

The Arabized Berbers: A Muslim Unreached People that Once Was Christian

Today, the vast region of Northern Africa is predominantly inhabited by Arab Muslims. But this was not always the case. The territory was once dominated by the Berbers, a non-Arab people who at one time were mostly Christians. The Berbers successfully withstood numerous invasions before finally being overrun by the Muslim Arabs.

Beginning in the seventh century, Arab invasions caused many non-Islamic tribes, including the Berbers, to be displaced. The Berbers were particularly affected by the mass immigrations of Arab Bedouins in the eleventh century. At that time, some of the Berbers fled. Others were driven into the desert, where they began displacing or enslaving the Negroes who lived there. Many Berbers remained and submitted, becoming "Arabized" in language and, to some extent, racially mixed with the Arabs. All of the Berbers, without exception, embraced Islam.

Today, most of the Arabized Berbers still identify themselves as Berbers. However, elements of Arabic origin have now become so prominent that it is difficult to distinguish them from the Arabs.

Their Way of Life

For the Berbers, "Arabization" occurred in three overlapping stages. The first stage was the initial contact with the Arab invaders in the seventh century. The second stage began with the arrival of the Bedouins in the eleventh century. The third stage of Arabization, which took place between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, was accelerated by the arrival of refugees from Andalusia (a region in southern Spain).

Traditionally, the Berber economy

rested on a fine balance between farming and breeding cattle. Each tribe, without exception, depended heavily on domestic animals for carrying heavy loads, milk and dairy products, meat, and hides or wool. Similarly, there was not a single tribe that did not also rely on agriculture for survival.

The arrival of the Bedouins in the eleventh century brought competition for pasture land. The Bedouins were numerous enough to compete with the Berbers who lived in the plains, but were not able to dislodge or greatly influence the mountain tribes. For this reason, the Arabization of the Berber was confined to the plains and plateau areas.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Andalusian refugees settled in towns. They brought with them a richer and more classical form of Arabic speech. This had a profound effect on the partially-Arabized Berbers, causing the differences between urban and rural dialects to become even greater. Certainly, those who retained the original Berber language have also retained more of the traditional Berber culture and customs.

The adoption of Arab speech is only one aspect of Arabization. Many Berber groups resisted Islam at first; but by two or three centuries after the Arab invasions, they had all converted to the Islamic faith, at least in name. Wherever Arabic replaced the Berber language, laws from the Koran replaced the traditional tribal order.

The harshness of the Berber lifestyle in Northern Africa has led many of the Berbers to immigrate. Today, large communities of Arabized Berbers can be found in several nations, particularly Europe. Although most of them are only involved in unskilled or semi-skilled

labor, they are able to earn more than they would "back home."

The Arabized Berbers, like many other groups that have immigrated to other nations, send much of their earnings back home to support their larger, extended families. Similarly, members of the extended families often travel to Europe, where they will live and work for short periods of time before returning home.

Their Beliefs

Today, virtually all of these tribes are 100% Sunni Muslim, with most belonging to the Malikite branch of Islam. Islam is a major world religion that is based on five essential duties or "pillars": (1) A Muslim must affirm that "there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet." (2) Five times a day he must pray while facing Mecca. (3) He must give alms generously. (4) He must fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year. (5) He must try to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca in his lifetime. Muslims are also prohibited to drink alcohol, eat pork, gamble, steal, use deceit, slander, and make idols.

While the Berbers adopted the five pillars of Islam, each was modified a little to fit their local traditions and tastes. For instance, many are very casual about prayer. Also, among some tribes, the giving of alms was not accepted because it was perceived as being some type of tax.

Their Needs

There are several Christian resources available to the Arabized Berbers; however, most of the tribes remain less than 1% Christian. Several missions

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