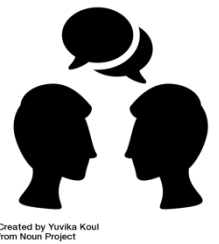




# THE DEBATE: ALMORAVIDS, ISLAM AND ANCIENT GHANA

The publication of the *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (CUP, Cambridge, 1981), edited and translated by Nehemiah Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, made available to historical study the principal Arabic sources for the history of the Almoravids and Ancient Ghana in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Humphrey Fisher and David Conrad promptly used this material to challenge the prevailing view that the Almoravids conquered Ghana in 1076 and forcibly converted its inhabitants to Islam.



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The conquest theory had been the prevailing view in the 1950s and through the 1960s and 70s. It was presented uncritically by J. S. Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (OUP, Oxford, 1962), and followed by Adu Boahen, *Topics in West African History* (Longman, London, 1966). It was subsequently accepted by Nehemiah Levtzion in what became the standard account, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (Methuen, London, 1973).

Fisher and Conrad's alternative thesis is complex in detail, although a useful summary appears in P. B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam* (Edward Arnold, London, 1982).

Fisher and Conrad felt that the prevalent conquest interpretation placed too much emphasis upon conflict and conquest and not enough on co-operation and interdependence. The Almoravid conquest theory was altogether too simple, and too reliant upon the fourteenth-century source of Ibn Khaldun, a Tunisian Berber intellectual who wrote in the time of the Mali empire. In Fisher's opinion Ibn Khaldun, though excellent upon Mali, was somewhat vague on the details of Ghana's history, and yet he was to become the principal source for the Almoravid 'conquest' of Ghana in 1076. As Fisher points out in his review of the *Corpus* (H. J. Fisher, 'Early Arabic Sources and the Almoravid Conquest of Ghana', *Journal of African History*, Vol 23 (1982), pp 549-60), Ibn Khaldun was writing 300 years after the event, whereas, in contrast, none of the near-contemporary Arabic sources mention an Islamic conquest and conversion – something that they would surely have known of, and boasted of, had it happened.

The main source upon which Ibn Khaldun and later historians built the conquest theory was a short passage written by an Arabic geographer, al-Zuhri, in about 1133 CE:

“ In former times the people of this country professed paganism (*kufir*) until the year 469 AH [1076-7 CE] when Yahya b. Abi Bakr the *amir* of Masufa **made his appearance**. They turned Muslim in the days of Lamtuna [the Almoravids] and became good Muslims. ” (Corpus, p9)

In other translations of al-Zuhri ‘**made his appearance**’ is translated as ‘**came forth**’; but, as Fisher points out, in neither version need this mean ‘**conquered**’. Furthermore, those who interpret this as firm evidence of conquest and forced conversion in 1076 assume that the Yahya referred to is the son of the Almoravid leader Abu Bakr. But Abu Bakr’s son was not a prominent person, nor was he the *amir* of Masufa. On the other hand, some years later, there was a prominent Abu Yahya al-Massufi who ‘**came forth**’ out of the desert to Sijilmasa after a brief period of personal disgrace and was appointed governor of Granada in 1107-8. This, argue Fisher and Conrad, is far more likely to be the person and event referred to and it is merely the date (1076) that al-Zuhri got wrong. In other words, al-Zuhri is saying that the Ghanaians converted to Islam ‘at the time of’ this major event, the coming forth of al-Massufi to Sijilmasa. Indeed, a little later al-Zuhri referred to the Muslim people of Ghana turning to the Almoravids for military help against troublesome neighbours. This did not sound like the relationship between conqueror and conquered.

Fisher and Conrad (D. Conrad and H. Fisher, ‘The conquest that never was: Ghana and the Almoravids’, *History in Africa*, vols 9 and 10 (1982/83)) presented a fascinating forensic dissection of documents, and Fisher’s conclusion seems now to have become the accepted interpretation:

“ ... we are left with this scenario: the gradual strengthening of Islam in the western Sudan, highlighted by the peaceful conversion of Ghana probably early in the twelfth century, a conversion which facilitated co-operative action, sometimes military, of black Ghanaian Muslims and Almoravids, with the former predominant. ”