



# THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

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## IN WEST AFRICA



## EARLY ISLAM

The religion of Islam is a monotheistic religion which declares that there is only one God (Allah). The religion has six articles of faith (iman) which provide the foundation of the religion. The six articles of faith are: 1) belief in Allah (one God), 2) belief in Angels, 3) belief in the holy books including Quran, Torah, Zabur (Psalms) and Injil (Gospel of Jesus), 4) belief in pre-destination, 5) belief in the day of judgement 6) belief in the prophets

(including Jesus, Adam, Moses, Abraham, Solomon and Muhammed). Islam was revealed by the Prophet Muhammed in 610 AD in Mecca, Arabia. According to Islamic doctrine, he was a prophet and God's messenger, sent to present and confirm the monotheistic teachings preached previously by Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. He is viewed as the final prophet of God.

## INTRODUCTION OF ISLAM INTO AFRICA

The earliest introduction of Islam to the continent of Africa happened 613 AD with a historical event called the First Hegira. The First Hegira was an episode in the early history of Islam when the early Muslims and followers of the Prophet Muhammed were being persecuted fled from the persecution of the ruling Quraysh tribe of Mecca. The early Muslims fled to eastern Africa specifically to the Kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia. According to the

traditions of Islam when the Prophet Muhammed saw the affliction of his companions, he said to them:

**“IF YOU WERE TO GO ABYSSINIA (ETHIOPIA) IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR YOU) FOR THE KING WILL NOT TOLERATE INJUSTICE AND IT IS A FRIENDLY COUNTRY, UNTIL SUCH TIME AS ALLAH SHALL RELIEVE YOU FROM YOUR DISTRESS.”**



The Kingdom of Aksum was a powerful Christian nation in eastern Africa at the time and ruled by King Armah. Shortly after the First Hegira the first mosque in Africa was constructed in the area of Zelia in modern-day Somalia in eastern Africa. By 639 AD the Muslim religion had developed into an empire and become engaged in war with the established Christian Byzantine Empire, these wars then spilled into the continent of Africa. The Byzantine Empire was a continuation of the Roman Empire which originated in Italy located in Europe. The Byzantine Empire had established

themselves within the continent of Africa along the Mediterranean Sea in some areas of modern-day northern Tunisia, Libya and also northern Egypt. The Muslims engaged and defeated the Byzantine Empire and from this event Islam began to spread into northern Africa amongst the African Berbers. Trade had been ongoing between northern Africa and western Africa for hundreds of years. With the introduction and adoption of Islam by north African Berbers slowly the new religion became known to west Africans.

## TRADE BETWEEN THE GHANA EMPIRE AND THE KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

The Empire of Ghana was located in western Africa, at the height of their power they controlled the gold and salt trade in the region. Ghana was known as the 'Land of Gold'. The Empire of Ghana established trade agreements with the African Berbers who were situated in North Africa which included the Kingdom of Morocco. The Kingdom of Morocco at this time was Islamic and controlled by the African Berbers who had established the city of

Sijilmasa in south-eastern Morocco. The Ghana Empire from their capital Koumbi Saleh which was the largest city in western Africa administered the trade of gold, salt and kola nuts. The Ghana Empire imported bars of salt and cloth from the Kingdom of Morocco in the north of Africa and exchanged it for gold and kola nuts which they harvested from western Africa. From North Africa gold, would reach Europe, the Middle-East and Asia.



## THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN THE EMPIRE OF GHANA

Once trade began to increase between the Berbers and the Empire of Ghana the Islamic traditions were slowly introduced. The kings of Ghana at this time encouraged Muslim traders to their capital city Koumbi Saleh and also employed literate Muslims in their courts. Many Berbers also lived in the capital of the empire and also Muslim converts from within the empire itself. We find that the historian Al Baki in his book called 'Kitab fi Masalik wal Mamalik' (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) describes some of the interactions in his writing as follows:

“THE CITY OF GHANA [KUMBI SALEH] CONSISTS OF TWO TOWNS LYING IN A PLAIN.

ONE OF THESE TOWNS IS INHABITED BY MUSLIMS. IT IS LARGE AND POSSESSES TWELVE MOSQUES. THERE ARE IMAMS AND MUEZZINS, AND ASSISTANTS AS WELL AS JURISTS AND LEARNED MEN. IN THE TOWN WHERE THE KING LIVES, AND NOT FAR FROM THE HALL WHERE HE HOLDS HIS COURT OF JUSTICE, IS A MOSQUE WHERE PRAY THE MUSLIMS WHO COME ON DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS.”

As long as the visiting Muslims obeyed the laws of the empire and paid the taxes imposed on them to the king on time they continued to enjoy the security of the empire.

AFRICA WAS THE FIRST CONTINENT INTO WHICH ISLAM SPREAD AFTER ITS CONCEPTION DURING THE EARLY 7TH CENTURY.



## THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN THE WEST OF AFRICA

It was apparent that in western Africa conversion to the religion was driven mostly by the traders, merchants and royal families of the kingdoms. Kings and other office holders being directly involved with long distance trading activities and diplomacy were more open to Islam than the common folk who tended to follow local spiritual practices with more vigor. In the early days only the basics of the religion were practiced and kings adopted a middle position between Islam and the local traditional religions and customs. Thus, the religion successfully penetrated into western Africa easily and gradually. Once the Empire of Ghana declined it was broken up into 12 separate kingdoms. At this time the west African Kingdom of Kangara was again able to rise as an independent nation. The Kingdom of Kangara was the predecessor to the great Empire of Mali. Just prior to the official founding of the Mali Empire there were

numerous kings and queens and this period of time is sometimes referred to as pre-imperial Mali. One of the early rulers was King Barmandana who came to power in 1050 AD. King Barmandana converted to Islam and made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Arabia (in modern-day Saudi Arabia). It became the custom at the time for the leadership of these west African kingdoms to be Muslims and also to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Much later, a Malian ruler named King Sundiata began the unification of Mali in 1240 AD. King Sundiata was a Muslim and as a consequence the Empire of Mali also became Islamic. Other African kingdoms in this region would also later become Islamic via their royal leadership including the Kanem Empire in modern-day Chad and the Hasua Kingdoms in modern-day Nigeria.