
A RELIGIOUS VACUUM EXISTS OVER MUCH OF AFRICA AND
ALTHOUGH ISLAM IS SPREADING, ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY IS CHANGING

AFRICA'S OWN BRAND OF ISLAM

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"Even in the Sudan region where we find a genuine Islamic culture we have to take account of the fact that it is also African."

Sudanese wrestlers.

George Rodger: Magnum

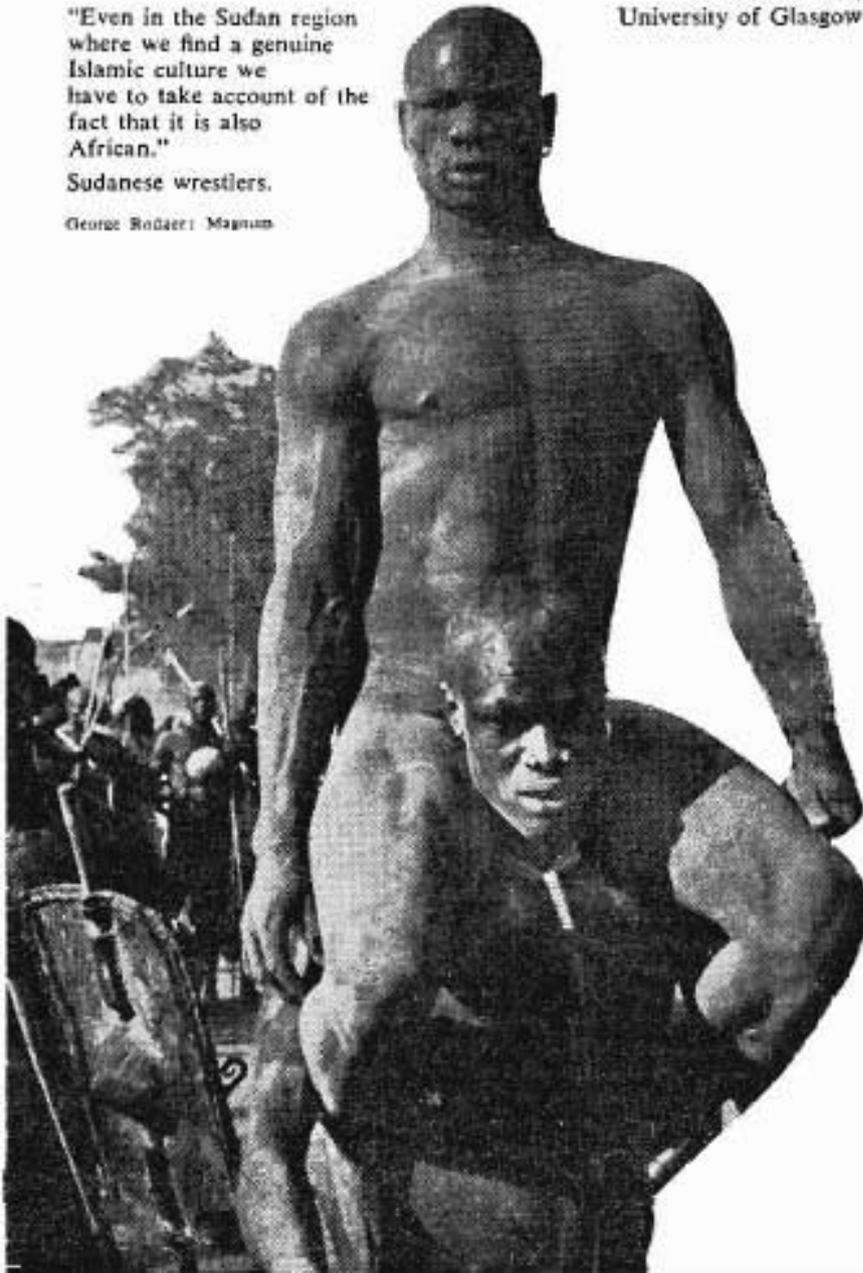
J. Spencer Trimingham

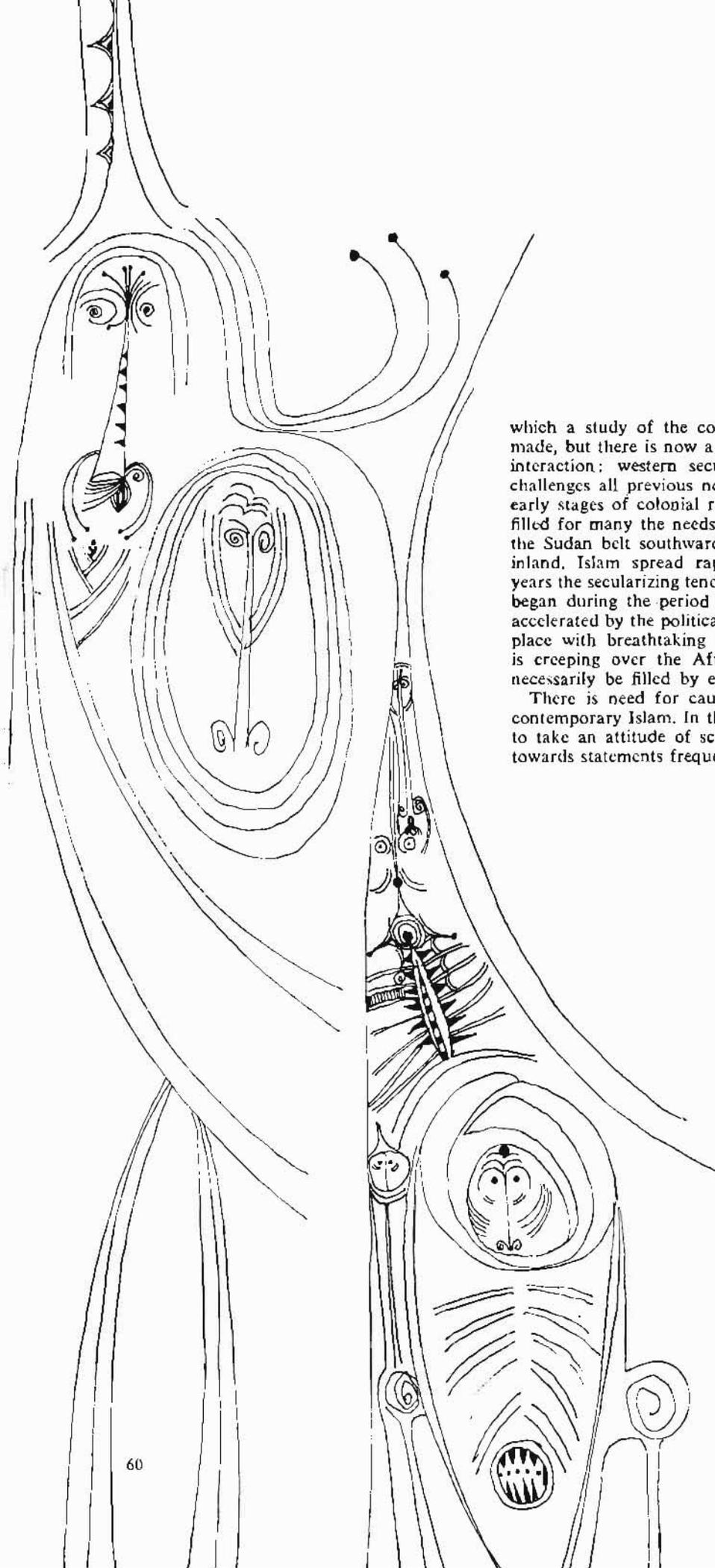
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Although the power of religion to change and mould society has diminished, it is unwise to dismiss its significance. Islam in Africa has been one of the forces whose original inspiration lay outside the continent, but which has moulded the life and shaped the destinies of many of its peoples. Until recently the role of Islam has rarely been taken into account in studies even of people who claimed Islam as their religion. Writers of studies on social anthropology at one time used to assert that they were concerned with a people's "original" state, and anyway, they said, Islam had had so little effect upon their social institutions that it could be ignored. Now a change is becoming apparent and the International African Institute is sponsoring a seminar on "The Spread of Islam in Tropical Africa" being held at the Ahmadu Bello University at Zaria in Northern Nigeria this week.

In the Sudan belt lying immediately south of the Sahara, Islam has become an African religion, whose agents were African, and which could therefore be assimilated into communal life without upsetting society. Islam's greatest expansion has been within and south of this belt and has taken place since the end of the 18th century. This expansion derived first from the formation of theocratic states and then, since 1890, from the new conditions which resulted from the occupation of Africa by European powers. The result was a lack of uniformity in the assimilation and depth of Islamization. In other words, Islam south of the Sahara can rarely compare with Islam, say, in Egypt where it was a fully integrated culture, woven into the very fabric of society. The Islam of many Africans is marginal. Not merely are the peoples of the Sudan belt not all Muslim, but their Islamic culture is not homogeneously Islamic. Even in the Sudan region where we find a genuine Islamic culture we have to take account of the fact that it is also African. It is more than just a regional Islamic civilization: religious life still has strong roots in the African religious past. Only a few strata of society (the clerical and trading classes) are participating at all fully in Islamic culture.

Islam and African culture had the opportunity throughout centuries of unbroken contact, through mutual interaction, to form an African Islam with its own characteristics. This is the foundation upon





which a study of the contemporary scene must be made, but there is now a third factor in the cultural interaction: western secular culture whose impact challenges all previous norms and standards. In the early stages of colonial rule African Islamic culture filled for many the needs of the situation, and from the Sudan belt southwards and from the east coast inland, Islam spread rapidly. During the last ten years the secularizing tendencies of the changes which began during the period of colonial rule have been accelerated by the political changes which have taken place with breathtaking speed. A religious vacuum is creeping over the African soul, but it will not necessarily be filled by either Islam or Christianity.

There is need for caution about two aspects of contemporary Islam. In the first place, it is necessary to take an attitude of scepticism or at least reserve towards statements frequently heard nowadays about

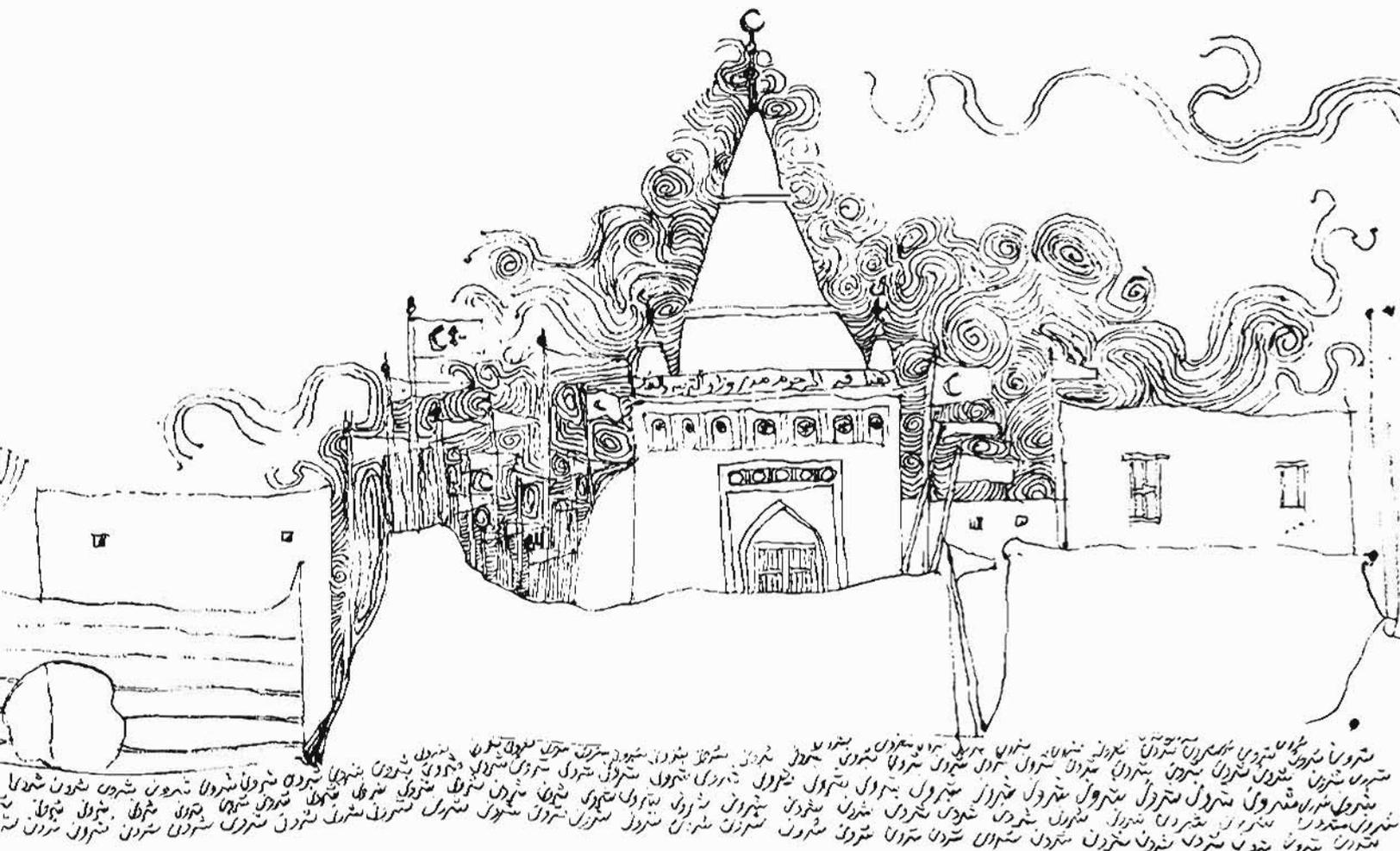
the rapidity of the spread of Islam today and about its numerical strength. On the latter point, for example, we may mention that the proliferation of mosques in East Africa has given many people a deceptive impression of the strength of Islam in that region, for many mosques belong to non-African communities who remain insulated from East African life.

Second, we need caution in estimating from surface impressions the depth of the Islam of many of those converted during the last 80 years. Caution in this respect should be obvious from comparison with the parallel spread of Christianity during the same period. Although, it is true, Islam could be assimilated more easily than Christianity and, where conditions were favourable and the apparatus existed for deepening the surface impression (clergy and an Islamic state) it might quickly affect certain social institutions, yet it often took centuries to change the ethos and institutions of an African community. Not only has the colonial period spread of Islam not had time to deepen but its influence has also been diluted by the new conditions in a changing Africa. It is particularly where Islam and western influences came at the same time that Islam lacks depth.

Africans have shown a real affinity with Islam wherever it presented itself in a Negro form carried and displayed by Africans. Where these conditions were not fulfilled, for example, where it continued to be the religion of aliens such as Arabs and Asians in East Africa, it has failed to take root. Had Islam been present in any significant form in South Africa it might have answered the needs of the situation there, and who can guess the speed with which it



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might have spread and its possibly revolutionary role? However, in Central and South Africa Islam is weak: it has not become indigenous and has few African adherents. In such conditions Islam is sometimes adopted by individuals, perhaps as a gesture of revolt against a white Christianity, but such individual conversions have had little social significance since no real African Muslim communities were formed. Many examples can be shown of Muslims throughout Africa who have strong economic (and, if Africans, sometimes social) influence, but little religious influence. These include many immigrant African traders living in their own colonies in West African towns (Hausa in coastal towns, Naga in Dahomey, Yarse among Mossi), some Swahili among Bantu, and, of course, Syrians in West Africa and Asians in East Africa.

INDIVIDUAL CONVERSIONS

The rapid spread of Islam which characterized the colonial period (from 1890 to World War II) has slowed down, very noticeably in some parts. In the past, Islam offered notable advantages to Africans whose spiritual, and frequently communal, life was upset or disrupted through wars and slave-raiding and subsequently under the conditions of colonial rule. But these advantages are diminishing, especially since the withdrawal of colonial rule.

Nowadays it is often Africans *not* in close touch with established Islam who are impressed by it. What they hear, perhaps from neo-Muslims about its practices, flexibility and community feeling, may evoke a personal response, but especially it appeals to individuals as an alternative to Christianity. Modern

Africans in touch with established Islam, especially the political type, however, are often repelled by it. They associate class and racial attitudes with it, dislike its authoritarian tendencies, and react against the conservative and obscurantist attitudes of its clergy, especially towards modern education.

Although traditional Islamic culture is stagnant or, where it is being undermined by the challenge of new values, is weakening, it is at the same time spreading in some regions (Guinea and parts of Mali, Nigeria and the Nilotic Sudan) in the old ways by gradually influencing a group (family or village). In others it is spreading by individual conversion which happened in the past in the Sudan belt only with such people as detribalized slaves, though it was the normal method in East Africa. It is offering itself to the "new men" (the *évolués*) and urban proletariat as a personal religion, with positive and negative appeals for its adoption. If, under changing conditions, Islam is felt to offer social and individual advantages, it is likely to be adopted. Where it is stressed as "the religion of the African", its appeal may derive from more negative aspects. It is therefore being adopted as a religion in the western sense rather than as a civilization, but at varying rates and generally slowly and imperceptibly.

SECULARIZING ISLAM

The whole tendency in Africa is towards increasing secularization and this is what is undermining the influence of Islam. Secularization does not rule out religion of course, but it does mean a complete change of relationship and outlook, different from



that which operated in the medieval Christian and still rules the Sudan Islamic world. This is not only an important religious question, it vitally affects society.

Religion still has its place in a secularized world, but it no longer permeates and directs the stream of life. Other interests, political and materialistic, dominate men's lives and are more dynamic than religion. Modern African politicians are aware of the usefulness of the secular trend for they are determined that potential rival forces such as Islam and the Christian Church shall not be powerful enough to affect the state, and they are prepared to use nationalism as a religion.

Thus among some modern Muslims a new form of Islamic consciousness is being formed. We find:

- ▶ a secular attitude towards religion; the restriction of the effect of Islam to purely religious aspects and such social aspects as are not likely to change society in any drastic way.
- ▶ religious tolerance (really indifference) both towards Christianity (change of religion is no longer

a great crime against society) and towards African religion in the form of remnant beliefs and rituals retained by the neo-Muslims.

▶ dislike of many aspects and psychological attitudes in the old established Islam with its medieval outlook, legalistic morality and the like—the attitude of the religious leaders towards the new, such as modern education, modern Arabic, or the changing position of women.

Islam will have much less effect upon social institutions than it exercised in the past. Society is being moulded more and more by other forces than religion. Yet one must not infer that the old type of Islam is doomed to extinction. We know from western society that the entrenched and privileged will cling to their privileges and the institutions in which they are enshrined, and that religious forms, seemingly irrelevant to modern society, can not only survive, but even spurt into surges of popularity. Religion will continue to move and mould people but, if what is happening in the Christian world is any guide, it will be in different ways and will play a different role from what it has done in the past.

What this rapid sketch means is that we have people at many different levels of participation in Islamic culture. This is one of the ways which makes the study of modern change in Africa differ from that in long established Muslim lands where the whole population has been Muslim for centuries. On the broadest level we need an awareness of three spheres of penetration: a) regions of established Islam, chiefly in the Sudan belt and a thin line along the east coast, and basically a medieval legalistic type of Islam; b) regions where Islam has penetrated within the last hundred years; and c) regions, basically pagan with strong Christian influence, where Islam is weak, represented chiefly by immigrants from other regions or outside Africa.

The rapidity of the changes which are taking place in Africa pose many new questions. What is the attitude of the new governments to religion, to the propagation of Islam or Christianity? Will the increased pace of secularization lead to the progressive disestablishment of Islam in the states of the Sudan belt? What is the place of religion in the life and thought of the neo-Muslims? To what extent does Islam remain a determining factor in the different sections of African Islamic society today?

At any rate the role that Islam will play in Africa will be different from the role it has played in the past, and it is perhaps important for the present seminar to concern itself with the present day significance (including the changing role) of Islam in Africa more than with the actual phenomena of the spread of Islam, though this is part of the assessment. If the seminar can coordinate the work of individual observers of the changing African Islamic scene and gain a better based overall view and relate Islam to the life of African society it will perform a useful task. But why does the idea still persist that Africa begins south of the Sahara? It is impossible to ignore the cultural influences and interrelationships between the states of tropical Africa and those of the north.