

# Spread of Islam in West Africa (part 3 of 3): The Empires of Kanem-Bornu and Hausa-Fulani Land

**Description:** How Islam spread into sub-Saharan region of West Africa, and the great civilizations it established there, taking its inhabitants out of paganism to the worship of One God. Part 3: A brief history of the Islamic Empires of Kanem-Bornu and Hausa-Fulani Land.

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## Islam in Kanem-Bornu Empire

Kanem-Bornu in the 13th century included the region around Lake Chad, stretching as far north as Fezzan. Kanem today forms the northern part of the Republic of Chad. Islam was accepted for the first time by the Kanem ruler, Umme-Jilmi, who ruled between 1085-1097 C.E., through a scholar named Muhammad B. Mani, credited for bringing Islam to Kanem-Bornu. Umme-Jilmi became a devout Muslim. He left on a pilgrimage but died in Egypt before reaching Makkah. Al-Bakri also mentions that Umayyad refugees, who had fled from Baghdad following plans to liquidate their dynasty at the hands of the Abbasids, were residing in Kanem [21, 22].

With the introduction of Islam in Kanem, it became the principal focus of Muslim influence in the central Sudan and relations were established with the Arab world in the Middle East and the Maghrib. Umme's son Dunama I (1092-1150) also went on a pilgrimage and was crowned in Egypt, while embarking at Suez for Makkah, during the third pilgrimage journey. During the reign of Dunama II (1221-1259), a Kanem embassy was established in Tunisia around 1257, as mentioned by the famous Andalusian historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 C.E.). It was almost at the same time that a college and a hostel were established in Cairo, named Madrasah Ibn Rashiq. Toward the end of the 13th century, Kanem became a center of Islamic knowledge and famous teachers came from Mali to teach in Kanem. By the middle of the 13th century, Kanem established diplomatic relations with Tuat (in the Algerian Sahara) and with the Hafsid state of Tunis at embassy level. The Kanem scholars and poets could write classical Arabic of a very high standard. We have evidence of this in a letter written by the Chief scribe of the Kanem court dating from 1391 to 1392.

The historian Ibn Khaldun calls Dunama II as the 'King of Kanem and Lord of Bornu,' because his empire had expanded as far as Kano in the west and Wadai in the east. It is said that Dunama II opened a Talisman (Munni or Mune), considered sacred by his people, and thus brought a period of hardship to his people. It was because of his enthusiasm for the religion of Islam that he committed this 'abomination' (perhaps the talisman was a traditional symbol of divine (kingship) and alienated many of his subjects).

In the late 14th century, a new capital of the Kanem empire was established in Bornu

at Nigazaragamu by 'Ali b. Dunama, also called 'Ali Ghazi, who ruled during the period 1476 to 1503. This thriving capital continued until 1811. 'Ali revived Islam. He was keen on learning its principles. He used to visit the chief Imam 'Umar Masramba to learn more about the Islamic legal system. He, by his own example, persuaded the nobility and Chiefs to limit the number of their wives to only four.

The Islamization of Bornu dates from the time of Mai Idris Aloom (1570-1602). We come to know about him through his chronicler, Ahmad bin Fartuwa. In the 9th year of his reign, he went on a pilgrimage to Makkah and built a hostel there for pilgrims from Bornu. He revived the Islamic practices and made all and sundry follow them. He also set up Qadhis courts to introduce Islamic laws in place of the traditional system of customary law. He built a large number of brick mosques to replace the existing ones, built with reeds.

In 1810 during the period of Mai Ahmad the glories of the Empire of Bornu came to an end, but its importance, as a center of Islamic learning, continued.

## Islam in Hausa-Fulani land

There is a well-known Hausa legend concerning the origin of the Hausa state, attributed to Bayajida (Bayazid) who came from Begh to settle down in Kanem-Bornu. The ruling Mai of Bornu of that time (we do not have any information about the time) welcomed Bayajida and gave his daughter in marriage to him but at the same time robbed him of his numerous followers. He fled from the Mai with his wife and came to Gaya Mai Kano and asked the goldsmith of Kano to make a sword for him. The story tells us that Bayajida helped the people of Kano by killing a supernatural snake which had prevented them from drawing water from a well. It is said that the queen, named Daura, married him in appreciation of his service to the people. Bayajida got a son named Bawo from Daura. Bawo, himself, had seven sons: Biran, Dcura, Katsina, Zaria, Kano, Rano and Gebir, who became the founders of the Hausa states. Whatever may be the merit of this story, it tries to explain how Hausa language and culture spread throughout the northern states of Nigeria.

Islam came to Hausaland in early 14th century. About 40 Wangarawa graders are said to have brought Islam with them during the reign of 'Ali Yaji who ruled Kano during the years 1349-1385. A mosque was built and a muedthin (one who calls to prayer) was appointed to give adthan (call to prayer) and a judge was named to give religious decisions. During the reign of a ruler named, Yaqub (1452-1463), one Fulani migrated to Kano and introduced books on Islamic Jurisprudence. By the time Muhammad Rumfa came into power (1453-1499), Islam was firmly rooted in Kano. In his reign Muslim scholars came to Kano; some scholars also came from Timbuktu to teach and preach Islam.

Muhammad Rumfa consulted Muslim scholars on the affairs of government. It was he who had asked the famous Muslim theologian Al-Maghilli to write a book on Islamic government during the latter's visit to Kano in the 15th century. The book is a celebrated masterpiece and is called *The Obligation of the Princes*. Al-Maghilli later went to Katsina,

which had become a seat of learning in the 15th century. Most of the pilgrims from Makkah would go to Katsina. Scholars from the Sankore University of Timbuktu also visited the city and brought with them books on divinity and etymology. In the 13th century, Katsina produced native scholars like Muhammadu Dan Marina and Muhammadu Dan Masina (d. 1667) whose works are available even today.

The literature of Shehu 'Uthman Dan Fodio, his brother, Abdullahi, and his son Muhammad Bello speaks of the syncretic practices of the Hausa Fulanis at the end of the 18th century. The movement of 'Uthman Dan Fodio in 1904 was introduced as a revivalist movement in Islam to remove syncretic practices, and what Shehu called Bid'at al-Shaytaniyya or Devilish Innovations.

The spread of Islam in Africa is owing to many factors, historical, geographical and psychological, as well as its resulting distribution of Muslim communities, some of which we have tried to outline. Ever since its first appearance in Africa, Islam has continued to grow. The scholars there have been Africans right from the time of its spread. Islam has become an African religion and has influenced her people in diverse ways.

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