

How Did Islam Enter Sudan?

(Translated)

Before the arrival of Islam, the region known today as Sudan was not a unified political, cultural, or religious entity. It was home to diverse ethnic groups, customs, and beliefs. In the north, the Nubians practiced Orthodox Christianity, and the Nubian language, with its various dialects, was the medium of politics, culture, and communication. In the east, the Beja tribes, descendants of Ham (son of Noah), had their own distinct language, culture, and religious practices. To the south, the Zanj tribes, with their unique features and languages, adhered to pagan beliefs, and similar diversity existed in the west. ⁽¹⁾

This ethnic and cultural diversity was a hallmark of Sudan's pre-Islamic population, shaped by its strategic geographic location in northeastern Africa. Sudan served as a gateway to the Horn of Africa and a bridge between the Arab world, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Its vital ports on the Red Sea, a key global trade route, further enhanced its role in civilizational, cultural, political, and economic exchanges throughout history.

The first early connection between Islam and Sudan can be traced to the migration of the Prophet's companions to Abyssinia "Alhabacha" (in Rajab during the fifth year of Prophethood /the second year of the public proclamation of Islam). Although the primary purpose of this migration was to seek refuge from persecution in Mecca, it marked the initial presence of Islam in the African and Sudanese context. In 6 AH, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) sent a letter with his envoy, Amr ibn Umayyah, to the Negus, inviting him to Islam. The Negus responded positively⁽²⁾.

With the conquest of Egypt by Amr ibn al-As during the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab in 20 AH/641 CE, the Nubians felt threatened as the Islamic state began consolidating its administrative and political control over the northern Nile Valley, particularly Upper Egypt, which was strategically and geographically linked to the Nubian kingdoms in Sudan. In response, the Nubian kingdoms launched preemptive attacks on Upper Egypt. Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab ordered Amr ibn al-As, the governor of Egypt, to send military expeditions into Nubian territory to protect Egypt's southern borders, to secure trade routes, to eliminate any power loyal to the Byzantine Empire and convey the message of Islam. In 21 AH, Amr dispatched an army led by Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri, but the Muslims were forced to retreat due to fierce resistance from the Nubians, who were skilled archers capable of precise shots, even targeting the eyes. This earned them the nickname "Archers of the Pupils" (Rumat al-Hadaq).

In 26 AH / 647 CE, Abdullah ibn Sa'd ibn Abi Sarh was appointed governor of Egypt during the caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan. He prepared a well-equipped campaign against the Nubians, advancing south until Dongola, the capital of the Christian Nubian kingdom, in 31 AH/652 CE.

Before Islam, Nubia was divided into 3 kingdoms, Nuba (Nobatia), Muqurra, and Alawa (from Aswan south to Khartoum today), then after that, the kingdoms of Nuba and Muqurra united between 570 CE to 652 CE and was called the Kingdom of Nuba, and its capital was Dongola

After a severe siege, the Nubians requested peace, and Abdullah agreed ⁽³⁾. A treaty known as the "Baqt" was concluded and a mosque was built in Dongola. Scholars have debated the meaning of "Baqt," with some suggesting it derives from the Latin "Pactum," meaning agreement. Historians and writers do not see this reconciliation as other peace treaties in which the Muslims imposed jizya on those they reconciled with, but rather as an agreement or truce between the Muslims and the Nuba.

The treaty granted the Nubians security, stipulating that Muslims would not attack them, and Nubians could pass through Muslim lands as travelers but not settle. The Nubians were required to protect any Muslim or ally entering their territory, maintain the mosque built by Muslims in Dongola, and provide 360 heads of slaves annually. In return, Muslims supplied them with grain and clothing (as the Nubian king had complained of food shortages) but were not obligated to defend them against enemies. This treaty ensured the security of Muslim borders, facilitated cross-border trade, and allowed Nubian strength to serve the Islamic state. Over time, ideas spread through trade, and Muslim merchants and preachers played a pivotal role in peacefully propagating Islam, especially through good conduct. Thus, trade caravans carried with them an ideology, language, civilization, and way of life as well as trade goods.

Arabic language also gained prominence in daily life, particularly in northern Sudan. The Baqt treaty established lasting contact between Muslims and Christian Nubians for six centuries. ⁽⁵⁾ During this period, Islam gradually permeated northern and eastern Sudan from the mid-7th century CE

through Muslim traders and Arab migrants. These great Arab migrations were infiltrated through 3 routes: The first From Egypt, the second from the Hejaz via ports like Bada'a, Aydhab and Suakin, and the third: From Morocco and North Africa across central Sudan. However, the impact of these early migrations was limited compared to the large-scale Arab movements from Egypt southward starting in the 9th century CE. Back then, a turning point came during the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim's reign (218–227 AH/833–842 CE), when he relied on Turkish soldiers and marginalized Arab troops, prompting widespread Arab migrations into Sudan. This influx led to the Arabization of the Beja, Nubian, and central Sudanese regions. Thus, the 3rd century AH / 9th century AD witnessed large-scale Arab migrations to Sudan and then penetrated the vast plains to the south and east.⁽⁶⁾ Settling in these areas helped in contacting and influencing the people of the country and influencing them to accept Islam and enter it.

By the 12th century CE, after the Crusaders occupied Palestine, the Sinai route became unsafe for Egyptian and Maghrebi pilgrims, who diverted to the port of Aydhab (known as the "Port of Gold"). This shift boosted Aydhab's religious and commercial significance, as it became a hub for pilgrims and trade with Yemen and India.⁽⁷⁾

In 1272 CE, when Nubian King David violated the treaty by attacking Aswan, the Muslims, under Sultan al-Zahir Baybars, were forced to retaliate. A new treaty was signed in 1276 CE. Finally, in 1317 CE, Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun conquered Dongola after King David's nephew, Abdullah, converted to Islam in 1316 CE, facilitating Islam's spread in Nubia.⁽⁸⁾

As for The Christian kingdom of Alwa fell in 1504 CE after an alliance between the Arab Abdallab and Funj tribes, leading to the establishment of the Funj Islamic Sultanate, also known as the "Blue Sultanate" or "Sultanate of Sennar." This marked the first Arab-Islamic state in Sudan after the spread of Islam and Arabic.⁽⁹⁾

As Arab-Islamic influence grew, ruling families in Nubia, Alwa, Sennar, Taqali, and Darfur embraced Islam after being Christian or pagan. The conversion of the ruling class to Islam led to a multidimensional revolution in Sudan's history. Muslim ruling families were formed, and with them, the first models of Sudanese Islamic kingdoms were established, which had a great impact in empowering this religion and contributed effectively to spreading Islam, establishing its pillars and laying the foundations of Islamic civilization in the land of Sudan. Some of these Muslim rulers became advocates for Islam, promoting justice, enjoining good, and forbidding evil.

So that, Islam spread powerfully amid pagan and Christian missionary pressures, with trade caravans and scholars playing key roles. The peaceful propagation of Islam through persuasion, evidence, and good treatment became a hallmark of Sudan's Islamic history. As noted by the scholar Abu al-Abbas Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti: "The people of Sudan have voluntarily converted to Islam without anyone seizing them, such as the people of Kano and Borno, and we have never heard that anyone seized them before they converted to Islam."⁽¹¹⁾

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Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir
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