

Conceptualizing the Trajectories and Proselytization of Islam in Africa

Fuabeh Fonge, PhD

Professor of History

North Carolina A&T State University

Greensboro

Abstract

A major challenge of the twenty-first century is figuring out how to reconcile the world's major religious cultures of Islam and Christianity and steer them away from persistent patterns of conflict. Although there seem to exist a widening rift between the two in Africa that seem to be irreconcilable, the situation is not bleak. Like Christianity, Islam which arrived in Africa during the earliest days of the faith, has left lasting imprints in the continent and become one of Africa's chief contact with Arabia, India, and the Iberian countries of Europe. The first batch of Muslims migrated to Abyssinia and sought refuge with the Negus, a Christian king of Abyssinia in the year 615 C.E. Although people are tempted to see the spread of Islam solely from the perspective of the current militant jihadists, the fact of the matter is that the expansion of Islam in African was neither simultaneous nor uniform; there were many trajectories of the faith, some of which were peaceful. Beside military conquests, Islam also took a gradual and adaptive path and used various negotiated, practical approaches to different cultural situations. Today, African Muslims, like Muslims in the rest of the world seem to be locked into intense struggle regarding the future direction of their religion. A positive lesson could, however, be learned from the Cameroonian nation whose Islamic and Christian populations have lived in harmony with each other since the European imposition of colonial rule and arbitrary amalgamation of Muslims and non-Muslims in a common Cameroonian polity. The case of the Cameroon Republic, in fact, supports the contention that in Africa, Muslims and Christians can cohabit peacefully with one another, despite disruptive actions of militant groups like the Boko Haram in Nigeria. It was the harmonious coexistence between the Cameroonian Muslims and Christians that influenced Pope Benedict XVI's decision to choose Cameroon as the first African nation to visit during his seven-day trip to Africa.

Historical Backgrounds

One major event that has impacted the lives of African peoples was the introduction and spread of Islam from the seventh century onward.¹ Initially associated with the Arab invasion of the Nile valley territories and the Maghreb, the consequences of the spread of Islam and the Islamic culture have remained significant to this day. Not only has the entire North African region become predominantly Islamic, but Islam is also spreading remarkably in sub-Saharan Africa. The religion has left lasting imprints on the African continent, some of which has been positive while others have affected the continent negatively.

Islam first arrived in Africa during the earliest days of the faith, when the Quaraishites - the priestly class of the Arabs - began to persecute the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers.² When their oppression went beyond limits, the Prophet advised the Muslims to migrate and seek shelter in some other part of the world.³ Acting on their founder's advice, the first batch of Muslims migrated to Abyssinia and sought refuge with the Negus, a Christian king of Abyssinia in the year 615 C.E.⁴

¹ The word "Islam" is Arabic word which means "submission to the will of God". This word comes from the same root as the Arabic word "salaam", which means "peace." As such, the religion of Islam teaches that in order to achieve true peace of mind and surety of heart, one must submit to God and live according to His Divinely revealed Law.

² The Quaraishites or Arab priestly class was particularly bent on persecuting Muhammad because he preached the abolition of the priesthood.

³ The word "Muslim" means one who submits to the will of God, regardless of their race, nationality or ethnic background. Being a Muslim entails willful submission and active obedience to God, and living in accordance with His message.

⁴ Ethiopia, formerly known as Abyssinia, had accepted Christianity since the third century BCE, long before pagan Europe.

In the Muslim tradition, this event is known as the first *Hijrah* or migration. It was significant that the first shelter of the early Muslims was in Africa, and their host who stood firm with them was also an African monarch. Writing for the CRS Report for the Congress, Hussein D. Hassan contends that “These first Muslim migrants provided Islam with its first major triumph, and as a consequence, Africa became the first safe haven for Muslims and the first place Islam would be practiced outside of the Arabian Peninsula.”⁵

Seven years after the death of Muhammad in 639 C.E. an Arab army invaded Egypt and within two generations, Islam expanded across North Africa and all of the central Maghreb.⁶ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries C.E., the consolidation of Muslim trading networks, connected by lineage, trade, and the Sufi brotherhoods had reached a crescendo in West Africa, enabling Muslims to wield tremendous political influence and power. Similarly, from the East African coast, Islam made its way inland. This expansion of Islam in Africa led to the creation of new communities and the reconfiguration of existing societies and empires.

Today, Islam remains a vibrant and still expanding religion, not only in Africa, but also in the entire world. Approximately one out of seven individuals throughout the world is Muslim, and Islam is the most rapidly expanding faith and culture of twenty-first century Africa. In spite of the fact that Christianity, the other major religion in the continent, was introduced in Africa more than two centuries before the birth of Islam, the Islamic culture and civilization had, between the eighth century and the eighteenth-century C.E., become Africa's chief contact with Arabia, India, and the Iberian countries of Europe. The Islamic faith has continued to experience a rapid growth into the twenty-first century. Now, backed by the gulf oil cash, Muslims have increased success in proselytizing, with a growth rate that is, by some estimates, twice as fast as that of Christianity in Africa.⁷

The rise of Islam in nearby Arabia was, indeed, immensely important for the history of Africa because it created a zone of intense intercommunication, stretching from Spain to Persia and beyond. Islam was also the first religion to profoundly affect the majority of African societies, incorporating new ideas into the African lifestyle and blending indigenous practices with Islamic ones. Unfortunately, the Western world refused to notice the events that were taking place in Africa for so long that it took the events like the attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001 by transnational Muslim fundamentalist for the U.S. to awake from its slumber. Until the events of September 11, the U.S. siesta had almost turned into a comma.

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. administration and Congress have been compelled to reassess American foreign policy in African nations with substantial Muslim populations and failing or failed states that could become breeding grounds for Muslim terrorists.⁸ In response to terrorist threats, the United States, in partnership with countries across Africa, has developed a range of strategies to help regional governments face the challenge of terror. As succinctly put by Hussein D. Hassan, “Since September 11, 2001, the size of U.S. diplomatic missions in sub-Saharan Africa countries with large Muslim population has increased.”⁹ Particularly worth noting is the fact that the U.S., in response to terrorist threats now has 45 active embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, including 16 new compounds built since 2001. This, probably explains the trips made by the former president George W. Bush to five African nations. Some observers saw those trips, especially the second, to five African nations as reflective of American focus, with an increasing American engagement with the continent since September 11, 2001.¹⁰

Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

In the attempt to understand the influence of Islam in Africa, it would be appropriate to discuss the teachings of Islam vis-à-vis those of both the traditional African spirituality and Christian beliefs. Such discussion would illuminate the reasons for the rapid expansion of the faith among Africans.

⁵ Hussein D. Hassan, “Islam in Africa.” Retrieved on 10/10/2009 from <http://docs.google.com/gviews?>

⁶ Maghreb or Maghrib is the Arabic term for Northwestern Africa. It applies to the territories occupied by the present Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. In some contexts it also includes Mauritania and Libya.

⁷ Bulliet, Richard, Pamela Crossley, Daniel Headrick, Steven Hirsch, Lyman Johnson, and David Northrup. *The Earth and Its Peoples*. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

⁸ Brennan M. Kraxberger, “The United States and Africa: Shifting Geopolitics in the Age of Terror,” *Africa Today*, fall 205, pp. 47-68.

⁹ Hassan, “Islam in Africa,” opt. Cit.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Todd Moss, “Africa: An Emerging Strategic Partner,” Press release, March 18, 2008.

This entails a discussion of the birth of Islam in nearby Arabia, the main doctrines of the faith, the holy Law or shar'ia, and the mechanism employed by Muslims to win converts in Africa.

Muhammad, founder of the Islamic faith, was the most influential historical personality of the Medieval Age. Born in Mecca in 570 C.E., of middle class family, he was orphaned at an early age. His father died before he was born, his mother when he was only six. Family members raised him, notably his uncle Abu Falib, a caravan trader whose profession was prestigious among the Arabs of his time. Abu Fail trained Muhammad to become a caravan trader like himself and when the young Muhammad attained the age of twelve, his uncle took him on a caravan expedition to Syria. There, Muhammad came into contact for the first time with people of Jewish and Christian learnings.

Later, as Muhammad became capable of leading caravans on his own, a rich, older, twice-widowed lady named Khadija hired him. When Muhammad attained the age of 25, he married Khadija in spite of her being 15-years his elder. It is said that Khadija herself initiated the contract and Muhammad accepted it. With this lady alone, Muhammad lived until he was over fifty while she was sixty-five years of age. When Khadija died at the age of 65 Muhammad, now over 50 years of age, stayed without a wife for some time. Then he married other women.

Meanwhile, when he was about forty years old, Muhammad went through a period of intense spiritual tension, in the course of which he became convinced that God had chosen him to be a prophet and a successor to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. He reported that God sent him messages through the angel Gabriel. The messages, he said, were sent in bits and that the entire text of God's message exists only in Heaven. These messages were the basis of Muhammad's proselytization and evangelization in Mecca. After his death the messages were compiled into the Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam. The central beliefs in Islam are submission to God (Allah), the revelations as given to Muhammad, and the last judgment and afterlife. Muslims believed that in the last judgment, God would separate the saved from the condemned. Heaven could be entered only through adherence to a strict behavioral code that includes praying regularly, fasting, avoiding alcohol and usury, practicing an austere sexuality, and eating a regular diet. They also believe that those who die for the Islamic faith, in the act of jihad, are guaranteed eternal salvation.

Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe in baptism. Instead, Islam is centered on five main bodies of doctrines known as the Five Pillars of Islam. The first of the five pillars is *Open profession of the faith (shahada)*. All Muslims are required to profess, at least once in their lifetime, that "There is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the messenger of God." The second pillar is *Prayers (salah)*. Muslims are required to pray five times a day. They may pray individually, but congregational prayers with other members of the Islamic community take place on Friday at the mosque. Prayers include movements of the body: kneeling, facing the direction of Mecca while praying, bowing, standing, and so on. The third pillar is *Fasting (Ramadan)*. It is said that the first revelation came to the prophet in the ninth month of the fast and during the Ramadan month, Muslims fast from day break to night fall for the entire month. Forth is the giving of *Alms (Zakkat)*. Muslims are expected to give alms generously. Islam discourages greed and acquisition of excessive wealth. Those who can afford it are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. At Mecca, they pray and worship at the Kaaba, the shrine God commanded Abraham (Ibrahim) and his son Ismail to build, now popularly known as the shrine of the Holy Stone. Nobody, male or female, wears veils in the Kaaba. All must unveil before they enter this holy sanctuary. It was only after the death of Muhammad that Muslims placed women under veil because for them, every portion of a female's body is capable of exciting passion in men. While in control of the country, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan even forced women to wear brocades.

The Qur'an and Early Converts

The Qur'an provides guidance for all phases of life — manners and hygiene, marriage and divorce, commerce and politics, crime and punishment, peace and war. Converts feel a sense of brotherhood and Islam helped to unite the hitherto scattered Arab peoples. The Holy Law (Sharia) was instituted in Islamic countries and until recently, remained the law of the land throughout the Muslim world.

Slowly, but steadily Muhammad won converts. His first converts were members of his immediate family and personal friends. As the band of converts grew, the wealthy merchants of Mecca became alarmed and feared that Muhammad's teachings would undermine the older religious beliefs and discourage pilgrims from coming to worship at the Shrine of the Black Stone (the Kaaba) in their city.

Due to the growing opposition to his teachings in Mecca, Muhammad accepted an invitation to go to the city of Yathrib, an oasis town on the trade route nearly 300 miles north of Mecca. There, the feuding populations of Arab and Jewish tribes welcomed Muhammad as an arbitrator. His emigration to Yathrib, known as the Hegira, took place in 622 C.E. and the Muslim calendar is dated from the beginning of 622. At Yethrib, Muhammad established a theocratic (rule by God) Muslim community. In his honor, the city was renamed Medina, meaning "City of the Prophet".

Trajectories of Islam in Africa

Originally the Arabs considered Islam their special revelation and had no intention of sharing the faith with non-Arab. However, several factors combined to attract large numbers of converts. From Medina, Muhammad organized attacks on the Mecca caravans. By 630 the Muslims were strong enough to capture Mecca, whereupon Muhammad made the shrine of the Black Stone (the Kaaba) the chief shrine of his religion. By 632 he had brought all of Arabia under Islam. Between 632 and 733 Syria, Egypt, the Maghreb, and Persia came under Muslim domination. In 711 Muslims took Spain and in 733 they expanded their conquest into France and were only halted at the Battle of Tours. The Muslim expansion after Muhammad's death, was the most amazing in world history.

By 751 the Muslims had driven eastward into Afghanistan and central Asia where they clashed with the Chinese army at the battle Talas River. From Persia, they entered the Indus Valley where they founded a colony, and in the eleventh century more of India came under the control of Islam.

So far as Africa is concerned, people are often tempted to see the spread of Islam solely from the perspective of militant jihads, but the fact of the matter is that the spread of Islam throughout the African continent was neither simultaneous nor uniform; there were many trajectories of the faith in the continent. Beside military conquests, Islam also took a gradual and adaptive path. Bearing in mind the fact that Islam often used various negotiated, practical approaches to different cultural situations, it would be apt to consider Islam in Africa in terms of its multiple histories rather than as a unified movement.

For instance, the spread of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries began with the Ummayyads, who brought the religion from the Middle East to the littoral sections of North Africa. Along the coast of Africa, Islam spread among the Berbers, who almost immediately drove north across the Mediterranean into Europe and conquered Spain in a bloody battle. J.C. deGraft-Johnson goes on to remark that the conquest of Spain was an African conquest as the conquerors were Africa Muslims, and not Arabs, who laid low the Gothic kingdom of Spain.¹¹ In Morocco, Muslims founded the city of Fès (808), which soon thereafter gave refuge to Andalusian Muslims fleeing an uprising in Córdoba. Although many historians give the impression that the Muslims scored easy victories in Egypt and other parts of North Africa, this does not seem to be the consensus as one historian writes:

It is not true to say that they carried all before them immediately; they met with fierce resistance and were more than once driven back. But history has largely forgotten the details of the struggle; the magnitude of the final success has obliterated the unsuccessful opposition of North Africa to its new rulers.¹²

In other words, the use of military force was but one means by which Islam spread in Africa. On the east coast of Africa, where Arab mariners had for many years journeyed to trade, Arabs founded permanent colonies on the offshore islands, especially on Zanzibar, in the 9th and 10th centuries. From there Arab trade routes into the interior of Africa helped the slow acceptance of Islam and led to the development of Swahili culture and language.

Prior to the 19th century, the greatest gains made by Islam were in the lands immediately south of the Sahara. The Islamization of West Africa began when the ancient kingdom of Ghana (c.990) extended itself into the Sahara and the Islamic center at Sanhajah. Mansa Musa (1307–32) of Mali was among the first West African emperors to make Islam the state religion of his empire and as the wealth of Mali grew, so did that of Islam. No event better represent this growing Islamic influence in Mali than the pilgrimage to Mecca that Mansa Musa made in 1324-25.

¹¹ J.C. deGraft-Johnson, *African Glory: The Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Publishing, 1986), p. 69-70.

¹² Jane Soames, *The Coast of Barbary*, pp. 90-91. Cited in J.C. deGraft-Johnson, *African Glory*, p. 65.

Seeking to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam that requires a Muslim to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a life time if one is fit and wealthy enough to afford the expenses involved, Mansa Musa did so on a grand scale. He set out for Mecca with thousands of retainers and 100 camel loads of gold. The story of his generosity on this pilgrimage is legendary. He gave away so much gold that the price of gold fell on the world market and did not recover for several years. His time in Alexandria brought Mansa Musa to the attention of the Venetian merchants who returned to Europe and spread tales of the great wealth of this Muslim African king.¹³ By the 16th century, the empire of Mali and its successor-state of Songhai had embraced Islam and included several Saharan centers of trade and Muslim learning, such as Timbuktu.¹⁴ In the region of the eastern Sudan, Islamic penetration followed the route of the Nile. By about 1366, Makurra, the more northerly of the two Christian kingdoms of the East Sudan, became Islamic. The other kingdom, Aloa, was captured (c.1504) by the Muslims. In the 16th century, the Somali conqueror Ahmad Gran unsuccessfully attempted to convert the Christian nation of Ethiopia to Islam. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Africa, like the rest of the Muslim world, was swept by a wave of religious reform. Militant reformers, such as the Fulani and the followers of Hajj Omar, greatly extended the area over which Islam held sway in West Africa. Usumanu dan Fodio (1809) founded the Sokoto caliphate, which was eventually incorporated under British rule into Nigeria.

Citing professor John Hunwick, Rahman Doi says that although this expansionist movement of the Arab people has sometimes been pictured as the greatest religious war of all times, it was in fact a simple imperialist expansion motivated more by economic than by religious factors.¹⁵ This is particularly true when one takes into account the fact that in most of the areas conquered, the former religions of those areas, whether Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism or indigenous cults, continued to survive, without general oppression for centuries, after the conquest by Muslim armies. Thus even in those areas where political authority was in the hands of Muslims owing allegiance to the central power of the Caliphate in Damascus or Baghdad, the actual Islamization of the population was generally a fairly slow process of absorption.

Thus, it is reasonable to say that force was not the only means employed by Muslims to spread Islam in Africa. Among other factors that helped to ensure the rapid spread of Islam in Africa are: the simplicity of the Islamic faith and the straight forwardness of its doctrines, Islamic acceptance of African cultures (especially polygamy), its tolerance to traditional African religions, its simplicity of doctrines, and its mode of worship that were somehow similar to traditional African religious modes.¹⁶ Many people in the Western world think that Muslim and African men are obsessed by physical passions and in possession of a number of wives and concubines. Many of these people are surprised to see a Muslim with one wife or a Muslim who is unmarried. They believe that the Muslim is at full liberty to shift from one wife or a number of wives to another. This attitude is aggravated partly by sensational motion pictures and cheap paperback stories, and partly by the irresponsible behavior of some Muslim individuals. The inevitable result of this situation is the fact that stationary barriers have cut off millions of people from seeing the brilliant lights of Islam and its social philosophy. And although Africans in particular have been chastised for taking multiple wives, the truth is that polygamy as such has been practiced throughout human history.

It was practiced by prophets like Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, etc.; by kings and governors; by common people of the East and the West in ancient and modern times alike. Even today, it is practiced among Muslims and non-Muslims of the East and the West in various forms, some of which are legal and some illegal and hypocritical; some in secret and some in public. It does not require much search to find out where and how a great number of married people maintain private mistresses, or stock spare sweethearts, or frequent their beloved ones, or simply go around with other women, protected by common law. Whether moralists like it or not, the point remains that polygamy is in practice and it can be seen everywhere and found in all ages of history. During the time of Biblical revelations, polygamy was commonly accepted and practiced. It was accepted religiously, socially, and morally; and there was no objection to it.

¹³ Alexandria was at the time the only Islamic port in which Europeans were allowed.

¹⁴ Some believe that the Sankoré Mosque University was the first modern university in the world.

¹⁵ Retrieved on 10/14/2009 from <http://worldupdates.tripod.com/islamintheworld/id25.htm>

¹⁶ When we speak about polygamy in this context, it actually means polygyny or a situation where a man takes multiple wives. On the other hand, if a woman has more than one mate, it is called polyandry. If it is a mixture of men and women, it is a group or communal marriage.

Perhaps this is why the Bible itself did not deal with the subject because it was then a matter of fact, a matter of course. The Bible does not forbid it or regulate it or even restrict it.¹⁷

Professor Toyin Falola maintains that Islam reached other parts of Africa at different periods, not through the Arab conquests, but mainly through the peaceful work of missionaries and traders. Holy men and scholars traveled to various places to preach and teach. The migration of Muslim groups spread Islam to new areas. Muslim traders served as self-appointed missionaries, taking Islam to areas where they had established contacts. The process was slow, and it continued well into the twentieth century.¹⁸

The true factor of Islamization lies in the religion of Islam itself. Wherever the Muslims went, they took their religion and culture with them. There were long-distance trade routes, running from North to South across the great Sahara. The Arab traders and businessmen and some quiet missionaries, who had dedicated their lives to the cause of Islam, carried the message of Islam wherever they traveled. Moreover, Islamic values have a lot more in common with traditional African life such as the Islamic emphasis on communal living, its clear roles for men and women, and its tolerance of polygamy. According to the *New York Times*, some Muslims argue that Christianity was alien to most Africans.¹⁹ All this made Islam more appealing to Africans than the brand of Christianity that Europeans tried to implant from the 18th century onward.²⁰ The quiet missionary works of Muslim traders and preachers, and the uncompromising monotheism of the faith were very instrumental in the spread of Islam in Africa. In addition, economic motives, theological and political quarrels among enemies, and Africans' dissatisfaction with their indigenous leaders constituted the trajectories of Islam in Africa. The psychic and social security offered to membership in a totally integrated Muslim community where one's entire life is subject to God's word, the desire to escape the second-class status of Islam's non-Muslim subjects, and the Muslim belief in the Holy war or jihad through which the world would be converted to Islam were other means by which Islam expanded in Africa.²¹

Islam in Africa also has, to varying degrees, incorporated tribal and pre-Islamic practices, and the Muslims of Africa have accepted claims of several self-proclaimed Mahdis. This explains why in the 20th century, Islam gained more converts in Africa than did Christianity, which labored under the burden of identification with European imperialism. Various scholars of African studies, prominent among whom was a noted 20th century scholar J. S. Trimingham, have elucidated these points.²² Islamic Arabs, unlike European imperialists, treated Africans with respect, settled among them and got married to the native women of their new African homes. Their children attended Islamic schools and became new generations of Muslims. Moreover, some of the teachings of Islam were not dramatically different from traditional African religious beliefs. For instance, the rejection of the doctrine of the original sin by Islam was identical to African beliefs in this regard. Explaining this point, Hammudah Abdalati tells us that:

The true Muslim believes that every person is born free from sin and all claims to inherited virtue. He is like a blank book. When the person reaches the age of maturity he becomes accountable for his deeds and intentions, if his development is normal and if he is sane. Man is not only free from sin until he commits sin, but he is also free to do things according to his plans on his own responsibility. This dual freedom: freedom from sin and freedom to do effective things, clears man's conscience from the heavy pressure of inherited sin.²³

¹⁷ Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Takoma Park, Maryland: International Graphic Printing Service, 1977), p. 165.

¹⁸ Toyin Falola, *Key Events in African History* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 85.

¹⁹ Norimitsu Onishi, "Rising Muslim Power in Africa Causing Unrest in Nigeria and Elsewhere," *New York Times*, November 1, 2001. Retrieved on 2/17/2010 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/01/world/rising-muslim-power-in-africa-causes-unrest-in-nigeria-and-elsewhere.html?pagewanted=1>

²⁰ We must not confuse the European attempt to spread Christianity in the 19th century to mean that Christianity was first brought to Africa by Europeans. Some of the earliest Christian communities in the world were in Africa, notably in Egypt and Ethiopia.

²¹ Islam teaches that, whether we like it or not, war is a necessity of existence and fact of life, so long as there exist in the world injustice and oppression.

²² See J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa* (1959), *Islam in East Africa* (1964), *Islam in the Sudan* (2d ed. 1949, repr. 1965), *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952, repr. 1965), and *The Influence of Islam on Africa* (1968); J. and L. Kritzeck, ed., *Islam in Africa* (1969).

²³ Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, p. 16.

Although some scholars maintained for a long time that the precise number of Muslims in Africa is unknown due to the fact that statistics regarding religious demography in Africa are incomplete, the reverse is true, and the latest scholarship tends to indicate that the percentage of Muslim population in Africa in 2014 was 53.04.²⁴ Even before this revelation, the *World Book Encyclopedia*, had stated that Islam is the largest religion in Africa, followed by Christianity. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that 45% of the population Africa's are Muslims, 40% are Christians and less than 15% are non-religious or follow African traditional religions. Many Africans continue to embrace Islam, especially in central and eastern Africa. The long and rich history of these religions in the continent has proved to be the source of many conflicts, primarily in countries where there is no clear Muslim majority, such as in countries like Tanzania, Nigeria, and Cote d'Ivoire. By 2005 the results of a survey conducted by the *Western Journal of Black Studies* revealed the results in the table below:

Religions in Africa, by Regions

	Indigenous	Muslim	Christian	Other	Total
Eastern Africa	52,114,073	59,091,873	135,194,880	6,058,251	252,459,077
Middle Africa	21,001,056	13,528,373	61,821,241	437,688	96,778,358
Northern Africa	9,020,093	167,131,245	6,410,368	632,920	183,194,626
Southern Africa	14,089,672	871,722	34,202,095	1,087,807	50,251,296
Western Africa	41,617,613	130,835,929	66,685,296	1,601,876	240,740,714
Total	137,842,507	371,459,142	304,313,880	9,818,542	823,434,071
Percentage	16.7%	45.1%	36.9%	1.2%	99.9%

Source: Adapted from "Spread of Christianity and Islam in Africa: A Survey and Analysis of the Numbers and Percentages of Christians, Muslims, and Those Who Practice Indigenous Religions," by Amadu Jackay Kamba, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 29, no 2, 2005, p. 561.

Islamic Influence or Proselytizing of Islam in Africa

Islamic political and aesthetic influence on African societies remain difficult to assess. In some capital cities, such as Kumbi-Saleh in Medieval Ghana, due to the vibrant trans-Saharan trade the presence of Muslim merchants resulted in the establishment of mosques. The famous Malian king Mansa Musa (r. 1312–37) brought back from his famous 1324 pilgrimage to Mecca many Muslim scholars and the architects, including al-Sahili, who is often credited with the creation of the Sudano-Sahelian building style. Mansa Musa's brother, Mansa Suleyman, followed his path and encouraged both the building of mosques and the development of Islamic learning.

As Islamic scholars and preachers visited different parts of Africa, bringing with them new knowledge and education, Africans too began to write and to produce their own famous Islamic scholars, such as the sixteenth century author, Ahmed Baba. Islam also helped to spread in many parts of Africa the art of writing and new techniques of weighting. The city of Timbuktu, for instance, whose fame as the seat of the famous Sankore Mosque University has been glorified by historians, flourished as a commercial and intellectual center, seemingly undisturbed by various upheavals. Starting as a Tuareg settlement, Timbuktu was soon integrated into the Mali Empire, then reclaimed by the Tuareg, and finally incorporated into the Songhai Empire. In the sixteenth century, the majority of Muslim scholars in Timbuktu were of Sudanese origin.²⁵

In the coastal areas of eastern Africa, Arabic vocabulary was absorbed into the Bantu languages to form the Swahili language. Today, Swahili is the lingua franca of the East African coasts. In many instances, conversion for sub-Saharan Africans was probably a way to protect themselves against being sold into slavery, a flourishing trade at the time in the zones between Lake Chad and the Mediterranean. For those rulers who were not active proselytizers, conversion remained somewhat formal, a gesture perhaps aimed at gaining political support from the Arabs and facilitating commercial relationships. Eventually, sub-Saharan Africans developed their own brand of Islam, often referred to as "African Islam," with specific brotherhoods and practices. The pilgrimage the made to Mecca and Medina brought other advantages.

²⁴ Retrieved on 01/05/2015 from Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, http://www.islamicpopulation.com/africa/africa_general.html

²⁵ The term Sudanese here refers to the various African peoples occupying the grassland areas south of the Sahara desert.

The Muslim elite made valuable connections in different parts of Africa and Saudi Arabia, learned the leading ideas of the time, and used some of these ideas to change their own societies. Some of these ideas related to the use of firearms in warfare, new roles played by the educated individuals in administration, and architectural innovations. Africans also gained access to the documented knowledge of the Islamic world. Muslim clerics' literacy and esoteric powers drew scores of converts to Islam. Sub-Saharan Muslim clerics known as *marabouts* began fabricating amulets with Qur'anic verses, which came to displace indigenous talismans and medicinal packets. Such amulets are featured in the design of many traditional African artifacts. Islam also reinforced the African fondness for geometric designs and the repetition of patterns in decorating the surface of textiles and crafted objects. Local weaving may have been transformed with the importation of North African weaving techniques.²⁶

Islam in Africa has also often existed side by side with representational traditions such as masquerading. Such practices have often been viewed as supplemental rather than oppositional to Islam, particularly when they are seen as operating outside of the central concerns of the faith. The Maghribi scholar, Ibn Battuta, who visited Mali in 1352–53 and witnessed a masquerade performance at the royal court of its Muslim king, noted an early example of such supplemental practice. In many areas of Africa, the coexistence of Islam with representational art forms continues today. But although Islam has influenced a wide range of artistic practices in Africa since its introduction, monumental architecture is the best-preserved legacy of its early history on the continent. Mosques are the most important architectural examples of the tremendous aesthetic diversity generated by the interaction between African peoples and Islamic faith.

From its early days till this day, Islam has affected African politics. The religion encouraged the trend toward political centralization and was employed by the kings and the civil servants to exercise more power. The use of the Arabic language enabled the keeping of records and exchange of written diplomatic correspondence. With time, Islamic judges replaced traditional ones, especially where the *sharia* was accepted as law.

Cameroon as Case Study

Today, African Muslims, like other Muslims in Asia, the Middle East, and the rest of the world seem to be locked into intense struggle regarding the future direction of their religion. At the core of the struggle are questions about the way in which Muslims should practice their faith and this sometimes drag none Muslims into the struggle, as was the case in northern Nigeria where Muslims insisted on enforcing the shar'ia rather than the Nigerian national law.²⁷ Although Nigeria is home to sub-Saharan Africa's largest Muslim population, there are substantial Christian populations in the country.²⁸ It is only in the northern part of the country that Islam is the dominant religion; the southern territories are Christian domains. In all parts of this most thickly populated African nation, Christians and Muslims have, until recently, worked together, especially in public services. For whatever the reason, the government of former president Olusegun Obasanjo sanctioned the operation of the Shar'ia in the northern states of Nigeria at the detriment of the federal law and by that action widened the gulf between Muslims and none Muslims in this African nation. The Nigerian endorsement of the shar'ia in its northern states is a unique situation in Africa; the majority of African Muslims have preferred to remain on the moderate, tolerant course that Islam has historically followed. With the exception of Nigeria and Somalia, secularism does not seem to face any serious threat in Africa.

A relatively small, but growing group of African Muslims would, however, like to establish a stricter form of the religion, one that informs and control all aspects of the society.²⁹

²⁶ Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, "Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–).

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsis/hd_tsis.htm (October 2001). Retrieved on 10/11/2009 from

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsis/hd_tsis.htm

²⁷ The Shar'ia law broadly influences the legal code in most Islamic countries, but the extent of its impact varies widely. In Africa, most states limit the use of the Shar'ia to "personal status" law for issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody

²⁸ The Muslim population of Nigeria had increased to a total of 121.52 million by 2014, according to figures retrieved on 01/05/2015 from http://www.islamicpopulation.com/africa/africa_general.html. For more information on Nigerian Muslims and the Shar'ia, see CRS Report RL33964 by Lauren Ploch, p. 15.

²⁹ Hal Marcovita, *Africa, Progress, and Problems* (Mason Crest Publishers, 2007), p. 91.

The move has often resulted in conflicts between the Muslim and Christian populations of Africa. A positive lesson could, however, be learned from the Cameroonian nation whose Islamic and Christian populations have lived in harmony with each other since the European imposition of colonial rule and arbitrary amalgamation of Muslims and non-Muslims in a common Cameroonian polity after the Berlin Conference of 1884. The case of the Cameroon Republic, in fact, supports the contention that in Africa, Muslims and Christians can cohabit peacefully with one another. It was this harmonious coexistence between the Cameroonian Muslims and Christians that influenced Pope Benedict XVI's decision to choose Cameroon as the first African nation to visit during his seven-day trip to Africa. Meeting with the country's Muslim leaders, the Pope told them that true religion rejects violence, and that he held up peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Islam in Cameroon as "a beacon to other African nations." In that meeting with twenty-two representatives of Cameroon's sizable Muslim population, Pope Benedict XVI also feted all religions as the basis of human civilization and told the audience that there is no incompatibility between faith and reason.³⁰

Muslim centers and Christian churches of various denominations have operated freely throughout the Cameroon. Approximately 40 percent of the population is at least nominally Christian, while approximately 20 percent is at least nominally Muslim, and another 40 percent practices indigenous religions or no religion at all. While Christians are concentrated chiefly in the southern and western regions of the country, Muslims are found in large numbers in every province, and there is significant internal migration within the country. Large cities have significant populations of every religion, with mosques and churches often located near each other. In the Northern provinces, the locally dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is mostly Muslim, but the overall population is fairly evenly mixed between Muslims, Christians, and animists, with members of each often living in their own communities. Elaborating on the coexistence of Christianity with Islam in Cameroon, the Catholic highest-ranking official in the country in 2006, Cardinal Christian Tumi, writes:

The impression some people give — perhaps for personal reasons — is that North Cameroon is entirely Islam territory. But one is astonished to find fervent Christians from the tribes of North Cameroon. The southern part of the country is often not aware that there are four dioceses in north Cameroon, with religious and diocesan priests, who are origins of that region. Among the bishops of Cameroon, two are from the north, namely, Mgr. Joseph Djidah, Bishop of Ngaoundere, and holder of a doctorate in Moral Theology, and Mgr. Samuel Kleda, an exegete (Bible specialist), Bishop of Batouri.³¹

The Cardinal made this observation in response to the actions of some overzealous public officials that attempted to use their offices to hinder the progress of Christianity in the predominantly Islamic northern regions. Questioned why the governor of the Big North was accusing the Catholic Church of building church houses in the region without government authorization while he was at the same time promoting the construction of unauthorized Muslim mosques in the same region, the governor responded that "Islam is a traditional religion and does not therefore require an authorization to build its place of worship."³² Nothing is further from the truth than the governor's assertion because it is a well-known fact that Islam was brought to this part of Africa by means of militant jihads. The governor had, certainly, not thought over carefully before uttering those words in defense of Islam. A point that has not been made clear by many writers is the fact that the Bamoun ethnic group of the Western Region in the southern portion of the country is a largely Muslim enclave surrounded by Christian majorities. Likewise, contrary to popular beliefs, the northern part of Cameroon is not entirely Islamic.

The Constitution of Cameroon provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. There is no official state religion. The state-sponsored television station, CRTV, carries two hours of Christian programming on Sunday mornings, normally an hour of Catholic Mass and an hour from a Protestant church. There is also one broadcast hour dedicated to Islam on Friday evenings. State-sponsored radio broadcasts air Christian and Muslim religious services on a regular basis, and both the radio and television stations periodically broadcast religious ceremonies on national holidays or during other national events. Christian and Muslim religious holidays are celebrated as national holidays.

³⁰ The current Muslim population of Cameroon is 5.16 million out of a total population of 21.5 million.

³¹ Christian Wiyghansa Shaaghan Cardinal Tumi, *The Political Regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, and Christian Tumi, Priest* (Douala, Cameroon: MACACOS S.A., 2006), p. 44.

³²Ibid.

These include Good Friday (Christian), Ascension Day (Christian), Assumption Day (Christian), Christmas Day (Christian), the Feast of the Lamb (Muslim), and the End of Ramadan (Muslim). These holidays do not affect non-observers negatively.

In terms of religious harmony all has not been smooth sailing, but the Christians and Muslim leaders in the country have been able to diffuse serious troubles. When in May 2004, a group of Muslim radicals circulated anti-Christian tracts in the North, Far North, and Adamaoua regions, both Muslim and Christian religious leaders in the area reacted promptly to identify the source of the tracts, condemn them, and encourage their congregations to respect religious diversity and promote religious tolerance. In April 2005, the Garoua assistant sub-divisional officer reported that a meeting with all the religious groups had been held the week before to discuss extremism in the area. The group reiterated their previous statement, asserting that it was non-residents who circulated the extremist tracts.

In 2003, a Catholic Church official in the Far North Province reported that Muslim "fundamentalists" who trained in Pakistan and Sudan were jeopardizing the usually good relationship between Muslims and Christians in the region. According to the official, these fundamentalists were gaining support and particularly among the youth because of the high levels of poverty and unemployment in the Northern regions. While the official did not feel that fundamentalism had caused serious problems in the region, he recognized that relations between religious groups could deteriorate if the economic situation remained poor.

From time to time, the northern regions suffers from ethnic tensions between the Fulani, an ethnic (or multi-ethnic) Muslim group that conquered most of the region some 200 years ago, and the Kirdi, the descendants of groups that practiced traditional indigenous religions. The Fulani conquered or displaced many Kirdi in course of a westward expansion of Islam in Africa.³³ Although some Kirdi subsequently adopted Islam, the Kirdi have remained socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to the Fulani. Unfortunately, from the early days of the Cameroonian independence, government officials were anxious to please every whim of the Muslim head of state, Ahmadou Ahidjo, even though Ahidjo was generally a pacifist in religious matters. Such government officials have been promoters of anti-Christian feelings in the predominantly Islamic northern portion of Cameroon.

Conclusion

The big challenge for the twenty-first century is figuring out how to reconcile the world's major religions and cultures and steering them away from their persistent patterns of conflict. Although some people have predicted the widening of the rift between the Islamic world and the Christian West and see the clash of civilizations as unavoidable, the picture until recently, was not all that bleak. Despite the controversy surrounding recent globalization and technological differences, there the world could maintain an understanding of various religions worldwide. Technology is promoting multiculturalism and tolerance as people all over the world are beginning to realize that cooperation yields better dividends, not only within one's society or religion, but worldwide. Racism is on the decline and the number of countries adhering to religious freedom is on the rise. The portion of global citizens living under open, pluralistic societies are at their highest ever.

The non-Western societies have, indeed, begun their march to modernity and in that process, peoples of various religions and cultures have found renewed confidence and are seeing others as partners rather than threats. These encouraging trends must, however, vie with the negative because in Africa and other third world nations, bigotry, intolerance, and ignorance are still rife. Although the polls show that the perception gap between Islam and the other religions remain problematically wide, we need to support the pessimistic stance embraced by people like Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, former president of Indonesia, who saw tolerance building as a central task of the twenty-first century.³⁴ Although there is no single remedy for the perception gap between Islam and the Christian West, Yudhoyono feels that certain measures taken on both sides can, at least, mitigate the problem.

³³ The westward expansion of Islam was particularly accomplished by means jihads such as the popular Sokoto jihad of Hausalands of Northern Nigeria that was conducted by Usumanu dan Fodio.

³⁴ Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was the president of Indonesia from 2004 to 2014 and is currently the chairman of the Democratic Party of his country. The views of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono were expressed in *The Economist*, Special Edition tiled in an article "The World in 2010," p. 66.

Among the suggested solutions are the strengthening by world leaders of various dialogues already taking place, clearer understanding of other religions, bolstering the forces of moderation worldwide, and ensuring that all civilizations benefit from globalization.³⁵ The ongoing discourse in this regard include the “UN Dialogue Among Civilizations,” the Saudi Initiative on Interfaith Conference, and the Global Inter-Media Dialogue that was launched by Indonesia after the crisis that followed the cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. A lot of ignorance about other religions still prevails, even in the most modern societies. In some Western countries, the fact that Islam is the fastest-growing religion has resulted in the escalation of "Islamophobia." While leaders in the Western world must speak against intolerance and discrimination, those in the Islamic world must also reach out to the West, just as much as they expect the West to understand Islam. Leaders all over the world must bolster the forces of moderation worldwide by teaching tolerance and moderation to children in schools at very early age. In Cameroon school examinations, for example, Muslim students are asked questions about Christian celebrations of Christmas and Christian students are often question about Muslim feasts like the Ramadan. Those still adhering to the Islamic jihadist principles ought to know that important trajectories of Islam in Africa today include more subtle means than militant jihads. More and more Muslim students are attending the same institutions of higher learning with Christian students. They live in the same student dormitories, eat at the same cafeterias, partake in sporting competitions, and run for offices in student governments.

The Islamic world might learn a useful lesson from their African brethren that have disassociated themselves from the violent schemes of some of their members when such members attempted to recruit, indoctrinate, and use their youths in the pursuit of violent extremist Islamic agendas. Attempt by a young Nigerian Muslim, Farouk Umar Abdulmutallab, to blow up a transatlantic plane on Christmas Day 2009 was loudly condemned by African Muslims, both at home and in the diaspora. In a failed terror bid, the twenty-three-years old Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate a bomb device attached to his body aboard the Northwest Delta Airlines, flight 253, as the plane was on its last twenty minutes descent into Detroit. The decision of the United States to place Nigeria, Abdulmutallab's country of origin, on a list of terrorist nations alongside the likes of Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan truly upset Nigerian authorities.³⁶ The fact that prior to the attempted attack Farouk Umar Abdulmutallab's father, Alhaji Umaru Mutallab, had approached the American and Nigerian authorities to warn them about his son's extremist views is a clear case of Muslims in this African nation disassociating themselves from extremist Muslim groups. Moreover, the young Abdulmutallab was recruited not in Africa, but in Yemen where he is said to have met a number of radical Muslims linked to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, including Anwar al-Awlaqi, the American Muslim cleric of Yemeni descent who had been linked to a series of attacks and plots across the world. However, the world must guard against terrorist groups like the Boko Haram, which in the Hausa language means “Western education is forbidden,” that emerged in northeastern Nigeria and is noted for wholesale killings and destruction of villages in Nigeria and the neighboring nations of Cameroon and Chad.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶ Olu Ojewale, "Nigeria Dismayed at Terror Listing," *News Africa*, January 31, 2010, p. 22.

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