the peasant. 'But', I was asked on several occasions, 'surely it is not a good thing for a ruler to be a priest?'

I spent the following Easter in the neighbouring village of Katomeri. On Saturday evening the church was crowded—the one time of the year when it was. After the joyful midnight announcement that 'Christ has arisen', the congregation dispersed with their lighted candles. Outside the church, however, 'the students' (who had returned for the occasion from Athens with their families), most of whom were strongly left wing, had continued another tradition, for they had constructed a bonfire on which they had placed the conventional figure of Judas the Jew, the betrayer of Christ. As the bonfire blazed, however, I noticed an innovation. Judas wore a sign round his neck on which was printed the name 'Khomeini'. The symbolism was, I think, complex (even if it had been done on the spur of the moment) and multivalent. Judas the Jew and Khomeini the Muslim: both the enemies of Christendom, both triumphed over by the Greeks. But I think the students were also up to something else: the figure that burned was also Khomeini the priest, a sight to greet their own *pappas* as he exited from his church.

Ahmed Al-Shahi

NORTHERN SUDANESE PERCEPTIONS OF THE NUBIAN CHRISTIAN LEGACY

People of the northern Sudan inhabit a semi-desert region.[1] Apart from the riverine Nile, where most of the people live as sedentary agriculturalists, the rest of the region is barren, consisting of deserts with some hilly outcrops and inhabited by nomadic groups. Despite the unfavourable ecological conditions, this region has attracted outsiders who came originally to proselytize and spread their religions. The process of religious conversion and reconversion began with the ancient Egyptians, followed by Christian missionaries from Egypt, themselves succeeded by the arrival of Arab/Muslims from Egypt and Arabia. In addition to those who came for religious reasons, others were drawn to the northern Sudan by its supposedly rich natural resources and for trade and slavery. However, to the present-day population of the north, neither the temples of the ancient Egyptians and indigenous Sudanese dynasties nor the ruins of Christian churches and monasteries have much cultural or ideological relevance. Rather, it is the two major Islamic institutions, the mosque and the Koranic school, which are of fundamental religious and ideological significance to the people. Islam has superseded previous religions; but it is interesting to examine in their historical context the pre-Islamic religions and cultural influences on northern Sudan and, in particular, the legacy of Christianity.

In view of its geographical proximity and vested interests, Egypt has had and continues to have a greater cultural and political influence on the Sudan than the rest of its neighbours. The ancient Egyptian dynasties contributed to the civilizations of the northern Sudan in the fields of religion, arts,

1. I am grateful to my wife Anne for her comments on the content of this paper.

architecture and system of government. The evidence of this influence can be seen in the presence of archaeological sites in the north, which include temples, pyramids and burial chambers. The Egyptians ruled the Sudan intermittently until Independence in 1956, though in 'partnership' with Britain from 1898 until 1956. Furthermore, Christianity, Arab culture and Islam came to Sudan via Egypt. During the second century AD Egypt was converted to Christianity, and, not unexpectedly, this new religion filtered to northern Sudan in the sixth century. It was the intention of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian to spread Christianity beyond the frontiers of Egypt. Thus missionaries were sent to convert the Nubians to Christianity as a 'needed replacement for the obsolete traditions of the Pharaohs'.[2] Although Christianity was not introduced as a conquering religion, it spread throughout Nubia and, by the end of the sixth century, 'it seems to have been rapidly accepted by rulers and subjects alike from Aswan to the junctions of the Nile.'[3] Resulting from this religious conversion, the temples and pyramids, which were, 'for 2,500 years, the climactic expression of human and divine authority, ceased overnight to be a meaningful symbol'.[4] Temples of pre-Christian civilizations were 'converted into churches, and other churches were founded'.[5] The extent of the conversion to Christianity is reflected in a profusion of churches such that 'the total number of surviving Nubian churches (more than 120 from lower Nubia and the Batn el-Hajar alone) is more than double the number of religious structures from all earlier times combined'.[6]

Thus at the time of the Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 639 there were three Christian kingdoms in northern Sudan, though these kingdoms had a political identity before they were converted to Christianity. First, Nobatia in the north, with its capital at Faras, extended upstream from the First Cataract. Secondly, Makouria (known sometimes by the name of its capital), with its capital at Old Dongola, extended beyond Nobatia, perhaps as far as Kabushiyya, a village near Shendi, but more probably as far as the Fifth Cataract. Thirdly, Alodia, with its capital at Soba, south of the modern Khartoum, extended from Kabushiyya 'probably as far south as Sennar'.[7] It appears that the first two kingdoms were joined together by the middle of the seventh century, and both came to be referred to by Arab historians as al-Maqurra, while Alodia was known as 'Alawa. Historical sources concerning the extent of Christian influence among the people of these kingdoms and the social, economic and political organization of the Christian communities are scanty. Trimingham does question the extent of conversion to Christianity,

2. See W. Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*, London: Allen Lane 1977, p. 435.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. See J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, London: Frank Cass 1965 (2nd impression), p. 58.

6. Adams, *Nubia*, p. 438.

7. Trimingham, *Islam*, p. 72; Adams, *Nubia*, p. 422; P. M. Holt, *A Modern History of the Sudan*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1963 (2nd edn.), p. 16. The boundaries of these kingdoms are matters of speculation rather than certainty.

though his statement requires evidence when he suggests: 'There is no reason to suppose that the mass of the rural population ever were Christians, and Christianity probably only existed in the principal towns and larger villages.'[8] However, it can be assumed that with the conversion of the people of these three kingdoms to Christianity, it became firmly established as the religion of the state. Though the official religion was Christianity, the Church in northern Sudan was linked with the Egyptian Coptic Church, which exercised control over the Church in the Sudan, particularly in the appointment of bishops.

With the conquest and conversion of Egypt to Islam in the seventh century Christianity lost its dominance, but it has survived until the present time on a smaller scale in the form of the Coptic Church. Islam became the official religion of Egypt, and, as with the spread of Christianity, Egypt was the main route for the introduction of Islam and Arab immigration into the Sudan. The other route was from the east, where the Arabs settled among the Beja tribes and intermixed with them. At first the Muslim Arabs of Egypt carried out frontier raiding against Christian Nubia. But in AD 651–2 the governor of Egypt, 'Abd Allah Ibn Sa'ad Ibn Abi Sarh, led an expeditionary force and besieged Dongola. This force could not subjugate the Christians in Dongola but the expedition resulted in a much-questioned treaty, known as *baqt* by Arab historians, between the ruler of Egypt and the Christian king of Dongola. The main terms of this treaty, according to early accounts, were an annual exchange of 360 slaves from Nubia for provisions from Egypt[9] and an article precluding settlement of either party in the country of the other. The treaty, however, could not stop the coming of Arabs into the Sudan. Though Nubia never became part of the Islamic empire, the conversion of Christian Nubia to Islam took place through gradual infiltration rather than through military conquest.

In the tenth century, more systematic efforts were made to convert the political hierarchy of Christian Nubia. For example, Ibn Sulaym al-Aswani, an envoy of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, was sent shortly after AD 969 to re-establish trading relations between Egypt and Nubia and, more importantly, to convert (though he was unsuccessful) the Nubian Christian king to Islam.[10] As Egypt became Islamized, Christian Nubia became isolated and vulnerable to further pressures from the Muslims. Neither the remaining Christian community in Egypt, nor the Coptic Church in Ethiopia, nor the Christians of Europe came to the rescue. Moreover, the Muslim Arabs were bent on converting Nubia to Islam. During the second part of the thirteenth century, the Mameluks and Arab tribesmen fought a battle with King David of Dongola, which resulted in the defeat of the king. Then King Shakanda, who succeeded King David, accepted the overlordship of the ruler of Egypt,

8. Trimingham, *Islam*, p. 78.

9. Holt (*Modern History of the Sudan*, p. 16) argues that the provisions, in the form of 'gifts of cereals and other goods', were not part of the treaty but were given by convention.

10. See P. M. Holt and M. W. Daly, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, London and New York: Longman 1988 (4th edn.), p. 17.

and thus his status was relegated to that of a provincial governor. For the first time in the history of Nubia, the Christian Nubians were classified as *dhimmis*, meaning 'Christians living under Muslim rule and protection and paying tribute'.[11] This represents the first political interference by Muslims in the affairs of Nubia, which led to the weakening of the power of the Christian kingdom. The *coup de grâce* came in AD 1316, when the rulers of Egypt, the Mameluks, installed 'Abd Allah Barshambu, a convert to Islam, as king of Dongola and in the following year converted the King's Throne Hall[12] at Old Dongola into a mosque. The repercussions of this change were a gradual Islamization of the rulers and an influx of Arab immigrants into northern and central Sudan.

In addition to religious conversion, an equally significant cultural process was the Arabs' introduction of their kinship system into the Sudan. Intermarriage between Muslim Arab immigrants and local Sudanese women took place wherever the Arabs settled. It is believed by Arab historiographers that a matrilineal system of descent and matrilocal residence after marriage were practised by the Sudanese before the arrival of the Arabs, who emphasised patriliny, and that the process of intermarriage shifted power from traditional Nubian rulers to male descendants of the Arabs, eventually changing the system of descent. The initial process of replacing the matrilineal system occurred when the kings of the Nubians

> proceeded to win them [Juhayna Arabs] over by marriage-alliances, so that their kingdom broke up, and it passed to some of the offspring of Juhayna through their mothers, according to the custom of the barbarians by which possession goes to the sister and the sister's son. So their kingdom was torn to pieces, and the Juhayna nomads took possession of their lands.[13]

By this change, the male offspring of the Muslim Arab immigrants established dominance and authority over the household. The central figure in the matrilineal system, the mother's brother, lost his authority over his sister's children and came to be replaced by the father. However, the common Arab practice of patrilocal residence after marriage is not adhered to among the northern Sudanese during the initial stages of marriage. The common custom among the latter is for the bridegroom to live with his bride's family in order for him to become acquainted with his in-laws and particularly his mother-in-law. The bridegroom's length of stay depends on various circumstances, chiefly the availability of residence in his father's settlement. But ultimately the husband takes his wife back to his own patrilineal group and settles there, in conformity with the general practice among Arabs and other patrilineal

11. Ibid., p. 22.

12. It is commonly thought that this was a church, but a Polish expedition's study of the structure of the building suggests that it was the King's Throne Hall; see S. Jakobielski, 'Polish Excavations at Old Dongola, 1978/79–1982', in Martin Krause (ed.), *Nubische Studien: Tagungsakten der 5te Internationalen Konferenz der International Society for Nubian Studies, Heidelberg, 22–25 September 1982*, Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern 1986, pp. 299–304.

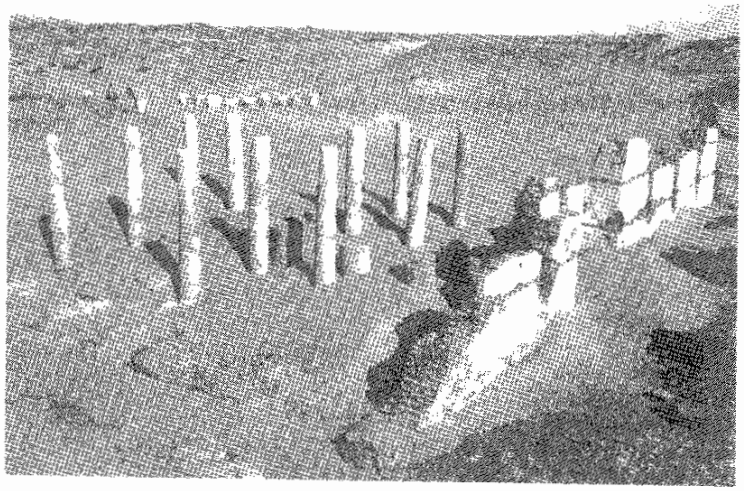
13. This is Ibn Khaldun's assessment, quoted in Holt and Daly, *History of the Sudan*, p. 23.

societies. Thus the initial practice of uxorilocal residence may be assumed to be a legacy of the matrilineal system prevalent among the northern Sudanese prior to the arrival of the Muslim Arabs.

In religious life, a weakened Christianity lingered on in the Nubian regions until the Funj Kingdom of Sennar came into being at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It was the first Arabized and Islamized state to rule northern Sudan, and it put an end to the continuity of Christianity in the country. It would have been unlikely for Christianity to have survived among the Arabized Nubians, as the Arabs who brought the new religion taught that Islam was the last revealed religion and that it was the 'right' religious path.

Thus conversion to Islam was successful in the north. It was during the rule of the Funj Kingdom that it became the religion of the state and a great deal of endeavour was exercised by Muslim men of religion, both immigrant and indigenous, to spread Islam widely in the Sudan.[14] Unlike the influence of Christianity, which was confined to the banks of the Nile in the north, Arab migration and the spread of Islam went beyond these limits, spreading to the deserts of the north and to the savanna belt of central Sudan. While Christianity survived on a smaller scale in Egypt, the gradual conversion to and assimilation of Islam have totally obliterated the influence of Christianity in the northern Sudan. At the present time there are no Christian communities which have continued in being since the Christian era. The various Christian denominations in the modern Sudan have been introduced through the efforts of missionaries since the nineteenth century and under the Condominium administration, or by immigrant communities from other nations, such as Greeks, Copts, Italians and Syrians. For the present-day Muslim population of the northern Sudan who claim Arab descent, even though historians refer to them as Arabized Nubians, their 'real' history begins with the dominance of Islam, the Arabic language and Arab culture. They recognize not only the present-day diversity of their country but also the past influence of Egyptians, Christians, Ethiopians, Turks, Europeans, Arabs and Africans. Nevertheless, they do strongly associate themselves with a particular and interrelated culture and ideology: Arabism and Islam. History books cite the influence of the aforementioned peoples, but the impact of Islam and Arabism are more meaningful to the people of the northern Sudan than any other culture or ideology which has contributed to their past. Even the Nubians, who as a distinct cultural group have been inhabiting their present-day homeland since before the emergence of Christianity, have acquired a new identity and historical perspective. They have discarded their origin and, despite the fact that they have retained their native languages, now claim Arab ancestry and are proud of this association. Indeed the present-day people have forgotten, and do not wish to remember, that part of their ancestry was Christian.

14. See Muhammad al-Nur Wad Dayf Allah, *Kitab al-tabat*, ed. Ibrahim Siddiq, Cairo 1930. The book consists of biographies of men of religion who made considerable efforts in spreading Islam and Sufi orders during the Funj Kingdom of Sennar (16th–19th centuries). The biographies have been translated into English by Sir Harold A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*, vol. ii, London: Frank Cass 1967 (2nd impression), pp. 217–72.



The Church of the Granite Columns (eighth century) at Old Dongola

The northern Sudanese look to Arabia and the Middle East for their genealogical links, language and religion. For example, the largest and most prestigious group of tribes in the north, the Ja'aliyyin, claims descent from al-Abbas, the Prophet's uncle, of the Quraysh tribe of Arabia. Men of religion and mystics came to the Sudan from Arabia and Egypt from the fourteenth century onwards to spread Islam and to establish Sufi orders, which are still influential in both the religious and the political spheres. The Greek and Coptic languages gradually disappeared from the north and were replaced by Arabic, though the Nubians and Beja peoples continue to speak their native languages. Moreover, Islam brought a new identity and a new system of religious education in the form of the Koranic schools, *khalwa*s, which are still widespread in the north. Islam brought new laws, some of which were enshrined in the Koran, a system of judiciary and a system of government. Finally, Islam linked Sudan to the Arab and Muslim worlds. For these reasons, it is understandable why the northern Sudanese are proud of their connections and would not value other connections, for example with Christianity, in the same way.

Due to its geographical proximity to Egypt, Nubia encountered greater cultural influence from the ancient Egyptians and from medieval Christianity than the rest of northern Sudan. Among the Nubians, house designs, jewellery and decorations have been influenced by ancient Egyptian and Christian

motifs, particularly the cross, the dome, and various animals.[15] With the coming of Islam, these motifs lost their meaning and significance. The cross has been replaced by the crescent, and the domed-tombs of Muslim saints and holy men have more cultural relevance to the modern northern Sudanese than the temples and pyramids of Meroe or the Nubian churches. To them, these are legacies of former religions which Islam came to change. In the religious and cultural idioms of the Muslim Sudanese it makes sense to admire an old mosque or a Koranic school more than a pyramid, church or monastery of greater antiquity. To the northern Sudanese Islam, coming as the last revealed religion, had to uproot the beliefs, practices, values and artistic expressions associated with Christianity, while nevertheless accepting that Christianity was one of the revealed religions and that its followers were *ahl al-kitab*, 'people of the [sacred] book'. Moreover, Christianity did not take root sufficiently among the population to withstand the pressure on it resulting from the conversion to Islam. No sooner had Christianity been introduced in northern Sudan than Islam and Arabism followed in its wake. It was less than a century between the conversion of the northern Sudanese to Christianity and their encounter with Islam. Had Christianity been in the north longer the conversion to Islam might have been more difficult.

Apart from the consideration of time, Christianity suffered from a weakness which may have helped the conversion to and spread of Islam. Christianity was dominated by Egyptian hegemony and culture. The bishops and many other religious functionaries were Egyptians. Thus,

> the Church in the Sudan always remained exotic and never became indigenous in the sense that Islam is today. Christianity came as a new cult, weakly grafted on to the regressive pre-Ptolemaic culture of the country, without revolutionising the lives of either the nobles or the masses.[16]

Moreover, while an indigenous cult of the saints, who are assumed to have miraculous power, has come to be an integral aspect of the religious life of the Muslim northern Sudanese, in Christianity 'the Church was not founded on the blood of martyrs because there was never any danger of persecution. So there were no indigenous saints to which to link their saint-practices.'[17]

It is assumed that Christian archaeological remains, in the form of churches and monasteries, are still to be found in the north, and further investigation of these is required. Some of these remains may have been converted later into forts, particularly in the region inhabited by the Shaygiyya people. They occupy the bend of the Nile in the north stretching from south of old Dongola almost to the Fourth Cataract. The Shaygiyya homeland was part of the Makouria Christian kingdom. After the establishment of the dominance of Islam and the Arabs, this people rose to become a military power and extended their influence, in the eighteenth century, further than Dongola. By

15. For further details on this aspect, see Ahmad Muhammad Ali al-Hakim, *House Decorations and their Evolution in Wadi Halfa* (in Arabic), Khartoum: University of Khartoum, Sudan Unit, Occasional Papers No. 1, 1965.

16. Trimingham, *Islam*, p. 76. 17. Ibid., p. 78.

this time, most of the Christian buildings had been dismantled. One of the surviving Christian remains in the Shaygiyya homeland is the Christian monastery at al-Ghazali,[18] a small oasis lying fifteen kilometres east of the present-day town of Meroe. The monastery and the cemetery attached to it have survived due to their isolation, being located in the desert and at some distance from the sedentary population who inhabit the banks of the Nile. Apart from giving occasional guidance to school picnics, expatriates and specialists visiting the archaeological sites of the pre-Christian and Christian eras, local people rarely visit them. Though they admire and appreciate the achievement and ingenuity of the people who left these remains, they do not appreciate their forebears as being the architects of these pyramids, temples and churches. To them, these buildings were constructed by ancient people and in ancient times. Though they conceive all this legacy as part of their country's cultural heritage, their significant ancestors were Muslim Arabs who came from Arabia and who established radically different religious and cultural traditions. The previous religious systems or cultural traditions are not part of their ideology or perception of history. Their projection of history is one of religious and cultural relevance to the present.

When asked about their genealogical connections, most people in the north would reply, 'We are Abbasiyya', meaning they are descendants of al-Abbas (the Prophet's uncle) of the Quraysh tribe of Arabia. This is a prestigious line of descent, and it would taint this connection were they to incorporate not only their Nubian ancestry but also the religion, Christianity, associated with it. This strong association, which has developed over centuries, was recognized early in the Condominium administration (1898–1956) when the authorities forbade Christian missionaries to proselytize among the northern Sudanese. No doubt the administration did not want to antagonize the Muslims in the north, as it had recently overcome the Mahdiyya Islamic state. However, missionaries were allowed to carry out their work in the south and west, and Christianity has come to be associated generally with Western culture and influence.

Whereas the pyramids and temples of the ancient Egyptian and indigenous Sudanese dynasties have survived, not many of the churches and monasteries of the Christian era can still be found south of Nubia. The pyramids and temples of the ancient civilizations are located on the periphery of modern settlements, and for this reason they were not destroyed by the Muslims. Moreover, their construction and scale are such that they could not be destroyed easily. When the Muslim Arabs arrived, the religious beliefs associated with the pyramids and temples had, as a result of conversion to Christianity, ceased to exist, and the Muslim Arabs had no cause to dismantle the buildings. In contrast, the Muslim Arabs encountered in the churches a living religion, Christianity. Unlike the pyramids and temples, the churches

18. For a detailed archaeological investigation of the church and monastery at al-Ghazali, see P. L. Shinnie and H. N. Chittick, *Ghazali: A Monastery in the Northern Sudan*, Khartoum: Sudan Antiquities Service, Occasional Papers No. 5, 1961.

were built in the existing villages or towns of the time. With the spread of Islam, most of these churches were either destroyed or converted into mosques, as in the case of the King's Throne Hall in Dongola. As the objective of the Muslim Arabs was to convert the Christian population to Islam, the church had to give way to the central Islamic institution, the mosque. Therefore, with the conversion to Islam, not only has Christianity disappeared but with it the church.

The gradual and effective spread of Islam, Arab culture and the Arabic language has caused the demise of Christianity in the northern Sudan. The meaningful religious and cultural identity to the northern Sudanese is one in which the Islamic ideological framework plays a dominant role. What went on before the arrival of Islam and the Arabs does not figure in the recollections, narratives, myths or popular history of the northern Sudanese. In reality very little has survived of the values, customs and beliefs of the pre-Christian and Christian eras as a legacy from the past. There is a cultural and religious discontinuity, which most northern Sudanese consider desirable. To them, history and cultural continuity began with the primacy of Islam and Arabism, which take precedence over previous ideologies.