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The Islamization of the Beja until the 19th century

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Abstract

The Beja tribes belong to the oldest known nations not only in the Sudan but also in the whole Africa. Their history goes back to the antiquity and nowadays they inhabit the eastern parts of the Islamic Republic of Sudan, the northern triangle of Eritrea, the Ababda tribe lives in the southern parts of Egypt around Assuan, and small enclaves of the Beja can be found in the northern tip of Ethiopia.

In this paper I will try to show the process of Islamization of these Cushitic people and to reinterpret as well as to present less known or insufficiently accented facts. There are several uncertainties that require attention. First of all, the date of the beginning of Islamization differs according to several scholars and authors. Second, it is difficult to find some adequate conclusions of the early Islamization of the Beja while we know almost nothing about the extent of this process in the 9th and 10th centuries. Even though we have some direct sources from Arab scholars such as Ibn Battuta, al-Mas'udi, Ibn Jubair and some others, the information about Islam among the Beja differ, so we have no clear idea of the early Islamization of the Beja tribes. In my opinion, we cannot consider the conversion to Islam a quick, but rather a gradual process caused by the intrusion of the Arab tribes since the 9th century and by the increasing importance of the Beja camel guiders and caravan route leaders. Moreover, as examples of some other peoples show, the conversion to Islam or Christianity is always slower in the case of nomadic people than in the case of sedentary population.

To sum up, we can talk about beginnings of Islamization of the Beja as early as in the 10th century but we should think of the 18th and the 19th centuries as the final phase of Islamization of the Beja, according to some scholars researching Islam. The differences in practicing Islam between some of the Beja tribes indicate that Islamization of these nomadic people was not a unified and sudden process.



1. Introduction

The Beja belong to the longest known people in Africa. Their history goes back to ancient times and we know them from many stone inscriptions as well as from the works of ancient and Medieval Greek, Roman and Arab authors. In the framework of the scientific field, there has been a long-lasting discussion, whether the Beja can be identified with the ancient Blemmyes. In this sense, mainly linguists like Andrzej Zaborski and Werner Vycichl have discussed this topic (Zaborski 1966, 1967, 1989, 1999; Vycichl 1958a, 1958b). Be it as it may, the connection between the Blemmyes and the Beja seems more probable than the connection between the Beja and some other ancient populations as Ichtyofags, Troglodytes, Medju, Taggaites, and others (Kirwan 1979).

Nowadays, the majority of the Beja live in the North-East of Sudan, but we may also find smaller numbers of the Beja living in southern Egypt and northern Eritrea. The Beja confess to Islam, but we cannot think of it as a cohesive and motionless fact. There are groups confessing to the traditions of Abul Hassan ash-Shadhili, and others that do not. In the following paper I will focus on the process of the coming of Islam among the Beja. The Arabs from the Arabian peninsula acted as bearers of ideas and goods, as well as Islam, they penetrated to the North-East of Africa since the 7th century and helped to islamize the indigenous population on the other side of the Red Sea. On the other hand, as we will see, acceptance of Islam among the Beja was not a simple and easy process that occurred within years, but a long and slow development lasting for centuries. At the beginning of the 21st century, though being Muslims, the Beja were in opposition to the arabic Muslim government, and this fact also helps us not to perceive Islam as a monolith, as it is sometimes expressed in the media. In general, this article can be viewed as a contribution to the history of the Beja people.

2. First steps

The words *balwiet* and *balwia* are terms for Arabic or Arabs in the language of the northern Beja. It is possible that these words had their origin in the era of the first contacts with the



Arab population, or the Balliyy respectively. The Balliyy tribe came from Sinai, and during the reign of khalifa Umar (634 – 644) they advanced as far as the South of Egypt. The first Arabs had migrated to northern Africa since 641 to spread Islam and the new order. The leader of these groups was Amr ibn al-As. His task was to finish the Nubian threat on the southern parts of Egypt.

In the 7th century, when the Arabs began to migrate to the North-East of Africa, the inhabitants of Nubia and Alwa were confessing to Christianity, and among them probably some of the Beja. The relationship between the Beja people and Christianity has not been sufficiently explained so far, but we may say, that the Christianization of the Beja was more superficial, than anything else. The first crucial moment in the history of Arab infiltration and the potential clash between Islam and Christianity were the years 651-652 and the occupation of Dongala lead by Abdallah ibn Sa'ad. The Arabs plundered the church and reached an agreement of trade and alliance. Since these years, there was nothing that kept the Arab migrants from settling in conquered areas, in the vicinity of the Beja and Nubian population. The Arabs did not want them to be subordinated to them, but to take their raids under control. The agreement that was signed between the two sides was called *baqt*, and according to Yusuf Fadl Hassan:

Baqt remained the major factor in the Muslim-Nubian relations for six centuries (Hasan 1967:14).

The Arab migration in Sudan was held in two ways. The first one has already been mentioned, the way from Egypt into the South. The second migration wave was taken across the Red Sea, the causes of this migration can also be found in preventing of pirates raiding from Africa to the Arab peninsula. Within these periods of Arab infiltration the Beja were confronted with the Semitic and Muslim elements from two sides. During the reign of Abdalmalik (715 – 717), the Dahlak archipelago was captured to prevent it against the pirate raids from Africa. It was the first occupation of the African coastal area in the Red Sea. This act brought many activities of Arabian merchants who helped to spread Islam. Nevertheless,



the Beja, alarmed by the Arab intrusions, intensified their raids on the Egyptian-Sudanese border, where they were defeated by an army lead by Ubaidullah ibn al-Habhab.

In 831 the Beja raided the Upper Egypt, concretely the region of Qift, where chaos and violence prevailed until Abdallah ibn Jahan forced King Kanun to sign a treaty, which guaranteed either one hundred camels or three hundred dinars. Kanun also had to promise that he would respect the Muslim faith as well as protect their property and lives. The move of Arabs towards the South caused the move of other tribes penetrating Ethiopia since the 7th century. For Ethiopia, the consequences of these migrations were disastrous and Carlo Conti Rossini talks about the "century of absolute darkness" in this sense (Conti Rossini 1928:266). Christian states found themselves endangered by the raids of the Beja, to whom Conti Rossini ascribes the major part in final destruction of the Axum Empire. According to al-Jaqubi, the Beja founded several "kingdoms" between the Red Sea and the Nile, each having its own sovereignty (Budge 1970; Zaborski 1966).

Since 831 the Beja were subjects of khalifa and the Beja country, extending from Assuan in Egypt to Badi in the Sudan, which was entirely khalifa's personal property. In 854 the Beja refused to pay taxes and they plundered several villages in the Upper Egypt. On the personal command of khalifa al-Mutawakkil the revolt was suppressed. Andrzej Zaborski contributes that the Arabian punishment expedition had no other character, because the gold mines were not in use yet and the only wealth of the Beja were their camels.

Now, it is time for us to stress one major aspect that helped to Islamize and Arabize the native population not only in the Sudan, but also in other parts of Africa. The major influence of the diffusion of Islamic ideas was the development of trade across Africa. First, in the case of Sudan it was caused mainly due to the discovery of the diamond and gold mines; second, along with the previous fact since the 10th century several important ports on the Red Sea coasts were created. The nomadic people played a major role in caravan routes, thus, they were often in contact with the Arab population. Besides the transport of goods, there was also a significant exchange of ideas. John Spencer Trimingham asserts that Islam in Africa was spread particularly by merchants and pilgrims rather than by religious zealots (Trimingham 1968:38). Coinciding with the Islamization the Beja were also influenced by Arabization, which is most evident in their genealogy. Their lineage distinctly bears an Arabic appearance.



The Arabs began to settle among the Beja since the turn of the 9th century, but in spite of this, they never had prevalence over the Beja. We can search for an explanation in the climatic conditions, because most of the Beja areas are not hospitable and the Arab settlers were looking for a better climate along the river Nile. Consanguineous affiliation of the Arabs and the Beja meant that a part of the Beja considered certain Kahil – the offspring of the Prophet's cousin Zubair ibn al-Awwan – their predecessor.

3. The Beja in the writings of Arab scholars

When talking about the Arab infiltration in the Sudan it is useful to read the work of the famous Arab medieval scholar Ibn Chaldun and his *Muqqadimma*, where he says:

Tribes, that are protected by the inaccessible mountain range against the nomadic Arabs, are in safety from their raids and invasions. The Arabs neither get across the mountains nor undergo an endeavor or danger to get to them (Ibn Khaldun 1972:148).

In the 9th century, the Arab tribes of Guhayna and Rabi'a began to settle in areas inhabited by the Beja and intermingled with the local population. After the discovery of the gold mines in Wadi al-Allaqi, the interest of the migrants intensified. Abul Hassan Ali al-Mas'udi brings us some interesting and useful information in his famous work *Gold-bearing deposit and gem mines*:

In their [Beja] country there are rich smaragd and gold-bearing deposits – it is a gnarled gold, called *tibr*. Lesser groups of the Beja raid the Nubian country on their pedigree-camels, plunder and capture the prisoners. In early times the Nubians were stronger than the Beja, but only until the coming and rise of Islam among them (Al-Mas'udi 1983:264).



Unfortunately, he does not give us any information about the direct impact on the lives of the Beja people and the intensity of their religious life. He only gives us examples of Arab infiltration:

The people of the Rabi'a tribe married the Beja daughters and gave their own daughters to them; this double conjunction strengthened the power of the Beja as well as of the Rabi'a, so that they could with the help of their new allies defeat the closest enemies, like the Kahtan tribe and some other Arab tribes originating from Mudar (Al-Mas'udi 1983:264-265).

The gold mines were in the hands of Abu Mansur Bishr from the Rabi'a tribe, whose allies formed thirty thousand Beja men, who, according to al-Mas'udi, "are called Hadariba and there are among all the Beja the only ones confessing Islam" (Al-Mas'udi 1983:264 – 265). If we can take these assertions of al-Mas'udi as absolutely relevant, then we may consider the 10th century as the beginning of Islamization of the Beja people. Nevertheless, we have to use this term carefully as long as we know nothing about the intensity and extension of the Islamization in these areas. The Hadariba tribe, mentioned by al-Mas'udi, is, according to some scholars, the Beja term for the so-called Hadarima or the inhabitants of Hadramaut. In the pre-Islamic period these inhabitants migrated to the North-East of Africa and settled in the vicinity of the Beja, north of Suakin.

According to Ibn Hawqal, the Beja were Muslims only by name, though they adopted some aspects of Islamic belief. Andrzej Zaborski also agrees with this statement. Moreover, John Spencer Trimmingham asserts that the Rabi'a tribe, rather than Arabize the Beja, itself absorbed the Beja customs, beliefs and language of the Beja. In the second half of the 10th century, the Arab historian al-Yaqubi mentioned the existence of some Beja "kingdom", named N.qís or Nagís with the capital H.ğ.r. Andrzej Zaborski points out the Semitic character of the word Nagís, thus, it is possible that it was borrowed from Arabic and transformed. Al-Yaqubi mentions three Beja kingdoms, which Zaborski opposes that we can talk about only one Beja "kingdom", the others were the kingdoms of Baria and Tigré. (Zaborski 1966, 1999)



In the 70's of the 10th century, Ibn Selim al-Aswani (ca 971) traveled to the Beja country, his book "Nubia, Makuria, Alwa, Beja and the Nile" disappeared some centuries after, but another Arab scholar, al-Maqrizi used it as a relevant source and he revealed matrilineality among the Beja. Since the 10th century, it is more than probable, that these customs vanished and were replaced by patrilineality. This patrilineality was rather caused by Arabization than intensive Islamization. On the other hand, if Beja absorbed some of the Arab social customs, the same process could have been in the case of culture and religion.

In the second half of the 12th century (ca 1180), an Arab scholar and traveler Ibn Jubayr reached Aidhab, the city that was increasing in its prosperity, thanks to gold mines, until the decline in the 14th century. Towards the city he met "the race of black people inhabiting the mountains", how he described the Beja. He characterized them as camel owners who spent much time on routes without water, thus, he confirms a general perception of the Beja as "unrestrained", as we know for example from Ibn Battuta. Ibn Jubayr states that the Beja "loot valuable objects, especially those of old age" (Ibn Jobair 1949:80). Unfortunately he does not give any concrete example of what he means. He describes the Beja country as inaccessible, where people risk their lives because of insufficient supplies of water. But the Beja had to be subordinate to some provincial leader, as Ibn Jubair states that they "sometimes go to the city to visit local governor" (Ibn Jobair 1949:82). In the case of faith Ibn Jubayr is very skeptical when he accuses them of faithlessness, "except the formula of God's unity they say to express confession of Islam" (Ibn Jobair 1949:82).

The city of Aidhab prospered of trade, but when Ibn Battuta visited it on his journey through Asia and Africa (1325 – 1354) we cannot consider the city very prosperous. Ibn Battuta finds Aidhab quite sufficiently supplied with fish, milk, dates and cereals, imported from the Upper Egypt. While Ibn Jobayr wrote that the Beja lived around the city in the 12th century, in the 14th century Ibn Battuta stated that the inhabitants of the city were

the Bujah, black-skinned people, who wrap themselves in yellow blankets and tie headbands, each about a fingerbreadth wide, round their heads. They give daughters no share in their inheritance (Ibn Battuta 1929:69).



We know about the Beja economy in the 14th century and that their food consisted of camel meat etc. Unfortunately, he does not mention their attitude towards Islam.

Let us return to the end of the 13th century, when Aidhab began to feel the decline of gold mines, having been almost exploited at that time. At the same time a new danger had arisen in shape of the Egyptian mamluks. Moreover, in 1272, the Nubian king David's city had been plundered, and after this disaster there followed a period of fights and quarrels between the Arab tribes, until the Egyptian sultan had to pacify the Guhayna and Rifa'a tribes. In 1426, Aidhab was completely looted by the sultan Bars Bey. It was a revenge for attacking the caravan route by the inhabitants of Aidhab. Penetration of mamluks caused migration of various tribes, decline of Nubia, and confirmation of Islamic expansion far to the African interior. The Turkish impact began to be more evident not only in Egypt, but also in the Sudan, which Ibn Battuta comments as follows:

On reaching Aidhab we found that al-Hadrabi, the sultan of the Bujah, was engaged in hostilities with the Turks, that he had sunk the ships, and the Turks had fled before him (Ibn Battuta 1929:69)

The history of cultural communication between the Beja and Arab settlers was at least in the first three centuries the history of mutual quarrels, fights and wars. If we may advert to the words of John Spencer Trimingham, it seems probable that the Islamization of the Beja as well as other nomads in the area, run slowly and superficially, and we cannot say that Islam settled among the Beja easily. According to the sources we have at disposal we may see opinions of the Arab authors on the Beja true faith, which are usually a bit sceptical. Islam finally settled in the Beja country during the New Ages, which we may prove on the basis of the 19th century sources, for example the German traveller Alfred von Kremer characterizes the Ababda and Bisharin tribes (two Beja socio-political units) as fully mixed with Arab blood and there is no doubt about their confession to Islam (von Kremer 1863).



4. History versus anthropology?

Christianity was adopted rather superficially by the Beja so we cannot talk about their real Christianization. According to the medieval Arab written sources we have at disposal, we may say, that Islamization of the Beja was not a mass and quick process either, at least in the first centuries after the Islam and the Arabs came to settle in the North-East of Africa. Its mode was due to a lot of aspects rather gradual than intensive, while we can place its peak to the first centuries of the New Age. Islam among the Beja can be characterized in two basic ways: First, as a process of bolstering of ethnic and social identity; second, as a space for redefinition and reinterpretation of old customs and rituals and their incorporation into the new religious system.

In the Sudan, as well as anywhere else in Africa and Asia, Islam has specific forms and cannot be perceived as a monolith that is coming through the same processes from Western Sahara to Indonesia. The Beja adopted Islam and a lot of obligations related to it. At the same time, many ancient, pre-Islamic beliefs or customs prevail, or they have been somehow redefined and reinterpreted. Such an example can be shown in a spiritual way, where *ghouls* (spirits or *jinns* respectively) still prevail. They live together with people, adopt human shape and moreover, they are even organized in clan structures, similar to those of the Beja. Ghouls can be divided into several subgroups: *afārit*, *šayātín*, *riyāh*, *zairān* etc. (Trimingham 1949:171). They inhabit places such as old houses or cemeteries. The Amar'ar women in Deim Omna allegedly refused to use local latrines, because they believe that they are inhabited by *ghouls* who would make them infertile. They also believe that the *jinns* or *ghouls* still return to the dark and dirty places in the peripheral areas of the villages. Such stories are still present among the Beja (Palmisano 1991:67-68).

Since the rise of the Mahdist movement, the Beja in urban areas – especially in Port Sudan – became adherents of Sufism. The Amar'ar were adherents of the Khatmiya order. As Palmisano states,

in the overcrowded conditions of the squatter areas, the brotherhoods represent for many persons and more than ever an opportunity for free expression and re-confirmation of an



heterodox social identity experienced in the margins of Islam and the market economy as well as in the everyday life in a center of islamization, occidentalization and industrialization such as Port Sudan (Palmisano 1991:68).

The Beja people were traditionally perceived as “Muslims only by name“ by the medieval Arab authors but this interpretation is wrong when we consider that the Beja incorporated many of their pre-Islamic customs into "their" Islam. John Spencer Trimingham, one of the most important scholars on Islam in Africa, gives the following view on religious life of the Beja:

The Islam of the majority of the Beja cannot be regarded as more than skin deep. None are particularly religious, though like most of the Sudanese they are extremely superstitious and show credulity of any fekis who gain amongst them a reputation for possessing *baraka* (Trimingham 1949:15).

The concept of *baraka* is very crucial for the Beja belief; people, who possess baraka, enjoy remarkable attention. Baraka is not only something that people have, but also that people are. *Baraka* among the Beja (*héequal* in to-beč'aiyiye) has a lot in common with Arabic *baraka*, meaning "giving prosperity, increasing fertility, mediating blessing from God, bringing good luck to people" (Jacobsen 1998:22). The last meaning seems to dominate.

Generally, Frode Jacobsen disagrees with Trimingham's thesis about the Beja's religious beliefs and life. On the contrary, he considers them a very religiously based people. He adds one story from his own fieldwork:

I once witnessed a couple of Muslim teachers of Islam coming from Suakin to a remote rural area in Sinkat to preach the observance of basic duties of Islam to what they recognized as ignorant rural Beja people. Among other things they wanted them to pray at the prescribed times. Learning that they had been following the wrong time schedule for



their prayers, the rural Beja tried very eagerly to correct their mistakes (Jacobsen 1998:22).

The ideas, thoughts, and prescriptions of the Koran are obvious in other aspects of life, too. In the last decades, especially Scandinavian anthropologists have uncovered the veil of secrets covering the Beja spiritual life. The Norwegian anthropologist Frode Jacobsen, mentioned before, has dealt with a research of diseases and how Beja understand them. He concludes that the Beja explain many diseases and illnesses on the basis of their knowledge of the Koran. Jacobsen also notices that they usually put traditional knowledge above knowledge taken from books. A lot of their information and experiences can be compared to that of American or Mexican Indians (Jacobsen 1998).

If we accept the thesis of John Spencer Trimmingham about the Beja Islam, which corresponds to those of the Arab medieval scholars, then we may admit it only when we take a look at the high illiteracy, which means that not many people really know the Koran and all the duties and prescriptions that the Holy Book includes. On the other hand, we can use our anthropological knowledge to focus on the individual instead on the general situation. The Frode Jacobsen story proofs us that we cannot measure religiosity on the basis of literacy. At the same time, to ask, whether Islam among the Beja is deeply rooted or not does not make any sense, because we do not have any criteria, with which we could consider this fact. There surely exist a large amount of prescriptions of Islam that the Beja do not take seriously, but there are also many that they do. This is undoubtedly an example of many other African Muslim societies, and not only Muslim, and it only forces us to perceive Islam not as a monolith, but as a religion with many colors, tastes and voices.



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