The Impact of Islamic Writing on the Oral Cultures of West Africa.

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In discussing the impact of Islamic literacy on the societies of West Africa, one ought to try and separate the influence of Islam from the influence of literacy. While a total separation is barely possible, at least we should have the problem in mind.\textsuperscript{1} There are two other aspects that we should separate analytically, though they are related over time. We need to distinguish the effect that Islamic literacy has had on a particular oral culture from that which it has, at a particular moment, on the pagan, or partially Islamic population, within a mixed culture. For those West African societies that know writing are characterized by a literacy that is restricted in its use and limited in its extent. They are consequently divided into literate and non-literate elements. But the non-literate elements had a status quite different from the illiterates of a Western society. In the kingdoms of Northern Ghana, for example, chiefs did not normally possess these skills; writing was associated with the Muslim estate, members of which acted as secretaries to the rulers where these were needed. While writing had its own prestige as a technological device, there was nothing shaming about being unable to read or write. The ‘community’ consisted of literates and non-literates; neither was automatically deemed to be more prestigious than the other.

The impact of Islamic writing on the non-literate sectors of West African cultures can be gauged by examining the oral traditions. Of great importance here are the recitations of those specialists that French authors refer to as ‘griots’. These men work within the framework of a ‘mixed’ society of the kind mentioned above and their recitals give some idea of the role played by Islam, and by Islamic literacy,

\textsuperscript{1} Some of the topics discussed in this paper are more exhaustively treated in two other articles, "Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana" and (with Ian Watt) "The Consequences of Literacy". Both of these have appeared in Goody, ed. (1968).
on the non-literate sectors of society. The example I take is the Soninke legend of the dispersal of the Kusa (Meillassoux et al., 1967).

In this text, the appeals to Allah (p. 50) and the reckoning of time by the hours of prayer (p. 61) provide strong evidence of Muslim influence. But above all, in this legend of ‘le héros magicien’, stress is placed upon the magical knowledge of Islam. At one point, the representative of the oppressed Kusa challenges the tyrannical king by accusing him of geomancy, contrary to the practice of Islam.

"Il dit : ‘Bien que Koussa, n’est-ce pas toi qui as interrogé la terre, chez nous dans le Koussata?’
Il dit : ‘Le règne de notre grand Allah, sa dignité et sa science infuse, surgira de ta géomancie.’"

(PP. 60-61)

When the hero, Jagu Maré, wants to revenge himself upon the tyrant for the death of his father, he goes off to acquire knowledge about the manipulation of things supernatural from elders well-versed in Islamic lore:

"Il alla chez un premier sage. Il dit : ‘Sage, ami d’Allah, sage, interlocuteur d’Allah, sage, confidant d’Allah, je suis venu [me faire traiter par toi, afin de venger mon père à Kelampo.’"

(P. 93)

The second example I take is from Koumen, by the distinguished authors, A. Hampaté Bâ and G. Dieterlen (1961), a work which is described in its sub-title as Texte initiatique des pasteurs peul of Macina. Although gathered in post-Islamic times, the authors see this text as referring to, if not composed in, the pagan period. It tells the story of the initiation of the first silatigi (ritual leader, diviner), who was called “Silé Sadio ou Soulé, diminutif de Souleyman, c’est-à-dire de Salomon” (p. 29). The actual text runs: “Koumen lui dit: ‘Silé Sadio! je suis Koumen l’Enchanteur. j’initie les hommes par degrés à l’exemple des génies de Salomon qui trempent l’acier’” (p. 35). On this passage the editors offer the following comment: “Les Peul font constamment allusion aux événements de l’époque de Salomon, qui apparaît dans les légendes et les traditions historiques comme un maître et la source de certaines initiations” (p. 34).

1 Some other features are associated with Islam—the stress on sandals, passed down from father to son (p. 62), and the taboo of one group on the wearing of Turkish slippers (p. 124)—à definition of one’s role in opposition to Islamic culture.
A little later in their commentary the editors claim that a knowledge of this text permits one to attribute the Tassili frescoes of the bovid period to the Fulani (p. 94). They go on to suggest that a further analysis of the text will throw light on the relations of these nomadic peoples with the Mediterranean and the Near East, "ou de préciser les influences subies au contact des peuples de l'antiquité classique, et dont témoignent, par exemple, les allusions à Salomon" (p. 95).

One might suggest, however, that such allusions bear witness not to any direct contact with classical antiquity but to more recent communication with Islamic sources. In much of the cabalistic literature of Christian, Jewish or of Muslim provenance, especially in the books of magic that circulated widely in the Western Sudan, Solomon is regarded as the fount of magical power. The tradition lives on in the Masonic myths of contemporary Europe as well as in the works of magic that have spread wherever writing is found (and in some parts where it is not). The reference certainly demonstrates a link with the Mediterranean world, but a link not through migration in the unrecorded past but through the movement of books and scholars since the coming of Islam.

The same neglect of the effects of literacy appears in M. Griaule's (1965) discussion of the zodiac among the Dogon of the Bandiagara scarp. In the course of his explicit effort to establish the equality of humankind and to show that Dogon philosophers lose nothing by comparison with their counterparts in the Near East, Griaule points to the existence of the zodiac among the Dogon, apparently thinking of this as an independent invention (p. 212). So of course it may be. But a much more likely suggestion (which he does not consider) is that, like the Fulani who surrounded them, who lived in amongst their lowland settlements, and who sometimes conquered them, the Dogon were influenced by the 'books' of Solomon. By this I mean the works of Al Bûni and other North African scholars who were instrumental in transmitting these off-shoots of Chaldean learning to the diviners, magicians and other religious practitioners located across the Sahara. Indeed there are other aspects of Dogon culture, such as the domestic architecture (Plate IIIa) and the clothing (Plate IV), which remind us of their proximity to the Niger bend as well as to those long-established Islamic centres of Mopti and Timbuctu.1

I draw attention to the content of these oral texts for two reasons.

1. The importance of Islam in the area was brought home to me recently when I had the privilege of seeing the excellent film which Germaine Dieterlen and Jean Rouch have made of the 1969 performance of the Dogon sigi ceremony. The final shot shows the mosque in the background and the serpent masks in the foreground.
Firstly, in dealing with any society in the Western Sudan, we have to think of the total context of social interaction; no tribe, state, or village can be treated as a cultural isolate, especially in magico-religious affairs. And an important part of this context of interaction, though clearly more important in Kano than in Konkombaland, has been the circulation of books, largely of Mediterranean origin, but also of local authorship. Here one needs to introduce a caveat. It does not follow that every mention of a High God, every manifestation of 'civilised' society, should be attributed to Islam and its works. Much of Islam, as Frankfort has insisted for ancient Egypt, comes from a wider base, a common source, which can be suggested only by assiduous comparison. But in every case we need to be aware of the possibility.

This first point leads to the second. The area in which the influence of Islam on non-Islamic, non-literate cultures is most immediately apparent is that of magico-religious activity. One example comes from Braimah's (1967) account of the Salaga civil war of 1892, written from the standpoint of that segment of the ruling group most directly involved in the rebellion. Muslims come into the picture on two main occasions. On one of these the Kabache chief, Isifa, goes to Salaga to consult the Imam and overhears his liege lord who has come there for a similar purpose, that is, to provide himself with destructive medicine (p. 17). The other time is when Isifa flies from Kpembe, the neighbouring 'king's town', and is about to raise the rebellion; through a Nanumba chief he is put in touch with Mallam Imoru of Miong in Dagomba, and it is the help of his magical powers that enables him to conquer the enemy (pp. 24 ff.). The only specific mention of books or writing is in connection with the use of the Qu’ran for swearing oaths.

One does not need to elaborate the point that, even for pagan cultures and for non-Muslim groups, Islam has a considerable magico-religious appeal and its practices are often incorporated in ritual activities of various kinds. Nadel noted the influence of Islam on a number of aspects of Nupe religion, including divination. Nupe is a Muslim state and we might well expect this fact to be reflected in its divinatory practices. But, even further south among the 'pagan' Yoruba, it is now generally thought that the famous Ifa divination was profoundly influenced by these Mediterranean methods. In commenting upon two recent studies of Ifa divination, Morton-Williams (1966: 407) writes: "The sixteen columns of the set of odù signs are identical with the signs used in a system of geomancy originating in antiquity in the Near East." The procedure survived to be acquired as a form of astronom]}
‘pagan’ Ashanti, ninety per cent of the early nineteenth-century collection of Arabic manuscripts that found its way to the Royal Library of Copenhagen was concerned with ‘magic’ (cf. Levtzion, 1966).

Why did such magic have such an appeal to Islamic and non-Islamic cultures alike? The orally transmitted religions of Africa are essentially eclectic in their approach to the supernatural; no written code tells them that this deity must be worshipped and not the other, that “thou shalt have no other God but me.” While they have a framework of religious concepts and beliefs, there is much scope for change, for new ideas, for new gods, for new cults. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the process of religious creation is rendered almost essential by the inability of existing shrines or medicines to live up to their promises about curing the sick, banishing witches and outlawing sin. The built-in obsolescence of such cults paves the way for a mobility in religious practice.1 Given this predisposition, the willingness to accept Islam rested on the following factors: firstly, the many points of contact between the religious frameworks, which have been well discussed by Lewis (1966: 66); secondly, the prestige of a ‘superior’ culture, whose representatives, being traders, had the goods one coveted; thirdly, the added value accorded to esoteric magic. In addition, the patent effectiveness of writing as a means of human communication made it an obvious candidate for use in intercourse between man and god; and the attainment of effective communication with supernatural powers lies at the centre of religious activity.

The problem for the non-literate cultures lay in the fact that Islam differed from other new cults in one significant particular; being a written and an excluding religion (the two epithets are, I suggest, almost synonymous), its practitioners were required to reject other approaches. First brought in as a supplement, it later emerged as a replacement. Such a situation clearly opened the way to total conversion, but it also put a premium on coexistence and even apostasy since those who were prepared to accept Allah were not necessarily ready

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1. I have discussed this view at greater length in other places, namely 1959, 1961, and in a forthcoming article.
to reject existing deities. Hence the process of conversion to Islam is not a matter simply of increasing the numbers and the communities of the faithful but of replacing those who have been drawn back to pagan practice.

The fact that writing had a pragmatic value in enabling Muslims to communicate at a distance, to record the passage of the years, to acquire the learning of past centuries and far-off places, was obvious to anyone; consequently magico-religious activity that made use of the same technique was thought to have similar advantages; divination by the book, literary magic, magical squares, phylacteries, and the whole paraphernalia of Mediterranean practice has a wide appeal which spreads far outside the boundaries of Islam. Even among the faithful, it is often one of its main attractions.

Of course, recourse to the 'magic of the book' was not the only benefit writing brought, even if it is what most impressed the pagan world. The change in the media of communication also altered the basic categories of time and space. Take time, for example. Here Islamic literacy introduces a fixed calendar, which sets aside the solar system and places its ceremonies on a lunar cycle. Typically non-literate societies adjust the two by a process of fudging; the harvest moon appears when the harvest is ripe. Only literate societies have to wrest the month away from the moon, or the year from the sun. The week provides another example. While literacy did not introduce this unit, which is an old-established West African institution, the seven-day week was probably based upon the planetary cycle that derives from Chaldean astronomy and provides the basis for many divinatory interpretations and symbolic constructs. Thirdly, literacy introduces the concept of the era, essentially a function of developments in astronomy and mathematics which were themselves dependent upon developments in the graphic arts and first introduced in Babylonia in 747 B.C. (cf. Goody, 1968, vol. 16: 31). Writing thus allows the development not only of history (cf. Goody and Watt, 1963: 321) but also its tool, chronology. Finally, literacy divides the day into periods no longer determined by diurnal activities; in oral societies, the time words cluster around the points where there is a shift from one mode of activity to another, as in the plethora of terms describing the coming of day, first-light, day-break, dawn, etc., words that are largely redundant in an industrialised and electrified society. But under Islamic literacy it is the religious act of prayer that now marks out the day into defined periods, to form divisions of a much more abstract character.

The same is true of space. Not necessarily writing itself, but the accompanying developments in graphic techniques encouraged a different attitude to space; by extending the possibilities of measuring,
numbering, recording and repeating observations, spatial relationships could be subjected to different kinds of treatment. In the Arabic world, the new treatment of space led to developments in geography.

However, works of the Arab geographers appear to have had little influence in the Western Sudan. It was the same with all the more empirical branches of Islamic knowledge, for reasons which I discuss later. But Islamic literacy at least permitted the recording of the itineraries such as those published by Dupuis in his account of the mission to Kumasi (1824), which were so valuable to the European scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged in building up a two-dimensional picture of the interior of Africa. These lists were mainly itineraries of trading voyages. But others existed that included the pilgrimage routes to Mecca; for, even among the mud-huts of the Gonja town of Salaga, the traveller Binger met men who had voyaged through the whole of the Middle East (1892: ii, 86).

Two points need stressing. The first concerns the role of writing in Islam. It is, I suggest, because Islam is a written religion that it can exercise the kind of pull upon the lives of individuals made manifest in the great pilgrimage; to make this journey, a man would give up seven years of a life that was considerably shorter than that of today. It is (and I hardly need to qualify such obviously speculative remarks by the phrase 'in my opinion') the fact that Islam is a written religion that makes and preserves its status as a universalistic creed and prevents it from disintegrating, not just into breakaway sects but into numberless 'local cults'. For the book persists, in whatever land or period Islam is found, as a permanent reference point—communication preserved as a material object and hence relatively immune from the transmuting power of the oral tradition, held only in memory, transmitted only in face-to-face situations. It immortalises Muhammad, or the myth of Muhammad, as it immortalises Christ, or the myth of Christ, so that the sufferings and victories of the Prophet (and consequently the places where these occurred) remain of continuing significance for their followers over time and over space.

The second point is that the influence writing had, directly or indirectly, upon the cultures of West Africa varied greatly within as well as between societies. It is this fact that enables us to observe some of the consequences of this form of literacy. In the state of Gonja, north of Ashanti, there were three main estates of the land: the rulers, the Muslims and the commoners, with slaves and strangers as additional groups. The activities and interests of the three main groups coincided at various points but at others they markedly diverged.

In recent times members of the three major estates are not greatly differentiated in terms of occupation, anyhow at the village level; most
men are farmers, whatever else they do. Before 1900 the differentiation was greater, since chiefs were more involved in ruling and raiding, while Muslims were more involved in trade and magic. The commoners, too, include warriors (mbong) and magicians (e.g. bilijipo), but their main activities were connected with the Earth and the bush, with farming, hunting and with local cults.

This internal differentiation is mirrored in their myths of origin as well as in their religious practices. But here I want to discuss differences in the space-time perspectives of the three groups, especially in the ways that these reflect the influence of literacy.

The commoners are mainly named groups ('tribes') of autochthones attached to a particular locality where they claimed to have lived before the Gonja state was established. They tend to speak local languages or dialects, to worship at local shrines and to practise local 'customs'. Though they marry across estate boundaries, they marry within divisional ones. Social space is for them largely bounded by their 'tribal' ties.

For the chiefs, social space is the state as a whole. Although the primary sphere of political action lies within their own division, they were nevertheless called upon by other divisions to assist in war or to give advice. While Gonja can hardly be said to have operated as a unified state in the immediately precolonial period, its divisions formed an interlocking network of political relations which depended upon acceptance of a common myth and upon communication through a common culture and a common language. The orientation of its chiefs was nationwide, from the standpoint of language, marriage and other communicative acts. Their frame of action included the neighbouring divisions competing for royal office and the neighbouring states competing in armed conflict. In their concepts of space, Gonja was visualised as surrounded by a network of states, friendly as well as hostile, between which lay interstitial areas of acephalous peoples who were raided for human booty.

For the Muslims, spatial relationships were yet more extended, partly for religious reasons connected with the pilgrimage, partly because their sphere was trade not war, and partly because of their access to 'preserved communication' with its constant references to distant places. Unlike the stranger Muslims, the local Muslim estate had become largely identified with the state. Nevertheless it tended to think more in terms of lines of communication than of opposition.

1. The attendance of the chiefs of Tuluwe at Kpembe in August 1894 is evidence of the latter (Braimah and Goody, 1967: 132); the events leading up to the Kong war and the invasion of Samory's forces are examples of the former.
2. Wa, Dagomba, Nanumba, Ashanti, Banda and Bouna.
between local units. This was (and still is) especially true of some of the Dyula groups who held such an important role in the transmission of learning in the Western Sudan (Wilks, 1968). Inevitably these men tended to think not only in terms of the individual states within which they lived but of the West African community of Islam as a whole, a fact which made them more aware of events in other parts of the region and in the Mediterranean world than their non-literate neighbours. They tended to see the states in relation to the Islamic communities within them and to judge their rulers according to their allegiance to the faith (and the security they afforded to long-distance trade).

The differences in the conception and measurement of time are equally marked. As agriculturalists, the commoners are largely tied to the farming year; their festivals are mainly determined by the passage of seasons; their rural markets (such as they are) by six-day (and sometimes five-day) cycles. They are of course aware of the royal ceremonies, which are religious in origin and political in character, and are firmly set within the Islamic calendar; but their main mode of time-keeping is by ‘natural’ cycles. Genealogically their reckoning is short; they do not have the extensive lineages of many acephalous societies in the area, for many of the main functions of these groups are taken over by chiefly government. Their history is local legend and their chronology a matter of counting summers.

The chiefly estate operates two calendrical systems, at least as far as its major festivals are concerned. The great public ceremonies of the political year are the traditional Islamic occasions that celebrate turning points in the life of the Prophet; these are based upon the lunar cycle of twelve moons. But there is another series of ceremonies connected with New Yams and with homicide medicine (gbanda’u) which is set within the solar or seasonal cycle; the same is true of rites connected with many of the Earth and other local shrines. The observation of a double set of festivals, each with their different calculus, corresponds to the ideological position of the chiefly estate, ruling over both Muslims and ‘pagan’ peoples, and responsible for practising the rites of both.

History for the chiefs is essentially dynastic history, manipulated to serve present ends. Genealogies themselves, as reference systems for social interaction, are relatively shallow, though more extensive than those of the commoners, especially in their lateral extension. Owing partly to the rotational system of succession, whereby office jumps from dynastic segment to dynastic segment, the memory of regnal lists is very limited and appeal has constantly to be made to the written lists kept by the divisional Muslims; there are no oral remembrancers, though certain divisional drummers do record enigmatic, proverbial songs which can indicate the relative seniority of
chiefs; and elsewhere the gravestones of chiefs provide their own more solid mnemonic, though in the absence of inscription, the time-depth of the record is again limited. The chronology they keep takes the form of the lengths of reign, but these recollections are rarely accurate beyond living memory. Unlike Ashanti, where the formal recitation of lineage legend plays an important part, the Gonja rulers give little attention to the oral conservation of the more concrete aspects of their past glories; all distant achievements tend to cluster around the name of the conquering hero, Ndewura Jakpa, about whom legends exist in bewildering multiplicity.

If the commoners conceptualise agricultural time, the rulers dynastic time, then the Muslims operate a system of religious time such as I have already described, tied to the life-cycle of the Prophet. Because their religion is literate, their conceptualisation can be more ‘abstract’, more divorced from other aspects of ‘reality’ than the alternative systems found within the same society.

As for their history, literate scribes occasionally make precise records (as they did in the eighteenth century Gonja chronicle; cf. Goody, 1954), using an objective system of annual dating. The content of such history includes not only local events but other significant occurrences in the Islamic world. The seven-day week is brought in from outside and merges with a local six-day week, though this conjunction does not produce the complex forty-two-day cycle of their southern neighbours, the Ashanti.

The effects of literacy are important in differentiating the major estates of Gonja. But even the non-literate groups are influenced by the existence of literates in their midst. It should also be remembered that the literate estate is itself highly differentiated in terms of literate accomplishments. Indeed so steep is the pyramid of learning and so narrow the base that I have characterised the situation as one of “restricted literacy”. While the reasons for this situation, and the results in terms of a restriction of the real possibilities latent within this great technological innovation, are important, they are somewhat tangential to my present theme. Here I have tried to map out some of the effects that the existence of Islamic literacy had on oral cultures and groups in West Africa, firstly by examining examples of their recorded literature, and secondly by looking at the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim groups within the framework of a single state.

I would conclude by suggesting that the initial appeal of Islam to outsiders was frequently magical (or magico-religious), and that writing was at first valued more for its role in superhuman than in human communication. This appeal inevitably influenced the development of Islam in West Africa, since its practitioners had to meet
the demands of non-Muslims as well as Muslims. This role in relation to the pagan community paved the way for the conversion of non-Islamic elements; but it also affected, in a contrary direction, the content of Islamic practice and belief, and hence contributed to its losses as well as to its gains.

This situation seems partly responsible for the restricted uses of writing in the Western Sudan, since it aggravated the limiting effects which were already inherent in religious literacy, whether of the Islamic, Christian or Hindu variety.

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