

## FOLKTALE DIFFUSION ACROSS THE SAHARA AND AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE: A NOTE

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Scholarship in African and Afro-American folklore continually confronts a stubborn opposition sponsored by adherents of Finnish diffusionist theories of whom the most impressive is Stith Thompson, the author of the tale type and motif indexes. Thompson's opinion counters suggestions of independent invention for folktales found similar to European tales in African collections. He asserts that their presence represents a "...taking over of tales from Europe" which "has occurred only during the last two or three centuries with the gradual penetration of the Western powers into Africa."<sup>1</sup> However, in the history of so ancient a continent as Africa, there has been a long record of contact with other peoples and cultures. Thompson was not unaware of the possibility of a folktale exchange which could have lasted more than 1000 years between Europe and Africa, but he instead denied the prospect outright.

The Sahara Desert has always served as a great dividing line for the cultures of the African continent. North of the desert, from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean, the contact with European and Moslem culture has been intimate and continuous.<sup>2</sup>

Many recent studies in African history have proven Thompson guilty of erroneous suppositions when regarding the Sahara as a "great dividing line." G. T. Bovill in The Golden Trade of the Moors sought to correct the popular misconception of the great desert to which Thompson fell prey:

Yet in fact the Sahara has never been a barrier, never a sterile wilderness devoid of life. From the dawn of history men have made their homes in the desert, for centuries there has been a commerce of a kind between those who dwell on either side of the desert, in Barbary and the Sudan.<sup>3</sup>

Bovill further demonstrates how the cultural contact between West and North Africa was also extended to Europe chiefly by means of a gold trade.

Gold always found its way across the desert. The discoveries of gold in excavations of Punic cemeteries has shown us that the ancient Carthaginians must have had contact with the mines across the Sahara.<sup>4</sup> The great wealth of North Africa, no doubt encouraged the Romans to conquer Carthage but according to Pliny "the fine imposed by Rome on Carthage was payable in silver instead of gold, not because of the scarcity of gold in Carthage, but in the world."<sup>5</sup> The Romans seemingly did not want to endanger their silver-based economy by introducing the abundant Carthaginian gold as a medium of exchange.

The most likely source of the wealth of Carthage was the area in West Africa known as Wangara. Here at the eastern base of the Futa Jallon Mountains nuggets and dust were extracted from alluvial gravels. The

gold was traded north to the kingdom of Ghana which had two major cities at the edge of the Sahara, Audaghost and Walata. Caravans from these two trading centers were accompanied by slaves who ended their days as domestic servants, concubines, laborers and soldiers on the Maghrib.<sup>7</sup> Bovill claims that this trade was not sporadic and isolated:

From the Nile valley in the east to the Atlantic in the west there was trafficking in gold with the interior of Africa at all times in recorded history. Slaves and gold... the life blood of the trade of the Maghrib with the Sudan.<sup>8</sup>

When the influence of the Roman Empire in North Africa declines, the forces of Islam arrived. The Arabs, who had begun their politico-religious campaign in Egypt in 642, had taken the whole of North Africa by 678. Once they were firmly established in the North, the Arabs moved quickly across the Sahara. As early as 700 a reference to Ghana as "a land of gold" appeared in the notes of an Arab traveler. By the beginning of the eighth century, Muslim merchants from the Mediterranean coastlands traveled for months to reach the great commercial centers of the south where gold and slaves were to be bought. Some idea of the volume of the traffic may be gained from a remark of the Arab traveler Ibn Hawkal. In the middle of the tenth century, he tells us that he saw a check for 42,000 dinars (gold pieces) acknowledging a debt of a trader resident at Audaghost to a merchant from Sijilmasa in southern Morocco.<sup>9</sup>

The Arabs possessed a great motivation for travel according to Bovill.

No branch to learning was more enriched by Muslim scholarship than geography. Inspired by the works of Ptolemy, which the Christian churches had translated in Arabic, the Arabs were quick to develop an interest in foreign lands which the vast extent and cosmopolitan character of the Muslim world stimulated.<sup>10</sup>

Further incentive for travel lay within the tenants of the Islamic faith in that the Hadj or pilgrimate to Mecca required extensive journeys on the part of many believers. But by far the greatest stimulus for Arabic travel was trade and commerce. Traders were taken across the Sahara and into Europe on many business enterprises. The extent of their journeys is sufficiently well illustrated by the finding of Islamic coins on the shores of the Baltic and a note of an Arab geographer that at one of the markets where they were trading for furs, the night was only an hour long.<sup>11</sup> Traveling extensively through both Africa and Europe, Arabs were thus agents of cultural exchange as they were highly mobile but intimately involved with all the peoples that they met.

The evidence showing the interaction of Arabs and Europeans is impressive. In the industrial arts during the fifteenth century, Venice had adopted a noticeable Arabic character as Oriental bookbinding was common and the inlaying of brass with gold and silver (hitherto an Arabic art) was performed with expertise.<sup>12</sup> Arabic scholarship was also widely appreciated throughout Europe. Roger Bacon was known to have quoted the works of a Moroccan physician named Rhazas (865-926), whose most important work, al-Hawi, appeared in its fifth edition in Venice in 1542.<sup>13</sup> Previously in the twelfth century a Spanish Arab named al-Idrisi was enlisted in the service of Roger II, the Norman

king of Sicily.<sup>14</sup> A similar example is Leo Africanus, a Moor who was adopted by the court of Pope Leo X. With papal patronage, he wrote an extensive description of African cities south of the Sahara. And finally in the gold trade, glass beads manufactured in Venice and Genoa were considered precious by the Negroes of the Sudan and they paid generous amounts of gold for them.

The absence of any extensive gold deposits in Europe had always encouraged European interest in African gold. This interest was increased during a gold shortage in Europe during the eleventh century when all gold specie disappeared due to debts incurred by an unfavorable balance of payments to the Far East. The lack of gold caused an increase in the mining activities and enhanced the prestige of North African sultans who were the major middlemen in the conduct of the gold trade as they controlled the access to Sahara trade route. Basil Davidson records the importance of African gold to Europe:

And so it came that the gold used in North Africa and Europe was largely supplied, century after century, by the producers of West Africa. Even kings in England had to buy West African gold before they could order their craftsmen to make coins in this price of metals. It was on this steady demand for gold that the states and empires of the Western Sudan founded their prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

Europeans did not rely solely upon Arabs to bring gold to them. They attempted several times to open their own trans-Saharan trade routes as the reports of a Genoese trader reveal. He got as far as Tuat, roughly half way across the desert, before contact with him was lost.<sup>16</sup>

The huge European demand for gold in the fourteenth century caused the discovery of additional gold fields. Moslem Dyula traders moved south from Wangara to Bono which is located in modern Ghana. The Dyula traders conducted their commerce from a main base at Begho on the northern outskirts of the Akan forests where the gold was mined. From Begho the main trading route went north-westward through Dyula towns and little states such as Kong and Bobo-Dioulasso and thence to Jenne and Timbuktu, where caravans were organized to cross the Sahara. Another main route went north-eastward from Begho to Kano and the rest of Hausaland but the bulk of the trade in this direction was conducted more in kola nuts than in gold. The trade routes through the north were so frequently traveled that little attention was given to the southern coast where European ships had begun in 1471. An early Dutch officer's report in 1619 suggests the importance of the northern trade to the Ashanti people. He mentioned that at that time no gold came down to the coast which was a journey of less than 200 miles.<sup>18</sup>

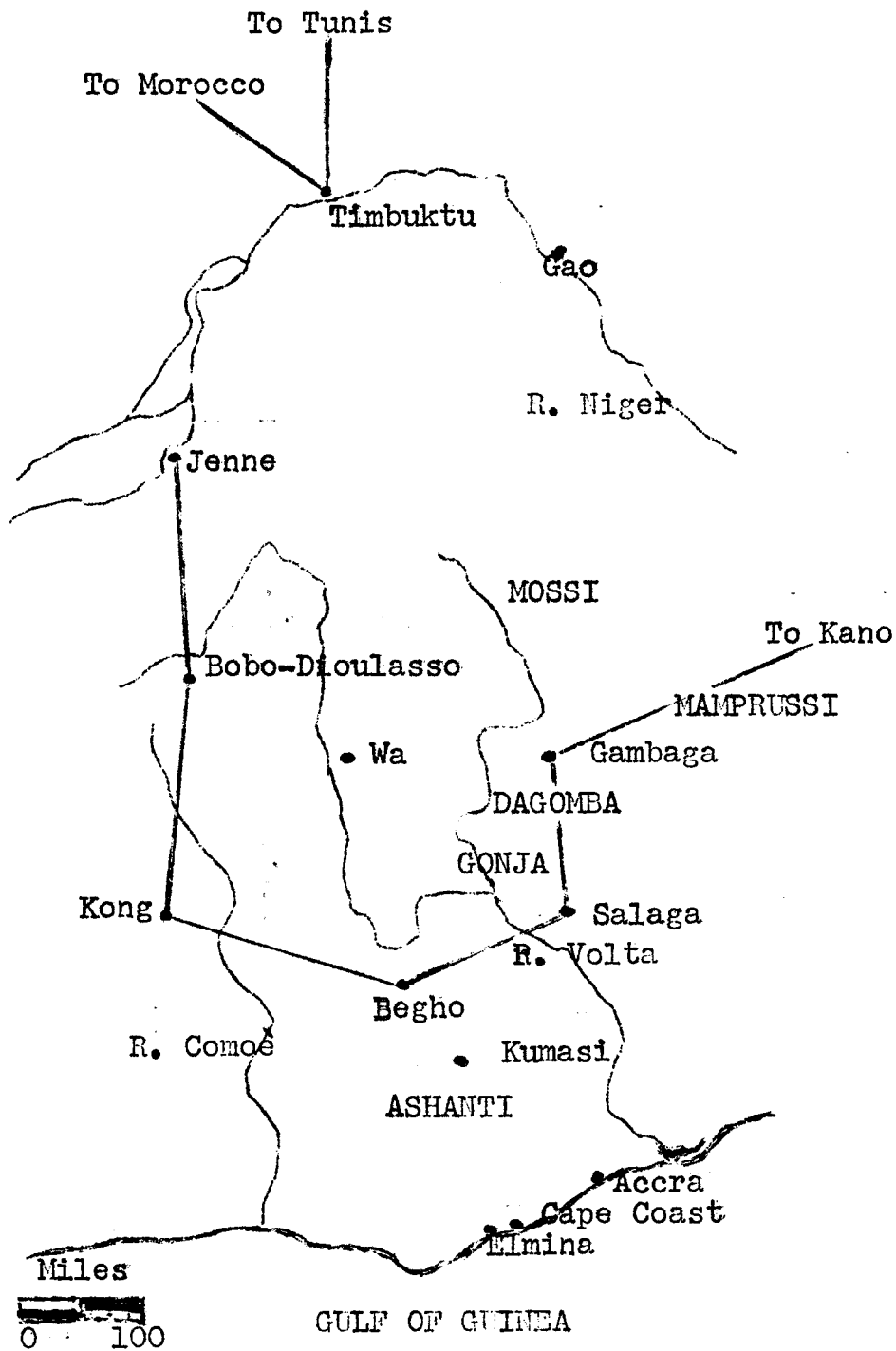
The Moslems in West Africa were no less involved with the Negroes than they were with the Europeans. The merchants who traded at Begho and resided in the Islamic states of the Sudan shared much with the indigenous peoples such that the Islamic faith in those places incorporated many pagan practices. The first contact between the gold miners and the traders was accomplished by "dumb barter," but as commerce continued there was no doubt an increase in the amount and kinds of intercourse between Moslems and pagans.

The Ashanti made Kumasi their capital city partly because it was close to Begho and later they conquered the Moslem states of Gonja, Dagomba, and Mamprussi to secure a rich annual tribute. Great numbers of Moslems were brought under Ashanti control by military expansion, but it seems that Ashanti not only desired the benefit of Muslim wealth but required the services of the scholars and holy men as well. Moslem communities were fostered within the Ashanti empire at Kumasi and they were given positions of authority and responsibility, such as the keeping of accounts for the treasury.<sup>19</sup> In the capital, Muhammad-al-Ghamba secured the good will of the king, Osei Tutu Kwame, by making a prayer for the success of the Ashanti armies then about to invade Fante. Henceforth, he enjoyed the king's patronage and was subsequently endowed a school in Kumasi, where he presided over 70 pupils.<sup>20</sup> The king also sent some Ashanti boys to this school which taught only the basic tenants of Islam because the Moslems were considered good and holy men. Islamic influence within Ashanti did not decline until 1819 when Muhammad-al-Ghamba defected during a battle in which he was leading troops against the Moslem states of Kong and Ghobgho. He was chastised for his treason but his life was spared because he was a man of learning.<sup>21</sup>

It must be remembered that the Islamic community was widespread in Africa, stretching the whole length and breadth of the area in which the trans-Saharan trade was conducted. There was a great Islamic center in Koumbi Saleh, the capital of ancient Ghana, which is described as a divided city with the Moslem sector having twelve mosques.<sup>22</sup> Later the empire of Mali emerged and its third king, Mansa Musa, made a hadj to Mecca and returned with many scholars, artisans, and holy men. Under Musa's patronage the cities of Gao, Jenne, and especially Timbuktu became great Moslem centers. As Mali gave way to Songhai, the strength of Islam did not decline for long as Muhammad Askia, a usurper to the throne, sought to legitimize his power by acquiring the support of Moslem scholars. He also made a hadj and constructed many universities, schools, and mosques. Finally with the Moroccan invasion of Songhai, the Hausa states of northern Nigeria rose to prominence. Here again Moslem traders did their business, while intermittently with pagan gods, Allah was also praised. The importance of these Sudanic states for both West African and Islamic cultures is great. From the eleventh century, they provided a much closer contact across the Sahara between the Arab and Negro worlds, and encouraged the growth of Muslim learning and scientific interests.<sup>23</sup> Moslems thus engaged in some kind of contact with peoples throughout West Africa.

Regarding the Indo-European folktales which have been found in Africa, it is apparent they may have been introduced into that continent much earlier than Thompson supposed -- if indeed they were introduced at all. If trade and commerce were carried on over so great a distance for such an extended period (certainly at least 1000 years), then some cultural exchange across the Sahara should also be expected. In the interaction between European and West African cultures via the Moslems, one might assume that African culture would somehow be altered before it reached the European continent. But through the medium of a curious, well traveled, and literate people like the Moslems, a dependable reportage was probably given. Hence, the quality of the knowledge of Africa gained by medieval and Renaissance Europeans was probably quite excellent.

THE NORTHERN ROUTE OF THE GOLD TRADE



In the same way that folktales may have been transmitted to Africa by Moslem traders, so might they have been transferred from Africa to Europe. It is known that the Europeans widely popularized the Arabic The Thousand and One Nights even though those stories were then considered of little import by the Arabs. It is quite possible that in their desire for new stories and exotic entertainment, as exemplified by their enthusiasm for Arabic stories, Europeans also sought and found African folktales as well. This situation certainly appears to be a very plausible explanation once the Sahara Desert is not considered a geographical and cultural barrier.

Thompson attempts to explain the presence of European stories in African and Afro-American folktale repertoires by suggesting an acquisition of tales during the periods of the Atlantic slave trade and the expansion of colonial powers.<sup>24</sup> Accepting his hypothesis, folklorists are compelled to accept a situation in which slavers told stories to their slaves. This circumstance provides a basis for a bizarre array of suppositions regarding the nature and the conduct of slavery and colonization, some of which border on the ridiculous and racist. Could Negroes, crowded into the darkened holds of disease-infested ships have been told stories by sailors? Is it possible that in a baracoon in the West Indies a jailer told a slave, who was awaiting sale, a version of Cinderella? Might plantation owners have gathered their work weary slaves about them at night and regaled them with the story of Jack and the Beanstalk? Certainly, the possibility for these situations is very remote as studies of the Atlantic slave trade reveal that during this era some of the most brutal and heinous crimes against humanity were committed. Likewise Michael Crowder has shown that the real motives of the colonial powers were not the altruistic ones that were proclaimed and that much was done by Western nations to retard the progress of West African people. Consequently, the recent three hundred years in which Thompson suggests a takeover of folklore was filled with conditions of serious stress and hardship for both Old and New World Negroes. This period is generally a time of polarization of Negro cultures and it is not likely that the White man's culture was incorporated with their own until the nineteenth century. By insisting that slavery and colonial exploitation generated an African appreciation of the novelty of European folktales, Thompson verges close to stating what Melville Herskovits called the fourth myth of the Negro past:

Even grantin enough Negroes of a given tribe had the opportunity to live together, and that they had the will and ability to continue their customary modes of behavior, the cultures of Adrica were so savage and relatively so low in the scale of human civilization that the apparent superiority of European customs as observed in the behavior of their masters, would have caused and actually did cause them to give up such aboriginal traditions as they may have otherwise desired to preserve.<sup>25</sup>

The fifteen tale types found in Africa which Thompson asserts are of Indo-European origin, may well be.<sup>26</sup> However, it should be now apparent that if these tales are not independent inventions, they at least arrived at the same time when they were first known in Europe. The medium of their diffusion to Africa was the trade across the Sahara which was conducted by Moslem traders. As early as 1917, W.H. Barker suggested that this manner of transmission of tales was a plausible explanation for the

marked similarities of European and Gold Coast folklores:

What connexion can there be, for example, between the negro and the Serb? Yet they have a story remarkably similar... How can these two peoples have a story with so many features in common? Is it possible that the Turk and the Moor have provided links?<sup>27</sup>

The "links" provided by the Moslems are not merely possible, but indeed they did occur. Apparently, ancient stories were dispersed throughout the entire Old World, including Africa. These tales became entrenched as part of an African tradition and remained so until much later when the tradition was reinforced by an established European presence in the twentieth century. Even in the New World these African (or Indo-European) stories remained coherent and still constitute a major portion Afro-American folklore. The folktales which are thought to be a contribution of colonial masters to Black culture are retentions of tales which were either invented in Africa or crossed the Sahara long ago.

#### NOTES

1. Stith Thompson, The Folktale, New York, 1951. p. 285.
2. Ibid., 284.
3. G.T. Bovill, The Golden Trade of the Moors, London, 1968. p. 7.
4. A.A. Kwapong, Carthage, Greece, and Rome in R. Oliver (ed.), The Dawn of African History, London, 1968. p. 18.
5. Bovill, op. cit., p. 23.
6. Ibid., p. 57.
7. Ibid., p. xi.
8. Ibid., p. 22.
9. Bernard Lewis, The Invading Crescent in R. Oliver, op. cit., p. 34.
10. Bovill, op. cit., p. 60.
11. Ibid., p. 61.
12. Philip K. Hitti, The Arabs, New York, 1968. p. 162.
13. Ibid., pp. 109-110.
14. Bovill, op. cit., p. 62.
15. Basil Davidson, The Growth of African Civilization: A History of West Africa 1000-1800, London, 1966. p. 42.

16. Bovill, op. cit., p. 110.
17. Davidson, op. cit., p. 114.
18. Ivor Wilks, The Northern Factor in Ashanti History, University of Ghana, 1961. p. 4.
19. Ibid., p. 26.
20. Ibid., pp. 20-21.
21. Ibid., p. 28.
22. Thomas Hodgkin, The Kingdoms of the Western Sudan in R. Oliver (ed), The Middle Age of African History, London, 1968. p. 38.
23. Ibid., p. 37.
24. Thompson, op. cit., p. 284.
25. The fifteen tale types are identified by Thompson as numbers: 15, 37, 125, 175, 333, 400, 403, 545, 563, 653, 670, 1074, 1119, 1535, 1655.
26. Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past, Boston, 1941. p. 2.
27. W.H. Barker and C. Sinclar, West African Folk-tales, London, 1917. pp. 20-22.