

AFRICA AND AFRICANS IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The contact of Islam with Africa and Africans could not be considered a matter of recent development. The continent had been in existence ver before the time of the Prophet, while Islam had been known to the time long as early as the prophet was called to the prophet hood. This paper examines the roles played by the Africans towards the development of Islam as far back as the time of the Prophet, as well as the efforts made by them to spread the religion and its tenets. Also it looks at the honour accorded the continent in Islam and in the Prophet's treatment of the Africans during his timer. This gives an impression that Islam is not a new religion in Africa and to Africans.

Keywords: African history, islam, development

INTRODUCTION

Islam came to Africa at the beginning of the seventh month of the lunar calendar in the year 626 C.E. That was the period when Prophet Muhammed was seriously persecuted by the Makkans and a number of Prophet's disciples were asked to migrate to Massawa, the area which is known today as Eritaria and Gabarur (Ethiopia) under the leadership of 'Uthmanibn 'Affan and his wife Ruqayah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammed. From Ash-shabiyya, a Makkan port, the said mission sailed across the Red Sea into two merchant boats to Massawa. It was during the rule of Negus, the Emperor of Ethiopia, Ash-amatibnAbiara that the Muslims numbering sixteen, twelve men and four children landed in the land of Ethiopia¹.

This topic is chosen in order to shed light on the contribution of Africans to the history of Islam during its early stage. This could be realized by considering the interactions between the early Muslims and Africans in the field of education, religious activities and the constant links between the Prophet and African rulers of the period.

AFRICANS IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

The conquest of Egypt by the Muslims during the tenure of Umar Ibn al-Khattab served as opportunity for the Muslims to penetrate into Africa. That was in the month of Safar 20 A.H. (641 CE), when on the order of the Caliph, Amribn al-'As conquered Egypt². The *Khalifah* again dispatched a mission of 300 men under the leadership of AlqamahibnMujassar al-Kaneum, to the land of Eritrea (Ethiopia) to preach Islam in the heart of Africa³. The routes followed by the Muslims to spread their religion in Africa were:

- a. Through the Red Sea to North Africa, e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.
- b. Across River Nile, namely from the lower part of Egypt to the Sudan, through the Nubious land and across the Sahara Desert and lake Chad, Bornu, Hausa, Yoruba and Nupe lands of Nigeria.
- c. Through the Indian Ocean from Yemen to Somalia, Omen and Albahrain, to the Island of Zanziban in Tangayika (Tanzania). From there Islam penetrated into the western part of South East Africa to Uganda, Malawi, Madagascar and Comoro land.
- d. Morocco through Northeast Africa to the fall of River Senegal to Mali, Guinea and all parts of West Africa⁴.

Furthermore, when the Prophet was dispatching his delegates to various routes of the world with the message of Islam, he as well sent delegates to some Africans rulers. He sent his companion, Sayyidina Hatib ibn Abi Balta with the message of Islam in the seventh year of Hijrah to the Coptic ruler of Egypt by name Juralibn Minahey (Mukau Citious) inviting him to embrace Islam. The Egyptian ruler received the delegate of the Prophet (P.B.O.H) warmly and gave them a present of one hundred *Dinar* and five clothes, and sent with him other bounties of gift to the Prophet which consisted among other things:

Women slaves – Maria (Maryam), Sirean Qansar Bareerah, and a man slave called Habu. Other things were: grey mule which the Prophet named Duldul; which happened to be the only mule found in the Arab peninsula at the time; a horse with saddle and bridle which the Prophet called Maimum; a grey donkey which the Prophet called Ya'afu; a wooden box which contained black antimony container, mirror, comb, a jar, pomade, scissors and *miswak* (chewing stick). The remaining things included honey from the town of Banha in Egypt which was famous...⁵

The two women slaves, Maryam and Sirean embraced Islam through Hatib before reaching their destination (Madinah). Maryam married the prophet and gave birth to only one child, Ibrahim; but Sirean was given to a companion of the Prophet called Hassan ibn Thabit⁶.

An African Country Mentioned in the *Qur'an*

Prophetic message to Yusuf was revealed and carried out in Africa. Yusuf received his revelation in Africa (Egypt) and preached it to two African young men who were imprisoned with him by Pharaoh in Egypt. Yusuf started to preach to them while in the cell and said: "O my fellow prisoners! Are diverse lords better, or Allah the One, the Mighty?" (Q. 12:39).

Egypt which is an African country is mentioned in the *Qur'an* in four different places thus:

The man in Egypt who brought him said to his wife: 'Make him stay (among us) honourably. May be he will bring us much good, or we shall adopt him as a son...' (Q. 12:21)

Then when they entered the presence of Joseph, he provided a home for his parent with himself and said: 'Enter ye Egypt (all) safely if it pleases God' (Q. 12:99).

We inspired Moses and his brother with this message: "Provide dwellings for your people in Egypt and make your dwellings into places of worship, and establish regular prayers, and give glad tidings to those who believe" (Q. 10:87).

And Pharaoh proclaimed among his people, saying "O my people, does not the dominion of Egypt belong to me, (witness) these streams flowing underneath my (place)? What see ye not then? (Q. 43:51).

Early Islamic Institutions

Many Islamic institutions which produced large proportions of famous Muslim scholars were founded in Africa. These institutions included:

Al-Azhar University

The university was founded by the Fatimid Dynasty of Egypt, a descendant from Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad. Fatimah was called *Az-zahra* (brilliant) and the university was named in her honour.

Studies began at *al-Azhar* in the month of Ramadan, 975 AD, the *Jami'ah* had faculties in Islamic law and Jurisprudence, Arabic Grammar, Islamic Astronomy, Islamic Philosophy and Logic in the 12th century⁷.

University of az-Zaytun

Ez-zitouna University is located in Tunis. It is claimed to be the oldest teaching establishment in the Arab world, since the *Ez-zitouna Madrassa* was founded in 737 C.E (120 A.H) as the teaching arm of the Olive-Tree Mosque (*Djemaa Ez-zitouna*) and has been in continuous existence since then. *Alwah Ubaidallah bin Alhab* extended it in the year 761 C.E (144 H.A) and redeveloped in 864 C.E (250 A.H) by the Abbasid Caliphate to its present structure⁸.

University of al-Qairawan

It was founded on 1st of Ramadan 245 A.H (859 C.E) by As-Sayyidah. Fatimoh, sister of Maryam the daughter of Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Fahr al-Qairawan. The institute is situated in the western part of the city of Fez (Morocco)⁹.

Honour to Africans

An African was among the first four persons to enter the Holy *Ka'bah* on the conquest of *Makkah* with the purpose of removing the idols kept there by the *Makkans*. Bilal ibnRabiah who was an African followed the Prophet with 'UthmanibnTaiha who possessed the keys, and UsamaibnYasid to clean the *Ka'bah*. Bilal was the first to call people to prayers (Adhan) on the roof of *Ka'bah* when it was captured by the unbelievers. He was also the first to add the expression "Prayer is better than sleep" to the calling of the early morning prayer. The Prophet approved the expression and it becomes a religious practice since then. He was also the second to embrace Islam outside the household of the Prophet after Sayyidina Abubakr¹⁰.

AshamahibnAbjar an-Najashi of Abyssinia was the first ruler to embrace Islam through AmribnUmyyaAdduri who delivered the message of the Holy Prophet inviting him to embrace Islam in the seventh year of Hijrah (628 C.E). Moreso, the Emperor of Abyssinia was the first to be prayed for in absentia by the Prophet when he died in Abyssinia. The prayer offered to him by the Prophet is taken by some scholars to have been an indication for his acceptance of Islam before his death. It has to be mentioned that the King refused to hand over the Muslims to the Qurayshs who requested that the Muslims who migrated to the land be deported back to *Makkah*¹¹.

Apart from the above, there are African names which are mentioned in the *Qur'an*. Among such names is Musa which is mentioned one hundred and thirty-six times in the *Qur'an*. This name is said to have etymologically framed from 'Mu' which means 'water' and 'Sa' which means 'sticks'. Also, Pharaoh is an African name mentioned in the *Qur'an* seventy four times. It is another Coptic compound name from 'Phar' meaning 'the Great' and 'Aoh' which mean 'household or family'. Furthermore, Luqman is an Abyssinian name, it is the name of God's apostle mentioned twice in the *Qur'an*. According to a school of thought, Prophet Lugman is an African name from Ethiopia.

Moreover, the nursing maid of the Prophet, *Barkah* was an African. She was nick-named Umm Aymar and was the second to embrace Islam after the first wife of the Prophet, Khadijahbint*Khuwailid*. She was among the property inherited from his father, Abdullah.

It is equally contained in the Books of Bukhari and Muslim that the prophet allowed his wife Aisha, to watch a show by some Africans from Ethiopian cultural performance near his mosque in Madinah on the occasion of a feast.

One of the best four chosen women of the world was an African. The Holy Prophet (P.B.O.H) was reported by Anas to have said: "The great pious women of the world are Maryam, the daughter of Imran and mother of Isa; Khadijah, the daughter of Khuwailid (wife of the Holy Prophet); Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet) and *Ashiah* (the wife of Pharaoh)". As narrated in the book of *Al-Tirmidhi*, *Ashiah* in fact, was the only woman who prayed to Allah to build for her a mansion in paradise as contained in the *Qur'an* thus:

And God sets forth as an example to those who believe, the wife of Pharaoh, behold she said: "O my Lord, build for me in nearness to Thee a mansion in the Garden and save me from Pharaoh and his doings and save from those that do wrong" (Q. 66:11).

Letters to African Leaders

As part of honour to Africa and its recognition by Prophet Muhammad (P.B.O.H), he sent many letters to African leaders inviting them to Islam. For instance, Negus, king of Ethiopia received letters from Prophet Muhammad three times. In the first letter, the Prophet asked him to accept Islam and follow his prophethood. He also urged him to extend his invitation to his subjects and treat his people hospitably by setting aside the vanity and pride of a ruler. The second letter was based on invitation to accept the obedience, sympathy and love of Allah, the One who is without an associate; and that he should follow him (prophet), and believe the message of Allah he had brought. The third letter to

Negus was to call back the refugees to Madinah. Negus replied the second letter of invitation where he took an oath of allegiance to Allah and His Prophet. The king (Negus) eventually accepted Islam as a religion together with his people¹².

Moreover, a letter of invitation to accept Islam was sent to Muqawqis who was appointed as a vicegerent of Egypt by the Roman emperor. Also, the king of Damascus, HarisGhassani also received a letter from the Holy Prophet to accept Islam. Mere writing of letters from the Prophet to these monarchs is an indication that they were recognized by the prophet¹³.

CONCLUSION

African Muslims should thank God and feel proud for vital role played by their continent towards the spread and promotion of the religion of Islam, as well as recognition accorded them by the Holy Prophet. Up till now, African Muslims in one way or the other are not relenting their efforts in promoting the religion.

Some African countries like Egypt and Ethiopia could not be forgotten in the history of Islam for the wonderful role they had played. The simple-minded nature of Africans was demonstrated by King Negus who though a Christian in the first instance, hosted the Muslims who migrated to his land and even allowed them to practice their religion freely. This is equally an evidence that he might have read from his scripture of the coming of the last prophet, hence his acceptance of Islam in the long run.

African countries could not be equally forgotten for the wonderful roles they played in the spread of education. Many notable Islamic institutions like Al-AzharUniveersity, Egypt and Sankore University, Timbuku flourished and produced notable scholars who had contributed in no small measure to the development of Islam across the globe. Muslims in Africa are thus intimated with this development for them not to relent in their efforts so that their past contributions may not be jeopardized and eroded away.

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