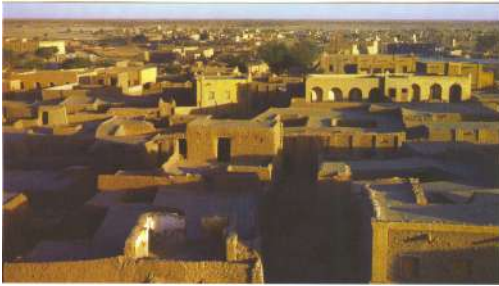


ARCHITECTURAL STYLES



The influence of Islam brought new styles of architecture to West Africa. People designed mosques for worship. They also created a new design for homes. Traditionally, West Africans had built small shrines to the forces of nature. As they converted to Islam, they began to build mosques. The materials that were most available in the savanna were mud and wood. Using these materials, West Africans built mosques that blended Islamic architectural styles with their own traditional religious art. For example, the minaret (tower) of one mosque was designed to look like the symbol of a Songhai ancestor.

After his pilgrimage to Makkah, the Mali ruler Mansa Musa wanted to build more mosques. He convinced al-Saheli, an architect from Spain, to return to Mali with him. Al-Saheli built several structures in Mali. One of them is the most famous mosque in West Africa, Djingareyber. Located in Timbuktu, Djingareyber was built out of limestone and earth mixed with straw and wood. The walls of the mosque have beams projecting out of them. Workers used the beams as scaffolding when the building needed to be repaired.

Al-Saheli also introduced a new design for houses. Most traditional houses in West Africa were round with a cone-shaped, thatched roof. Al-Saheli built rectangular houses out of brick and with flat roofs. The outside walls were very plain and had no windows. Only a single wooden door decorated with a geometric design interrupted the rows of bricks. Al-Saheli introduced another feature to houses that made life easier during the rainy season. To help prevent damage from rainwater, he built clay drain pipes.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES



As Islam spread in West Africa, people adopted new religious practices and ethical values. African Muslims learned Islam's Five Pillars of Faith. They prayed in Arabic, fasted, worshiped in mosques, went on pilgrimages, and gave alms. They were taught to regard all Muslims as part of a single community.

West Africans also began to celebrate Muslim religious festivals.

The festival of Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha commemorates a key event in the story of the prophet Abraham. As a test of faith, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. God spared the boy after Abraham proved his faith by being willing to offer his son to God.

Alongside these new customs, West Africans kept some of their old religious practices. Muslim leaders allowed them to continue religious traditions as long as they did not contradict the Five Pillars of Faith. So, for example, West African

Muslims continued to show respect for the spirits of dead ancestors. They kept their belief in spirits who could help those who prayed to them or made sacrifices to them. They used amulets, or charms, that they believed helped people or protected them from harm.

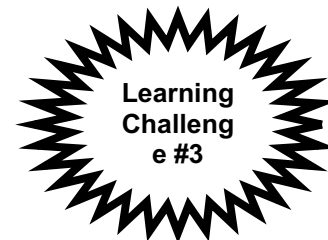
Ibn Battuta, an Arab who traveled to Mali in the 14th century. Battuta was upset by some local customs. For instance, women, including the daughters of rulers, went unclothed in public. Battuta also saw Muslims throwing dust over their heads when the king approached. These customs upset him because they went against the teachings of Islam.

With the introduction of Islam, West Africans began praying five times a day

Yet Battuta was also impressed by the devotion of West Africans to Islam. He wrote, "Anyone who is late at the mosque will find nowhere to pray, the crowd is so great. They zealously learn the Qur'an by heart. Those children who are neglectful in this are put in chains until they have memorized the Qur'an."

EDUCATION

Muslims greatly value learning. In West Africa, Muslims encouraged people to become educated. They built many schools and centers of learning.



One key center was the trading city of Timbuktu, on the Niger River. Under Mali and Songhai rule, Timbuktu became famous for its community of Islamic scholars. It remained an important center of learning until Songhai was conquered by Morocco in the late 1500s.

Several universities were built in Timbuktu. The most famous was the University of Sankore. It became one of the world's great universities.

Sankore was made up of several small, independent schools. Each school was run by an imam, or scholar. The imams at Sankore were respected throughout the Islamic world.

Students at Sankore studied under a single imam. The basic course of learning included the Qur'an, Islamic studies, law, and literature. After mastering these subjects, students could go on to study a particular field. Many kinds of courses were available. Students could learn medicine and surgery. They could study astronomy, mathematics, physics, or chemistry. Or they could take up philosophy, geography, art, or history.

The highest degree at Sankore required about 10 years of study. During graduation, students wore a cloth headdress called a turban. The turban was a symbol of divine light, wisdom, knowledge, and excellent moral character. When travelers and traders passed through Timbuktu, they were encouraged to study at one of the universities. Trade associations also set up their own colleges. Students in these colleges learned about the profession of trading in addition to Islam.

Muslims also set up schools to educate children in the Qur'an. Timbuktu had 150 or more Qur'anic schools where children learned to read and interpret Islam's holy book. With their love of education, Muslims treasured books. Muslims did not have printing presses, so books had to be copied by hand. Mosques and universities in West Africa built up large libraries of these precious volumes. Some individuals also created sizable collections. One Islamic scholar's private library contained 700 volumes. Many of his books were among the rarest in the world.

LANGUAGE



In West Africa, Arabic became the language of religion, learning, commerce, and government. West Africans continued to use their native languages in everyday speech.

For Muslims, Arabic was the language of religion. The Qur'an, of course, was written in Arabic. All Muslims were expected to read the Qur'an and memorize parts of it. As West Africans converted to Islam, more and more of them learned Arabic.

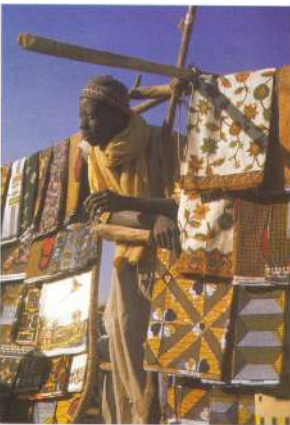
Arabic also became the language of learning. The scholars who came to West Africa were mainly Arabic-speaking Muslims. Some of their students became scholars themselves. Like their teachers, they wrote in Arabic.

The Arabic language in which the Qur'an is written, became the language of learning, government, and trade.

Scholars used Arabic to write about the history and culture of West Africa. They wrote about a wide variety of topics. They described how people used animals, plants, and minerals to cure diseases. They discussed ethical behavior for business and government. They told how to use the stars to determine the seasons. They recorded the history of Songhai. They also wrote about Islamic law. These writings are an invaluable source of knowledge about West Africa.

Finally, Arabic became the language of trade and government. Arabic allowed West African traders who spoke different languages to communicate more easily. Arabic also allowed rulers to keep records and to write to rulers in other countries.

DECORATIVE ARTS



Muslims used calligraphy to decorate objects with words or verses from the Qur'an. West Africans adopted this practice. They began using the Arabic word for God to decorate costumes, fans, and even weapons. They also wrote verses from the Qur'an in amulets.

Geometric patterns were an important element in Islamic art. Recall that Muslims used these patterns rather than drawing pictures of animals or people. Geometric designs were popular in traditional West African art as well. West Africans used them to decorate textiles for clothing and everyday objects such as stools and ceramic containers. The arrival of Islam reinforced this practice.

Muslims also influenced the way people dressed in West Africa. Arab Muslims commonly wore an Arabic robe as an outer layer of clothing. An Arabic robe has wide, long sleeves and a long skirt. Muslims used writing to identify and decorate their robes. West Africans adopted the Arabic robe. Like Arabs, they still wear it today.



Islam reinforced the West African tradition of using geometric designs in decorations.

