style, but in the Berber language. They also prescribed a greater or lesser number of Islamic-type prayers and some fasting, either in Ramadan or other months. Both also enforced some taboos which would seem to be of local origin: the prohibition of eating eggs, fish, the heads of any animals and, in the case of the Barghawata, cockerels.

The contemporary example is that of the Songhay, whose religious and magical beliefs have been investigated by the French scholar Rouch.[10] In fact, almost all of the Songhay would claim to be Muslims, but those in the scattered bush villages of western Niger have beliefs and practices which are best described as syncretic. Rouch has suggested that in fact Islam has come as an overlay to the indigenous religion, not ousting it, but complementing it. The celestial end of the cosmology is quite Islamic, with Allah or Irkoi as the supreme, rather otiose, creator-god, and with good angels (*maleka,* from the Arabic *mala'ika*) and evil angels (*seytan—shaytan*) headed by Iblis. Other spirits are the *zin* and the *holey*. The *zin,* whose name evidently derives from *jinn* are not the same conceptually as the Islamic *jinn*. The Songhay *zin* are spirits of localities, the land *zin* occupying trees, rocks and mountains, and the water *zin* inhabiting rapids, gorges, whirlpools, lakes, etc. The priests of these cults are said to be descended from the original 'masters of the soil' and 'masters of the river' or from cult heroes of incoming groups who overcame them. The land *zin* are propitiated at their various localities annually by animal sacrifice to ensure good crops and good health. The water *zin* were controlled by special magician priests who had the power to send away man-eating crocodiles, prevent people from drowning, find objects lost in the water and, if necessary, stay under water for several hours. The latter cult is now being superseded by a generalised cult of the *jin* of the waters and in the more islamised areas sacrifice to the water *zin* has been replaced by alms-giving to children and mallams at the beginning of the fishing season.

The *holey,* on the other hand, are much more like the Islamic *jinns* and the Maguzawa *iskoki,* to both of which they may owe something. They are divided up into seven families, all related by descent or in master-slave relationship. Thus there are the Torou spirits of the river and sky who are closely tied up with Songhay mythology (as the *orisa* are among the Yoruba) and especially with ethnic origins in an area of great ethnic diversity; the *gandyi korey* white, Tuareg, spirits, and the *gandyi bi,* black, Voltaic spirits. There

are also dwarf spirits, cold spirits, Hausa spirits and, since the cult continues to evolve, power spirits—Europeans. The possession cult with which they are associated is similar in its manifestations and results to the Maguzawa *bori*.

The other spirit of which these Songhay are aware is called *ndebi* which seems to be the Arabic *nabi*—' prophet ', though this spirit, if it has anything to do with Islam, has similarities with the esoteric *nur Muhammadi* concept which is only known in an attrited form by some scholars in West Africa. The Songhay *ndebi* appears as a mysterious demiurge in charge of coordinating the various spirits and the activities of man. It is only a vaguely understood concept and *ndebi* has no separate cult. Other areas of Songhay territory have been much more firmly islamised and in these there is a legitimate Muslim cult of the Prophet, whose birthday is celebrated and whose qualities and prerogatives may be recited in the mosques in Ramadan. In fact, throughout the wide area inhabited by Songhay-speaking peoples around the Middle Niger, one could find all shades of islamisation from the syncretism described above to the most orthodox, reformist scholarly expression of the faith. This mixed situation does not seem to have changed much since it was first alluded to by the great Askia Muhammad at the close of the fifteenth century when putting his questions to the visiting scholar Al-Maghili.

Moving across the spectrum and passing the formal barrier, we come now to the type of society which has accepted Islam, whose beliefs accord with, at any rate, popular Islam, whose members observe the Islamic obligations, but which has, nevertheless, retained various un-Islamic customs which appear to be in conflict with the spirit or the letter of Islam or both. Historical examples of this are manifold. One of the most frequently cited of these is that of prostration before a ruler and pouring dust on the head, which is widely attested from fourteenth-century Mali to late eighteenth-century Hausaland. Orthodox Islam prohibits prostration to any human being and reserves this sign of obeisance for God alone. Such profane prostration was not unknown elsewhere in the Muslim world and although Mansa Musa of Mali made his subjects prostrate before him he attempted to refuse this gesture on his own part in front of the Mamluk sultan of Egypt.

There are many other examples which could be cited: the persistence of matrilineal inheritance and succession, noted by the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta among the Berber-

Tuareg populations of the southern Sahara, in clear defiance of the Islamic law of patrilineality; the scarification or cicatrization still practised by many African Muslim peoples (Songhay, Kanuri, Yoruba, Sudanese, for example), the barbarous 'Pharaonic circumcision' practised on females still in parts of the Sudan and Somalia—all clear contraventions of the Islamic prohibition on mutilation. Aberrant forms of marriage also persist: the nomadic Fulani of Bornu practice inheritance of brothers' widows and this is said to be also the practice of the Muslim Manding and Yoruba. Nupe have preferred the marriage of a young man to his mother's brother's widow, but this has now died out except in remote rural areas. Temporary marriage (*mut'a*) is practised, clandestinely, in commercial centres such as Timbuktu and Jenne and in Hausa towns such 'marriage for pleasure' (*auran jin dadi*) is often entered into for the month of Ramadan.

One of the more interesting examples of the persistence of African rituals in a Muslim environment is that of masking cults. It is especially interesting because the mask is generally viewed as an object having clearly un-Islamic ritual associations. Such art forms, even when not tied to the rituals, are usually thought to be forbidden by Islam and since such ceremonies are accompanied by drumming and dancing, the scholarly guardians of the faith might be expected to oppose them quite vigorously. In a fascinating recent study, *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa,* Rene Bravmann has shown how such masking cults can survive in islamised areas and even be patronised by *imams* and other pillars of the faith.

He has studied three masking cults to be found among the ethnically very mixed populations of the Cercle de Bondoukou in Ivory Coast and the western area of the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana. The Bedu cult, which exists on the Ivory Coast side of the border is directed to protecting the community from disasters, to ensure human fertility and to cure infantile sicknesses. It is always controlled by non-Muslims, but in Hwela villages it is recognised also by the Muslims as being a cult which concerns the well-being of the total community. Muslim dignitaries may be present at its manifestation and Muslims participate in the feast at the end of the annual month-long Bedu ceremonies.

The Gbain cult, also controlled by non-Muslims, exists on both sides of the border. It is essentially a purification ritual and the task of the masqueraders is to drive out witches and evil spirits from the community. The major manifestation of the Gbain occurs

annually at the period of the Muslim New Year and comes to a climax on the day of 'Ashura', the tenth day of the first month, Muharram, a holy day on which the most orthodox Muslims fast in keeping with the Prophet's practice. Muslim participation in the Gbain is considered very important and without Muslim expertise, say the non-Muslims, the tradition would soon die. Muslims participate in all stages of the Gbain ceremonies. The mask itself is sprinkled with water washed off a Qur'an board and mixed with local herbs. Qur'anic charms are attached to the mask itself which is secretly 'fed' with a piece of smoked meat preserved from the great Islamic Festival of the Sacrifice (*'Id al-adha*) held a month earlier. In this way, it is believed, the *baraka* of the old year may be transferred to the new. In addition to these Gbain masking activities, the Muslims in the villages where this cult exists also hold prayers in their mosques on the night before the 'Ashura' day.

The third masking tradition, the Do masquerade, found among the Manding sub-groups of the Ligbi, Hwela and Dyula in the same areas, is an entirely Muslim affair. The masks are owned and maintained by members of the scholarly class and in one case by the *imam* of the town. The task of the Do is essentially to ward off evil spirits from the community, but in its major manifestation which takes place immediately after the end of the Ramadan fast, there is also an element of simple release of tension after a month of hardship. The Do masked dancers also perform during the Festival of the Sacrifice and on 'Ashura' in years of calamity. Such performances take place in an open area in front of the mosque. They also make more private appearances, notably at the compounds of learned Muslims on the third, seventh or twelfth day after their death. This participation of Muslims in masking traditions in Manding areas is certainly surprising and perhaps unique, but it does show the extent to which the meeting of Islam with African cultural traditions can go and still retain official approval.

Finally, in examining the ways in which Islam and Africa have been able to meet, I would like briefly to look at certain facets of the Muslim way of doing things and looking at things which have correspondences in traditional African cultural features. I have already referred to such features as the cult of the ancestors and the belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits which have parallels in the two cultural areas. I also alluded to the way in which a minor Islamic festival, the 'Ashura' has become a more major event in the annual cycle by assimilating to itself ceremonies connected with

chasing out the bad spirits of the past year and preparing the community for a propitious new year. The festival is enthusiastically celebrated in Morocco and often includes the lighting of a purificatory fire which people jump over. This feature is also found among the Songhay who have been influenced by Moroccan customs, and fire, in the form of torchlight processions, also features in the Manding and Nupe celebrations. Formerly among the Nupe there was ceremonial bathing on this day and ritual fighting between groups of youths, the latter feature also occurring in Timbuktu. Among the Nupe and the Yoruba it is common for there to be readings from an Arabic book of unknown origin, called the 'Book of the Year' which is supposed to yield prophecies for the new year. The preservation of parts of the ram from the last year's Festival of the Sacrifice to be eaten on this day, noted in the Gbain masking tradition, is also common among Muslims in Senegal, Sierra Leone and Guinee and among the Yoruba, though in all these cases the meat is eaten by the people themselves.

The various features of the life cycle—naming ceremonies, circumcision, marriage and burial have in African Muslim societies often retained elements from indigenous traditions. There are, of course, Muslim ways of conducting these ceremonies, but almost everywhere local features have been retained, blending with the Islamic rituals. The same sort of thing has occurred among Christians in Europe where priests are not generally known for example, to frown on such non-Christian customs as throwing confetti at a wedding (originally to ward off evil spirits) or the use of a horseshoe symbol on wedding cards and cakes to bring good luck.

Other very important features of most African cultures and religions—dancing, drumming and singing—which are generally thought to be against the law of Islam, are, in fact to be found at the heart of religious devotion among Muslims almost the world over. I refer here to the devotions of the mystical fraternities, the Sufi *tariqas,* which have as their end the annihilation of the self in a mystical union with God which is to be achieved through the communal repetition of the name of God and other phrases of hypnotic effect—an effect which is heightened in many of the fraternities by rhythmic drum—beating, swaying movements of the body and, in some cases by actual dancing. The excesses of some of these fraternities have been condemned by the conservative scholars and the Wahhabiyya of Saudi Arabia utterly condemn all such practices and anything which smacks of a cult of saints. Nevertheless, to a

greater or lesser extent, these popular Muslim practices continue to be a common feature. In Africa the use of drums, and often other musical instruments, is common on festival days when the emir or other local dignitary makes his way to the public prayer, even in those areas of Hausaland most heavily influenced by Dan Fodio's reforming movement. Thus the African genius for music and dancing can find a legitimate outlet in islamised societies.

The field of divination and healing is a very large one which can only be touched on at this point, though the use of Muslim techniques, sometimes to supplant and sometimes to complement indigenous African methods has been of great importance in making Islam acceptable, as was also the case with the protective amulet referred to earlier. In the strict sense any attempt to discover or predict the future is forbidden in Islam, since knowledge of the future is a unique prerogative of God alone. On this there is the well-known saying of the Prophet: ' Whoever puts trust in a soothsayer or a diviner or an astrologer has denied (the truth of) what God revealed to Muhammad '. In spite of this, there is an extensive literature in Arabic on geomancy, numerology and letter-magic as well as oneirology (*ta'bir al-ru'ya*). It includes books by North African authors and also some by West African writers. The matter was one of considerable controversy and, though such techniques continued to be practised particularly by quasi-Sufis, (and were rampant in nineteenth-century Egypt, Algeria and Morocco) the scholars of the law, at any rate, condemned them.

In West Africa techniques of geomancy and letter-magic, often closely associated with healing techniques, continue to be practised to the present day, especially in societies which have strong indigenous traditions of divination, such as the Yoruba with their *Ifa*. The interplay between Muslim and indigenous techniques in Yoruba society has recently been the subject of a detailed investigation by Father Ryan of this university, to whose work I am indebted.[11] The various practitioners, the Muslim Alfa and the Babalawo of the Ifa cult sometimes have occasion to consult each other when their respective techniques are slow in producing the desired result. The Muslim Alfa, who also functions as medicine-man may use a combination of Yoruba herbal remedies derived from the Ifa tradition along with Qur'anic verses washed from a slate, or include such herbs and other natural elements in amulets along with verses of the Qur'an or magic squares based on letters or their numerical equivalents. Likewise, Muslim methods are sometimes used against

disasters brought on by various *orisa,* such as smallpox which is brought by Sopono, and in such cases there is a positive identification of *orisa* with *jinn.* The Alfas also have techniques involving recitation of verses of the Qur'an for counteracting the work of witches and curing madness caused by witchcraft.

Techniques in which Muslim methods are united with *Ifa*-derived methods are naturally condemned by the more orthodox scholars. But the use of verses of the Qur'an for healing is as old as Islam itself and was practised by the Prophet. He is also said to have used recitation of the chapter Yasin to blind his enemies to his presence when leaving Mecca on his *hijra* to Madina. There are also Qur'anic methods, if not for telling the future, at least for enabling the believer to have divine guidance in making a decision. This process, known as *istikhara,* is carried out in various ways, one of the commonest being to recite certain verses of the Qur'an, then open the book at random and draw the answer to one's problem from the seventh line of the right-hand page. Other methods include the interpretation of dreams after the performance of certain prayers. Such methods have been commonly accepted and used by religious leaders, though a strict reformer such as Dan Fodio is known to have disapproved of them.

I have reviewed at some length the various levels at which Islam has met Africa and mixed with it. There are, of course, other levels and other degrees of interaction. I have referred to the views of the orthodox scholars and indicated the accepted plurality of views among them. There is no doubt that most of them would like to sweep aside the many 'compromises' as they would see them, that Islam has made and does still make with African cultural traditions. This was the purifying aim of the great *jihad* movements. But I believe that it has been the very plasticity of the faith which has enabled it to be so widely accepted in Africa. This is no doubt true of the spread of Islam in other far-flung areas of the Muslim world such as China, Indonesia and the Phillipines; the evidence certainly suggests it. The same was equally true of the spread of Christianity in Europe in the Middle Ages. As Sir James Fraser pointed out in *The Golden Bough,* after reviewing the Christian festivals in the context of pre-Christian beliefs and rituals:—

> Taken together, the coincidences of the Christian with the heathen festivals are too close and too numerous to be accidental. They mark the compromise which the Church in the hour of its triumph was compelled to make with its vanquished yet

> dangerous rivals. The inflexible Protestantism of the primitive missionaries, with their fiery denunciations of heathendom, had been exchanged for the supple policy, the easy tolerance, the comprehensive charity of shrewd ecclesiastics, who clearly perceived that if Christianity was to conquer the world it could do so only by relaxing the too rigid principles of its Founder, by widening a little the narrow gate which leads to salvation.[12]

This message, which was not generally taken to heart when Christian missionaries came to Africa, has unconsciously been in the minds of those who have spread the Islamic faith in the continent. While African Christianity has revolted against the cultural arrogance which came with its introduction and has divided itself into many sects and movements in the process of this revolt, there has not been in African Islam, with the exception of the early Berber separatist movements I mentioned, any similar splintering among the Muslims. Unity in diversity has been the general rule and Islam has permitted itself African forms of expression. The Persian experience in particular (and other examples could be easily quoted) has shown that to Islamise is not necessarily to Arabise. In Africa it has been Islam's experience to adapt and adopt without losing its essence. In the words of a great African thinker and devout Muslim, Ahmadou Hampate Ba: 'In Africa Islam has no more colour than water. This is what explains its success. It takes on itself the colour of the lands and the hues of the stones.'[13]

Friend or foe? The antithesis with which we started out has not, I think, proved useful or valid. Islam as a system of belief and a way of life has not been forced upon unwilling recipients in Africa, nor, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, has it come as a by-product of an alien imperialism. In so far as it has been accepted by African peoples, it has been accepted in the way and to the degree which those peoples found it responded to their own spiritual needs and cultural patterns. Its future, too, like that of Christianity, will depend upon the tolerance and charity with which its adherents continue to respond to the indigenous spiritual and cultural vitality which still characterise African societies.

NOTES

1. P. M. Holt in his introduction to *The Cambridge History of Islam*, i, Cambridge, 1970, p.xii.
2. Quoted by Muhammad Bello in his *Infaq al-Maysur*. The English translation is from T. L. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, 2nd edn., Oxford, 1975, p. 263.
3. See his *Risala*, ed. and trans. L. Bercher, Alger, 1945, p.318.
4. 5th edn., London, 1860, p. 222.
5. *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 2nd edn., London, 1816, i, pp.56-7·
6. *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, London, 1819, p. 271.
7. In J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 198–265.
8. *The Influence of Islam on a Sudanese Religion*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1946, p. 68.
9. *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal, 2nd edn., Princeton, 1967, iii. p. 159.
10. *La Religion et la Magie Songhay*, Paris, 1960.
11. P. J. Ryan, ' *Imale:* Yoruba participation in the Muslim tradition—a study of clerical piety ' Ph. D. thesis, Harvard University. 1975.
12. Abridged edition, London, 1954, p. 361
13. Quoted in V. Monteil, *L'Islam Noir*, 2nd edn., Paris, 1971, p. 48.

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