Religious Change among the Hausa, 1000-1800

A Hermeneutic of the Kano Chronicle

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The Kano Chronicle is a unique document for its portrayal of the historical and phenomenological aspects of the interaction of Islam and traditional African religion. Its translator, H. R. Palmer, believes it represents a nineteenth century reconstruction of an earlier record which perished during the Fulani jihad. While not ancient, the Chronicle's reliability is widely supported—even by the Hausa malamai themselves.¹

The purpose of this study is to show how Islam and the traditional Hausa religion interacted and influenced each other. The Kano Chronicle is one of the few written records that indicates what this religion was before Islam. It also reveals ways in which Islam acted upon the traditional religion, while, at the same time, Islam itself was changed. The following will show how a primitive negro culture weakened and was overcome by a more progressive alien system. This second wave of culture provided an environment which was congenial to the development to an Africanized Islam. Even when Islam was resisted, traditional behaviour was altered by the force of Islam.

1. Essential Elements of Dalla Religion (Before 1000)

Before 1000 A.D. the original Dalla tribes of Kano had developed a strong primitive kingdom, the government and religion of which are richly preserved in legend.² The mythology of this empire is extremely important for its description of a true primitive environment. All discussion of this period, however, must be done with the reservation that the material is mythical.

In this archaic period, the Dalla tribes saw each other and every act as part of an unalterable chain of events linked with its own beginning. The simple descriptions in the Chronicle show that this primitive negro man:

Acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others.³

According to the record of the Chronicle, religious phenomena developed in three areas: (1) the cultic center and ritual shrines, (2) leader figures and ancestors, and (3) ritual and sacrifices.
The Cultic Center

Dalla Hill, The power of the sacred hill was so fixed in early Hausa tradition that as late as 1819 the second Fulani Muslim ruler combines his Muslim prayers of forty days with a retreat to Dalla Hill, thus gathering assurance of victory in war. The old "pagan" center energized prayers sent up to Allah. Dalla Hill was the center of power around which all rituals revolved. Here the ancestor figure, the father of the race, first lived. Here he had his wives and seven children. It was here that the first event took place, and it was to Dalla that the descendants must return again and again. The mythical ancestor figure was represented by his Rock which stood above all other deities. Dalla was the place, the sacred mountain, the center of the world.4 As the center for perpetuation of the memory of a beginning and sustenance of life, it gave continuity with the living ancestor to ensure life. It was said that "Barbushe the priest figure never descended from Dalla except on the two days of Idi."5

The sacred place could be approached only through the "living next of kin" who symbolized the cycle of creation and re-creation for all people. "When darkness came, Barbushe went forth from his house with his drummers. And the people said, 'Look on Tchuburburai, ye men of Kano—Look toward Dalla.' Then Barbushe descended and the people went with him to the God."6 The sacredness of the hill of Dalla required that the living ancestor figure, Barbushe, first perform the purification ritual. Even then, the ordinary people could not mount the hill—only Barbushe. It was here that the cycle of life began, ended and began again.

The Sacred Shrines and Residence of Divinities

The "sacred place" (Kakua), an active and fearful center of concentrated magic was the locale of all festive activity and communal ritual. Observation of the sacred shrines and rituals of the tribal deity was the essence of daily life. The deity was seen not only as creator, but also as a force of societal regeneration and renewal.

The Dalla deity, Tchuburburai, lived in a great tree, Shamuz.8 The tree, guarded day and night by the priest of the tribal deity (Mai-tchububurai), was located in a sacred grove, Jakara. Jakara was described as a swamp, the water of which was black and sacred.9 The water and the trees taken together were called Kurmin Bakin Ruwa.10 This picture typifies the wurin tsafi (ritual place) of modern primitive tribes of Northern Nigeria. The apparent confusion of names and places must be understood ritually, that is, as making out certain areas for participation by the people as opposed to the priest.

Power restrictions were connected with the sacred tree (Shamuz), the residence of the local deity. Attempts to gain entrance to the tree or to damage it were the most heinous sacrilege.11 It was at the shrine of Tchuburburai that religious practices had to be observed, for here was demonstrated the intimate connections between myth and ritual. The rituals and spoken formulas that took place at Jakara were dramatic representations of the myth which Dalla held in mystery, translating this myth into life and being.12