

# Chapter 9

## Islamic Education and Islamic Affinities in Precolonial West Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Evidence shows that in pre-colonial West Africa, Islamic education played a significant role following conversion of West Africans to Islam because of its impact on all spheres of life. With the establishment of theocratic states and communities, Islamic learning centers emerged to spread Islamic education and consolidate the Islamic way of life in West Africa. In this vast region where people of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds lived and interacted for trade and commerce, Islamic education fostered Islamic affinities constructed on the universalism of Islam and Islamic injunction to form Muslim brotherhood and create the Ummah.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, research on Islam in pre-colonial West Africa has yielded ground-breaking findings. Now, there is robust evidence that demonstrates that pre-colonial West Africa was an important Islamic epicentre (Levtzion, 2000a; Levtzion, 2000b; Insoll, 1996; Trimmingham, 1980). The existing body of academic and non-academic research shows that the establishment of Islamic theocracies and communities and world-class learning centres made pre-colonial West Africa attractive to Muslims from West Africa and beyond. With the spread of Islam, people of different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds lived and interacted for trade

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and business as well as for Islamic education and religious pursuit in West Africa. The introduction of Islamic education in West Africa, on the one hand, and the subsequent development of *Ajami*, on the other hand, facilitated Islamic affinities among Muslims in the region. These Islamic affinities were mainly constructed on Islamic teachings such as the universalism of the Qur'anic message and the Qur'anic injunction to form brotherhood with Muslims and forge an Islamic *Ummah* or community of Muslims across the world. This article is about the ways in which Islamic education fostered Islamic affinities among African Muslims in precolonial West Africa. By Islamic affinity, I refer to the emotional, mystical, spiritual, and social relationship of affiliation, conviviality, and co-existence fostered by Islamic education for a shared membership to Islam. To address the ways in which Islamic education fostered Islamic affinities in pre-colonial Africa, the article is divided into four sections: In the first section, I provide the ethnic and linguistic context of West Africa in the precolonial situation. In the second section, I describe the place of Islam in the region. In the third, I analyse the ways in which Islamic education and, to certain extent, *Ajami* laid the foundations for Islamic affinities by providing the (basic) Islamic education that is essential for a person to identify and practice as a Muslim and to be able to forge affinities. In the fourth and last section, I discuss the ways in which Islamic education fostered Islamic affinities in West Africa.

## **The West African Context**

Scholars of the history of Islam in Africa have often divided the continent into zones based on the ethno-cultural characteristics of the population, the geographic features of the region and the process of the penetration and spread of Islam in Africa. For example, in their studies of the history of Islam in Africa, Trimingham (1980) divided the continent into six zones while Insoll (1996) offered seven zones. For this article, I use West Africa to loosely refer to the current regional space that includes most country-members of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS)<sup>1</sup> (excluding Cabo Verde) and non-member countries such as Mauritania, Chad, and Cameroon. In the precolonial context, this vast region, with wide geographical contrasts and a heterogeneous landscape (forests, deserts, and savannahs), was divided into secular and theocratic states and communities (e.g.: kingdoms, empires, sultanates, and caliphates). Of these, the best known pre-colonial West African states were the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire, the Songhay Empire, the Sokoto Caliphate, and the Kingdom of Dahomey. The arrival and the settlement of Arab and Berber traders and Islamic scholars in West Africa significantly contributed to the racial, cultural, linguistic and religious diversities of the region. As highlighted by Rebstock, it is indeed trade and religious motivations that brought Arabs and Berbers to the region:

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