

Cambridge University Press

052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan

Ladislav Holy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Among the Berti of Northern Darfur (Sudan), as among many Muslim societies, the formal religious practices are predominantly the concern of men, while local, unorthodox customary rituals are performed mainly by women. It is usual to dismiss such local, popular practices as pre-Islamic survivals, but Professor Holy shows that the customary rituals constitute an integral part of the religious system of the Berti. Carefully analysing the symbolic statements made in Berti rituals, Professor Holy demonstrates that the distinction between the two classes of rituals is an expression of the gender relationships characteristic of the society. He also examines the social distribution of knowledge about Islam, and explains the role of the religious schools in sustaining religious ideas.

The work is not only an ethnographic study of ritual, belief and gender in an African society. It also makes a significant contribution to current anthropological discussion of the interpretation and meaning of rituals and symbols.

Cambridge University Press

052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan

Ladislav Holy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*

*Editors: Jack Goody, Stephen Gudeman, Michael Herzfeld,  
Jonathan Parry*

78

Religion and custom in a Muslim society

Cambridge University Press

052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan

Ladislav Holy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*A list of books in the series will be found at the end of  
the volume.*

Cambridge University Press

052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan

Ladislav Holy

Frontmatter

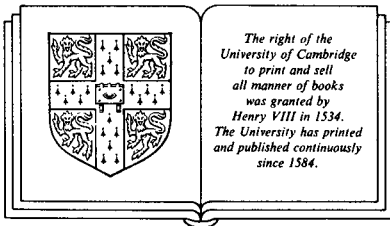
[More information](#)

# RELIGION AND CUSTOM IN A MUSLIM SOCIETY

---

*The Berti of Sudan*

LADISLAV HOLY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*

*New York Port Chester*

*Melbourne Sydney*

Cambridge University Press  
 052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan  
 Ladislav Holy  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521394857](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521394857)

© Cambridge University Press 1991

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1991  
 This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Holy, Ladislav.  
 Religion and custom in a Muslim society: the Berti of Sudan/  
 Ladislav Holy.  
 p. cm. (Cambridge studies in social and cultural  
 anthropology: 78)  
 Includes bibliographical references and index.  
 ISBN 0-521-39485-6  
 1. Berti (African people) 2. Sudan—Social life and customs.  
 3. Muslims—Sudan. I. Title. II. Series.  
 DT155.2.B47H65 1991  
 305.896'50624—dc20 90-20417  
 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-39485-7 hardback  
 ISBN-10 0-521-39485-6 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02496-9 paperback  
 ISBN-10 0-521-02496-X paperback

## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Berti and Islam	13
2 Men and women	47
3 Milk and water	66
4 Village and wilderness	103
5 Custom and religion	129
6 Life cycle	141
7 Circumcision	164
8 Blood and rain	189
9 Custom and superstition	202
<i>Glossary</i>	222
<i>References</i>	226
<i>Index</i>	234

## Illustrations

### Map

The Berti area, Northern Darfur page xi

### Figures

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1.  | Men eat a sacrificial meal in the village mosque   | 21  |
| 2.  | Communal prayer on <i>'īd al-fatur</i>   | 26  |
| 3.  | Men slaughter a bull for a <i>karāma</i>   | 37  |
| 4.  | A bridegroom mounted on a camel is led to a <i>hajlīd</i> tree by women beating earthen drums  | 73  |
| 5.  | A man puts an ear of millet, <i>gongobai</i> , a <i>hajlīd</i> twig and a palm leaf onto the top of the roof of a new house  | 74  |
| 6.  | Women sprinkle the roof of a new house with water and <i>dashīsha</i>  | 76  |
| 7.  | <i>Dukhla</i> . A woman anoints a millet plant with butter and milk  | 88  |
| 8.  | Two women start winnowing the grain by jointly using one winnowing basket  | 90  |
| 9.  | A bride is led to her new house by a turban cloth tied round her neck  | 115 |
| 10. | Circumcision: a circumcised boy returns from the latrine to the shelter  | 172 |
| 11. | Circumcision: a circumcised boy standing at the <i>hajlīd</i> tree   | 174 |
| 12. | Return from the <i>hajlīd</i> tree on the third day after circumcision. A woman carries back to the village the branch of the <i>hajlīd</i> tree which the circumcised boy cut off | 175 |

## Preface and acknowledgements

The material for this book was collected between 1961, when I started my intermittent fieldwork among the Berti, and 1986, when I was in the field for the last time. I visited the Berti area on six occasions and my stays there stretched from three to nine months. I spent in total a little over three years in the field. Most of the time, I lived in the village of Dūda, three kilometres south of the market and well at Madu, in the northern part of the Berti area along the track connecting Melit and Malha. My wife and I had our own household there in 1965 and then again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before the village was temporarily abandoned during the drought in the mid 1980s. Its inhabitants lost virtually all their donkeys and, being unable to transport water to the village, camped in the vicinity of the well in Madu where we joined them in 1986. In 1980, we spent two months in the village of Watkani, about six kilometres south of Melit and, in 1986, we lived for three months in Am Ja ‘āl, about ten kilometres east of the market and wells in Sayah.

My field trips to Darfur were sponsored by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, the International African Institute, the Queen's University of Belfast, the Carnegie Trust and the Social Science Research Council. I am very grateful for the generosity of these bodies. In the Sudan my work would have been impossible without the continual hospitality and help I was given. I should like to express my appreciation of the hospitality and assistance received from the members of staff of the Department of Anthropology at Khartoum University. Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable help provided by the Governors of Darfur, and later the Governors of Northern Darfur Province, and their staff. Special thanks are due to Abdullahi Osman el-Tom, a Berti whom I supervised as a doctoral student in Social Anthropology, and who was with me in the field in 1978 and 1980 living as a member of our household while pursuing his own research



Cambridge University Press

052102496X - Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society: The Berti of Sudan

Ladislav Holy

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface and acknowledgements*

into the role of Berti religious leaders. My discussions with him helped me to understand many aspects of Berti religiosity.

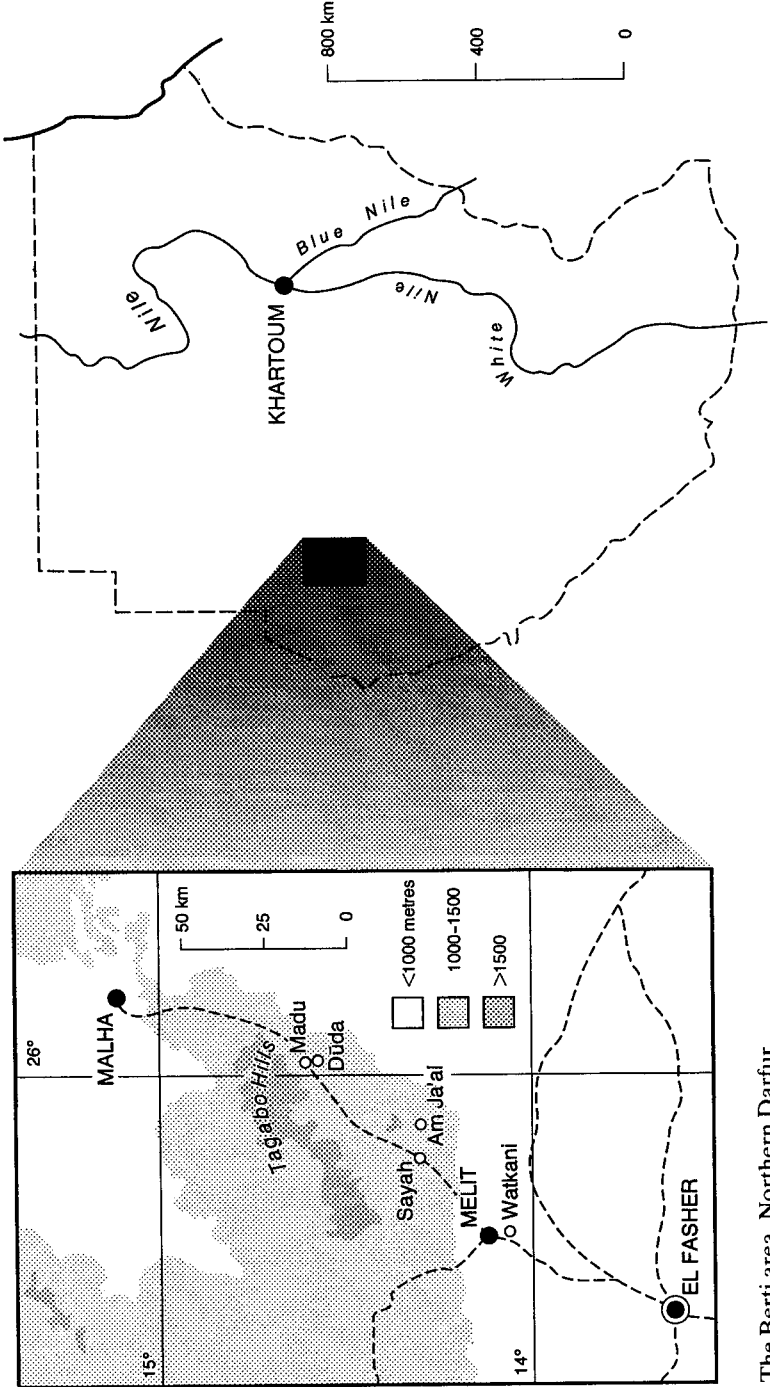
I cannot name all the Berti who so willingly helped me, allowed me to join in their activities and responded with remarkable patience to my enquiries. I wish, nevertheless, to express my special thanks to Ādam Abbakar and his wife Fātna who were my hosts in Dūda and over the years became my and my wife's close friends. Our own household in Dūda was adjacent to theirs and, apart from being an invaluable source of information, they provided constant and unselfish help in coping with the practical aspects of life in a Berti village.

My thinking and writing have been profoundly influenced by invaluable comments on the earlier drafts of the manuscript made by Kay Milton, Richard Werbner, Richard Fardon, Paul Baxter and Roy Dilley. Special thanks are due to my wife Alice who accompanied me on all my trips to Darfur from 1965 and who shared with me the joys and frustrations of the fieldwork and gave me immeasurable support during the writing of this book. She died a few days before I completed the final revision of the manuscript and I gratefully dedicate this book to her memory.

Material contained in Chapter 2 was first published in *Reason and Morality* (ASA Monographs 24, ed. J. Overing, 1985) and some of the material contained in Chapters 3 and 6 was first published in *Man* (N.S.) 18 (1983) and 23 (1988). I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the Association of Social Anthropologists and the Royal Anthropological Institute to use it in this book.

The Berti speak a dialect of Arabic which resembles the Arabic spoken by other Darfur peoples but is quite distinct from the standard spoken Arabic as well as from the colloquial Arabic spoken in the riverain Sudan. Berti Arabic does not differentiate gender and has done away with a number of Arabic phonemes, particularly thā, dhāl, the aspirated ḥ, and the emphatic ṣ, ḍ, ṭ and z. The standard Arabic qāf is pronounced like the English g in 'go'. I follow the standard system of the transliteration of Arabic. But with the exception of a few words of classical Arabic, to preserve the flavour of Berti speech, I transliterate from the dialect rather than from the classical or standard Arabic words with which the dialect is connected. The long vowels, none of which is diphthongised, are indicated as ā, ē, ī, ō and ū. I have kept familiar words in their standardised English usage: for example, Darfur, El Fasher, Koran, Sufism.

Republic of the Sudan



The Berti area, Northern Darfur