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THE ROLES OF ORAL AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS IN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the state of oral and written Islamic history tradition in parts of Africa before European colonialism in 18th and 19th centuries. The written tradition introduced by Islam about the 8th century A.D. will be reviewed and put in perceptive with latter written tradition introduced by Europeans. The need and possibility of reconciling these historiographical traditions is critically discussed. The paper employed qualitative descriptive approach and content analysis as methodology for the description of the roles of oral and Islamic tradition in African historiography. The paper discovered that oral traditions helped Africans to save their own history. This is because the elders have memorized the stories which they got from their parents and passed it to the younger generation and the younger generation passed these stories to the following generations. The paper also discovered that, before the coming of Islam, Africans did not have a writing system, but through Islam many Africans learned how to read and write in Arabic script and later they used the Arabic alphabet and started writing in their own *African languages.*

Keywords: Roles, Oral tradition, Islamic tradition, History, Arabic language, African Historiography.

Introduction

The story of a people's past is their history. A story, whether written or unwritten, remains a story. It is the responsibility of a historian to research a people's history through both written and oral sources and thus create a coherent story in the process. The historian must approach the oral tradition as kind evidence whatever scholars in other disciplines may choose to do with the same narratives. Historical method is essentially concerned with tracing the exact relationship between the evidential remnants in the present and their origins in the past. The use of oral tradition would not be necessary if written materials were available. Narration was utilized more in the past in the practical works of collecting oral tradition on a systematic scale and using them as legitimate historical materials. The study of the methodology of the oral tradition has become a minor academic industry amongst historians, psychohistorians and anthropologists. Different aspects of the problems posed by the use of this family of historical evidence included datation and chronology, reliability and method of collection and preservation.

Oral Tradition

An oral tradition is, a narrative describing or purporting to describe, events that happened before the time narration. This definition differs slightly from the conventional one, which terms 'tradition' as any spoken report produced by a direct eyewitness; the account stresses the fact of transmission by word of mouth from one person to another. The intent here is rather to emphasize the narrative style (Awonnor, 1975:1). Increasing distance between the teller and the event forces a historian in an oral environment to develop techniques for remembering and recounting events that have no equivalents among literate historians (Awonnor, 1975:3). Most African traditional cultures are oral cultures; History was recorded by word of mouth and passed from generation to generation, by storytelling. In some cultures; it was the elders who were custodian of the people's history. They told the young stones. In other cultures, there are specialized oral historians, like the griots in Mali (Awonnor, 1975:5). Africa processes both written and unwritten traditions. The former are relatively well known. At any rate the recent writings in European languages have helped to publicize earlier Arabic and local written literatures in Africa. The unwritten forms however are far less widely known than the familiar categories of literate cultures. They are hard to record at present. And for a superficial observer, they are easier to overlook than the corresponding written materials.

Since the early 1950s, when historian first began using oral traditions in writing the history of Africa, they have been searching for better methods to deal with the basic fact that oral traditions, as documents which are stored in the human mind and transmitted a new to each generation with little change over time. Although some historians continue to treat them as more or less straight forward account of past events, many others have turned to newer approaches which take the dynamic element in account (Awonnor, 1975:7).

Oral tradition helped Africans to save their own history. This is because the elders have memorized the stories which they got from their parents and pass them to the younger generation and that younger generation passed those stories to the following generations; if this did not happen by now; we Africans, would not have any story about our peoples. Many Africans did not have any system of writing they depended only on orature. (Alagoa, 1977: 222). By the eleventh century, the time of penetration of southern Sahara by the Arabs along trans-sahara even routes, method of writing was introduced to some Africans. At this time, any community or individuals who accepted Islam, the Arabs will teach the people how to read and write the Arabic language because the Holy Qur'an was written in the Arabic language, (Alagoa, 1977:223).

In Hausaland for example, the first Kano chronicle was written in Arabic language by Arabs from North Africa, who came to Hausaland for the purpose of trans-Sahara trade, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. They used to interview the elders in the capitals of old cities of the seven Hausa States. So, here an observation of how oral history is very important in history of Africa can be seen if we don't have oral system, how we can save the stories, cultures and tradition of African peoples, (Ikime, 1980:228).

Islamic Tradition

Islamic penetrated Africa about 700 AD like Christianity before it (Carl, 1939). It was an invader's religion. It spread in Ethiopia and like the Christian faith then it influenced all Africa, North of the Niger valley, the "Nile headwater, and the Mecca to Medina equatorial rain

forest. Preached by the Arabian invaders, it quickly took a dominant position, especially on the Northern Coast of Africa. Mohammad's (SAW) influence in the Middle East began spreading after his flight from in 622. The Holy Qur'an compiled after his death and containing his teachings on religion and social and political matters, at once provided direction for the organization and dissemination of the news faith. Islam's first triumph was its swift unification under its law of the scattered nomadic groups of Arabia. From this unity Islam became powerful enough to spread into other lands, in the fertile crescent and the north-east, as far west as Algeria and the shores of the Atlantic, Egypt, Spain, and the Pyrenees were under Muslim power by the year 711 AD. The next four hundred years saw the consolidation and growth of Islam as popular faith. From Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia it was spread across the Sahara through traders, who developed the earliest trans-Sahara caravan routes. When the faith became absorbed by new groups, these in turn ensured its rapid establishment elsewhere. Thus the Almoravids, largely of Tuareg origins, began a series of Jihads (holy wars) under their leader Ibn Jasin, attacking and defeating the Ghana Empire in 1076 AD and introducing Islam into the Northern edges of the tropical forest just below the Sahara, (Awonnor, 1975:12).

By 1235 Islam had become the official religion of Mali, which covered a wider territory than its predecessor, Ghana; stretching from the Atlantic seacoast to present-day Northern Nigeria. Its ruler Mansa Musa went on a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1323. When Mali was superseded by Songhai, under Askia the Great, a fiercer Jihad followed, accompanied by the desire to return Islam to more orthodox ways. By the fifteenth century, during this religious renaissance, the Europeans were in early contact with the African Coast. Revolt in the Muslim world north of the Sahara, especially in Morocco with the support of the Castilians and Portuguese, diminished Islamic interest in Africa south of the Sahara, (Hogban, 1967).

From 1300 to 1600, the extension of Portuguese influence on the western part of Africa as far down as the Congo Basin meant diversions in the overland trade routes and a major reapportioning of areas for wandering peoples. There last great African migration must have been a direct result of Muslim harassment and political turmoil all over the continent, (Hogban, 1967:251).

A new burst of life for Islam came in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the Islamic states of Hausa land were conquered by Usman Danfodiyo's inspired, Jihadists. His army of Fulani cattlemen carried out a bloody conquest aimed at wiping out the non Islamic features of Hausa culture and re- establishing a new political system based on Qur'anic law and teaching. He established Sokoto as the capital over which he became the first Sardauna, or emperor. For each of the districts, he appointed Fulani Emirs with whom he ran the empire. It was this system that impressed Lord Lugard so much and led to the concepts of indirect rule. Its politics was based on an autocracy deriving from Islamic law, feudalist in scope and maintaining rigid class system, with serfs and slaves working on farms for their masters. The Funlani masters played an active role at the tail end of the slave trade, raiding the southern states for their human commodity. One of Usman's Lieutenants, Ahmadu Lobo, Spread Islam as far west as the Senegal River. Samori Toure, who ruled Guinea, and Umar, ruler of Tucular in the Futa Jallon, are two examples of powerful rulers who emerged in close alliance with Fulani power by the middle part of the nineteenth century. The European penetration and the

rise of powerful non- Muslim states in Benin, Dahomey and Ashanti constituted a cheek on Fulani power and total hegemony (Hogban, 1967:252).

East Africa has also been settled by Arab Muslim who was offshoots of the Arab incursion into Egypt. These settlements began as commercial enclaves radiators from Kilwa. By the middle of the seventeenth century, most of the east coast was taken over by Islam, and cities such as Mombasa, Kilwa, Malindi, and Zanibar became the most important centers of trade not only with the hinterland but also with Arabia, India and the far East. Portugal tried to take over the flourishing centre but to no avail and to settle for Mozambique in the south since the power of the sultan of Oman, ruler of the zenj (Arab settlements in East Africa), was enormous. After a series of sporadic revolts in Mombasa, the Sultan moved his headquarters to Zanzibar in 1840 (Awonnor, 1975:18). Meanwhile, the Arab rulers intensified the slave trade. Their participation on the East Coast brought into the now-fading west Coast trade a large flow of slaves, especially across the continent through the Congo. Zanzibar, the headquarters of the Zenj sultanate, became the home of Swahili culture. Its power was paramount until its annexation by the British in 1890.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, then the Islamic influence in sub- Sahara Africa was well established. The kingdoms of the middle Niger and the western Sudan were centers of learning even though their contact with the wider Muslim Word was lessened as a result of the diminishing importance of the caravan trade routes. Islamic education, based on the Qur'an and taught by the learned Imams and sheiks, provided the earliest direction in scholarship. But the politico- religious structure of Islam was too vast and impractical to hold together. In the face of the resistance of the powerful rising states of the forest belt, the European challenge in trade, and an aggressively competitive Christian religion, the Islamic states began to lose their grip on: sub-Sahara Africa. Swahili civilization, centered in Malindi, Pemba, Mombasa, and Zanzibar, was a distinctive variant of African culture. Islamic architecture can be seen today in the great mosques of Kano and Mopti and in the general patterns of housing and clothing in all the Moslem areas. And literatures of Hausa and Swahili, the two large and active linguistic and cultural amalgamations of Islam and indigenous Africa are also in existence (Awonnor, 1975:9-10).

Islam's effect was also fundamental. There is still a large traffic of travelers between the Islamic centres of West and East Africa and the spiritual homeland, Macca, with African rulers, heads of families, and common people undertaking the Hajj, or pilgrimage, for renewal of faith with Allah for themselves, their subject, their households, and of the brotherhood of the Moslem faith. To a larger extent, Islam was able to acclimatize itself in Africa more successfully than Christianity. It is egalitarian nature and its combination of orthodoxy and news ideas. It is allowing local religions to continue their practice, its acceptance of polygamy (thereby maintaining the traditional family and clan structures), and its encouragement to the giving of alms enabled it to maintain a communistic system base on public feasts and celebrations not too different from the indigenous system. Its theology was much simpler for the African to grasp than Christianity as it avoided tangled theological ideas. Above all, its religion was a way of life; a social and political institution, with rituals that brought it closer in form to African religious system. It produced strong African elite, completely independent of outside interference in matters of theology and worship, which steered the practice of Islam into a generally harmonious coexistence with older religious institutions. Its message of love,

charity, and tolerance was translated into practical everyday terms, for the worship, of Allah rests on the three points of love, charity, and fraternity. Its non-racist orientation, seen in the community of worship for both white and black, reveals it as a more flexible faith than Christianity (Hogban, 1967:253).

Islamic Education

Educationally, Islam's influence has been minimal. It lacked the funds and the formalistic approach of the Christian missions necessary for it to be able to make any significant impact in this area. Its educational system was limited to the study and digestion of the Holy Qur'an. The role of the learned men was to inculcate into the youth the day-to-day adherence to the law and letter of the faith. (It has been said that no one ever graduates from an Islam school since, strictly speaking sense) (Fafunwa, 1947:222). Islam's impact on African social structure was enforced through the system of taboos and fasts enjoined by it, lose ground to Euro-Christian culture, Muslim culture was neither distinctive nor homogenous, and it opinions to present a no challenge to the culturally system with, and it was had no clear-cut body of aggressive Western system. But religious system, with which it agreed to coexist were concerned.

If the impact; political, social, and economic of Islam has been concerned because it has lacked an international oriented politically Berbers been minimal, it is Concerted socio-cultural program of indoctrination and control. The importance of the Islamic centers across the Sahara diminished through the political conquest of these areas by a succession of their invaders, including Turks and Europeans, the Berber empires and the limited Maghreb dominion had been broken up by the middle of the sixteenth century and the important trade in gold had been diverted by the maritime trade. Where Islamic political states survived in sub-saharan Africa they were superseded by the European colonial powers that conquered and annexed them in the late nineteenth century. Most of the political Islam struggled to resist western ways and the corrupting effects of the Christian invader and his materialist outlook. But the military power of Islam wherever it existed had warned. Islam religious and cultural features, however, suffered only minimal interference, as is evidenced today in the Sudan and Northern Nigeria. At times, colonial rulers warned missionaries away from Muslim cities; this became a factor in the suggested educational backwardness of these areas today. It was to take a long time to work out a compromise between Christian education and Islam so that African children could keep their Islamic faith, since to receive western type education, it was assumed, and one would have to be a Christian (Hogban, 1967:253).

It has been estimated that a larger number of African are now under the influence of Islam than before the establishment of the colonial regimes. This is the case particularly in large urban centres like Kano and Lagos and in the North- central parts of most of the West African nations. With the rapid urbanization of diverse groups, it is only natural that their religious attention would be directed by one of the two large religious systems rather than by the fragmented and locally oriented African religious structures. Besides these two religions attract people across group boundaries, providing a unifying factor in what conquests in the name of Islam represented inspired zeal without the backing of administrative skill and were, thus sporadic and short-lived. Successive attempts to purify the faith and return it to its pristine state or insulate it against contamination by indigenous religious system were at times, marred by un-necessary fanaticism and bloodshed, which weakened rather than

strengthened these efforts. Besides, Islamic missionaries and traders were readily absorbed into the indigenous culture and, in some instances, even if their influence remains obtrusive. This served only to create hybrid cultures such as Hausa and Swahili. Islamic University Azhar in Cairo became moribund and were superseded by western type institutions. It was only as recently as 1962 that Al-Azhar established faculties of medicine agriculture, engineering, and management to expand beyond its original medieval curricula of Islamic law and religious sciences, (Dokaji, 1957).

Western Education

The colonial assault on Africa also took Islamic culture on the continent by storm. The traditional system fought to keep them intact, while it is generally an amorphous community. Islam tends to draw it adherents from the large community of common people and migrant workers who have wandered from distant homeland and find a ready support in the brotherhood that faith provides Because it lacks a formalist, elitist approach to worship (in this sense it resembles the apostolic or evangelical Christian Churches which also cater for the urban poor) and does not insist upon status, formal attire, or a great social showing, Islam draws to its ranks the very ordinary people hurled together by economic demands into the precarious situation of urban living. Its social law pertaining to marriage divorce, property, and responsibility are simple and straightforward, while it's theology, after centuries of warring among factions. It has settled down into a simple spiritual outlook which concerns itself both with man's survival on earth and his aspirations towards paradise. Christianity, with its hierarchy of theologies, outlooks, and priests appeals more to the social climber and the evolves', while Islam's adherents are mainly the lower classes- laborers (hermit saints) it approximate those of the diviners and priests of the indigenous religious. Their contact with their adherents is direct and their help visible (Fafunwa, 1947: 224).

For centuries many scholars have realized that Arabic as a language and Islam as a religion have contributed substantially to world civilization and culture. It was Islam that revived the human pursuit of science and it was through the Arabs and not the Romans that the modern world achieved light and power through science. In the ninth and tenth centuries the Muslims compiled great lexicons and developed philological learning in Islam. The Muhammad V University in Morocco today has a valuable collection of some of these early works. At least a century of learning, the Muslim world and established such institution in Basra, Kufa, Bagdad, Cairo and Cordova. These began as religious schools located in mosques, and later developed into universities, (Agbodike, 2007:87). Moreover, Arabic as a language contributed to an understanding of the early history and civilization of West Africa. As Basil Davidson in his old Africa Rediscovered... records of the South (of Sahara) begin with Wahb Ibn Munnabbeh, who wrote in 738Ad. To begin with, they are mainly the records of migration, footnotes in Arabic to the ceaseless peopling of an African interior whose presence was still obscured by myth and legend. Here was the earliest statement of West Africa's great "Migration Legend that would was the earliest for long century therefore, (Miller, 1980:245).

Nevertheless, our knowledge of the ancient kingdoms of Kush, Kumbi, Saleh, Timbuktu, Geo, kanem, Bornu, Mali, Songhai, Darfur, Segu, Sokoto, was derived largely from Arab travelers and historians Reassessment of the civilizations of the great bend of the Niger during the centuries between A.D. 500 and 1500 has rested partly on a fuller knowledge of the people and their tradition- knowledge that was first collected systematically and intelligently by

Heinrich Barth in six great years of travel after 1848; and partly (and most importantly) on a fuller knowledge of written records which had begun to appear in Arabic script from the eighth century onwards. From Wahb Ibn Munnabbeh in 738 A.D. to Leo Africans in 1526 A.D. at least a score of notable Arab and Berber historians and geographers wrote of these negro state, and to this most be added the writings of the scholars of the Western Sudan itself, (Awonner, 1975:10).

The two most outstanding Muslim historians who contributed substantially to the early history of West Africa were Hasan Ibn Muhammad al - Wassan al- Sayyati, a moor who was carried into captivity by the Venetians and re-named Leo Africans and Ibn Batuta who traveled extensively in Arabia, China, India and had written admiringly of the kingdom of Mali, 300 years before the Tarkh al-Sudan was completed. It was not a coincidence that most of the early rulers of the old West African kingdoms, such as Mali, Ghana, Songhai, and Borno were Muslims of African descent and most of the capitals of these great kingdoms came under considerable Islamic influence. Timbuktu and Djenme in Mali, Gosso in Ghana, Sokoto, Gao and Borno became Famous throughout the Islamic world as centre of commerce, religion and learning. In Timbuktu there were numerous Judges, doctors and clerics. The exploits of Mansa Musa of Mali, Mai Idris Alooma of Borno and others is welt known to most Africa historians, (Agbodike, 2007:90).

Conclusion

Oral tradition and Islamic religions are very significant in the history of Africa. Oral tradition has the capacity to help us, because our elders have memorized the story of past generations and passed them on to another generation through poetry and folktale. Table (ie. Fantastic story) etc. and transferring it, to the coming generation up to the time of trans-Sahara trade in eleventh century, when writing came with Islam traders and scholars.

Arabs conquer Africa South of the Sahara through North and Eastern routes. For example the one from the North is that route from (Tirabulus) Le Tripoli capital of Libya to Tunis - Agades - Zinder and Katsina - Kano. The Eastern route from Tirabulus to Aiqahura - Fessan - Sudan - Kukawa – Birnin Ngazargamu - Kano. By that time, Kano was the last point of trans-Sahara trade routes. Traders from all over Hausa land came to Kano for the purpose of business. Peoples from Gwanja and Bauchi used to come to Kano, to sell their goods and buy other goods (Gidado, 1969). And these routes had linked the North Africa to central Sudan and from Central Sudan to North Africa and facilitated Islam's consolidation and growth as popular faith. From Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, it was spread across the Sahara through traders.

So, before the coming of Islam Africans did not have writing, but through Islam many Africans learned how to read and write, most of the Empires got their own political system of government. For instance, by 1235 Islam had become the official religion of Mali Empire, which covered a wider territory than its predecessor, Ghana, stretching from the Atlantic seacoast to present day Northern Nigeria under the ruler Mansa Musa. And Islamic religion had brought the complete change of life to its followers in Africa, at that time. Before the coming of Islam most part of the Africa was practicing traditional religion and paganism. For example, the people of Kano were worshiping sprits (Tsumburbura). They received law and order from Barbushe, the priest secretary of the Tsumburbura, and were the only person who was allowed to see Tsumburbura. The house of Tsumburabura was built on top of Dala hill

inside the city Kano. That practice had continued up to 1346 A.D. during the reign of Emir Aliyu Yaji Dan Tsamiya, who overthrew Tsumburabura in 1352 A. D. Those who did not worship Tsumburabura Worship Rivers, tree, mountains, sun, stars, snake, goat etc. (Awonnor, 1975:18).

When Islam Religion penetrated Africa most of them were converted to the religion, and that religion in many ways encouraged its followers to go and learn. Through that knowledge Africans learned how to read, and write their own history, in Arabic scripts and later they used the Arabic Alphabet and started writing in their own African languages. For example; languages like Hausa, Fulfulde. Kanuri, Swahili etc. These ethnic groups (Ajami) use one form of writing i.e. adapted Arabic Alphabet to write what they want to write, in their own languages (Gidado 1969). It can be seen that these two things; oral tradition and Islam are very significant in African history.

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