

ISLAMIZATION OF NUBIA

Throughout the Middle Ages, the peoples of Nubia adhered almost exclusively to the Coptic Christian faith. They had successfully resisted two [Arab](#) invasions, in 642 and 652, and subsequently concluded the BAQT TREATY, which ensured them against further [Islamic](#) incursions for several centuries. Muslim merchants from Egypt were allowed to travel and to settle in Lower Nubia, but there is no evidence that they sought or made any converts among their Nubian neighbors. Arab chroniclers described the Nubians as being mainly Christians in the fourteenth century, and recent textual finds have shown that parts of Lower Nubia were still Christian at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet, when J. L. Burckhardt, the first European visitor of modern times, passed through Nubia in 1811-1812, he found no surviving trace of the Christian faith. All of the Nubians professed a nominal allegiance to Islam, although Burckhardt also observed that “the only [prayer](#) known to [most of them] is the expression Allahu Akbar [God is great]” (1822, pp. 136-37).

The circumstances of Nubia’s transition from Christianity to Islam are obscure, for it took place at a time for which historical records are almost entirely lacking. From the available evidence, however, it appears that the demise of Christianity and the adoption of Islam cannot be viewed as closely linked events. Christianity disappeared apparently very gradually after the loss of contact between the Nubian church and Alexandria, while Islam at a later date seeped into the void left by the disappearance of the earlier faith. Moreover, different factors seem to have contributed to the Islamization of the Nubians in different parts of the country.

As early as 1235 the patriarch of Alexandria had refused to send bishops into Nubia, because of disturbed political conditions in the country. This policy was not consistently followed by later patriarchs, and as late as 1372 a certain [Bishop](#) Timotheus was dispatched to Phrim (Qasr Ibrim), in Lower Nubia. However, there is no record of any further contact between the Nubian church and Alexandria after that date. The [apostolic](#)

succession was therefore weakened, if not broken, and knowledge of the Christian liturgy probably diminished with each passing generation. In 1540 a delegation of Nubians called on the emperor of Abyssinia, asking him to send priests and monks to teach them, but he responded that he had no authority to do so. Thus, it seems likely that in the absence of any renewal from abroad, the Nubian clergy gradually dwindled away.

At the same time, the Nubian church lost the support of the ruling monarchs. In 1323 the ruler of MAKOURIA, the largest Nubian kingdom, became a Muslim, although it is clear that the majority of his subjects did not immediately follow. Farther to the north, the smaller kingdom of [DOTAWO](#) remained under a Christian ruler until at least 1484, but a generation later its territories were overrun and annexed by the Ottomans. To the south of Makouria, the kingdom of 'Alwa remained under a Christian ruler until sometime around 1500, when it was defeated and absorbed by the Funj sultanate of Sennar. Thus, by the end of the fifteenth century, all of Nubia had passed under the control of Muslim rulers. There is no evidence that the new monarchs attempted forcibly to convert their subjects to their own faith, but it is nevertheless probable that the church as an organized entity lost much of its strength when it was no longer actively supported by the rulers.

Another factor contributing to the Islamization of Nubia was the wholesale [migration](#) of [Arab](#) bedouin tribes into the Sudan at the end of the Middle Ages, partly from Egypt and partly from the Arabian Peninsula. The immigrants overran most of the territory of 'Alwa and a part of that of Makouria, establishing a number of petty principalities ruled by tribal *shaykhs*, who in turn were subject to the sultan of Sennar. The newcomers intermarried extensively with the settled Nubian population and, in time, were absorbed into it. Their knowledge of [Islamic](#) doctrine was probably no more than minimal, but they nevertheless conferred a sense of Islamic identity on their offspring. This was specifically true in the case of the Kanuz, the most northerly of the Nubian peoples, who became converted to Islam through their

amalgamation with the [Arab](#)-Beja tribe of the BANU AL-KANZ. They were probably the first of the Nubian groups to become Islamic. At a somewhat later date, the same phenomenon of conversion by intermarriage was noted by the historian Ibn Khaldun among the Nubians of the DONGOLA area.

In spite of these developments, there are a number of references to the continued presence of Nubian Christians in the sixteenth century and even the seventeenth. The last known reference to them dates from the year 1742, when a missionary friar reported hearing of a small surviving colony of Christians living somewhere in the vicinity of the Third Cataract of the Nile. It was said, however, that there were neither priests nor monks among them.

Meanwhile, active propagation of Islam began in central Sudan early in the sixteenth century, within the territories of the Funj sultanate. At the invitation of the Funj rulers, a number of learned religious mystics came to found schools at various places, mostly along the middle reaches of the White Nile, above the site of present-day Khartoum. Sudanese tradition attributes the Islamization of the country entirely to these pioneers, whose biographies are preserved in the extraordinary *Tabaqat* (story) written by Wad Dayfallah, set down at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The missionaries were all schooled in the Sufi tradition and were either members or founders of *туруq* (orders). In traditional Sufi fashion, they did not travel around the country but settled in a single place and gathered disciples about them. The disciples later went forth to carry the teachings of their masters to other parts of the Sudan and Nubia; as often as not, they became *wali* (founders of local orders) in their own right. It is therefore not surprising that Sudanese and Nubian Islam came to be dominated by the Sufic traditions of *tariqah* and *wali*. By modern times the [faith](#) of the Nubians had come to include a whole galaxy of local saints; indeed, more than 150 such saints were recognized in the single

Lower Nubian community of Dehmit in the 1960s. After the founding of the Mirghaniyyah or Khatmiyyah order in the last century, however, the majority of Nubians also became affiliated with this very widespread sect, which has branches both in the Sudan and in Saudi Arabia.

The formal teaching of Islam seems to have been confined largely to the Funj territories in the central Sudan, the areas where large numbers of [Arab](#) migrants had already settled. There is virtually no evidence of bedouin migrations to the driest parts of Nubia, comprising BATN AL-HAJAR and the more southerly parts of Lower Nubia, and there is also no evidence of formal religious schools in this area before the nineteenth century. It is not surprising, therefore, that the last surviving mention of Christians in Nubia comes from just this region or that Burckhardt (1822, pp. 136-37), at the beginning of the nineteenth century, found that the Nubians here had only the sketchiest knowledge of [Islamic](#) doctrine. Their nominal conversion to Islam can probably be attributed simply to the circumstance of Ottoman rule, which was established in Lower Nubia and Batn al-Hajar sometime in the sixteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, two factors contributed to the development of a fuller [Islamic](#) religious life among the Nubians. The first was the reestablishment of Egyptian administrative control over Sudan, following the invasion of Ismail Pasha in 1821-1822. This led to the establishment of Egyptian colonies, and of mosques and schools in many of the towns of Sudan. The second factor was the founding of the Mirghaniyyah or Khatmiyyah religious order by Muhammad 'Uthman al-Mirghani, who resided for a time at Dongola and who married a Nubian woman. Nubian-speaking descendants of the Mirghani family have continued to govern the order down to the present day, and so the Nubians can in some sense claim it as their own.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under Egyptian and, later, British rule, the Nubian peoples came increasingly to rely on education as a means for social and economic advancement. They became, and remain

today, by far the most highly educated population element in the Sudan, and their dedication to learning has included religious as well as secular learning. Thus has it come about that the Nubians, whose knowledge of Islam two hundred years ago was no more than minimal, have today a reputation for exceptional piety among their Sudanese and Egyptian neighbors.

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