

# **THE ASSESSMENT OF THE MARGINALIZATION AND THE SYNCRETISM MODELS OF THE DISSEMINATION OF ISLAM IN AFRICA: ZAGHAWA AS A CASE STUDY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is believed that Islam is the most spreading religion in Africa. This paper critically assessed and evaluated the existing literature on conversion to Islam in Africa using the Zaghawa African Muslim community in Western Sudan as a case study. It also examined the impact of Islam upon their cosmology and traditional system of belief. The process of conversion to Islam in Africa has been scrutinized by many scholars but this study adopted Trimingham's and Fisher's tripartite or marginalization models, Horton's intellectualist theory and Lewis' syncretism model where relevant. The research indicated that the traditional Zaghawa society believed in a host of lesser spirits and a high god (ido) who was linked with certain objects such as caves and mountains. The research revealed that Islam first found its way to Dar Zaghawa peacefully and gradually from North and West Africa and the Nile Valley at different times by different agents during the reign of Suliman Solong. Among these agents the extramural activities of the long distance caravan traders across the Sahara desert, Ulama and sufi orders mainly Tijaniya and Sanusiya, returning pilgrims from Mecca who settled permanently among the ruling Zaghawa Families and Muslim clerics (wise strangers). The Zaghawa ethnography indicated that the marginalization and syncretism models are useful tools for analyzing the process of conversion to Islam in Africa, yet they are insufficient for they do not go far enough to explain why the Zaghawa continued to perform their pre-

Islamic rituals even when their belief changed. Many scholars mistakenly based their analysis on a dichotomy of Islam and paganism whereas the tribesmen and women they studied like the Zaghawa including those who still implore rain from the gorbu manda (sacred rock) regard themselves as good Muslims. However useful those classificatory models may be, they represent an external observer's perspective and do not necessarily convey the views of the natives themselves. For an adequate explanation we need to adopt the emic approach which gives full weight to the views and interpretations of the actors themselves to grasp why they do what they do. The Zaghawa society is internally divided into various categories which differ in their awareness of the proper religious knowledge and practice. This can justify why in the same society some intolerant religious activists burnt down the sacred trees, and rocks to put an end to what they called the performance of shirk (heresy) while others still believe in the efficacy of such sanctuaries in guaranteeing the flow of water underneath the sacred rocks and trees or the bore holes. The Participation of the educated and illiterate, men and women in the pre-Islamic rite of offering butter to the sacred rock suggests that fernandez's analysis which differentiates between the social consensus and the cultural consensus as particularly useful for deeper analysis of the impact of Islam upon the Zaghawa society.

**Key Words:** *marginalization, syncretism models, dissemination, Islam, Africa, Zaghawa*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Zaghawa are a pastoral semi-nomadic group in Northern Darfur region in Western Sudan. They occupy an area of 40,000 km in the sahelian zone delimited by the latitudes 15 -18 N and the longitudes 21 -25 E which is traditionally known as Dar Zaghawa. Today, however, not all the Zaghawa of the Sudan live in it. They started to spread out beyond its boundaries to the more hospitable areas of Southern Darfur, Northern Kordofan and the Gazira Aba for various reasons of which the most important ones are the frequent droughts and harsh environmental conditions (Harir: 1996) and the recent war in Darfur which started in 2003 but more or less, Dar Zaghawa still remains to be the core of the Zaghawa.

The Zaghawa neighbor, the Fur, Tama and Tunjur sedentary cultivators in the South and the Masaliet and Gimir in the West. They encounter the sedentary Berti and Meidob in the eastern Fringe of their territory. They also neighbor the beni Hussain cattle rearers and some pastoral camel rearing Arab nomads such as the Mahriya, Mahameed, Ereigat, Zayadiya who cross the south eastern part of Dar Zaghawa during their long transhumance. In the north the international border line between Sudan and Chad separates the Zaghawa of Darfur from those living in Chad.

Today the Zaghawa have been seriously affected by the war in Darfur. Many of their villages have been deserted and accordingly many of them took refuge to neighbouring countries mainly Chad and others stayed in locally displaced camps in the vicinities of the urban centers in Darfur such as El Fasher and Nyala.

It is hard to conceive of more timely or more relevant issue for deliberation nowadays among the African communities which face great challenges of nation building and political stability than religious change which in some cases brings about fundamentalist interpretations of its teachings and ends up in catastrophes?

This research is meant to give an inside to the conversion to Islam among the Zaghawa community in Darfur as a case of an African Muslim community and evaluate its impacts on their cosmology and traditional system of belief.

Data was collected through many tools not ably observation, group discussions, direct interviews and case study for more specific and deeper information when the researcher stayed for a year (1988/1989) among the community gathering information. Additional information was also obtained from secondary sources such as unpublished thesis, government documents and the library for more authenticated data about the subject. For analyzing the data, the historical and the analytical approaches were applied as the most appropriate ones.

The research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the weak points in the tripartite models of Islamization in Africa on basis of the Zaghawa case study?
2. Why the tripartite or the marginalization models are regarded as classified models and represent an external observer's perspective?
3. Why the Zaghawa continued to perform their traditional pre-Islamic rite even after they changed their belief?
4. Why the dichotomy of Islam / paganism is an inappropriate model to analyse the process of Islamization among the Zaghawa?
5. What is the impact of the conversion to Islam upon the Zaghawa cosmology and their system of belief?

### **The Zaghawa cosmology and Traditional system of belief**

According to the traditional Zaghawa belief, the universe has been created and controlled by a High god known as ido in their own language. Ido was thought to dwell in some natural objects such as the cave of idoha (lit the mount of ido). He was considered to be controlling not only this world but also the nether world. There are other spiritual beings which also people the world is subsumed in the Zaghawa belief system among these Jinun (Jin), boi (familiar) and bardobordo (spirit of a dead person) are salient.

In the past the Zaghawa conceived ido beggira (High god) as remote and invisible. He could not be directly approached by human beings. They sought his divine consultation for problems of their mundane life and during their current life hardships through intermediately spiritual beings which existed in some natural objects. Among these objects mountains, rocks, and trees are most salient. These natural objects were prone to be occupied or possessed by various spiritual beings and for that reason they were called manda which gives the connotation of association with some kind of undefined supernatural beings. Therefore the mountains, rocks, and trees of this kinds are referred to in Zaghawa by ha manda, gurbo manda and betti manda respectively.

The phenomenon of holding some mountains and tree in reverence was also reported in the past from among some other ethnic groups in Darfur (see e.g. Trimingham (1949: 179) and Brown (1799) for the Fur and Lampen (1928) for the Meidob).

### **The conversion to Islam in Africa**

The process of Islamization or conversion to Islam in Africa has been scrutinized by many scholars among whom Trimingham (1980), Horton (1971, 1975), Fisher (1973, 1985) and Lewis (1980, 1986) are prominent.

## **Trimingham's Model**

Trimingham viewed the process in terms of a three stage model: 'germination', 'crisis' and 'gradual reorientation'. According to him, Islamization in Africa started by germinating in the deeper levels of individual, in society and in the collective consciousness, the seed of Islam through cultural contact. This was achieved through miscellaneous factors, most notably visits and settlements of clerics and caravan traders, pilgrims' traffic and immigration and movement of people (see Trimingham, 1980: 34—43). This eventually resulted in breaking the barriers of the old religion and adopting the Islamic identity by wearing Islamic amulets and dress without adopting the Islamic body of doctrine. Trimingham believed that the point at which Islam first met the Africans was such that it seemed hardly alien and its adoption offered little disturbance to the old order and the inner man. The Africans gradually assimilated the real elements of the Islamic religion such as ritual prayer and differentiation between permitted and prohibited actions according to its doctrines. Trimingham asserted that the religious practice at this stage was characterized by forms of accommodation and dualism of the old and the new but elements of the indigenous culture were persistently weakened, and both the individual and social behaviour were modified through time until the societies reached the point of 'crisis'. This, to him, marked the beginning of the third stage of the 'gradual reorientation' at which the old religious authority was consciously rejected, and clerics imbued with an uncompromising and intolerant conception of Islam waged the jihad (holy war) to restore the golden age of Islam. The village ritual pattern was disrupted and religious teachers replaced the practitioners of the old rituals. The ancestor worship, which was the core of the old religion, was rejected as inappropriate in the new situation. Although Islam had great influence on the society, many aspects of the old religion, such as consulting diviners and offering sacrifices to the nature spirits, were retained on an individual level.

On the whole, according to Trimingham, the outcome of the introduction of Islamic culture into Africa has resulted in transforming the African culture, mutual adjustment and ultimate synthesis. Many African institutions were incorporated into Islamic institutions, for example the African bride wealth coalesced with Islamic mahr and the pre—Islamic god with Allah. Where assimilation was impossible, as in the spirit cult, the traditional institutions were tolerated and existed parallel to the Islamic ones, as in the agricultural rituals. Trimingham also maintained that when the assimilation took place between the African and Islamic institutions the basic institution into which the other was assimilated might be either, but generally was the African (see Trimingham, 1980: 44). This is a view on which Horton built his model. Trimingham also believed that the Islamization of the African societies resulted in the sex division of religion whereby men became more religious than women who stood nearer to the pagan pole of the continuum due to their lack of participation in the Islamic rituals (1980: 47). Women represented the majority of those who offered sacrifices to the nature spirits and participated in the cult of

shrine visits and zar (spirit possession). Islamization also resulted in a differentiation between the town and the countryside in that the townsmen became more religious than the country dwellers.

### **Horton's Model**

Horton, unlike Trimingham, originally developed his model which he called “the Intellectualist Theory” on evidence drawn from his research into the conversion to Christianity in Africa and generalized it to cover the process of conversion to Islam (see Horton, 1971). Later when he became aware of the inappropriateness of such a sweeping generalization, (see Horton, 1975), he added evidence from the Islamic communities in West Africa to support his argument. He based his model on the idea of the ‘basic’ African cosmology which has a two tier structure: lesser spirits (under pinner of the events and the processes in the microcosm or the local community and its environment) and a supreme being (under pinner of the events and processes in the macrocosm or the world as a whole). Horton asserted that the subsistence way of life pursued by the Africans kept them confined within the boundaries of their microcosm and that they consequently paid great attention to the lesser spirits and only little attention to the Supreme Being. When they came into contact with the missionaries in the presence of other external non-missionary influences-such as long distance trade and development of commerce-the microcosmic boundaries became weak and people started to be more conscious of the macrocosm world which is the domain of the Supreme Being. As a result the lesser spirits became irrelevant (1971: 102).

According to Horton, the acceptability and rejection of the Islam was wholly determined by the ‘basic’ African cosmology. The Islamic beliefs and practices were therefore accepted only where they coincided with “the responses of the traditional cosmology to non-missionary factors of the modern situation” (1971: 104) but in a later development of his model, Horton refused to relate the weakening of the microcosmic boundaries to modernity (see Horton, 1975: 90). He concluded that where no counterpart to Islam existed in the traditional cosmology, the Islamic beliefs and practices were either completely rejected or weakly developed in the life of the converts, but where they existed, the Islamic beliefs and practices appeared as embarrassing additions to the life of the converts. This view led Horton to reduce Islam to a mere catalyst of changes which were ‘in the air’ any way (1971: 104-6, 1975:220) and to conclude that “in Africa, as in the west it seems likely that religion, if it survives, will do so as a way of communion, but not as a system of explanation, prediction, and control” (1971: 107).

Even though Horton produced evidence from the Islamic communities in black Africa in his second paper (1975) to strengthen his argument, Lewis and Fisher considered this additional as irrelevant and continued to criticize his model on many grounds. In their view, it was not applicable to the Islamic societies in Africa beyond the limited area which Horton studied (see Lewis 1980: vii and Fisher (1973, 1985). Although Horton admitted that “it is perfectly true that



for most of the indigenous cosmologies, we have very little direct evidences concerning their past history (1975: 222)”, he implicitly assumed that all African societies had supreme beings in their pre-Islamic history, which is not true. One can thus ask how his model can adequately analyze the conversion of those societies which had no explanation of the fact that many of those societies which were exposed to external stimulus remained unchanged and that even those which responded did so because of internal factors (1975: 221). Horton’s conclusion that even with the absence of Islamic missionary in Africa, the Africans could have undergone the same kind of religious changes, which he though were ‘in the air’ anyway is a mere speculation which ignores the fact that Islam is not simply a way of explaining ideas intellectually at the conscious level, but also a blueprint for a distinct way of life (see Lewis 1980: viii; Trimmingham, 1980:53; Fisher, 1985: 234).

I find it difficult to accept Horton’s assertion that the outcome of the religious movement could have been similar had the deprived groups been led, for example, by the secular political activities. The reason is that the socio-economic factors and political crises in the Muslim societies often create a conducive environment for the religious reformers to take the lead and demand the application of shura (Islamic popular consultation) and the return to pristine Islam. As these are the basic demands raised by nearly all the Islamic activists in the Muslim societies, I do not think that the outcome of a political reform movement could be the same had the political movement been spearheaded by secular political leaders who demand a different package of reforms such as separation between religion and state, abolition of sharia’ law, freedom of drinking alcohol.... etc.

According to Horton, the pagan and the Muslim shared the same two tier cosmology (i.e. the lesser spirits and the supreme being) and thus no radical change of cosmology was involved (1975: 393—9), a point which was subject of criticism from Lewis (1986) and Fisher (1985: 163—5). These two scholars together with Trimmingham argued that, on the contrary, Islam introduced an exclusive religious allegiance and radically different cosmology formerly unknown. Particularly Lewis (1980:vii) pointed out that Islam introduced a radically different eschatological evaluation of sin and reward which is other worldly in contrast to that of the traditional cosmology which is this worldly. This view would meet with support from Islamic reformers themselves, notably Qutb, whose view is that Islam has a different ideological view based on tawhid al oluhiya (the recognition of Allah as the only true god entitled to be worshipped) which makes it unique and radically different from any other religion (see Qutb, 1983).

The fact that many Africans regard the Islamic supreme being as referring to their own pre—Islamic high god seems to fit Horton’s model (1975:223). But even though the Zaghawa refer to Allah by the name of their pre—Islamic god (ido), at present, ido has a totally different conceptualization and attributes than the ido of the pre—Islamic era.

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By stating “in Africa, as in the west, it seems likely that religion, if it survives...(1971:107)”, Horton seems to be unaware of or ignores the phenomenon of re-emerging Islam in many African communities like Boku Haram in Nigeria, Daish in Libya, Syria and other parts of the world today.

Despite the above mentioned shortcomings in Horton’s model and his overestimating of the role of the ‘basic’ cosmology in his analysis, his model is important in that it specifies the social conditions which led to the conversion to Islam in Africa. It also gives an insight to the responses of different social and economic groups to the advent of Islam.

### **Fisher’s Model**

Fisher, using Trimmingham’s analogy, suggested three stages of Islamization which he calls the ‘quarantine’, ‘mixing’ and ‘reform’ stage (1973: 31, 1985). In the ‘quarantine’ stage, new comers, possibly traders, religious clerics or refugees introduced the Islamic religion to a pagan community. At first there was little or no conversion and religious purity was kept intact. Through time some individuals were gradually converted to Islam and as more people accepted the new faith the ‘mixing’ stage came about, as the indigenous people combined the Islamic beliefs and practices with those of paganism. Finally after a considerably long period of time, some devoted clerics, “who kept the element of the ‘quarantine’ stage, by the aid of literacy” managed to bring about a reform movement, which converted the ‘mixers’ to purer Islam. According to Fisher, the progress through these three stages was not necessarily uniform and people who were in different stages could be encountered at any time. For instance, the break-up of a great empire could bring about a temporary reversion from ‘mixing’ to the ‘quarantine’ stages. Conquest was a powerful ‘solvent’ of traditional beliefs and literacy served as “time—bomb” of reform. But the overriding trend was a progressive one because of the cumulative effect of Islam which was made possible by literacy. What has been achieved at one period may be preserved, and then placed beside, added to, and used as foundations for the achievements of another period (1973: 29, 1985: 160). Without literacy, much of the ground gained over years may be lost through backsliding. Horton criticized Fisher’s approach as lacking the overall causal explanation of the progress towards a purer faith. According to him, Fisher saw Islam as “one of an inexorable juggernaut, rolling forward under its own momentum. Using his own evidence, Horton presented the sequence of religious change in Africa as ‘quarantine’ ‘mixing’ ‘mixing’ or ‘quarantine’ ‘mixing’ ‘quarantine’ (1975: 195) as opposed to Fisher’s ‘quarantine’ ‘mixing’ ‘reform’ sequence.

### **The Assessment of the Marginalization Models:**

The above mentioned tripartite models became known as marginalization models because each successive stage marginalized its predecessor.



Though I find Fisher's argument of the impact of the 'cumulative effect' in religious knowledge valid and important, Fisher seems to be unaware of the fact pointed out by Osman (1983) that literacy in many traditional African societies is not always such a conducive element to religious reform as he thought, for among the Berti, the Zaghawa and many other societies in Darfur and West Africa, literacy paradoxically perpetuated the 'mixing' stage and acted as an obstacle to religious reform. Also Fisher's mixing stage and Trimingham's Crisis and reform embody value judgment. For instance, the sufi orders and the Mahdism were once pure Islam and led many jihad movements in the Sudan, West Africa and elsewhere whereas they are at present being relegated by the (Jamaat Ansar al Sunnah al mohamedyia (JASM) : fervent followers of the prophet's tradition) and AL Ikhwan al Muslimin Muslim brotherhood to the stage of 'mixing' and even superstitious. By scrutinizing these tripartite models one discovers that there is no complete breakthrough from one stage to another. What we encounter is accommodation and synthesis.

### **Lewis's Syncretism Model**

Lewis, though he accepted Fisher's 'three stage' model, agreed that the model represents an external observer's perspective and does not necessarily convey the views of the people themselves. Despite the fact that many members of the Muslim societies consult diviners and make offerings to sacred trees and rocks, they consider themselves proper Muslims and wish to be so considered by others (Lewis 1980: viii). Fisher refuted this view by stating that in matters of faith what people consider themselves to be, must be considered together with how others from within or without the community view them (see Fisher 1985). The Zaghawa ethnography seems to strengthen his argument. It is not only outsiders who categorize members of a society in terms of the different stages of Islam but the actors themselves do so. For instance, despite the fact the Zaghawa, who consult the diviners and offer sacrifices to gurbo manda and betti manda, (see plate 1 and 2) consider themselves proper Muslims and label the mai (blacksmiths) as pagans or lax in religion, they are themselves considered by the (JASM) as marginal or nominal Muslims. Furthermore, many Zaghawa, when they become aware of alternatives to their religious practices through their contact with the ulama in the urban centers like Nyala and El Fasher and Omdurman, often condemn their former religious practices in their homeland as mixed and describe those who still perform them as ignorants.

Lewis criticized Fisher for overestimating the influence of Islam as a spiritual force and for underestimating the importance of the African's traditional beliefs and institutions in their Islam. He also criticized Horton for doing the opposite i.e. overestimating the significance of the traditional African beliefs and practices and underestimating the role of Islam as a unique social system based on its own cosmology. He furthermore pointed out that both Fisher's and Horton's models ignore the fact that Islam is not only a religious faith but also an identity and because of

this he suggested that both models have no explanation for the contemporary Black Muslim movement in America for instance.

Islam in a Muslim society in the Sudan, Like that of the Zaghawa in Darfur, is greatly influenced by the African culture, which makes it different from the Islam observed among societies in the Middle East, or even marginal in relation to the wider Islamic umma (community)(Ahmed and Hart, 1984). Despite this characteristic, it cannot be adequately studied in isolation from the Muslim societies in the Middle East, of which it constitutes a part. These societies are studied by scholars of various interests, most importantly orientalists, the major part of whose analyses is based on a dichotomy which cannot provide an adequate insight into the process of Islamization (Holy, 1989). On the basis of this dichotomy, the Muslim communities are seen as either puritan or heterodox (Tapper, 1979), following the great or little Islamic traditions, scriptural or popular Islam (Gellner1983), or pure Islam or superstitions, which are all classificatory concepts and embody value judgment (cf. Holy, 1989). Tapper (1984) for example used a fourfold criterion of orthodoxy (purity), piety, mosque dimension and importance of shrine in order to grasp and measure the degree of religiosity in a Muslim society. By adopting this yardstick, a particular society can be classified by the anthropologist as heretic or heterodox whereas the actors undoubtedly regard themselves as the most puritan and pious Muslims (Ahmed and Hart 1984: 6; Lewis, 1986: 33; Holy, 1989: 13). Therefore, however useful these classificatory models may be, from an anthropological point of view they cannot adequately analyse the complicated phenomenon which they intend to study while ignoring the actors' point of view in their analyses.

For an adequate explanation we need to adopt an approach which fully incorporates also an emic point of view and gives full weight to the views and interpretations of the actors themselves in the effort to understand why they do what they do (Munson, 1988: 117).

Another weakness of many of the studies of the contemporary Muslim societies is that these societies are being treated as if they are unified homogeneous groups, whereas in reality most of them are internally divided into various categories which differ in degree of literacy, education and access to the religious scholars through seminars, workshops and consequently in their awareness of the proper religious knowledge and practice (Gibb, 1962: 179). For instance, despite the fact that Islam is the overriding culture of many societies, there is substantial evidence that men and women, 'ulama and fakis (local religious men) gurus (holy men in Pakistan and Afghanistan), sayyids (religiousmen in Iran, Morocco and Algeria), and lay groups interpret and practice Islam differently. This means that a society may be seen as fundamentalist by the analyst whereas some sectors within it consider it not sufficiently following the Islamic tenets and take to arms to alter it like the seizure of the sacred mosque of Mecca (al masjid al haram) in 1979 by the group of Juhayman in Saudi Arabia, which is considered by the analysts as the most Islamic fundamentalist society (Munson 1988: 70, Voll 1982: 285), and the revolt of

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jamaat al takfir wa al hijra in Egypt, the seat of Al Azhar (Munson, 1988: 82; Ibrahim, 1990) and Daish in Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan are the most outstanding cases. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to analyse the religious aspect of a particular Muslim society as though it were a single homogeneous group.

Furthermore, it is not only literacy and access to the Book that determine purity and pristine Islam. This criterion cannot explain why some people, though they have access to the literacy traditions and sources of Islam do not make use of them, while others achieve access to these sources only with great difficulties, as is evidenced by the great effort to obtain a copy of the Holy Quran by the Muslims in Russia, (Ahmed & Hart, 1984: 7, Tapper, 1984: 245). The ethnography of the Berti and the Zaghawa has indicated that although the fakis in both societies have access to the Quran and use writing almost as a routine work, they are often seen by the 'ulama and the formally educated members in both societies as marginal nonpuritan and practitioners of magic. The (JASM) consider the fakis' removal of the Quranic verses from their original contexts and putting them in different contexts to suit their purposes as appalling, if not real heresy.

In my analysis of Islam among the Zaghawa I have generally adopted Trimingham's three stage model of 'germination', 'crisis' and gradual reorientation' which Lewis (1986: 97) described as standard approach to the study of dissemination of Islam in Africa. But I have also used Horton's and Fisher's notions in the analysis where relevant. I found the historical approach which is implied by the 'marginalization model' a useful tool for analyzing the process of Islamization of the Zaghawa society because it enables the analyst to study Islamization in Africa as a continuing process instead of as a dichotomy.

### **The Spread of Islam among the Zaghawa**

The Zaghawa of the Sudan are blend of heterogeneous groups of different cultural backgrounds which have bearing on their religious practice. Therefore it is rather impossible to analyse the religious change in the Zaghawa society as though they are a single homogeneous group.

Little is known when and how Islam found its way to Dar Zaghawa in the Western borders of the Sudan. In fact there is paucity of recent research on the Zaghawa and the lack of documented historical evidence concerning the process of Islamization in the traditional Zaghawa. But many scholars (see e.g. Hasan, 1977: 202) and O'fahey, 1980: 122) are of the belief that the process of conversion to Islam in the whole region of Darfur came gradually from the Nile valley and West and North Africa at different times and by different agents.

Those who introduced Islam to Darfur from Egypt and the Nile valley were mainly Arabs whereas those who introduced it from the west were themselves converted Africans among whom Islam became a religious culture which has incorporated many pre- Islamic elements.

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The long distance caravan trade routes further enhanced the process of Islamization in Darfur through contacts and acculturation and the extra-mural religious activities of the traders (Hasan 1977:200, Trimingham 1962, 1980 and Abdle-Rahim, 1982). The Trans – Sahara trade routes connected Darfur with Maghrib, Tunisia and Tripoli and also with Kanem / Bornu in the west, in which Islam had already flourished for several centuries by the time it became an official religion in Darfur during the reign of Suliman Solong (Lampen, 1950; AL Hajj, 1877:18 and Biobaku and AL Hajj, 1980:231).

With regard to the Zaghawa as the actors themselves indicated, Islam was first introduced to them by Muslim clerics [Wise strangers] or ulama and Sufi orders mainly Tijaniya Who either traversed the reign on their way to Mecca or came from Dongola (The Nile Valley), Libya and North Africa across the Sahara desert. These ‘Wise strangers’ eventually intermarried with chiefly families and settled permanently among the indigenous population to propagate Islam. Many clans now claim genealogical links with these ‘Wise strangers’ and regard them as their founding ancestors. Islam was hardly practiced outside the ruling families of the dominant Mirra Clan and the other small chieftaincies. Their Islam in the ‘germination’ stage (see Trimingham, 1980) or ‘quarantine’ stage (see Fisher, 1973), was only nominal.

By the time the Mahdist troops traversed Darfur, the Zaghawa were only Muslims in name but pagan in practice. Slatin who visited Dar Zaghawa prior to the beginning of the Mahdist movement states that if the Bideyat were asked to repeat the creed, they could utter “ there is no God but the only God and Mohamed is His prophet” but beyond this they knew nothing and they could not pray as Muslims do (Slatin 1896:114) . The ‘germination’ or ‘quarantine’ stage only kept the momentum on which the Mahdist reformers built on.

### **The impact of Islam upon The Zaghawa traditional System of belief**

The ‘Wise strangers’ introduced new cosmological views, the basic Islamic teachings and religious concepts such as permissible and prohibited marriages in the ‘germination’ or ‘quarantine’ stage. Although the idea of high god (ido) was known to the Zaghawa before their Islamization, like many other African Muslim communities, they transformed their pre- Islamic Supreme Being into the Arabic ‘Allah’ after their conversion. But unlike the Berti, their neighbors, whose original language waned gradually when they were converted to Islam, the Zaghawa remained bilinguals. They refer to the Supreme Being as Allah when they communicate in Arabic and ido when they skip into their own vernacular. Ido is conceived now to be the same as Allah, the omnipotent and omnipresent god and has none of his previous attributes such as linkages to earth, or specific mount.

Trimingham (1980: 43) indicated that the point at which Islam met Africans was such that it seemed little alien to them and that its adoption appeared to have disturbed the old order by only

little. This seem to be the case among the Zaghawa who also incorporated many of their pre-Islamic beliefs and practices to Islam and continued to make offerings to sacred rocks and trees in spite of the fact that they were Muslims. Also their social life continued to be governed by their customs and traditions rather than by Islamic Law or shari'a. This duality did not only accommodate the Zaghawa customs which coincided with the Islamic precepts but also tolerated many other customs which contradicted Islam (cf. Holy 1989: 18).

Islam became a religious culture greatly influenced by the interpretation of Islam introduced by the early Arab settlers in West Africa who Horton (1975: 374) described as shrewed merchants rather than dedicated proselytizers. Literacy enabled the preservation and transmission of this mixed Islam to future generations. Fisher describes this phenomenon as the 'cumulative impact of Islam.

Islam failed to displace the established social institutions but offered itself as an additional option in the 'crisis' stage (Trimingham: *ibid*) or 'mixing' stage (Fisher:*ibid*) which created a duality in the Zaghawa religion and enabled the individuals to behave in a different manner at any particular social situation.

In reality there is no complete breakthrough from one stage of Islamization to another. What we rather encounter is accommodation and syncretism. Therefore, Trimingham's and Fisher's three stages or marginalization models, though important, are alone insufficient to explain and analyses adequately the process of Islamization among the Zaghawa without the syncretism model (see Lewis 1986: 96—97), which entails accommodating the religious beliefs and ritual practices of any one stage with those of the following one. The marginalization and the syncretism models combined together can enable the analyst to view Islamization of an African Muslim community as a continuous process and a movement along a continuum between tawhid al oluhiya (recognition of Allah as the only true God entitled to be worshipped) and tawhid al rububiya(the belief in a high god ido) rather than a dichotomy of these poles. These two models together also make it possible to account for the major changes brought by the Islam into various aspects of life at each phase and for the underlying socio-economic factors which facilitate the leap forward from one stage to another, and they enable us to understand why in the society people at different stages of the same process can be encountered (Tubianas 1977: 10; Holy 1989: 13).In fact, Islamization brought about considerable changes in the Zaghawa system of belief. For example, ido was held to be a transcendent deity which was remote from any individual and whose relationship to humans was not precisely known. Ido is now conceived as ubiquitous nearer to any individual than his / her neck artery as stated in the Quran. Ido is also conceived as the sustainer and the only protector.

Ido in the past was thought to dwell in natural objects such as the cave of ido Ha (lit. the mountain of ido) but since the introduction of Islam he is conceived as an omnipotent and all-

encompassing deity, which does not reside on the earth or in a particular locality. Although the traditional Zaghawa system of belief recognized tawhid al rububiya, tawhid al oluhiya was introduced only after the Islamization of the community. At present all the Zaghawa are Muslims despite the fact that some of them still propitiate the nature spirits which they believe, could favor or harm them if they so wished. It is therefore appropriate to interpret the Zaghawa system of belief in terms of a continuum between tawhid al rububiya and tawhid al oluhiya instead of a dichotomy of Islam and paganism. Using Horton's model (see Horton 1975), the educated men and women and the majority of the uneducated men, who have been involved in contact with the macrocosmic environment i.e. with people from outside the community either through trading, seasonal migration to south Darfur in the lean years to avoid famines and hunger, the Gazira Scheme or the urban centres, acknowledge tawhid al oluhiya. In contrast to this group, the majority of the uneducated women, who are all confined within the boundaries of their microcosmic environment and believe in the efficacy of mani (supernatural power such as thunder, curse) in killing at will, seem to acknowledge only tawhid al rububiya. The bulk of the Zaghawa can be seen as moving along the continuum between these two poles.

On the whole, the outcome of the introduction of Islam to the Zaghawa society has resulted in many cases in mutual adjustment and accommodation of the Zaghawa and the Islamic institutions and the incorporation of many non-Islamic customs into Islam. In effect, Islam among the Zaghawa lost its universalistic qualities and became a folk religion.

The Zaghawa, as part of the Islamic umma, can only be expected to be influenced by the phenomenon of re-emerging Islam in the world today but many local factors also played a vital role in the call for the return to pure Islam. The increasing pace of formal education which offered the Zaghawa a different kind of religious training is an important factor which is conducive to change. For instance, the Mahdiya was in essence a reform movement meant to restore true Islam by purifying it from al bid'a (customs) which were unduly incorporated with it and to adopt the sunna of the prophet and his rightly guided Caliphs. Its ultimate goal was to reestablish an Islamic umma (community) on an analogy of the early Islamic community in Medina. This meant among other things that submission was to be confined to Allah Alone and the previous duality of Islam and tribal customs which characterized the 'crisis or 'mixing' stage could no longer be tolerated. This attitude was clearly stated in the Mahdi's indharat (warnings) and also in the following text of the covenant (ahd) which the Mahdi's followers were asked to express in advance as an oath of allegiance;

We swear allegiance to God and His Apostle, and we swear allegiance to you, upon the unity of God, and that we will not associate anyone with Him, we will not steal, we will not commit adultery, we will not bring false accusation and we will not disobey you in what is lawful ... (Holt, 1958:101).



This second phase of the Islamization of the Zaghawa differed from the previous one both in technique and approach. Instead of concerning itself with a limited locality or the upper stratum of the Zaghawa community, it showed a great concern about a nation and umma.

The common feeling of injustice by the commoners and their revolt against the ruling families throughout Dar Zaghawa during the late 1960s facilitated the move toward the 'reform' or the 'gradual reorientation' stage. Many commoners joined the Muslim Brotherhood and (JASM) together with other Sudanese in the Centre and demanded the application of shari'a law. These activists with the university students who have been influenced by the ideas of Islamic scholars in the urban centre's could no longer tolerate the propitiation of nature spirits practiced by their uneducated relatives or members of their local communities. The deterioration of the environmental conditions in the Zaghawa territory resulted in an intensive out migration, a fact which facilitated cultural contact with the wider Sudanese society which practices Islam differently. Those who settled in towns enriched their religious knowledge by attending religious study circles in mosques where they listened to the views of the 'ulama, who differ greatly in their scope of religious knowledge and practice from the itinerant fakis in Dar Zaghawa.

The fakis rejected the consulting of gro, (sand divination) and bada (spirit medium) as heresy and inappropriate for a believer. The (JASM) and the Muslim Brothers did not only condemn the practitioners of these traditional divinatory techniques but also the fakis who practice sagit al kitab (book divination) which they perform to arrive at the hidden Knowledge according to their belief. They regarded as ignorant all those who believed in the existence of any kind of supernatural powers beside Allah that can kill or harm, and they considered their beliefs as shirk, (heresy). Both the (JASM) and the Muslim Brotherhoods rejected the use of (ketib) erasure and (hijab) amulets as bida' (an innovation which had not been practiced by the prophet) despite the fact that these protective devices contain verses of the Quran.

The fact that the ritual practices performed in one stage of Islamization contain many elements of the ritual practices performed in an earlier stage can be best viewed in the rain--making rituals. In the 'quarantine' stage, the botu ila (rain chief) was the centre of rain rituals. He wore a black cloth to symbolize the rain clouds and carried a water bag from which drops of water dripped onto the ground to symbolize the rain. Although in the 'mixing' stage the fakis became the centre of rain rituals, their rituals contained many elements of the rituals performed earlier by the botu ila. For instance, to induce rainfall the fakis entered a khalwa (secluded room) to implore rain from Allah and gathered under a tree to perform the rain dua` (supplication) and to recite the Quran. While performing this rite, the fakis usually hung, a water bag on a tree branch to enable drops of the water to fall onto the ground in resemblance to the water bag carried by the botu ila (rain chief) in the past. Sometimes the following text and the rain seal is written on the water bag to efficate the rite (see the rain seal in Figure1). The villagers also perform botu karama (rain

sacrifice) during which they slaughter a black goat to induce rainfall, as water is described as black in the entire Darfur sub-culture.

In the 'reform' stage the (JASM) proclaimed that nobody can bring rain other than Allah, and they declared any claims to the possession of such powers as a clear heresy. They criticized the fakis for claiming the powers to bring rain, if they like, in mid-summer, (i.e. pre- time). The (JASM) also insisted that Muslims should stick only to the performance of istisqa prayer, which had been practiced by the prophet to implore rain but to nothing else. Despite the influence of (JASM), many individuals perform the istisqa prayer in the morning but in the afternoon of the same day they perform the rite of botu karama and rain du'a (supplication) in which they slaughter a black goat to feed the practitioners of the rite. Many Zaghawa being illiterate and so unaware of istikhara relapsed to (ramul) sand divination justifying it as the myrical of the prophet Idris ie nothing is wrong with it.

From the above discussion it should be clear that we cannot talk about a gradual religious change from one stage to another but about constant accommodation of elements and characteristics of various stages. Hence, for an adequate analysis of the process of Islamization of the Zaghawa society both the marginalization and the syncretism models are to be used simultaneously.

Though in Islam Allah can be directly addressed by any individual without intermediaries (Sura, 2:186), many individuals now offer Him sacrifices through intermediary objects, as they did with the pre-Islamic ido. The reason is that the Zaghawa, similar to the Berber of the High Atlas (see Gellner 1969), being illiterate and unfamiliar with the Quran, need mediators to communicate on their behalf with Allah. Therefore, instead of seeking the mediation of the spirit who dwelt in the clan's ha manda (sacred mountain) in the past, many people now seek the mediation of the spirit of the dead weli (blessed person) whose grave became gubba (shrine).

Unlike many other Muslim communities (see for example, Gellner 1969 for the Berber, Gilsonan 1973 for Egypt, Tapper 1979 for the Shahsevan of Iran and Ahmed and Hart 1984 for Pakistan and Afghanistan), the Zaghawa do not generally claim a genealogical link with the prophet. Hence, they believe the gubba has no chain of baraka (blessing) from him. To them, any God-fearing person has a chance of becoming weli through his/her personal achievement and the will of Allah. If a grave becomes gubba it means that Allah has chosen to bless the dead person in it; therefore any person whose grave becomes gubba is conceived as weli. This in itself is taken as a merit, for the weli can radiate baraka to his descendants and to any other person who seeks his assistance and mediation for it's believed that Allah never turns down his weli's intercession.

Many individuals consider offering sacrifices to the gubba and invoking the dead weli's intercession an Islamic alternative to the ha manda, gurbo manda and betti manda. Accordingly, instead of offering the consecrated vows to the spirit of the ha manda in the past, they now offer

them to the dead weli. Whenever Zaghawa fear the spread of a contagious disease among their children, or the theft of their animals for instance, they deliver offerings in advance to the gubba and ask the dead weli to mediate with Allah and protect their children and animals. They usually utter “May Allah averts the disease from my children and the theft of my animals by the baraka of, for example, Tabit”.

In this case, Tabit is the name of the dead weli who may or may not be ego’s forefather. He is believed to be a good Muslim who can mediate on behalf of the client to Allah regardless of the latter’s ethnic identity or nationality as in Islam all believers are brothers (Goody 1968: 2). According to some other informants a person can perform baire rite to the dead weli in a slightly different manner. For example, if an individual fears the spread of a contagious disease among his children, he approaches the gubba and addresses the dead weli by uttering: “Oh my er, (grandfather) if you protect my children from illness, I will sacrifice to you a ram”. After performing this rite he feels his children are safe from the disease as though they have been vaccinated. When the disease is over, he feels that Allah has protected his children because of the mediation of that dead weli and therefore he fulfills his promise by sacrificing the ram he had offered to the weli.

In contrast to the ha manda, ritual cleanliness is required when communicating with the dead weli. Therefore, those who seek the mediation of the dead weli abstain from sex for some time before making their journey to the shrine and perform ritual ablution before they invoke the weli (see the wet ground in front of the clients feet in plate 3). The ritual cleanliness is required in this rite because the clients, in fact, address Allah the almighty through the intercession of the dead weli.

The gradual dissemination of Islam in Dar Zaghawa had led many individuals to regard offering sacrifices to the gubba as an alternative Islamic rite and accuse those members of the society who still offer their sacrifices to the nature spirits of practicing superstitions. The majority of the Zaghwa doubt the efficacy of the ha manda in guaranteeing the socio-economic well-being of the population surrounding it. These doubts were further enhanced by a bold action taken by many individuals in the early 1970s to bring an end to the belief in the er the (spirit of the ancestor living in the ha manda). In about three separate localities in Dar Zaghawa an educated person of a religious background (e.g. Hajj, Imam or his son or a graduate of Al-Azhar University) burnt the ha manda, gurbo, and betti manda of his area.

At this stage (JASM) also considered offering sacrifices to Allah through the mediation of the spirit of the dead weli which lies in his shrine is impertinent so long it is possible for anyone who seeks his grace to do so directly by supplication and invocation without any mediator. Therefore they tend to classify those who still visit shrines as guboory (worshippers of graves).

Despite the insistence of both (JASM) and the Muslim Brotherhood to describe as heresy and as inappropriate the ritual practices of the ‘quarantine’ stage and of most of the ‘mixing’ stage, many individuals, including the young educated ones, continued to offer butter to the nature spirits assumed to be dwelling in the sacred rock, sacred mount and sacred tree, I therefore believe that although Lewis’s syncretism or historical model and Trimingham’s and Fisher’s tripartite models of Islamization in Africa are useful in conceptualizing the systematic changes introduced by Islam in different stages, they do not go far enough to explain why a ritual practice continued even when the belief governing it had changed.

### **Fernandez’s interpretation**

It seems that Fernandez’s model (see Fernandez, 1965), which differentiates between the social consensus and the cultural consensus, is particularly useful for a deeper analysis of the impact of Islam on the Zaghawa society. Although the educated Zaghawa, the illiterate and elderly women participated in the rite of offering butter as a sacrifice to the gurbo manda in the same manner, this social consensus did not necessarily imply the actors’ cultural consensus or cultural coherence. Various actors participated in the rite for different reasons.

Generally speaking, the Zaghawa seem to be more “nativistic” than many of their neighbors who abandoned sacrifices to the nature spirits and the local demons some time ago (MacMichael, 1967: 73—4, Browne, 1799). The Zaghawa women who acted as cult leaders had only little access to the ‘ulama and only a limited opportunity to participate in the Islamic rituals monopolized by men. Therefore, they participated in the rite with the intention of guaranteeing the flow of water in the vicinity of these natural objects.

The young Zaghawa who received secular education rejected this belief as naïve, as to them no rock, tree or mountain can cause water to flow. Despite this view they took part in the rite because the performance of the rite usually ended by the establishment of hula (tribal dances). But the strong kinship obligations used to hinder these young men and women from participating in any joyous activity, particularly the hula, for a considerably long period of time whenever one of their relatives died. When that period of time passed they were quite ready to participate in the rite of anointing (offering) butter to the gurbo manda as that enabled them to participate in the hula. The Zaghawa customs which prevented young men and women of the same village, who normally claimed close consanguinity and affinity ties, from dancing together also had a bearing on their participation in these customary rituals and hula. This state of affairs encouraged these young men and women to be on the lookout for the first opportunity which gave them a chance to establish hula with members of other villages.

Meanwhile, the educated Zaghawa who acquired deeper religious knowledge and were exposed to the waves of reemerging Islam emanating from the urban and the cosmopolitan centers of the

Middle East, like Mecca and Medina and Quranic Schools (Khalawi:Arab) such as Mabruka, Hamashkoreib and Turba (see plate 4) adopted a universalistic view of Islam. They became intolerant to the existence of what they regarded as survivals of the pre—Islamic era which no longer have a place in a Muslim society, and they ended up by burning or cutting down most of the sacred trees and rocks in various parts of Dar Zaghawa.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The conversion to Islam among the Zaghawa took place peacefully and gradually by many elements including the long distance caravan traders from North and West Africa, Pilgrims, Wise strangers and Sufi orders, mainly Tiganiya.
2. The spread of Islam among the Zaghawa changed their system of belief, in that they transformed their pre-Islamic high god ido to Allah but with different attributes.
3. This new faith brought about a radically different cosmological view formerly unknown based on the differentiation between tawhid al oluhiya (The belief in Allah as the only true god entitled to be worshipped) and tawhid al rububiya (The believe in high god).
4. The study proved that the Zaghawa Muslim community in Darfur is greatly influenced by the African culture which makes it different from Islam observed in many societies in the Middle East or even marginal in relation to the wider Islamic Umma .
5. The dissemination of Islam among of The Zaghawa society resulted in transforming its culture, mutual adjustment and ultimate synthesis.
6. Both Fisher’s and Horton’s models ignore the fact that Islam is not only a religious faith but also an identity. For this reason both of them have no explanation for the contemporary Black Muslim Movement in America for instance.
7. It appear that Trimmingham’s crisis and gradual reorientation stages and Fisher’s mixing stage embody value judgment. This is so because the sufi orders and the Mahdism were originally reform movements which strived to sift Islam from tribal customs and retain the glorious era of Islam yet they are relegated by (JASM) to the status of bida’ and superstitious.
8. The research proved that the paradigm of religious change in Africa based on a dichotomy of Islam / paganism is an inappropriate model for analyzing the process of the Islamization of an African community, because in reality there is accommodation and synthesis but no complete breakthrough from one stage of religious change to another. It suggested instead a model based on a movement along a continuum between tawhid al oluhiya and tawhid al rububiya .
9. The research also proved that it is rather difficult to talk about.
10. The marginalization model though important in delineating the historical process of religious change in Africa and the socio-economic elements that facilitated the move foreword, it is insufficient to explain the dissemination of Islam among the Zaghawa without the syncretism model.

11. This research indicated that in the same society people at different stages of the same process can be encountered therefore it is inappropriate to analyze religious aspects of a particular Muslim society as though it is single homogeneous group.

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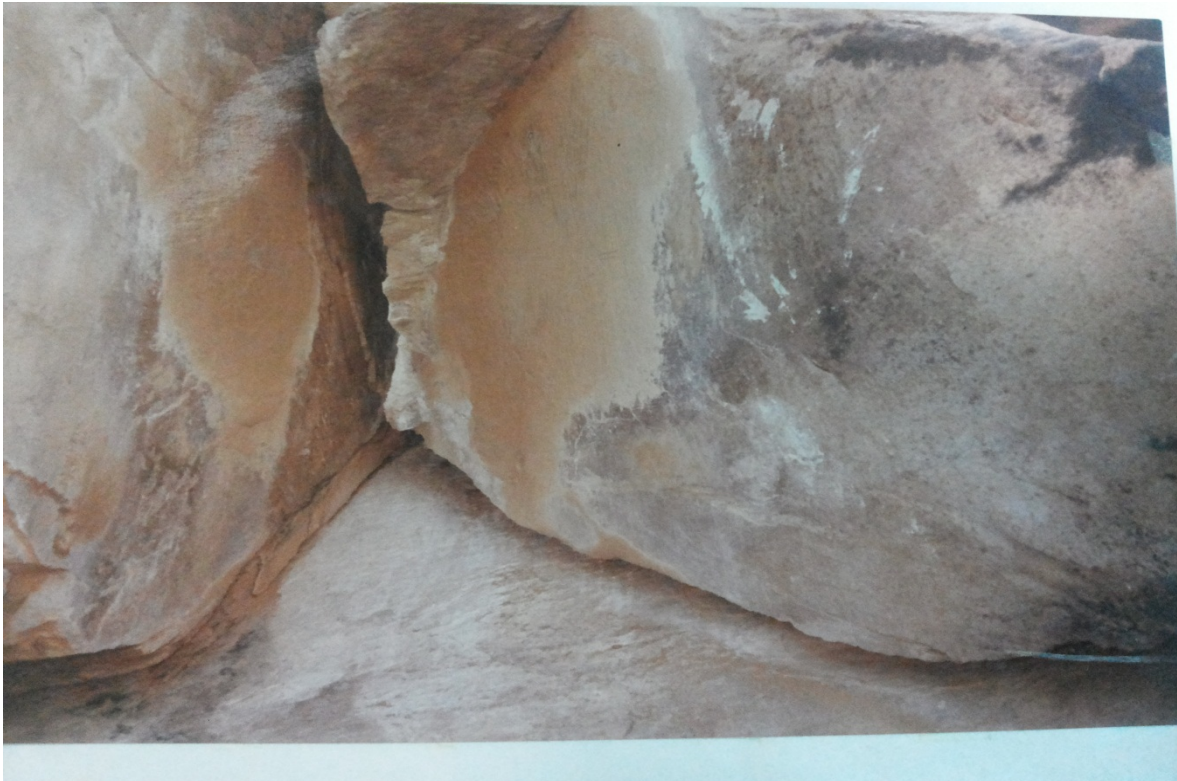
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**APPENDIX**

**Figure 1: Plate (1): Betti manda (sacred tree)**



**Figure 2: Plate (2): grubo manda (sacred rock)**





**Figure 3: Plate (3): a client beseeching Allah through the mediation of the dead weli**



**Figure 4: Plate (4) (a): The Khalwa of Turba**



Figure 5: students reciting Quran in the Khalwa of Turba in Dar Zaghawa



Figure 6: The rain seal

