



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN

ISLAM: TENETS AND PRACTICE

Sudanese Muslims are adherents of the Sunni branch of Islam, sometimes called orthodox, by far the larger of the two major branches; the other is Shia, which is not represented in Sudan. Sunni Islam in Sudan is not marked by a uniform body of belief and practice, however. Some Muslims opposed aspects of Sunni orthodoxy, and rites having a non-Islamic origin were widespread, being accepted as if they were integral to Islam, or sometimes being recognized as separate. Moreover, Sunni Islam in Sudan (as in much of Africa) has been characterized by the formation of religious orders or brotherhoods, each of which made special demands on its adherents. Sunni Islam requires of the faithful five fundamental obligations that constitute the five pillars of Islam. The first pillar, the shahada or profession of faith is the affirmation "There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is his prophet." It is the first step in becoming a Muslim and a significant part of prayer. The second obligation is prayer at five specified times of the day. The third enjoins almsgiving. The fourth requires fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. The fifth requires a pilgrimage to Mecca for those able to perform it, to participate in the special rites that occur during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar.

Most Sudanese Muslims who are born to the faith meet the first requirement. Conformity to the second requirement is more variable. Many males in the cities and larger towns manage to pray five times a day—at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sundown, and evening. Only one of these prayer times occurs during the usual working day of an urban dweller. A cultivator or pastoralist may find it more difficult to meet the requirements. Regular prayer is considered the mark of a true Muslim; it is usually accomplished individually or in small groups. Congregational prayer takes place at the Friday mosque when Muslims (usually men, but occasionally women separately located) gather, not only for the noon prayer, but to hear readings and a sermon by the local imam (generally speaking, the leader of congregational prayers). Muslims fast during the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, Ramadan, the time during which the first revelations to Muhammad occurred. It is a period during which most Muslims must abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual activity during the daylight hours. The well-to-do perform little work during this period, and many businesses close or operate on reduced schedules. Because the months of the lunar calendar revolve through the solar year, Ramadan occurs during various seasons over a period of a decade or so. In the early 1990s, observance appeared to be widespread, especially in urban areas and among sedentary Sudanese Muslims.

Historically, in the Muslim world almsgiving meant both a special tax for the benefit of the poor and voluntary giving to the needy, but its voluntary aspect alone survives. Alms may be given at any time, but there are specific occasions in the Islamic year or in the life of the donor when they are more commonly dispensed. Gifts, whether of money or food, may be made on such occasions as the feasts that end Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, or in penance for some misdeed. These offerings and others are typically distributed to poor kin and neighbors.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is less costly and arduous for the Sudanese than it is for many Muslims. Nevertheless, it takes time (or money if travel is by air), and the ordinary Sudanese Muslim has generally found it difficult to accomplish, rarely undertaking it before middle age. Some have joined pilgrimage societies into which members pay a small amount monthly and choose one of their number when sufficient funds have accumulated to send someone on the pilgrimage. A returned pilgrim is entitled to use the honorific title hajj or hajjih for a woman. Another ceremony commonly observed is the great feast Id al Adha (also known as Id al Kabir), representing the sacrifice made during the last days of the pilgrimage. The centerpiece of the day is the slaughter of a sheep, which is distributed to the poor, kin, neighbors, and friends, as well as the immediate family.

Islam imposes a standard of conduct encouraging generosity, fairness, and honesty. Sudanese Arabs, especially those who are wealthy, are expected by their coreligionists to be generous.



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

In accordance with Islamic law most Sudanese Muslims do not eat pork or shellfish. Conformity to the prohibitions on gambling and alcohol is less widespread. Usury is also forbidden by Islamic law, but Islamic banks have developed other ways of making money available to the public.

Sunni Islam insists on observance of the sharia, which governs not only religious activity narrowly conceived but also daily personal and social relationships. In principle, the sharia stems not from legislative enactment or judicial decision but from the Quran and the hadith—the accepted sayings of Muhammad. That principle has given rise to the conventional understanding, advocated by Islamists, that there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in a truly Islamic society. In Sudan (until 1983) modern criminal and civil, including commercial, law generally prevailed. In the north, however, the sharia, was expected to govern what is usually called family and personal law, i.e., matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In the towns and in some sedentary communities sharia was accepted, but in other sedentary communities and among nomads local custom was likely to prevail—particularly with respect to inheritance.

In September 1983, Nimeiri imposed the sharia throughout the land, eliminating the civil and penal codes by which the country had been governed in the twentieth century. Traditional Islamic punishments were imposed for theft, adultery, homicide, and other crimes. The zealotry with which these punishments were carried out contributed to the fall of Nimeiri. Nevertheless, no successor government, including that of Bashir, has shown inclination to abandon the sharia.

Islam is monotheistic and insists that there can be no intercessors between an individual and God. Nevertheless, Sudanese Islam includes a belief in spirits as sources of illness or other afflictions and in magical ways of dealing with them. The imam of a mosque is a prayer leader and preacher of sermons. He may also be a teacher and in smaller communities combines both functions. In the latter role, he is called a faqih (pl., fuqaha), although a faqih need not be an imam. In addition to teaching in the local Quranic school (khalwa), the faqih is expected to write texts (from the Quran) or magical verses to be used as amulets and cures. His blessing may be asked at births, marriages, deaths, and other important occasions, and he may participate in wholly non-Islamic harvest rites in some remote places. All of these functions and capacities make the faqih the most important figure in popular Islam. But he is not a priest. His religious authority is based on his putative knowledge of the Quran, the sharia, and techniques for dealing with occult threats to health and well-being. The notion that the words of the Quran will protect against the actions of evil spirits or the evil eye is deeply embedded in popular Islam, and the amulets prepared by the faqih are intended to protect their wearers against these dangers.

In Sudan as in much of African Islam, the cult of the saint is of considerable importance, although some Muslims would reject it. The development of the cult is closely related to the presence of the religious orders; many who came to be considered saints on their deaths were founders or leaders of religious orders who in their lifetimes were thought to have baraka, a state of blessedness implying an indwelling spiritual power inherent in the religious office. Baraka intensifies after death as the deceased becomes a wali (literally friend of God, but in this context translated as saint). The tomb and other places associated with the saintly being become the loci of the person's baraka, and in some views he or she becomes the guardian spirit of the locality. The intercession of the wali is sought on a variety of occasions, particularly by those seeking cures or by barren women desiring children. A saint's annual holy day is the occasion of a local festival that may attract a large gathering.

Better-educated Muslims in Sudan may participate in prayer at a saint's tomb but argue that prayer is directed only to God. Many others, however, see the saint not merely as an intercessor with and an agent of God, but also as a nearly autonomous source of blessing and power, thereby approaching "popular" as opposed to orthodox Islam.



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS AND RELIGIOUS ORDERS

Islam made its deepest and longest lasting impact in Sudan through the activity of the Islamic religious brotherhoods or orders. These orders emerged in the Middle East in the twelfth century in connection with the development of Sufism, a reaction based in mysticism to the strongly legalistic orientation of mainstream Islam. These orders first came to Sudan in the sixteenth century and became significant in the eighteenth. Sufism seeks for its adherents a closer personal relationship with God through special spiritual disciplines. The exercises (or *dhikr*) include reciting prayers and passages of the Quran and repeating the names, or attributes, of God while performing physical movements according to the formula established by the founder of the particular order. Singing and dancing may be introduced. The outcome of an exercise, which lasts much longer than the usual daily prayer, is often a state of ecstatic abandon.

A mystical or devotional way (sing. *tariqa*; pl. *turuq*) is the basis for the formation of particular orders, each of which is also called a *tariqa*. The specialists in religious law and learning initially looked askance at Sufism and the Sufi orders, but the leaders of Sufi orders in Sudan have won acceptance by acknowledging the significance of the sharia and not claiming that Sufism replaces it. The principal *turuq* vary considerably in their practice and internal organization. Some orders are tightly organized in hierarchical fashion; others have allowed their local branches considerable autonomy. There may be as many as a dozen *turuq* in Sudan. Some are restricted to that country; others are widespread in Africa or the Middle East. Several *turuq*, for all practical purposes independent, are offshoots of older orders and were established by men who altered in major or minor ways the *tariqa* of the orders to which they had formerly been attached.

The oldest and most widespread of the *turuq* is the Qadiriyyah founded by Abdul Qadir Jilani in Baghdad in the twelfth century and introduced into Sudan in the sixteenth. The Qadiriyyah's principal rival and the largest *tariqa* in the western part of the country was the Tijaniyyah, a sect begun by Sidi Ahmed al-Tidjani at Tijani in Morocco, which eventually penetrated Sudan in about 1810 via the western Sahel (a narrow band of savanna bordering the southern Sahara, stretching across Africa). Many Tijani became influential in Darfur, and other adherents settled in northern Kurdufan. Later on, a class of Tijani merchants arose as markets grew in towns and trade expanded, making them less concerned with providing religious leadership. Of greater importance to Sudan was the *tariqa* established by the followers of Sayyid Ahmad ibn Idris, known as Al Fasi, who died in 1837. Although he lived in Arabia and never visited Sudan, his students spread into the Nile Valley establishing indigenous Sudanese orders which include the Majdhubiyyah, the Idrisiyyah, the Ismailiyyah, and the Khatmiyyah.

Much different in organization from the other brotherhoods is the Khatmiyyah (or Mirghaniyyah after the name of the order's founder). Established in the early nineteenth century by Muhammad Uthman al Mirghani, it became the best organized and most politically oriented and powerful of the *turuq* in eastern Sudan (see Turkiyyah). Mirghani had been a student of Sayyid Ahmad ibn Idris and had joined several important orders, calling his own order the seal of the paths (Khatim at Turuq—hence Khatmiyyah). The salient features of the Khatmiyyah are the extraordinary status of the Mirghani family, whose members alone may head the order; loyalty to the order, which guarantees paradise; and the centralized control of the order's branches.

The Khatmiyyah had its center in the southern section of Ash Sharqi State and its greatest following in eastern Sudan and in portions of the riverine area. The Mirghani family were able to turn the Khatmiyyah into a political power base, despite its broad geographical distribution, because of the tight control they exercised over their followers. Moreover, gifts from followers over the years have given the family and the order the wealth to organize politically. This power did not equal, however, that of the Mirghanis' principal rival, the Ansar, or followers of the Mahdi, whose present-day leader was Sadiq al-Mahdi, the great-grandson of Muhammad Ahmad, who drove the Egyptian administration from Sudan in 1885.



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

Most other orders were either smaller or less well organized than the Khatmiyyah. Moreover, unlike many other African Muslims, Sudanese Muslims did not all seem to feel the need to identify with one or another tariqa, even if the affiliation were nominal. Many Sudanese Muslims preferred more political movements that sought to change Islamic society and governance to conform to their own visions of the true nature of Islam.

One of these movements, Mahdism, was founded in the late nineteenth century. It has been likened to a religious order, but it is not a tariqa in the traditional sense. Mahdism and its adherents, the Ansar, sought the regeneration of Islam, and in general were critical of the turuq. Muhammad Ahmad ibn as Sayyid Abd Allah, a faqih, proclaimed himself to be al-Mahdi al-Muntazar ("the awaited guide in the right path"), the messenger of God and representative of the Prophet Muhammad, an assertion that became an article of faith among the Ansar. He was sent, he said, to prepare the way for the second coming of the Prophet Isa (Jesus) and the impending end of the world. In anticipation of Judgment Day, it was essential that the people return to a simple and rigorous, even puritanical Islam (see Mahdiyyah). The idea of the coming of a Mahdi has roots in Sunni Islamic traditions. The issue for Sudanese and other Muslims was whether Muhammad Ahmad was in fact the Mahdi.

In the century since the Mahdist uprising, the neo-Mahdist movement and the Ansar, supporters of Mahdism from the west, have persisted as a political force in Sudan. Many groups, from the Baqqara cattle nomads to the largely sedentary tribes on the White Nile, supported this movement. The Ansar were hierarchically organized under the control of Muhammad Ahmad's successors, who have all been members of the Mahdi family (known as the ashraf). The ambitions and varying political perspectives of different members of the family have led to internal conflicts, and it appeared that Sadiq al-Mahdi, putative leader of the Ansar since the early 1970s, did not enjoy the unanimous support of all Mahdists. Mahdist family political goals and ambitions seemed to have taken precedence over the movement's original religious mission. The modern-day Ansar were thus loyal more to the political descendants of the Mahdi than to the religious message of Mahdism.

A movement that spread widely in Sudan in the 1960s, responding to the efforts to secularize Islamic society, was the Muslim Brotherhood (Al Ikhwan al Muslimin). Originally the Muslim Brotherhood, often known simply as the Brotherhood, was conceived as a religious revivalist movement that sought to return to the fundamentals of Islam in a way that would be compatible with the technological innovations introduced from the West. Disciplined, highly motivated, and well financed the Brotherhood became a powerful political force during the 1970s and 1980s, although it represented only a small minority of Sudanese. In the government that was formed in June 1989, following a bloodless coup d'état, the Brotherhood exerted influence through its political wing, the National Islamic Front (NIF) party, which included several cabinet members among its adherents.



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity was most prevalent among the inhabitants of the states of Equatoria: the Madi, Moru, Azande, and Bari. The major churches in the Sudan were the Roman Catholic and the Anglican. Southern Sudanese communities might include a few Christians, but the rituals and world view of this part of Sudan were dissimilar to those of Western Christianity. The few communities that had formed around Western missions had disappeared with the dissolution of the missions in 1964.

The indigenous Christian churches in Sudan, with external support, continued their mission, however, and had opened new churches and repaired those destroyed in the continuing civil conflict. Originally the Nilotic peoples were indifferent to Christianity, but in the latter half of the twentieth century many people in the educated elite embraced its tenets, at least superficially. English and Christianity have become symbols of resistance to the Muslim government in the north, which has vowed to destroy both. Unlike the early civil strife of the 1960s and 1970s, the insurgency in the 1980s and the 1990s has taken on a religious character.

INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

Each indigenous religion is unique to a specific ethnic group or part of a group, although several groups may share elements of belief and ritual because of common ancestry or mutual influence. The group serves as the congregation, and an individual usually belongs to that faith by virtue of membership in the group. Believing and acting in a religious mode is part of daily life and is linked to the social, political, and economic actions and relationships of the group. The beliefs and practices of indigenous religions in Sudan are not systematized, in that the people do not generally attempt to put together in coherent fashion the doctrines they hold and the rituals they practice.

The concept of a high spirit or divinity, usually seen as a creator and sometimes as ultimately responsible for the actions of lesser spirits, is common to most Sudanese groups. Often the higher divinity is remote, and believers treat the other spirits as autonomous, orienting their rituals to these spirits rather than to the high god. Such spirits may be perceived as forces of nature or as manifestations of ancestors. Spirits may intervene in people's lives, either because individuals or groups have transgressed the norms of the society or because they have failed to pay adequate attention to the ritual that should be addressed to the spirits.

The Nilotes generally acknowledge an active supreme deity, who is therefore the object of ritual, but the beliefs and rituals differ from group to group. The Nuer, for example, have no word corresponding solely and exclusively to God. The word sometimes so translated refers not only to the universal governing spirit but also to ancestors and forces of nature whose spirits are considered aspects of God. It is possible to pray to one spirit as distinct from another but not as distinct from God. Often the highest manifestation of spirit, God, is prayed to directly. God is particularly associated with the winds, the sky, and birds, but these are not worshiped. The Dinka attribute any remarkable occurrence to the direct influence of God and will sometimes mark the occasion with an appropriate ritual. Aspects of God (the universal spirit) are distinguished, chief of which is Deng (rain). For the Nuer, the Dinka, and other Nilotes, human beings are as ants to God, whose actions are not to be questioned and who is regarded as the judge of all human behavior.



THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

Cattle play a significant role in Nilotic rituals. Cattle are sacrificed to God as expiatory substitutes for their owners. The function is consistent with the significance of cattle in all aspects of Nilotic life. Among the Nuer, for example, and with some variations among the Dinka, cattle are the foundation of family and community life, essential to subsistence, marriage payments, and personal pride. The cattle shed is a shrine and meeting place, the center of the household; a man of substance, head of a family, and a leading figure in the community is called a "bull." Every man and the spirits themselves have ox names that denote their characteristic qualities. These beliefs and institutions give meaning to the symbolism of the rubbing of ashes on a sacrificial cow's back in order to transfer the burden of the owner's sins to the animal.

The universal god of the Shilluk is more remote than that of the Nuer and Dinka and is addressed through the founder of the Shilluk royal clan. Nyiking, considered both man and god, is not clearly distinguished from the supreme deity in ritual, although the Shilluk may make the distinction in discussing their beliefs. The king (reth) of the Shilluk is regarded as divine, an idea that has never been accepted by the Nuer and Dinka.

All of the Nilotes and other peoples as well pay attention to ancestral spirits, the nature of the cult varying considerably as to the kinds of ancestors who are thought to have power in the lives of their descendants. Sometimes it may be the founding ancestors of the group whose spirits are potent. In many cases it is the recently deceased ancestors who are active and must be placated.

Of the wide range of natural forces thought to be activated by spirits, perhaps the most common is rain. Although southern Sudan does not suffer as acutely as northern Sudan from lack of rain, there has sometimes been a shortage, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s and in 1990; this lack has created hardship, famine, and death amidst the travail of civil war. For this reason, rituals connected with rain have become important in many ethnic groups, and ritual specialists concerned with rain or thought to incarnate the spirit of rain are important figures.

The distinction between the natural and the supernatural that has emerged in the Western world is not relevant to the traditional religions. Spirits may have much greater power than human beings, but their powers are perceived not as altering the way the world commonly works but as explaining occurrences in nature or in the social world. Some men and women are also thought to have extraordinary powers. How these powers are believed to be acquired and exercised varies from group to group. In general, however, some people are thought to have inherited the capacity to harm others and to have a disposition to do so. Typically they are accused of inflicting illnesses on specific individuals, frequently their neighbors or kin. In some groups, it is thought that men and women who have no inherent power to harm may nevertheless do damage to others by manipulating images of the victim or items closely associated with that person.

Occasionally an individual may be thought of as a sorcerer. When illness or some other affliction strikes in a form that is generally attributed to a sorcerer, there are ways (typically some form of divination) of confirming that witchcraft was used and identifying the sorcerer.

The notions of sorcery are not limited to the southern Sudanese, but are to be found in varying forms among peoples, including nomadic and other Arabs, who consider themselves Muslims. A specific belief widespread among Arabs and other Muslim peoples is the notion of the evil eye. Although a physiological peculiarity of the eye (walleye or cross-eye) may be considered indicative of the evil eye, any persons expressing undue interest in the private concerns of another may be suspected of inflicting deliberate harm by a glance. Unlike most witchcraft, where the perpetrator is known by and often close to the victim, the evil eye is usually attributed to strangers. Children are thought to be the most vulnerable.



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THE RELIGIONS OF SUDAN CONTINUED

Ways exist to protect oneself against sorcery or the evil eye. Many magico-religious specialists—diviners and sorcerers— deal with these matters in Sudanese societies. The diviner is able to determine whether witchcraft or sorcery is responsible for the affliction and to discover the source. He also protects and cures by providing amulets and other protective devices for a fee or by helping a victim punish (in occult fashion) the sorcerer in order to be cured of the affliction. If it is thought that an evil spirit has possessed a person, an exorcist may be called in. In some groups these tasks may be accomplished by the same person; in others the degree of specialization may be greater. In northern Sudan among Muslim peoples, the faqih may spend more of his time as diviner, dispenser of amulets, healer, and exorcist than as Quranic teacher, imam of a mosque, or mystic.