

## **SUPRA-ETHNIC UNIVERSALITY OF ISLAM AND THE ETHNOCENTRISM OF AFRICAN CULTURE: QUESTIONS OF ASSIMILATION AND RESILIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

*A cursory glance at the historical development of Islam in Africa reveals that it made itself present and expanded through trade and migration. While Islam was introduced into North Africa through the movements and activities of the Arabs, in West Africa, it was introduced from North Africa by the Berbers through the Trans-Saharan Trade as early as the ninth century. Trading among local African groups which extended to Senegal and the Northern part of Nigeria helped the diffusion of Islam to penetrate peacefully beyond the Sahel – the semi-arid region of Africa, between the Sahara and the Savannah – into the Savannah area. In the coastal areas, the process of interaction between the immigrant Arabians and the dominant African groups created a new urban ethos in which Islam blended with the indigenous local culture to produce an indigenous Islamic religion, like the Swahili Islam. In this way, a balance was established between local ritual prescriptions and those of universal Islam. The present work on schedule is an effort in religio-cultural studies to understand the extent of religio-cultural interaction between Islam and African Culture: to what degree the Islamic religion assimilated the African culture and to what extent the African culture found a home in Islam. To arrive at the shores of the objectives of this study, the historical and hermeneutic method of inquiry would be patronized. This piece, however, discovered that the contact between Islam and African culture was an interaction in which there was a reciprocal assimilation.*

**Keywords:** Islam, African, Culture, Assimilation, Social Movement Theory, Islamization

### **Introduction**

I would like to describe my invitation to Saint Augustine's Major Seminary to present a paper as a privilege for two reasons. It is a privilege, first, because I was invited by one of the finest minds that taught me, the person of Rev. Fr. Peter Hassan. We knew him as a productive scholar; an academic whose productivity is marked by happy versatility, rich variety, unfailing originality, consistent incisiveness, high voltage reasoning, limpidity of style and unwavering logic. Secondly, I have honoured invitations from different seminaries to make presentations, but the presentation I made in Saint Thomas Aquinas Major

Seminary, Makurdi in 2016, and now in Saint Augustine Major Seminary comes with a different taste- the taste of a profound privilege. This is because this is my *alma mater*. Saint Augustine's Major Seminary was the garden where we were nurtured by quiet but industrious academic bees; producing scholars whose inner peace, transparent honesty, self-effacing demeanor, yet joyous sense of humor have fascinated colleagues all over the world. At this juncture, I cannot but say a big thank you to you all.

As a scholar with an African appetite, I sought for an image from my glossary of African images with which to describe the NACATHS week; and of course an image that delivers the content of an African perspective. The image that first came to my mind was that of a FESTIVAL, not just any sort of festival, but the New Yam Festival. This is important, as the NACATHS week is an opportunity for us to gather as a community of inquiry, in terms of a harvest of knowledge, for the education, entertainment and edification of one another. We are harvesting from the immense and measureless garden of knowledge, the social, cultural, philosophical, theological fruits, among others, which have matured for us as a result of the labors of academics who are committed to the apostolate of pen and paper. Implicit in the concept of harvest is a preceding period of sowing or planting. This explains why harvest is a period of blissful celebration, marked for us, especially as Africans, by group dances and colorful masquerades, by goodwill visits and exchange of gifts. In the cosmological context of planting and harvesting, as the human drama unfolds, the dynamics provide part of the light which enables us see and understand the human condition at any time in history<sup>104</sup>: that "Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest"<sup>105</sup>.

As I travelled from Osogbo to Jos, I knew very well that many masquerades (scholars) must have performed at various points within the NACATHS festival. And I am sure that the performing scholars have not only danced but danced beautifully well. It is in the nature of every serious masquerade to make an impression on the spectators. However, the nature of this impression cannot, unfortunately, be forecast before hand as it depends not only on the dexterity of the masquerade or lack of it as a dancer, but also on the humor of the spectators, and on their ability to assess and appreciate an artistic performance<sup>106</sup>. To achieve this, I have decided to choose dancing steps that are not monotonous

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<sup>104</sup> A. E. Afigbo, *The age of innocence: The Igbo and their neighbours in pre-colonial times*. A lecture delivered at the 1981 Ahiajoku Lecture, p.7.

<sup>105</sup> John 12:24

<sup>106</sup> A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their neighbours*. Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1987, p. 10

and insipid, neither do I intend to repeat any of the other dance steps that have already been presented during the NACATHS week. Nor do I intend to make a mere arrangement of an old and jaded dance steps. When I speak in these ways, it is only my idiosyncratic way of indicating my intention to avoid the unnecessary.

My presentation would border on the tension between the supra-ethnic religious universalism of Islam and the ethnocentrism of African culture; basically, focusing on the questions of assimilation and resilience.

### **Research Methodology**

Research methodology involves the science of proper modes and orders of procedure. And the research method that would be patronized during the course of this study would be the historical method of inquiry, an effort to recount some aspects of past life in a way that is scientific and analytic. This is necessary as the study would include a historical development of the relationship between Islam and African peoples at various periods of time or at a particular time in African history. The hermeneutic method of inquiry would also be employed for the interpretation of the historical experiences and also for the interpretation of certain dimensions of African cultural realities. This hermeneutic method of inquiry is necessary for the discovery of generalizations that are necessary for the understanding of the past, understanding the present, and to a limited extent, anticipating the future.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories are formulated to explain predict and understand phenomena and, in many cases to challenge and extend existing knowledge, within the limits of the critical boundary assumptions. This section on the theoretical framework focuses on a theory that would be of great significance in the interpretation and understanding of this research on Islamic assimilation of African culture. It would, in fact, through the provision of a lens for analysis, help in explaining the meaning, nature and challenges of such religio-cultural assimilations so that the knowledge and understanding may be used to act in more informed and effective ways<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>107</sup> Kanu I. A. *African Bioethics: An indigenous Humanistic perspective for integrative global bioethical discourse*. Lambert Academic Publishing: Germany, p. 50.

The theoretical framework to be patronized is the Social movement theory<sup>108</sup> which is an interdisciplinary theory that generally seeks to explain why social mobilization takes place, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, and political consequences. Within the context of Islamic assimilation of African culture, this idea of social mobilization for the Islamization of Africa, is not based on factors of deprivation<sup>109</sup> or random action<sup>110</sup>, but rather individuals, who are mobilized and who are mobilizing, are rational actors who strategically weigh the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and choose that course of action which is most likely to maximize their utility.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Very important to this research is the concept: "African Culture". The African like every other human person is shaped by culture and contributes in the shaping and transmission of this culture. The African therefore, is a *homo culturalis*. African culture generally refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of the African's diverse mental and psychological endowments<sup>111</sup>. It is the integral system of learned behavior patterns which are the characteristic of the African society and which are not the result of biological inheritance. This bears with the etymology of the word culture as *colere*, which means "to cultivate" or "to practice". The human person is, therefore, the author and architect of culture<sup>112</sup>. It includes the embodiments in African artifacts, the historically derived and selected traditional ideas and values. It is a way of life that is particularly African. The values of the African culture include: honesty, truthfulness, hospitality, among others<sup>113</sup>. Elders in Africa are esteemed as figures of wisdom; as such respect for elders is an African culture. There is respect for sacredness of life. Communal life is also part of African cultural value,

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<sup>108</sup> Olson, Mancur. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 48. Lichbach, Mark. *The Rebel's Dilemma*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 24; Chong, Dennis. *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Smelser, Neil J. 1962 *Theory of Collective Behavior*. London: Collier-Macmillan.

<sup>110</sup> Gurr, Ted. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.

<sup>111</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World; Second Vatican Council Document, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1965, no. 40.

<sup>112</sup> Kanu I. A. *A hermeneutic approach to African Traditional Religion, theology and philosophy*. Augustinian Publications, Nigeria p.379

<sup>113</sup> Iroegbu, P. (2004). 'The dynamism of African Culture', *Viewpoint Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 5.

summed up thus: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am"<sup>114</sup>. There is also the sensitivity towards the sacred, music and dance<sup>115</sup>.

The word "Islam"- etymologically is from the Arabic word: اسلام, (Ar-al-Islam). It is part of a large class of words mostly relating to concepts of wholeness, submission, safeness, and peace<sup>116</sup>. As a religion, it means "voluntary submission to God"<sup>117</sup>. Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by Allah. Thus, historically Islam is sometimes called Muhammadanism. This concept has not been accepted by many as it suggests that a human being, Muhammad, rather than God is central to Islam.

The word "Assimilation" is also important to this study. It is a word developed in the business of sociology. It refers to the gradual process by which a person or group belonging to one culture adopts the practices of another, thereby becoming a member of that culture<sup>118</sup>. It describes the way a person or group of a particular culture (such as immigrants) might respond to or blend with another culture, or how a minority cultural group might relate to a dominant cultural group<sup>119</sup>. The process of assimilation can take the form of forced or unforced assimilation. In forced assimilation, a person or group is compelled to take on the practices of another culture, such as by adopting that culture's language and religious traditions. In unforced assimilation, a person takes on the practices of another culture but is not forcibly compelled to do so.

## THE ADAPTABILITY OF THE AFRICAN CULTURE

The African culture by its nature is elastic, and like the Greek culture, it is open to new ideas, people and methodologies. The African tends to incorporate other cultural values that are beneficial to his or her culture. The African languages are

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<sup>114</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*. Eastern Educational Publishers, Nairobi, 1969, p. 104

<sup>115</sup> Kanu, I. A. *African philosophy: An ontologico-Existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Augustinian Publications, Nigeria p.131.

<sup>116</sup> "[What does Islam mean?](#)". The Friday Journal. 2011-02-06. Archived from [the original](#) on 2011-03-14.

<sup>117</sup> Lewis, Barnard; Churchill, Buntzie Ellis (2009). [Islam: The Religion and The People](#). Wharton School Publishing. p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Boyer, P (2001). Cultural Assimilation. International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. pp. 3032–3035.

<sup>119</sup> Chegg.Study. Assimilation. <https://www.chegg.com/homework-help/definitions/assimilation-49>; Wikipedia. Assimilation. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cultural\\_assimilation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cultural_assimilation)

in general languages with a concrete vocabulary, rather limited in the expression of more abstract realities. With the Arabic language, Africans have been able to fill a gap. Many African peoples, some scarcely touched by Islam, have borrowed a complete abstract, and especially religious, vocabulary from Arabic. The presence of Arabic language in African languages like Hausa, Berber, Fulani, Harari, Swahili, etc., is an indication of the openness of the African culture to other cultures. There is also a lot of borrowing from the English language by African languages. For instance, the Igbo would say: *Odi* good; *Achorom* that thing; in Hausa language we often hear: *Da munje* now; *Kai fool ne fa, wane irin nonsense ne wannan?* etc. This sense of adaptability of African culture to other cultures is obvious in African proverbs, myths and parables. Thus, some models of the openness of African culture to diversity would be discussed.

#### **a. The 'Ife' Thermodynamic Model**

Very interesting is the Yoruba mythology of creation. The myth holds that Olodumare, the Supreme God, originally lived in the lower part of heaven, overlooking endless stretches of water. One day, Olodumare decided to create Earth. He sent an emissary, the Orisha Obatalá to perform this task, giving him what he needed to create the world: a bag of loose earth, a gold chain, and a five-toed hen<sup>120</sup>.

These different elements had their purposes. Obatalá was instructed to use the chain to descend from heaven to the water below. When he got to the last link of the chain, he poured the loose earth on top of the water and placed the hen on the pile of earth, and ordered it to scatter the earth with her toes across the surface of the water. When the hen was done, Obatalá climbed the chain to heaven to report his success to Olodumare, who then sent his trusted assistant, the chameleon, to verify that the earth was dry, after which Olodumare gave the earth the name: *Ile Ife*, the sacred house<sup>121</sup>.

After the creation of the earth, Olodumare returned to the uppermost part of heaven. However, before his retirement, he distributed his sacred powers to Obatalá, the Orisha of creation, and Yemayá, the orisha of the ocean, who gave birth to a pantheon of orishas, each possessing a share of Olodumare's sacred power. Olodumare gave Obatalá the sacred power to create human life. Obatalá

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<sup>120</sup> Marta Moreno Vega, "The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria," One World/Ballantine, 2001. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/ifa.htm>

<sup>121</sup> Marta Moreno Vega, "The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria," One World/Ballantine, 2001. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/ifa.htm>

was the divinity that created our ancestors, endowing them with his own divine power<sup>122</sup>.

The Ife thermodynamic myth of creation, leaves us with several lessons about the openness of the African to diversity.

### **b. Proverbial Model**

One of the major traditional vessels where African philosophy, religion and culture have continued to be preserved is in African Proverb. Mbiti writes that: "It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom"<sup>123</sup>. The Igbo refer to them *as vegetables for eating speech* and *as the palm oil with which words are eaten*. The Zulu of Southern Africa describe proverbs thus: *without proverbs, language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul*. The Yoruba would say that *proverbs are horses for chasing missing words*<sup>124</sup>. They spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their beliefs, principles of life and conduct<sup>125</sup>. Some of these proverbs include:

- a. A person is a person because of other people
- b. Sticks in a bundle cannot be broken
- c. When spiders unite they can tie up a lion
- d. If one finger tries to pick up something from the ground, it cannot
- e. If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together
- f. I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am
- g. If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught
- h. A tree does not make a forest
- i. When a bird builds its nest it uses the feathers of other birds
- j. One person is not the whole world
- k. It is by taking a goat around that you are able to sell it
- l. If two or more people urinate in the same place at the same time, it would produce more foam

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<sup>122</sup> Marta Moreno Vega, "The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria," One World/Ballantine, 2001. <http://www.religioustolerance.org/ifa.htm>

<sup>123</sup> John Mbiti, African religions and philosophy. East African Education Publishers, Nairobi, 1969, p. 89.

<sup>124</sup> Kanu I. A., A Hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, philosophy and theology. Augustinian Publications, Nigeria, 2015, p. 65

<sup>125</sup> Kanu I. A., *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential Hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Augustinian Publications, Nigeria, 2015, pp. 55-56.

From these proverbs, one can draw a lot about the African principle of openness to religio-cultural diversity.

### **c. The 'Choosy Princess' Complementary Model**

There was once a choosy princess who turned down the requests of those who asked for her hand in marriage. Her father was disturbed because of her choosy attitude and made public that any man who would win the love of his daughter would have half of his kingdom given to him. This was heard by a python that lived in the river and immediately it went about borrowing the parts of the human body and when it looked fully human, physically, it stormed the palace of the king in a grand style. Immediately the princess saw the human python, she was attracted to him, fell in love and decided to marry him. The human python departed with her and owned half of the wealth of the kingdom as the king had promised. When the python was returning with her to his home, just before the river, it turned into a python and went into the river with the princess. Those who witnessed the scene brought word back to the king that his son-in-law is not a human being but a python<sup>126</sup>.

This bordered the king who assembled the wise men in his kingdom for a way forward towards rescuing the princess. They came to the decision that to rescue her, extraordinary talents would be required for the mission. This included professionals like: a boat rider, a thief, a carpenter, a diviner, a hunter and a swimmer. When they got to the river, and did not know where to begin to find her, the diviner did some incantations and found out where the princess was hidden by the python. Having discovered her, the thief went into the river and stole the princess from where she was hidden. He handed her over to the skillful swimmer who immediately moved with her behind him. At this point, the python woke up from its slumber and angrily went after the swimmer. This was when the hunter came in and fired at the python. While the boat rider was heading to the shore with her, the anger of the python was stirred and it hit hard on the boat, damaging a good part of it; and to save the boat from sinking the carpenter came in and mended the damaged part of the boat that they may continue on their journey. With a combined effort, the team was able to take the princess back to the king<sup>127</sup>.

## **ISLAM AND OTHER RELIGIO-CULTURAL TRADITIONS**

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<sup>126</sup> Kanu I. A., *Sources of Igwebuiké Philosophy*. International Journal of Religion and Human Relations. 9. 1. 1-23. June 2017. p. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Kanu I. A., *Sources of Igwebuiké Philosophy*. p. 11.

The relationship between Islam and other religio-cultural affiliations can be categorized into her relationship with “People of the Book” and with traditional religion, under which the African culture’s experience with Islam can be studied.

#### **a. Islam and the Religions of the ‘People of the Book’**

Religious and cultural diversity was part of the scene from which Islam emerged. Christians and Jews lived around the various peninsula and its environs during the time of Prophet Muhammad. In the northwest we had the Ghassanids and the Byzantine which were Christians. To the southwest in Yemen, there were small Christian groups. To the west of Yemen was the Abyssinian Christian Kingdom of the Negus. In the city of Medina, there was a significant Jewish presence as well<sup>128</sup>. Springing from this environment, the Qur’an accepts a world created by God in its diversity:

O humankind! We created you male and female, and we made you into peoples and tribes that you might learn to know one another. Indeed God considers the most noblest among you those of most reverent awe<sup>129</sup>.

In another text, the Quran speaks of diversity within the context of plural communities of faith:

We have made for each among you a revealed road and a way to travel. Had God wished, he would have made you a single community, but to test you according to what he has given to each of you. Therefore, vie with one another in good deeds, for God is the final goal of all of you, and it is he who would clarify for you those things about which you now argue<sup>130</sup>.

The above texts from the Qur’an, understand religious and cultural diversity as coming from God, and allowed by him so as to test how we can work out our differences, and as an impetus to a beneficial moral competition<sup>131</sup>.

However, the relationship between Islam and other religious cultures have varied from one place to another. Early Muslim administrators at one point allowed for freedom of worship, while others didn’t. Under the administration of the the Umayyads, Islamic rule had a policy that protected the Dhimmi (Protected Minority), that is, non-Muslims who chose not to convert to Islam. This policy gave them the right to freedom of worship as long as they paid their

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<sup>128</sup> John Renard, Responses to 101 questions on Islam. Better Yourself Books, India, p. 110

<sup>129</sup> Qur’an 49:13; cf 30:22; 14:4

<sup>130</sup> Qur’an 5:48; cf 2:148; 23:61

<sup>131</sup> John Renard, Responses to 101 questions on Islam. Better Yourself Books, India, p. 111

Poll Tax (Jizya) in addition to the universally levied tax (Kharaj). In Iranian territories, the Dhimmi's included Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, etc<sup>132</sup>. This freedom policy did not in any way remove the significant restrictions that the Islamic administration placed on the people of the Religion of the Book. They were forbidden to proselytize and had to wear clothes that identified their confession. While they could repair their ritual sites, they could not build new ones<sup>133</sup>. This is still operative in some Muslim communities to this day.

### **Islam and the Religions of "Idol Worshippers"**

The word 'Idol' is from the Greek word *eidolon*, which means image or shape, usually copied from the real thing. Thus it speaks of what is false compared to the real thing. In relation to African Traditional Religion, it was used, mainly by Islam to speak of it as the worship of false gods. Africans were thus a people who needed to be liberated from their worship of false gods<sup>134</sup>. This served the bases for Islamic missionary work in Africa.

The Dhimmis must be distinguished from 'Idol worshippers' at this juncture- the Dhimmis were the 'People of the Book' comprising Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, etc; while they had some respect, the Idol worshippers were treated without respect or religious toleration. They had the choice to get converted or flee for their lives<sup>135</sup>. The implication being that while Islam had more tolerance for the culture of the 'People of the Book', it had very limited tolerance for the religion of 'Idol worshippers'. Thus, it is not surprising that most Muslims stress that they have a duty to convert "pagans" from primal religions to Islam. This is backed by the Qur'an<sup>136</sup>, which makes it the collective responsibility of the Muslim community to wage holy war, *Jihad* against unbelievers in order to subject them to Muslim rule<sup>137</sup>. It was with the lens of "Idol Worshippers" that African religious culture was understood.

### **CREATIVE ADAPTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL CATEGORIES IN ISLAM**

A cursory glance at the historical romance between Islam and African culture reveals that despite efforts to purge Islam of African elements has continued to display a level of 'Africanness' that reveals a progressive indigenization of Islam

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<sup>132</sup> John Renard, Responses to 101 questions on Islam. Better Yourself Books, India, p. 29

<sup>133</sup> John Renard, Responses to 101 questions on Islam. Better Yourself Books, India, p. 29

<sup>134</sup> Kanu, I. A., African Traditional Religion in a Globalizing World. *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*. Volume. 1. Issue. 8. 4-12. 2014.

<sup>135</sup> John Renard, Responses to 101 questions on Islam. Better Yourself Books, India, p. 30

<sup>136</sup> Qur'an 9. 5

<sup>137</sup> Clark P.B., & Linden I., *Islam in Modern Nigeria*, Munchen, 1984, pp. 138-149

in Africa. This is evident in her interaction with the Bori traditional Hausa religion and the North African church.

### **The Chronicles of Bori Hausa Religio-Cultural Heritage**

In the pre-colonial Hausa states, long before the advent of Islam, there was what we could consider a strong Hausa animism. It was called Bori, which was the state religion of the traditional Maguzawa<sup>138</sup>. Bori means 'the spiritual force that resides in physical things'. It has a relationship with *borassa*, which is the word for local distilled alcohol and *boka*, which means the practice of medicine<sup>139</sup>. In traditional Hausa societies, the Bori controlled the forces, and the performance of an *adorcism*, which constituted the rituals, dances and music by which these spirit forces were controlled and by which illness was healed. The network of Bori priestesses and their helpers was led by the royal priestess, called the 'Inna', or 'Mother of us all'. The Inna oversaw this network, which was responsible for protecting society from malevolent forces through possession dances, but provision of healing and divination.

When Islam started making inroads into Hausa land in the 14th century, certain aspects of the Bori religion and culture were driven underground. Such aspects include: The pre-eminence of women in power. The powerful advisory roles of women, exemplified in the Bori priestesses, either disappeared or were transferred to Muslim women in scholarly, educational, and community leadership roles. Idol worship was obliterated. However, some other aspects were assimilated, making the Hausa to feel at home with Islam. These aspects include:

- 1. Polygamy:** Polygamy has existed all over the African continent as an aspect of the African culture. This practice was very important to the African because children were seen as a form of wealth and this way a family with more children was considered to be more powerful. When Islam came to Africa, it's religious regulation on polygamy blended with the African culture. The Qur'an says:

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans,  
Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear  
that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or

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<sup>138</sup> Maguzawa are a subgroup of the Hausa people who still adhere to some of the tenets of the pre-Islamic traditional religions of Kano and Katsina, cities in northern Nigeria. Most of the citizens are found in the rural areas close to Kano and Katsina.

<sup>139</sup> H. R. Palmer. Bori Among the Hausas. *Man*, Vol. 14, 1914 (1914), pp. 113-117.

(a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice<sup>140</sup>.

This provision in the Qur'an made it possible for the assimilation of the African culture of polygamy by Islam.

2. **The Use of Charms and Amulets:** The use of charms and amulets, also known as the "goodluck charm", were very important, in traditional African societies. When Islam came into Africa, they recognized that the making and sale of charms and amulets, which were believed to offer protection against evil forces and generally ensure success in life, were important in winning over converts. Islam, therefore, took the making of amulets to the next level by making packages, usually of animal skin containing sacred verses of the Qur'an to generate a force that is able to interact with unseen forces. These were attached to the clothing of children and also worn by adults to give them protection from seen and unseen evil forces.
3. **Belief in Spirit Forces:** The African universe is one that is dominated by spirit forces, both benevolent and malevolent. When Islam came, the idea of spirit forces were not obliterated but assimilated for the indigenization of Islam. For instance, in the northern part of Nigeria, the Bori spirit possession priestesses maintained nominal influence over the Sultanates that replaced the earlier Animist kingdoms. Priestesses communed with spirits through ecstatic dance ritual, hoping to guide and maintain the state's ruling houses. The pre-Muslim *babbaku* spirits of the Maguzaci were added to the Muslim spirits *farfaru*, and spirits of other ethnic groups, even those of the European colonialists. Thus, Mbiti avers that even after the suppression of African traditional religion, in matter of deeper subjects such as life, birth, marriage, death, many African Muslims remain the followers of African religion<sup>141</sup>. Moreso, the Muslim ritual prayer did not completely dislodge the traditional rituals of seeking to appease the ancestors<sup>142</sup>.
4. **Architecture:** with the advent of Islam in Africa, the African traditional forms and symbols, especially, the artistic and architectural domains

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<sup>140</sup> Qur'an, Sura 4, 3

<sup>141</sup> John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi: East African Publishers. p.191.

<sup>142</sup> Clark P.B., & Linden I., *Islam in Modern Nigeria*, Munchen, 1984, pp. 138-149

indicative of an indigenous system, were often not discarded but retrieved and recast in new forms blending with Islamic architecture. Once a compromise was reached between the local traditional cultural heritage and the universal prescriptions of the Islamic religion, the next step was to adopt the African ancestral imagery or iconography into Islamized form. For instance, the African traditional architecture was highly patronized during the construction of the Mosque in Mande of West Africa, which was configured from a local altar shrine. According to Labelle Prussin:

The single, towering pyramidal earthen cone became the *mihrab* with its system of projecting wooden pickets extending out of this massive structure. The ends of these wooden pickets served as a scaffold for workers to climb and repair the walls. The ancestral conical structure pillar was now redirected to a new focal center, that of Mecca. In certain cases... some of the mosques that were built in Mali had *mihrabs* that evoked the image of an African mask<sup>143</sup>.

The adoption of the African traditional architectural design also influenced the Islamic architectural tradition through the inspiration of the architectural imagery of mosques evident in the thatched domes of the Senegal-Guinea area<sup>144</sup>.

- 5. The African sense of community:** The Africans who were converted to Islam found in the Muslim *umma*<sup>145</sup> a solidarity and a sense of belonging not very different from that obtainable in traditional African societies<sup>146</sup>. With the advent of colonialism which oversaw the dismantling of the African sense of community and brotherhood, the Islamic brotherhood provided a safe haven for so many Africans who were disoriented after losing their cultural heritage. The new solidarity within the Muslim community replaced the African village and tribal solidarities.

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<sup>143</sup> Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World. African Culture and Islam. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-culture-and-islam>

<sup>144</sup> Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World. African Culture and Islam.

<sup>145</sup> Ummah (Arabic: أمة [ʾum.mæ]) is an Arabic word meaning "community". It is distinguished from Sha'b (شعب [ʃæʕb]) which means a nation with common ancestry or geography. ... It is a synonym for ummat al-Islām (الإسلام أمة), 'the Islamic community', and it is commonly used to mean the collective community of Islamic people.

<sup>146</sup> Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World. African Culture and Islam.

6. **Prayers:** Another area of assimilation was the manner of prayer. In traditional African societies, most prayers were said at home, presided by the head of the family, who was the priest at this level of worship. In the same way, Islam allowed for small prayer units at home headed by the father of the home. When Islam came, this practice in traditional African societies created a fertile ground for assimilation.
7. **Traditional Medicine:** Medical practitioners belong to a class called sacred personages or sacred specialists. They principally concern themselves with sickness, disease and misfortune<sup>147</sup>. They symbolize the hope of society: hopes of good health, security and prosperity. Sickness and misfortune were generally believed to be caused by the ill will or ill action of one force against the other. The medical personnel is thus consulted to diagnose the type of sickness and trace the cause of it. When Islam came, it encouraged a system of healing that was psycho-spiritual. In fact, in most Islamic communities, the Imams were the medicine men.
8. **Simplicity:** The simplicity of Islam made it attractive to African people who were already part of a religious culture that was very simple. The simplicity of the Islamic doctrine and mode of worship helped propagators to make converts in Africa. Unlike some other religions, Islam is not just a religion or a mass of doctrines or beliefs and rituals, but rather a complete way of life or civilization, just as the African traditional religious culture was a way of life. As regards conversion, the Islamic faith was much more adaptable in Africa with very minimal requirements for new members. Keeping to religious responsibilities and the understanding of the faith came later after conversion.

## **The North African Chronicles**

A study of the decline and eventual disappearance of Christianity from North Africa and its Islamization is relevant to this study. Before the Islamic invasion of Africa, the great Alexandria, the second most important city of the then Roman empire, was the naval and centre of African Christianity. Thoughts of the Alexandrian school of theology and their famous catechetical school, far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century reminds us of how Egypt shared in primitive Christianity. We

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<sup>147</sup> Kanu, Ikechukwu A. (2012). "A Metaphysical and Epistemological Study of African Medical Practitioners". In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy* (pp. 227-240). A publication of the Association of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars.

learn from the Acts of Apostles that pilgrims from Egypt were present during the Pentecost<sup>148</sup>. The catechetical school produced great theologians like Origen, Philo, St Pantanus, Clement of Alexandria, St Dioysus, Eusebius of Caesarea and, Athanasius, who explored Greek philosophical categories to formulate Christian mysteries<sup>149</sup>.

In Upper Egypt, the Christian community had introduced monasticism to the church by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> C<sup>150</sup>. This new form of life contributed greatly to “the history of a phenomenon of the inner life of the church”<sup>151</sup>. Modern Tunisia, located at the western side of Egypt, and was then referred to as Carthage; a place where the great St Augustine lived between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. After Carthage there was the great city of Numidia which is today’s Algeria. It was from among this Christian community that the earliest church martyrs emerged: St Perpetual, a noble lady of Carthage, and the slave girl Felicity<sup>152</sup>. Through a progressive process of islamization, this rich Christian heritage in North Africa declined and eventually disappeared.

At the time of Arab invasion of Egypt, there was a conflict between the Duosites and the Monophysites (copts). This conflict and division provided a fertile ground for Islamic penetration. While Egypt gradually became an Arab nation, the Coptic community clung to its identity and continued to use the Coptic language in their liturgy<sup>153</sup>. The strength of the Coptic Church that has kept it surviving to this day is their acceptance of the Gospel within the categories of what they already believed and knew. They were already having some quasi belief in the trinity, based on the Egyptian Osiris, Isis and Horus, so believing in the Trinity was not something strange. They maintained their originality and were only converted to Christianity using the Coptic language. Thus, their resistance of the Islamic invasion was based on the fact that they had their faith interwoven in their language and tradition, giving it a nationalistic identity<sup>154</sup>.

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<sup>148</sup> Kanu, Ikechukwu A. & Elizabeth Ezenweke (2012). “Revisiting the Lessons of the Interaction between faith and Culture in North Africa”. In the Proceedings of the *International Conference on Sustainable Development*. Vol. 8. No. 2. pp. 67-71.

<sup>149</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1987, p.2.

<sup>150</sup> L. A. Thompson, *Christianity in Egypt Before the Arab Conquest*, In *Tarikh*, Vol.2, No. 1. Pp.4-15

<sup>151</sup> Jedin, H. and Dolan, J. (eds), *History of the church*; Vol. II, London: Burns and Oats, 1980, p.337

<sup>152</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.10

<sup>153</sup> Raymond Hickey, *Two Thousand Years of African Christianity*, p.4

<sup>154</sup> Sylvester Dagin, Lecture note on *African Church History*, St Augustine’s Major Seminary, Unpublished material, 2006. pp.10-12

Christianity in the Nubian church was completely wiped out. It is only through the effort of the world archeological community under the supervision of UNESCO from 1959-1969, that they discovered the long history of the Nubian Church. They uncovered a church of unbaked bricks dating to a period of 543 AD<sup>155</sup>.

What were the reasons for the success of the islamization of the North African Church? The reasons include:

1. While the Christians were fighting over doctrines, Islam came with its simplicity of doctrine, providing an alternative to the people. A simplicity that augurs well with their traditional religion.
2. Unlike the copts, Christianity was presented as a religion of the elite. Rather than using the language of the local people, Latin and Greek languages were used. Islam came with simplicity, extending its hands to the poor and unlearned.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of Islam's reserved openness of Islam to African religious culture, which paved the way for assimilation, there were obvious areas of irreconcilable differences. Instances of obvious areas of difference included, the Islamic emphasis on individual ownership of land and property, whereas in various African societies, land belonged to the community. The African customary law was oral in nature while the Islamic law was written down, with the written word held in high esteem. Following is the emphasis on rights and obligations: while the Islamic law emphasizes the rights or obligations of individuals, the African customary law was kinship based.

Very interesting, is that the intensity of assimilation varies from one part of Africa to another. For instance, the Yoruba women of southwestern Nigeria continued to be market women even after the coming of Islam, whereas their counterparts in northern Nigeria tended to lead more secluded lives. In 1941, Muhammad Jumat Imam, a Southern Muslim scholar in Ijebu-Ode taught that women should be educated, included in public affairs and attend mosques together with men<sup>156</sup>. So many factors account for this differences in assimilation. These factors include the length of time during which Islam and the particular

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<sup>155</sup> Sylvester Dagin, Lecture note on *African Church History*, p.12

<sup>156</sup> Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World. African Culture and Islam. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-culture-and-islam>

African culture interacted. There was also the factor of the compatibility or incompatibility of the worldviews of Islam and the particular African culture<sup>157</sup>.

In our age of globalization, an era when one quarter of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims live in Africa, making Muslims, half the continent's population, the paramount question looming at the horizon is: How will both Islam and African indigenous traditions fare? Is the African culture destined to die out as religious-cultural interactions have disrupted the cultural nexus in which these traditions have thrived? This is rather unlikely as African indigenous cultures have demonstrated much resilience even as their followers become Muslims. As I look into the future, with the benefit of hindsight, I have no doubt that the final episode of the unfolding global resurgent Islam is yet to emerge.

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