

Arabité, islamité, ‘soudanéité’

Being Arab, Muslim, Sudanese



WORKING PAPER NO. 1

CHANGING THE STATE OF BEING

Muslim Notions of Life, Death and the Hereafter in Western Sudan

by **Bakheit Mohammed Nur**

October 2019

Being Arab, Muslim, Sudanese.

Reshaping belongings, local practices and state policies in Sudan after the separation of South Sudan

The project focuses on dynamics of Arabization and Islamization in relation to national identity-building in Sudan through an analysis of the three notions articulation within practical processes and the practices of social actors. The central socio-anthropological approach is based on a micro-scale perspective, while also paying attention to macro-scale phenomena, in particular state policies on citizens' affiliations to an identity forged from categories of Arabness, Islamity and national integration. The aim of the project, which is rooted in classical works on issues of ethnicity, religion and nationality, is to give renewed impetus to the scientific contribution of the debate on the relations between Arab identity and Islam and the issues at stake in the relationship between State and citizens in an African country in which the colonial legacy and ethno-cultural pluralism have made the objectives of nation-building particularly complex.

Founded by the AUF (Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie) as a PCSI (Projet de Coopération Scientifique Inter-Universitaire), the project has four institutional partners: CEDEJ Khartoum, the University of Khartoum, University Paris 8/LAVUE and the Max Planck Institute. Barbara Casciarri (University Paris 8) is the scientific coordinator, Jean-Nicolas Bach (CEDEJ Khartoum) is the project leader and Mohamed A.G. Bakhit (University of Khartoum) is the coordinator of the Sudanese research team.

Nur, Bakheit Mohammed. 2019. *Changing the State of Being. Muslim Notions of Life, Death and the Hereafter in Western Sudan*, Working Paper 1, AUF Project “Arabité, islamité, ‘soudanéité’/Being Arab, Muslim, Sudanese”, Khartoum, October 2019.

CHANGING THE STATE OF BEING

Muslim Notions of Life, Death and the Hereafter in Western Sudan

ABSTRACT

In the Islamic world view, life on earth is viewed as both a test and an opportunity for humans to do deeds that comply with religious teachings. During this testing period, they determine their ultimate everlasting abode in the hereafter – be it heaven or hell – through their actions in this world. In this article, I discuss the concept of Western Sudanese Muslims, for whom death is not the end of life but a transition through which the state of being is perceived as changing to another form. I examine how Muslims deal with and respond to this transitional process. How do Muslims in Western Sudan conceive life, death and the afterlife within their range of socio-cultural contexts? What rituals do they perform when a person is dying? What meaning do these rituals have in the local socio-cultural and religious contexts? How do Muslims deal with the deceased? How do locals ceremonially initiate a cadaver into a new state of being? I address these questions empirically and provide thorough ethnographic answers to them, delving into the local socio-religious cosmology and the set of ceremonial rituals that local people perform during and after death.

RESUME:

Dans la vision musulmane la vie sur terre est conçue à la fois comme un essai et une opportunité pour les êtres humains pour réaliser des actions conformes avec les enseignements religieux. Pendant cette période d'essai, par le biais de leurs actions dans le monde, les hommes déterminent leur condition définitive dans l'au-delà – que cela soit au paradis ou en enfer. Dans cet article je présente la conception des musulmans du Soudan de l'Ouest, pour qui la mort n'est pas la fin de la vie mais une transition de l'état de l'être perçu comme en mutation vers une autre forme. J'analyse comment les musulmans du Soudan de l'Ouest affrontent ce processus de transition. Comment conçoivent-ils la vie, la mort et l'au-delà au sein d'un contexte socio-culturel ? Quels rituels performent-ils à la mort d'une personne ? Quelle signification possèdent ces rituels dans leur contexte socio-culturel et religieux ? Comment les acteurs locaux initient par des cérémonies le mort vers un nouvel état de l'être ? J'affronte ces questions par une approche empirique et j'en suggère des réponses ethnographiques, qui plongent dans la cosmologie socioreligieuse locale et dans l'ensemble de rituels cérémoniels que les acteurs locaux mettent en œuvre pendant et après la mort.

Bakheit Mohammed Nur is a lecturer at the Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, Sudan. He is also a Fritz Thyssen Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, University of Bayreuth, Germany. He holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Bayreuth. His research focuses on Anthropology of Islam; Islamic Education and Knowledge; Religion and Conflicts; Muslim Religious Specialists; Automobility and Technology. He recently authored *The Religious Men in Jebel Marra: The Process of Learning and the Performance of Islamic Rituals and Practices* (LIT Verlag, 2017).

CHANGING THE STATE OF BEING

Muslim Notions of Life, Death and the Hereafter in Western Sudan

INTRODUCTION

The end of life, or death, is a phenomenon that all living organisms must inevitably experience at some moment in time.¹ Humans' perceptions of death differ greatly across religions and cultures, even though it is a shared phenomenon. The most intriguing question with which humans wrestle in regard to death is what happens to them when they die. The answer to this question will vary from one socio-religious context to another, depending on how death is perceived within a given society. In this article, I focus on the Muslim concept of death in Western Sudan, where people believe that death is not the end of life but a transition through which the state of being is perceived as changing to another form. This change customarily entails processes and ceremonies as the deceased moves from one state of being to another. It is therefore of interest from an ethnographical standpoint to be aware of how Muslims in this particular social setting deal with and respond to this transitional process. In Western Sudan, death is believed to be innocuous, because it does not represent extinction but a transition or portal through which the departed passes to the afterlife. In accordance with this belief, the afterlife is a place where the departed are resurrected and continue to live. While death means the end of one existence, people's perceptions of life and death may well be different.

The prospect of another life to come encourages the people of this region to look on their lives as a journey that will lead them to the hereafter. They therefore plan and act during their lifetimes in accordance with this belief. In this sense, many aspects of life's events are very deeply affected by the prospect of another life to come: the afterlife, that is. As Kastenbaum explains, the integration of the prospect of death into a person's personality has far-reaching implications for their code of conduct (Kastenbaum, 1959). In his philosophy of death, Luper argues that the prospect of things to come prompts people to act now, to take some time out of their busy day to carry out actions that will make things possible for their future selves (Luper, 2009: 3), the term 'future self'

¹ I collected the ethnographic data for this article in 2013 and 2014 as part of my PhD research on Islamic education and the performance of Islamic rituals in Jebel Marra in the Darfur region of Western Sudan. I conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork through interviews, and led group discussions with members of different social categories. I also used participant observation of the minutiae of everyday life.

referring here to posthumous living conditions in the afterlife. These conditions, in whatever state they may be, are perceived to be determined by the various activities people carry out during their lifetimes. It is empirically intriguing, therefore, to examine how Muslims in Western Sudan conceive life, death and the afterlife within a range of socio-cultural contexts. What rituals do they perform when a person is dying? What meaning do these rituals have in the local socio-cultural and religious contexts? How do locals deal with the deceased? How do locals ceremonially initiate the departed into a new state of being? In order to provide comprehensive answers to these questions, I will discuss various rituals that Muslims in Western Sudan perform during their ceremonies around death, burials and funerals from an ethnographical standpoint. I will also shed light on the meanings of these rituals, and on their symbolic values in the Western Sudanese cultural context.

There are great similarities in the burial and funeral ceremonies of the various ethnic groups in Western Sudan because of their shared Islamic beliefs. The case at hand relates specifically to the ethnographic data I collected in the Jebel Marra area, which is the traditional homeland of the Fur people. The Fur are predominantly farmers who subsist through agriculture, including the cultivation of orchards, but they are also cattle herders and traders. They speak their own language, which is also called “Fur”. Most communicate with their neighbors from other ethnic groups in Arabic. They are homogeneously Muslims who following the Maliki School of Islamic Law. The Fur have been renowned for their committed Qur’anic learning and melodic chanting for centuries (see O’Fahey, 1980). Some even dedicate their entire lives to seeking Qur’anic knowledge and consider the learning and teaching of the Qur’an to be a way of life. They demonstrate their memorization of the Qur’an at socio-religious occasions such as marriages and funerals. In order to participate actively in these socio-religious events, villagers – especially men – must either know certain Qur’anic chapters by heart or at least be able to read them properly (Nur, 2017). The rituals and practices around death that I intend to discuss here pertain to the Fur socio-cultural context.

DEATH

According to the Fur’s ontological conception, the older a person becomes, the more religious he or she is expected to be. This religiousness is seen as a preparation for the next life – the hereafter. It is interesting to note that as part of their preparations for death, some elderly people even buy or make the shroud in which they will be wrapped and buried when they die. They also reserve a

small piece of land at the graveyard by planting a twig of the *birie*² (F.)³ tree there. When they die, they are buried in this piece of land. They inform their close relatives, who bury them at their behest, about this piece of land and show it to them. These reservations are only made by very few people who are considered highly pious and do not fear death: when they die, they are buried in the plot they reserved under the tree they planted.

Like many other African people, the Fur do not see death as the complete extinction of a person, but rather as a departure from this world for the afterlife. A person is believed to move on to join the company of other departed ones, and the only major change that is perceived to occur is the decay of the physical body. In this sense, death means the separation of the body and the soul. In the local world view, the body is intangibly composed of *al-rôh* (Ar.) (the spirit) and *al-zât* (Ar.) (the soul). Etymologically, the word *al-rôh* (spirit) means “breath”; the spirit is understood to infuse the human body with vitality. When locals speak of spiritual energy or spirituality, they are not referring to morality or religiosity, but to a phenomenon rooted in breath. The spirit is believed to make the human body work. Locals believe that when someone is dying, their spirit leaves the body, making it unable to function. While death is seen as the extinction of the corporeal body, however, the spirit is thought to be immortal. According to this belief, the spirit is what leads the soul (*al-zât*) to the hereafter. The soul, in turn, is not the physical person but the symbolized person—that is, the ego or persona. Thus, the soul is believed to move on to another state of existence, where it lives forever.

Life among the Fur people is therefore viewed as a pilgrimage or journey that leads to the final destination, where people are believed to live for ever. This is the afterlife. In his book on African religions and philosophy, John Mbiti reports similar ideas in other African societies (Mbiti, 1989: 152 - 153). Local religious specialists (*fuqâra*, singular *fakî*)⁴ say that since one’s whole life must be seen as a journey, people should not pay too much attention to it. Sometimes, for example, they will say to those who strive to accumulate wealth and pay little attention to their religious obligations: “Whatever you may collect, you will only take a shroud with you.” This phrase not

² The *birie* is a local tropical tree. Its symbolic significance is that it has the ability to revive after death. A twig cut from it can be taken and replanted in another place and it will come back to life, even in the dry season. The cutting therefore symbolizes death in this world, while replanting and reviving symbolize resurrection and a new life in the next.

³ I use vernacular terms from both Arabic and Fur. As abbreviations, I use (Ar.) to stand for Arabic and (F.) to represent the Fur language.

⁴ Unlike in Central and Riverain Sudan, the *fuqarâ* in Jebel Marra are not affiliated with specific religious organizations such as Sufi brotherhoods, and so do not share a uniform ideology.

only discourages cupidity and hedonism, but also tacitly pushes people towards worship and encourages them to concentrate on what is judged to be useful in the hereafter. This represents the philosophical view of religious specialists on materiality and its limitations, and signifies the importance of spirituality and morality, as well as their limitless nature. In this regard, Kaba states that for Muslims, the aim of human existence is to prepare for attaining salvation and paradise in the hereafter (Kaba, 1976: 409). This applies to religious specialists who devote a great deal of their time to worship, however, whereas ordinary people seek to balance the activities of their daily lives with worship, citing a popular phrase attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which reads: “Work for your life as if you will live forever and work for your afterlife as if you will die tomorrow”.⁵ This saying emphasizes the importance of both the world and the afterlife, to which a person should devote equal attention.

Those who nurse the dying are usually elders, as they have the necessary knowledge of death rituals and experience of supervising the dying. Young people tend to have a fear of corpses, and play no part when a family member is passing away. When someone becomes terminally ill, elders from their close family sit beside them to make sure they die in a proper Islamic fashion, bearing witness to God. Those who nurse the dying therefore make certain that they bear witness to the oneness of God as their final words. The customary formula in this situation is “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah alone, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger”. The elders nursing a dying person assiduously help them utter this phrase. If someone is gravely ill and cannot speak, they may raise their right index finger⁶ as a sign symbolizing the witness ritual. It is also possible for one of elders to utter the phrase on behalf of the dying person and attribute it to him or her.

In local Islamic mythology, there is an angel of death who is believed to have been entrusted by God with pulling souls out of bodies and escorting them to the afterlife. This angel is called Azrael, and is sometimes referred to by locals by his nickname *Malak al-Mawt* (Ar.), meaning the “Angel of Death”. The angel of death is believed to appear to dying people in different ways, depending on their deeds: people who have done good deeds in their lifetimes see a beautiful creature, while those who have done bad deeds see a horrific monster. It is also believed that

⁵ From a hermeneutic theological standpoint, some religious specialists attribute this quote to Ali Bin Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph for Sunnis.

⁶ The Fur people call the index finger *turie shawding* (F. & Ar.), which literally means the witness’s finger, as people move it up and down during invocation in a sitting position. When raised up, it symbolizes the utterance of witness to God.

Azrael removes the souls of sinners' violently and painfully, while he takes those of the righteous gently and peacefully. More explicit anthropomorphic features are sometimes attributed to him in expressions such as "Be careful. Do not come across Azrael on your way", a warning to travellers going somewhere that may be dangerous to take care of themselves so that they do not encounter the Angel of Death, who may remove their souls. In this case, Azrael and death seem to be synonymous.

When a person dies, people say "*daing dora toqie*" (F.) and "*mashi kari tabo, ki dok ning ko naskomie*" (F.) when they exchange greetings. The former translates literally as "our path is one", meaning that all of us, without exception, will take the path of death: in other words, everybody will experience it. The phrase expresses the fact that death is a path that leads to another life – the hereafter, where people will live forever. Existentially, death is a "doorway" through which the dead pass on their way to the afterlife. In this sense, as Marcuse explains, death is an "existential category" (Marcuse, 1959) in which life is not viewed as an end in itself but rather as a means to a supreme life. The latter phrase literally translates as "the walk comes later; we will join the deceased later on". The word 'walk' here means death, which people experience one after another, so that a deceased person who experiences death first will be joined by his or her relatives in the afterlife later on.

BURIAL

When a person passes away, his or her face is massaged to close the eyes, while the arms and hands are straightened against the body and the legs are aligned. This is a form of (re)arrangement of the corporeal body after it has been upset by the departure of the spirit. Since the spirit is believed to depart the body by force, it leaves the body in a state of disorder, and it has to be (re)arranged before the burial. When the body has been properly rearranged, young boys are sent to inform close relatives in neighboring villages of the death. Other boys are also sent to market centers to telephone relatives who live in cities. It is understood that a death is a tragedy; every adult man who receives the news must immediately leave work, however important it may be, and go to help dig a grave and take part in the burial ceremony. Occasionally, inhabitants of a village will say that it is a sin for anyone to work while others are digging a grave or burying the deceased. From a wider Islamic theological perspective, however, grave-digging and prayers for a deceased Muslim are shared community duties, which means that only some Muslims need to

offer the prayer, and it is enough if it is offered by some of the Muslims who are present at the time, while others are excused the responsibility (see, for example, Abdalati, 1975: 79).

For the purposes of burial, the length of the dead person is measured with a millet stalk,⁷ which is then taken to the cemetery and used to measure the land on which the grave will be dug. The purpose of this is to make certain that the body will fit the grave. The grave is dug in an oblong shape in a south-north direction using a hoe, and is about a meter and a half deep. A shovel is used to remove the loose earth from the grave. A small cave-like shape is dug at the bottom of the grave, on the east side, in the direction of Mecca, in which the body is then laid. This cave is referred to locally as *koing tong* (F.). The first word means “baby” and the second means “home”. The phrase therefore reads “baby’s home”. In this sense, the baby is a metaphor for the cadaver, while the home denotes the cave in which the body is laid. The cave is referred to as a home because it is thought that it provides a home for the deceased. It is also compared to a womb, because the cave within the grave holding the body is seen as a womb with a baby in a mother’s stomach. If we relate this idea to beliefs about the afterlife, we see that the cave is viewed womb and the body is regarded as a baby due to the fact that it is believed that the deceased is (re)born or resurrected and lives again in the hereafter, a form of birth similar to that which takes place in this life. Both the womb and the *koing tong* symbolically convey the meaning of a home within a home. This might be compared with reincarnation, which is a central tenet of Buddhism and Hinduism, and confers the idea that the departed begins a new life in a different bodily form.

According to locals, how difficult or easy it proves to be to dig a grave indicates how pious the deceased was in his or her lifetime. A rocky grave that is difficult to dig is interpreted as a sign of bad deeds the deceased may have committed, while a grave with no rocks that can be dug easily indicates a high level of piety, as well as the good deeds the person might have performed. Needless to say, the grave is only dug by men, while the women congregate in the deceased’s home and prepare food and drink for the mourners. When they receive the news, men from other villages go straight to the graveyard to participate in the burial ceremony. Before greetings are exchanged and the digging is commenced, they utter *al-Fâṭha* (Ar.) (a supplication), a ritual in which one of the participants recites Qur’anic verses while raising his hands with all the other participants, and says at the end of the recitation, “*wa habnâ lahâ*” (Ar.) (we dedicate this

⁷ The stalk is millet because it is a plant from which the locals collect grains for porridge, which is a staple of the Fur diet. Millet and porridge are both considered to be auspicious. The millet stalk measuring device is known as a *jadid* (F.), and is laid on the top of the grave after burial.

supplication to the deceased). Afterwards, they greet each other and join in the digging or making special bricks known as *libbina* (F.) (singular, *libbin*), which are usually made near the grave when the digging has almost been finished. They are used to seal the cadaver into the bottom of the grave (the “cave”).

The dead body is ritually cleansed by close relatives and placed in a shroud, which is a white piece of cloth made locally from cotton and covers the entire body. A man is washed and enshrouded by men, whereas a woman is washed and enshrouded by women. The piece of cloth is measured, cut and sewn by hand to be the right size for the body. Before the body is dressed, it is perfumed with incense, and pieces of cotton are placed into all the orifices to prevent unpleasant liquids from leaving the body. The deceased is then dressed and placed on the traditional bed, of wood and cattle hide known as a *fidie/fitie* (F.).⁸ The body is tied down with ropes at the edges and in the middle so that it will not move while it is being carried to the graveyard. The body is now ready to be taken to the cemetery for burial. It is only ever carried to the graveyard by men, whether the deceased is a man or a woman. At the cemetery, the body is placed along the eastern side of the grave, facing east, with the head to the south and the feet pointing north. In other words, it is placed in a position facing Mecca, the direction used for praying. Semantically, this laying in an eastern direction is said to refer to the *qibla* (Ar.) (the direction of Mecca), which Muslims face when they pray or perform any religious ritual. Whenever the word ‘east’ is mentioned in the performance of rituals, it automatically refers to the direction of Mecca. According to Holy (1991), the four cardinal points, their use in directional references and the regularity with which the performers of rituals position themselves in relation to them are related to people’s orientation in space. This derives from the symbolic significance of directions and directional oppositions. Holy explains that “in certain contexts, east and south are jointly opposed to west and north. This opposition is semantically expressed by west and north being referred to as *j̣iha* (Ar.) (direction) and east and south as *qibla* (from *yiḡâbil*, to face)” (Holy, 1991: 152-153). The Fur’s notion of cardinal points is similar to that of the Berti, among whom Holy lived when he wrote his study. Holy further notes that east is the direction of Mecca, and so Muslims face towards the east when praying or performing rituals. The distinction between east and south as the direction of prayers and rituals is made again, however: east is referred to as *qiblat al-sala* (Ar.)

⁸ Cattle hide is used in the construction of this bed because it is strong. Cattle is also believed to be auspicious.

(the direction of prayer) while south is referred to as *qiblat al-mayit* (Ar.) (the direction of the dead) (Ibid, 1991: 153).

In order to say the prayer for the deceased, the mourners in the graveyard first perform ablutions – the act of ritually washing oneself – and then stand behind the deceased and the *fakî* (Ar.), who leads the prayer, facing towards Mecca. The prayer, which is called *ṣalât al-mayit* (Ar.) or *ṣalât al-janâzah* (Ar.) (both meaning “funeral prayer”) asks for God’s forgiveness for the deceased. It consists of four *takbîrât* (Ar.) (magnifying God). The Qur’anic verses are silently recited by the *fakî* and the other participants between *takbîra* (Ar.). Unlike the case with other prayers, there is no bowing or prostration when the funeral prayer is spoken. It is performed for adults, but not children, because children are believed not to be accountable to God for their deeds until they reach the age of puberty. Before puberty, children are not religiously classified as sinful or righteous, and so it is believed that there is no need for the performance of rituals intended to invoke God’s forgiveness. When the prayer has been concluded, the body is brought close to the grave. The *fakî*, together with other men who are considered to be pious, unties the cadaver from the bed and places it in the cave-like shape at the bottom of the eastern side of the grave. In line with the locals’ perception of cardinal points, the deceased is placed in the cave with the head at the southern end and the face towards the east. The body is laid on its right-hand side, which is perceived to be auspicious – the same hand is used in eating, drinking and the like.

Unlike the digging, which is done by all those present in turn, the act of putting the deceased into the cave, the *koing tong*, is only performed by individuals who are considered by the local community to be pious. The opening of the cave is built by assembling wet bricks (*libbina*) (F.). The small holes between the bricks are sealed properly by placing mud in them so that they are the same as the side of the grave on which the cave is dug. The grave is then filled with the loose soil that had been dug out of it previously. When it is nearly full, two long stones are placed at the southern and northern edges. These stones are called *siqilo* (F.) (singular, *siqil*) (gravestones), and they are positioned half in the grave and half above the surface. Soil is then heaped on to the grave until the two gravestones disappear. The heaped soil is then demarcated with footstones on all sides so as to keep the grave heaped up. The footstones mark not only the top and bottom of the grave area but also its whole perimeter. Thorny branches are cut nearby and placed on the top of the grave to prevent it from being destroyed by animals. When the heaped soil on top of the grave erodes some years later, the gravestones reappear, pointing upwards through the surface,

indicating that someone is buried there. In this way, the gravestones notify people of the presence of an old grave so that they will not dig a new grave on top of it. In other words, they alert locals not to build one “house” on top of another. Usually, a goat is slaughtered at the graveyard and its meat grilled and consumed by the men. Tea and juice are also provided during the burial ceremony.

When the deceased has been buried, the *fakî* announces *al-Fâṭha*, which marks the end of the burial ceremony. It is believed that soon after burial, the deceased is resurrected for a questioning led by two angels, *Monkir* and *Nekîr*, who are responsible for keeping records of all human actions. If a person has done good deeds, the questioning is believed to be smooth and friendly. If the person has done bad deeds, on the other hand, it is thought that he or she will be subjected to torture and a lengthy interrogation. This torture is called *‘azâb al-qabr* (Ar.) (the grave punishment) and is believed to mark the beginning of hell for those who have committed bad deeds. In his work on African religions and philosophy, Mbiti states that it is believed that after death a person presents himself before God and gives an account of his or her earthly life (Mbiti, 1989). Everything people do on earth is recorded by two angels – *Monkir* and *Nekîr* – who are considered to have been entrusted by God with recording the good and bad deeds of every person in a book. After death, the book is given to its owner, who presents it before God for a reckoning. In an anthropomorphic sense, *Monkir* is perceived to be always sitting on the right shoulder of an individual, and *Nekîr* on the left, so that they can observe individuals closely and write their personal biographies for accountability in the hereafter. The locals attribute auspiciousness to the right shoulder and inauspiciousness to the left. The quality of (in)auspiciousness in turn determines which angel sits where and why. *Monkir* is believed to be responsible for recording only good deeds, and he therefore sits on the right shoulder, which is associated with good intentions. *Nekîr*, meanwhile, is seen to be charged by God to record bad deeds, and therefore sits on the left shoulder, which is associated with wicked intentions. Anthropomorphically, the two angels act as God’s soldiers and chroniclers who carry out God’s commands.

The locals refer to all the religious and secular activities people carry out in their lifetimes as *a‘mâl* (Ar.) (actions). In the afterlife, God judges people by these actions and the intentions behind them. For religious purposes, they are divided into virtues and sins. In the hereafter, those who do good things during their lifetimes will live in heaven, while those who do bad things will live in hell. From a cosmological standpoint, when a person’s life ends, God judges him or her based on these acts. The purpose of this judgment is to determine where the person will live in the

afterlife on the basis of his or her deeds. People therefore believe that on the Day of Judgment they will be distributed between heaven and hell, depending on their qualities. Since different people do different things, heaven itself is divided into eight hierarchical grades, while hell is divided into seven layers. In heaven, the higher the grade the better, while in the case of hell, the lower the layer the worse it is. People therefore pray and do good deeds so as to be in a better position in the hereafter; indeed, many strive to perform virtuous acts throughout their lifetimes for the sake of peace in the afterlife. It is believed that heaven is connected to the place of accountability by a rope tied over hell. People who have performed good deeds cross easily, while those with bad deeds on their record fall into hell, where they remain. The qualitative difference between the two major afterlife positions is that heaven is a transcendent place where angels are said to be enthroned and God is believed to live, while hell is a place of torment and punishment where devils are said to have their origins. The hereafter is therefore seen as a continuation of life that bears some similarities to the worldly life.

FUNERARY SACRIFICES

When a person dies, the deceased's family organizes *sadaqa* (Ar.) or *karâma* (Ar.) (literally meaning charity or sacrifice), which is the crucial element of the funeral ceremony. It is attended by adults from the neighboring villages and relatives from faraway villages and other areas. Mourners come to offer their condolences to the deceased's family. The *sadaqa* takes place on four separate occasions; on the day of death, and on the third, seventh and fortieth days after it. Not all four sacrifices are considered to be equally important, however, and attendance varies. The most important is called *sadaqa appa* (Ar. & F.) (the great sacrifice) and it is normally held on the day of death (or if the death is in the evening, on the next day). The great sacrifice can also be postponed to the third day if the deceased did not own a herd of cattle from which a bull can be taken for sacrifice. On some occasions, the deceased's relatives look for a bull to buy and slaughter in the *sadaqa appa* for one or two days before the sacrifice. Sometimes relatives may buy a bull, sugar and oil earlier – before death – especially if the person is critically ill and there is little hope of a recovery. If the great sacrifice is held on the same day as the death, those who have participated in the burial ceremony go to the deceased's house and take part in the *sadaqa appa*. If it is postponed, porridge with sauce is brought to the gravesite by women and consumed there by the mourners, who are then informed by the relatives of the day on which the great sacrifice will be held.

In the great sacrifice, women bring millet flour or grain and ingredients for sauce and soup. Those who live in the neighborhood put their ingredients – flour and grain – into one or two containers and take turns carrying them to the location of the *sadaqa appa*. They also make contributions in cash. This payment is standardized among women from a particular village, who all pay the same agreed amount of money. Women from neighboring villages who attend the great sacrifice are married, or have been married before, and have independent families. All the adult women from the deceased's village participate in the *sadaqa appa* by preparing food and drink. The men from neighboring villages who attend the sacrifice are also married and have families, although close adult relatives may also attend. Traditionally, men used to bring firewood and make their contributions in cash, but these days they make contributions in cash but bring no firewood. Unlike women, men do not make standardized payments: they pay different amounts depending on how close they were to the dead person or on their financial situation. The money is given in the form of a charitable donation with religious connotations, although there is also a social aspect. In accordance with Islamic beliefs, the charitable gift must be made anonymously, otherwise the payment will be seen as hypocritical. The person who is entrusted with receiving the contributions customarily writes down the name of each contributor and the amount he has paid. When the sacrifice is over, the deceased's relatives check the list to see who paid what. This represents an attempt to negotiate social status rather than the religious meaning of charity.

In the great sacrifice, the men congregate in one of the neighboring homesteads or in the village mosque, if it is located close to the deceased's home. When they arrive, they perform *al-Fâṭha*, greeting the mourners and sitting with them on mats or chairs. Normally, the deceased's close male relatives sit with the mourners so as to receive *al-Fâṭha* and greetings from mourners from other villages. Every time new mourners arrive or meet the deceased's male relatives for the first time after the death, they perform the same funerary rituals before they join the mourners on mats or chairs. Greetings during the sacrificial and burial ceremony are standardized and are distinct from ordinary daily greetings. For example, people utter phrases such as *modang dok soboring ka* (F.) (let us be patient with our sorrow), *Kasang Allah keing katinṅa faso* (F.) (may God erase his or her sin), *kalang Allah janna jabie* (F.) (may God give the deceased a home in heaven), or *dain dora toqie, hod alanq kawa akiba* (F.) (our path is one and nothing to complain about). After greetings have been exchanged, water, juices and tea are served to the newcomers. Unlike men, women do not perform *al-Fâṭha* when they meet the deceased's family members for the first time after death; they do, however, utter the same greetings and join the others in the preparation of

food. In patriarchal societies like this, religious rituals on social occasions are usually performed and led by men, while women are confined to religiously-formulated greetings – evidence of men’s domination over women in religious domains. In the context of female subordination and male domination in Muslim societies, Holy went so far as to argue that religious rituals are the domain of men, while customary rituals are the domain of women (Holy, 1991).

In the men’s area, when the number of mourners has reached about fifty, the *fakî* distributes a copy of the Qur’an to those present. The local inhabitants believe that the Qur’an has an unlimited capacity for solving problems, seeing the Qur’an as a panacea that can provide solutions for all difficulties and crises. It can also be a symbolic means of offsetting one’s sins, as well as a method for generating virtues (see Nur, 2017). They therefore read the Qur’an in groups on different social occasions and for various reasons. Death is one of the most important occasions on which men gather to read the Qur’an, dedicating the reading to the deceased. If it is for a dead person, the *fakî* commences the reading by asking participants for their attention, calling out in a loud voice: “Could we please put our intentions together to read the book for a dead person so that God may bless (him or her) and erase (his or her) sins”.

In every case, once the *fakî* has the worshippers’ attention, he picks up the book and says the words “In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful” and starts distributing the chapters of the Qur’an to the readers. The *fakî* calls the name of each chapter out loud. A participant who knows the chapter by heart will respond: “Give it to me.” Each participant takes a chapter he knows well and that it is easiest for him to read without difficulty. Participating *fuqarâ* are free to take any chapter they wish because they know the whole Qur’an by heart. When distribution of the chapters has been concluded, the *fakî* recites the opening chapter of the Qur’an with all the readers. Each reader then starts reading his own chapter out loud individually. When a reader starts reading, he makes a mumbling sound similar to that of a swarm of bees. The *fakî* gives any readers who finish early another chapter to continue reading. If all the chapters have been distributed, the *fakî* asks them to repeat the same chapter. When someone has finished reading his chapter, he gives it back to the *fakî* to put back in order. The reading ends with a recitation of *al-Fâṭha*, which is also led by the *fakî*. The *fakî* performs the reading ceremony in the same manner on all social occasions in which locals gather to read the Qur’an (for more details, see Nur, 2017). If there are over a hundred mourners, more than one book may be distributed. Those who arrive after the reading has started join the ritual after they have performed *al-Fâṭha*, but greetings are postponed until after the reading. If a large number of people are in attendance, the entire Qur’an

is read three times or more, depending on the number of people at the ceremony. If it is someone from the neighborhood who has died, it is quite normal in everyday conversation to hear people asking each other how many times the mourners read the Qur'an to the deceased. It is believed that the more recitations there have been, the more blessings the dead person will receive in the hereafter.

The men who participate in reading the Qur'an are not only *fuqarâ* but also those with basic reading skills, because participants do not recite from memory but read from a book. However, they are given short chapters with as few as three or four verses, which are located at the beginning of the Qur'an and are expected to be known by the majority of Fur people, as they are normally the chapters that are learned first. While the readers are reading the Qur'an, elders gather and recite the *du'a* (Ar.) (invocation) by which people ask for God's blessing on them. The purpose of the *du'a* is to request God to forgive or erase the deceased's sins. In this rite, the elders usually recite God's attributes, such as *istakhfir Allah* (asking for God's forgiveness) and *subhâna Allah* (glory be to God). As they recite these attributes they use prayer beads to count the number of recitations. This is because each *du'a* must be recited a certain number of times if it is to be effective. Readings of the Qur'an and the invocation are concluded with *al-Fâṭha*, which is led by the most prominent *fakî* at the ceremony. Unlike *al-Fâṭha*, which can be observed in all Sudanese communities, the *du'a* rite and the reading of the Qur'an are mainly practiced in Western Sudan. Men who have no reading skills serve food and drinks to the readers. The community looks down on the men who serve food and drinks because they are illiterate. In this particular context, a person's status is defined by his level of Qur'anic education and ability to read Qur'anic verses clearly. When the rituals have been concluded, the main meal – porridge with sauce and meat – is served. Some mourners may leave at this point, while others gather to chat for the remainder of the day.

On the third day after the death another *karâma* is held. This one is known as *tarie soqa esing* (F.), which means a minor sacrifice on the third day. It is attended by those who were not able to go to the great sacrifice because they did not receive the news in time or were away. It is also attended by those from distant villages. People from the deceased's village also join them to entertain the guests and take part in various activities. In the minor sacrifice, only one or two goats are slaughtered rather than a bull, because there are not very many mourners in attendance. Rituals

such as the Qur'anic reading, *al-Fâṭha* and the *du'a* are performed in a similar way to the great sacrifice, although the mourners may recite the Qur'an just once because of their small number.

Another *karâma* is organized on the seventh day after death. This one is called *tarie soqa saling* (F.), meaning a minor sacrifice on the seventh day, and it is chiefly attended by relatives from other areas. The village *fakî*, relatives from the village and neighbors join the mourners. The deceased's family sacrifices one goat for the event. In this sacrifice, in addition to an intermittent *al-Fâṭha*, which is performed every time new mourners arrive, the mourners perform the main *al-Fâṭha*, which is led by the village *fakî*. If the number of mourners reaches around thirty, they may read the Qur'an once, but no *du'a* is performed on this occasion. The seventh day sacrifice is the final one. When people say "*atto taringo kowril*" (F.) it means today (on the seventh day) we will end the sacrifice. The third and seventh day sacrifices are known as *tarie* (F.), which literally means a minor funerary event.

Those who do visit the deceased's family within seven days after death may go to offer their condolences at any time. This is known as *kala waa* (F.), which connotes the idea of a sympathy visit to show moral support for those who have lost their loved one. In short, it means "offering condolences". No rituals are performed during this visit except *al-Fâṭha*, and no animal is sacrificed. The final ceremony for the dead person is arranged on the fortieth day after the death of a male and on the forty-first day after the death of a female. The gender-based time difference for the performance of this rite is taken for granted, and an explanation is almost never given for the discrepancy, even by local religious specialists. It is believed, however, that the soul of a departed man completes its journey to the afterlife on the fortieth day, while the soul of a deceased woman takes one more day to arrive at its destination. This symbolically characterizes male domination and female subordination.

The ceremony is simply called *arbiana* (Ar.) which literally means the forty-day event. Locals do not refer to it as a sacrifice because no animal is slaughtered and no mourners attend from outside the village. The ceremony is only attended by close relatives and the village *fakî*, who leads *al-Fâṭha*, which is the only ritual performed at the event. Ordinary food like porridge with relish and drinks such as tea are provided.

In general, a deceased's family members will mourn for two weeks. Their daily activities are totally suspended during this period. After two weeks, a widow may do some domestic work such

as cooking and washing. A widower, on the other hand, may carry out any necessary activities outside the home. If the death occurs during the rainy season, however, the deceased's family may resume their daily activities after one week, especially if they are farmers. Generally speaking, the rest of the village mourns for one week, during which entertainment events such as dancing and playing in the evenings are suspended. Any celebration due to take place within two weeks after the death is also suspended.

The various funerary rituals performed at the time of burial and the subsequent sacrifices symbolically initiate the deceased into the afterlife. Conceptually, anthropologists refer to the ceremonies that accompany and dramatize a major event such as death as a "rite of passage" (Gennep, 1960) or "life-cycle ritual" (Bell, 1997: 94; Barfield, 1997). The anthropologist Victor Turner calls these rituals "life-crises" and defines them as "important points in the physical or social development of an individual, such as birth, puberty, or death". Turner further explains that life-crisis rituals not only "concern the individuals on whom they are centered, but also mark changes in the relationships of all the people connected with them by ties of blood, marriage, cash, political control, and in many other ways" (Turner, 1973: 7). Mandelbaum (1959) makes a similar argument, explaining that "although the funeral ceremony is personal in focus it is societal in its consequences", and that "the rites performed for the dead generally have important effects on the living" too (Mandelbaum, 1959: 189). The social implications of the funeral rites therefore go beyond the advantage of the deceased to include both relatives and non-relatives.

Catherine Bell argues that rites of passage are marked by a three-stage process in which "the person leaves behind one social group and its concomitant social identity and passes through a stage of no identity or affiliation before admission into another social group that confers a new identity" (Bell, 1997: 95). She briefly classifies these stages as separation, transition and incorporation, through which individuals pass to the new state of being.

CONCLUSION

In the Muslim world view in general, and among the Fur of Western Sudan in particular, one's whole life is perceived as a journey, which, it is imagined, leads to the permanent destination where people live for eternity, the afterlife. At the time of death, this journey comes to an end and a new life begins, into which the dead person is initiated. Locals therefore perform a set of funerary rituals to prepare the deceased for and initiate them into their new life. The aim of the

various funerary practices and rituals is to call upon God to offset the sins of the deceased and increase the number of their good deeds, as well as to invoke God to offer the dead person a home in a higher transcendent place in the afterlife: that is, in heaven. The rituals such as the Qur'anic reading, supplication and invocation performed by locals in the sacrificial ceremonies and funerals are also means of equipping the deceased for faring well in the hereafter. From a cosmological standpoint, it is believed that the soul departs the body through death and flies up to the sky, where it lives for ever in another form of existence that is perceived to take place transcendentally in a spiritual realm and in the divine presence, because the sky is the place where God is believed to exist too. The essential part of the departed that is thought to live on after death is the soul, which bears a personal identity with it. It is believed that the deceased departs for heaven or hell after death, as decided by God, based on their actions during their lifetimes. In this sense, the afterlife is a form of continued existence in a spiritual realm.

It is believed that the nature of life in the hereafter is teleologically determined by the actions of individuals on earth. These actions can be posthumously enhanced by the deceased's family members through the performance of ceremonial rituals and funerary practices. The rituals mourners perform and symbolically confer on the deceased can therefore be regarded as provisions to be used by the departed to sustain their contentment or enhance the level of their abode in the life to come. The performance of rituals also creates connections, and serves as a means whereby the deceased and relatives who are still alive in this world can communicate. In this sense, death does not completely cut the deceased off from surviving relatives, who continue to believe that the departed remains near to them and can be approached through prayers and funerary practices. This relationship mystically connects past and present generations through rituals and offerings, and also creates a posthumous hope of a better life to come.

The ethnographical data illustrated in this article confirm that Islam is not a unified system of beliefs or a standardized set of rituals that all Muslims must agree on. In contexts such as Sudan, dynamics of Islamization have a complex history of encounters with ethnic and cultural diversity, which has fostered the plurality of Islam. Rather than questioning what does or does not conform to Islam as a monolithic, never-changing entity, researchers might look at diverse system of beliefs and practices that become Islamic through local discourse (see Manger, 2002). This discourse (re)shapes notions of life, death and the afterlife and different local religious beliefs and everyday practices, as well as personal identities in a given society.

REFERENCES

- Abdalati, H. (1975). *Islam in focus*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications.
- Barfield, T. (1997). *The dictionary of anthropology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gennep, A. Van (1960). *The rites of passage* (translated by Vizedom and Caffee eds.). London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Holy, L. (1991). *Religion and custom in a Muslim society: The Berti of Sudan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaba, L. (1976). The politics of Qur'anic education among Muslim traders in the western Sudan: The Subbanu experience. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 10(3), 409-421.
- Kastenbaum, R. (1959). Time and death in adolescence. In H. Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (pp. 99-113). New York & Toronto & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
- Luper, S. (2009). *The philosophy of death*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mandelbaum, D. G. (1959). Social uses of funeral rites. In H. Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (pp. 189-217). New York & Toronto & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, INC.
- Manger, L. O. (2002). Religion, identities, and politics: Defining Muslim discourses in the Nuba Mountains of the Sudan. *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 4, 132-152.
- Marcuse, H. (1959). The ideology of death. In H. Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (pp. 64-76). New York & Toronto & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, INC.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*. Gaborone; Blantyre; Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers (Pty) Limited.
- Nur, B. M. (2017). *The religious men in Jebel Marra: The process of learning and the performance of Islamic rituals and practices*. Berlin: LIT.
- O'Fahey, R. S. (1980). *State and society in Dâr Fûr*. London: C. Hurt and Company.
- Turner, V. (1973). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Arabité, islamité, 'soudanéité'.

Enjeux de la redéfinition des appartenances, des pratiques locales et des politiques étatiques au Soudan après la séparation du Sud

Focalisé sur les dynamiques d'arabisation et d'islamisation en relation avec la construction d'une identité nationale au Soudan, le projet analyse l'articulation des trois notions par les processus concrets mettant en jeu l'inscription des acteurs sociaux. L'approche socio-anthropologique implique une démarche à la micro-échelle tout en visant l'étude de phénomènes à la macro-échelle, telles que les politiques mises en place par l'Etat au sujet de l'affiliation des citoyens à une identité forgée sur les catégories d'arabité/islamité et d'intégration nationale. Nourri de l'apport des travaux classiques sur les problématiques d'ethnicité, de religion et de nationalité, ce projet offre une contribution renouvelée sur le rapport entre arabité et islamité suscitant la reprise du débat scientifique sur les enjeux de la relation Etat/citoyen dans un pays africain où l'héritage colonial et le pluralisme ethno-culturel ont rendu la construction nationale davantage complexe

Financé par l'AUF (Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie) comme PCSI (Projet de Coopération Scientifique Inter-universitaire), le projet a quatre partenaires institutionnels : CEDEJ Khartoum, University of Khartoum, Université Paris 8/LAVUE et Max Planck Institute. Barbara Casciarri (Université Paris 8) est coordinatrice scientifique du projet, Jean-Nicolas Bach (CEDEJ Khartoum) son porteur et Mohamed A.G. Bakhit (University of Khartoum) coordinateur de l'équipe de recherche soudanaise.

Nur, Bakheit Mohammed. 2019. *Changing the State of Being. Muslim Notions of Life, Death and the Hereafter in Western Sudan*, Working Paper 1, AUF Project "Arabité, islamité, 'soudanéité'/Being Arab, Muslim, Sudanese, Khartoum, September 2019.

Arabité, islamité, ‘soudanité’

Being Arab, Muslim, Sudanese