

²A tax on non-Muslims in return for exemption from the *zakat* tax on Muslims and military service. [Ed.]

³Byzantine soldiers and officials. [Ed.]

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Epic of Sundiata, Thirteenth Century

This is a brief selection from one of the great epics of West Africa. In a culture without a system of written notation, stories like this were told by griots—specialists with prodigious memories. Most of these griots worked in the courts of kings, learning, like their fathers before

Source: *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*, trans. David C. Conrad and narrated by Djanka Tassej Condé (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 17–19 (lines 420–93).

them, to tell the story of their patron's family. The *Epic of Sundiata* is the account of one of the great families of the Mande people. The *Epic* centers on Sundiata Keita (c. 1217–1255), who founded the Mali Empire. Our selection is drawn from the story of Maghan Konfara, Sundiata's father, and tells of his conversion to Islam. It begins with the declaration of a visitor, Manjan Bereté, after Maghan Konfara has asked to marry his sister. What does this story add to your understanding of religious conversions and the spread of salvation religions?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

A single conversion would seem to bring far less change than the conquest of a city. Yet, as we have seen, the conversion of a king might have consequences as profound as the conquest of a kingdom. What sort of changes would you expect to occur after this conversion? We are also used to thinking of religious conversion as a momentous change for the individual who experiences it, not the casual affair depicted here. What, if anything, does this story tell you about the history of internal or psychological change?

[The visitor declares:]

"We are Bereté.

It was our ancestor who planted a date farm for the Prophet
at Mecca

That was the beginning of our family identity.

When the date farm was planted for the Prophet,

He blessed our ancestor.

He said everyone should leave us alone:

Bè anu to yè, and that is why they call us Bereté.

No man of Manden will tell you

That we originated the Bereté family identity.

It was the Prophet who said we should be set apart,

That nobody's foolishness should trouble us.

Bè anu to yè, everyone should leave us alone.

Thus we became the Bereté.

From that time up to today,

We have not done anything other than the Prophet's business.

This place¹ has already become impious

¹Maghan Konfara's place, Konfara, Farakoro, or more generally the land of the Mande (modern southwest Mali). [Ed.]

Because of your lack of attention to Islam.
 So how can I give you my little sister?
 I did not come from Farisi² for that purpose,
 So I will not give you my little sister."
 "Aaah," said Simbon,³ "Give her to me.
 If you want wealth, I will give you wealth."
 (You heard it?)
 "If you not give her to me,
 I will take her for myself,
 Because you are not in your home, you are in my home."
 When Manjan Bereté was told this, he said,
 "If you take my sister for yourself, I will go back to Farisi.
 I will go and get Suraka⁴ warriors to come and destroy Manden
 If you take my little sister by force."
 Simbon said, "You just do that.
 If you go back to Farisi to get warriors,
 You might come and destroy Manden.
 But by then your sister will be pregnant,
 I will have a child by then.
 Even if I die, it will still be my child."
 (You heard it?)
 He said, "I have taken her."
 He took her.
 "If you call for wealth, I will give you wealth.
 If you call for the sword, I will agree to that.
 I have the power, you have no power, you are in my place."

Manjan Bereté packed up his books and went back to Farisi.
 He went and told his fathers and brothers,
 "The Mande *mansa*⁵ that I went to visit,
 He has used his chiefly power to take my little sister from me."
 His fathers and brothers said, "Ah, Manjan Bereté,
 Your youth has betrayed you.
 You carry the sacred book.
 Go back and tell the Mande people,
 Tell Simbon,
 That if he is in love with your younger sister,
 You will give him both her and the book.

² Fars, Persia. [Ed.]

³ Speaks for Maghan Konfara. [Ed.]

⁴ Arab, Moor, or North African warriors. [Ed.]

⁵ King. [Ed.]

Tell him 'If you convert, and become another like me,
 So that we can proselytize together,
 I will give you my younger sister,
 But if you refuse to convert, I will go for my warriors.'
 If he does not convert, come back and we will give you warriors.
 If he agrees to convert, that is what you went for."

Manjan Bereté returned to Farakoro.
 After he explained to Simbon,
 Maghan Konfara said, "What your father said,
 That your youth betrayed you, is true.
 If you had done what he said in the first place,
 You would not have returned to Farisi.
 All I want is a child, no matter what the cost.
 I agree to what you propose.
 Since you have requested that I convert,
 I agree."
 They shaved his head, and together they read the Koran.
 After reading the Koran,
 Manjan Bereté gave his little sister to Maghan Konfara.

■ REFLECTIONS

The expansion of the great universal religions continued well beyond 1000. In fact, it continues today. We live in a world of about two hundred nation-states, but two-thirds of the world's people follow only three religions: Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. We return to the question that opened this chapter: What enabled these particular religions to convert so many?

We noted here, and in the previous chapter, that many of the religions of this period were book or text based. The Bible and Quran were said by many to be given by God. The stories of the Buddha also took on an aura of authority that must have enhanced their appeal. Most people could not read or write, of course, but the great religions created writing-based bureaucracies, educators, and thinkers who ensured the dissemination of the sacred scripture, eternal truths, and revered tales. The stories of the life of Jesus were carved into the walls of the Christian churches, etched into the colored glass of the windows, and told and reenacted in the religious rite of the Eucharist, which celebrated the last supper of Jesus. Statues of the Buddha of every size and description were carved and placed for worship in temples throughout Asia. Five times a day, the Muslim call to prayer

reverberated from the minarets that spiked the skyline from Morocco to Malacca, and from Tashkent to Timbuktu. One did not have to be able to read in order to pray.

The learned devised, collected, or correlated these texts, often insisting they were the words of the founder, spoken by God or engraved in stone. Then they and their successors explained and interpreted them, often turning intractable prose into metaphor, amending failed prophecies, and inventing myths to suit current politics.

Our readings suggest that the decision to adopt a particular religion was often more political than theological. Kings and emperors made the decision, often with the same degree of calculation whether they were defending state cults, like Trajan (document 4.8), embracing radical challenges, like Constantine, or simply negotiating a marriage, like Sundiata's father. Universal religions and imperial systems fit well together because it was easier for the emir or emperor to work with a unified set of religious values and only universal religions allowed new converts. Example and influence probably played a greater role than conquest. The spread of Islam was the most obvious conquest in this period (as Christianity was later), but the image of Muslims forcing others to convert or die was largely a projection of later Christian crusaders. Recent historical research reveals a rapid military conquest by traditional Arab raiding armies followed later by a gradual process of conversion. Many conquered people, like the Jews of Jerusalem, viewed the Arab armies as liberators. In general, Arab rule was remote and indirect. Normally, the Arabs left earlier structures in control, sometimes making the collection of tribute more efficient, even more lenient. Arab Muslim conquerors were not highly motivated in winning converts because mass conversions would limit the *jizya*, the head tax that only non-Muslims paid. A study by the historian Richard Bulliet shows that Iranians adopted Muslim names (a sign of conversion) gradually a hundred years after the conquest of 648 and that the number of Iranian Muslims increased over the next few hundred years at rates that can be charted on a standard bell curve, the same way any new style or technology rises and then levels off close to saturation.

Distinguishing change and continuity is a historical skill useful in understanding any historical document, period, process, or place. It helps us pose questions, not give simplistic answers like "religion x was continuous, but religion y changed." Everything changes to some degree. It is relative change or constancy that we are after. How fast, how sudden, what specifically changed, and what continued pretty much as before? And what can we learn from asking these questions?

If Judaism was a universal religion that converted large populations from North Africa to Central Asia in the years before and after the fall

of Rome, then its continuity, like that of the other universal religions, is in belief and tradition, not ethnicity or place. If the continuity of Islam stretches back to a more widespread Judaism than previously thought, then it makes sense to think of a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, to recognize the apocalyptic theme that pulses through it, and to see the continuity between Islam and Nestorian Christianity, as well as the seal of a new prophecy. On the other hand, a post-Nestorian Christianity in Tang China that neither mentions Jesus nor explains the symbolism of the cross, but instead speaks in the metaphors of the Dao, may tell us more about the continuity of Chinese cultural traditions than of Christianity. Lessons like these are not only interesting in their own right. They might have also been useful for later generations of empire builders, colonial settlers, missionaries, and diplomats.