



Sudan – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 7 January 2013

Any information on the customs and traditions of the Zaghawa tribe in Darfur? What languages are spoken by the Zaghawa tribe in Darfur? Are there any subgroups within the Zaghawa tribe? If yes, what are their names?

Footnote 96 of a Human Rights Watch report on Darfur refers to the Zaghawa as follows:

“The Zaghawa tribe consists of several sub-clans: the Wagi, Kobe, and the Bideyat. The Wagi are only found in Sudan while the other two sub-clans, the Kobe and the Bideyat, straddle the border.” (Human Rights Watch (2 April 2004) *Darfur in Flames: Responses To The Darfur Conflict*)

An entry on the Zaghawa in *The Peoples of Africa: An Ethnohistorical Dictionary* states:

“The Zaghawas are a subgroup of the Beri peoples of Chad and Sudan. Their population exceeds 300,000 people, virtually all of whom are Muslims. The Zaghawas are scattered around Sudan and southwestern Ethiopia. A remnant of the Garamantes people, they are closely related to the Bertis and Bideyats. They live in small, sedentary villages of no more than 100 people each and make their living raising millet, sorghum, peanuts, okra, sesame, watermelons, cucumbers, and pumpkins. Some Zaghawas raise cattle, goats, sheep, and sometimes donkeys, camels, and horses. Because of changing economic patterns in recent years, more and more Zaghawa young men travel seasonally to Libya in search of wage labor. The Zaghawas are Sunni Muslims, but their devotions are lukewarm, at least when compared to many other Muslim groups. They also practice karama-the sacrifice of a bull, goat, or lamb to ward off evil or to bring rain and a good harvest. Political power among the Zaghawas was once exercised by omdas, or chiefs, but, in recent decades, the Sudanese government has imposed a series of village, division, and regional councils. The omdas, however, are still recognized as important judicial officials.” (Olson, James S. (1996) *The Peoples of Africa: An Ethnohistorical Dictionary*, Greenwood Press, Westport)

A section headed “Zaghawa” of an article published by Cultural Survival Quarterly states:

“Scattered throughout Sudan, Chad, and Niger, the roughly 171,000 Zaghawa live primarily along the border between Sudan and Chad in the northern Darfur region. The Zaghawa, who also call themselves Beri, are a semi-nomadic ethnic group who rely on camel and cattle herding.

Zaghawa lands are the most ecologically fragile in Darfur and are frequently affected by drought. The Zaghawa must wait nine dry months for a brief rainy

season. Competition for access to pasture and water often creates conflict either with settled farmers or among themselves.

Some Zaghawa grow tomatoes, onions, and okra in gardens around their homes. Women cultivate these gardens and also gather wild grasses, seeds, honey, and berries. Many men have become merchants and travel to southern and eastern Darfur to buy manufactured goods and other foods. These migrant Zaghawa, part of the lower working class, also depend on hunting for survival, although the introduction of firearms has limited the amount of game in the region.

In the 1600s, the majority of Zaghawa converted to Islam. This change greatly reduced the power of ruling chiefs and Zaghawa either completely abandoned their traditional religion or modified their religious practices to comply with Islam.

Zaghawa villages in northern Darfur in 2003 were the main targets of aerial bombs. The Zaghawa fled to wadis, or tree-lined riverbeds, where they were able to access hand-dug wells. Air and ground attacks in the recent conflict have followed the Zaghawa to their wadis and have forced many to find refuge in Chad and other lands in Darfur." (Cultural Survival Quarterly (20 August 2004) *Peoples of Darfur*)

See also section on the Zaghawa in a document published on the African People website which states:

"The Zaghawa are scattered throughout the African countries of Sudan, Chad and Niger. Also called the Beri, the Sudanese Zaghawa are a semi-nomadic Ethnicity that is found living primarily along the border between Sudan and Chad. Numbering approximately 171,000, they are a camel and cattle herding group who also engage in a fair amount of agriculture.

The Zaghawa are an ancient society that dates back to the seventh century. During that time, they had their own kingdom ruled by chieftans and divided into strict social classes and family clans. The various clusters of Zaghawa tribes are still divided into clans, yet the development of the nations of Sudan, Chad and Niger has weakened the chiefs and the overall Zaghawa social system.

The problem of water is a major preoccupation for the Zaghawa, who during normal years must wait nine dry months for a short rainy season which lasts between the end of June and the end of August. To survive, many herdsman drive their animals north to graze during the dry season, and return south when it rains.

In addition to using the milk of their cattle, sheep and camels and selling some animals for income, the Zaghawa also grow vegetables such as tomatoes, onions and okra in small gardens surrounding their homes and raise crops such as millet and tubers (starchy root vegetables). Many Zaghawa are merchants who travel southward and eastward to find food and manufactured goods that are not available in their own region. Sugar, tea, oil, blankets, plastic products and soap are all purchased or exchanged for cattle, sheep, wild grasses and the gum of the acacia tree. Some men also work as blacksmiths, although craftsmen would be a better collective name for these

artists who make metal tools, weapons and jewelry; create pottery; carve wooden stools and musical instruments; weave cotton; and tan hides to make various leather items.

The adoption of Muslim (sic), which was introduced into the region in the 1600s. Villages have become hospitable to outsiders, and sacrifice and ancestor worship have either been modified and reinterpreted in order to be acceptable to Muslim. Although Muslim is widely accepted and the study of Muslim law is highly respected, the Zaghawa, like Muslims everywhere, still hang on to many of their traditional superstitions. To avoid the curse of the 'evil eye,' a rather vague yet terrifying phenomenon, they wear charms, construct their houses in a certain fashion and cover their babies' faces in public." (African People (undated) *People of Africa: Zaghawa*)

A document originally published by the Bethany World Prayer Centre, in a section titled "What are their lives like?", states:

"Since the independence of Sudan, Chad, and Niger, the governments have greatly reduced the power of the Zaghawa chiefs. Also, Islam has weakened their traditional clan system. Today, the Zaghawa are concerned about their economic welfare, their political independence, and their national heritage. Their economy is based on animal husbandry, agriculture, gathering, and trading. Cattle, sheep, camels, and other animals are raised and marketed, primarily for their milk. The milk of cattle, sheep, and camels is consumed either hot or cold, sour or fresh, pure or mixed with water or tea, as a porridge mixed with millet, or as butter. The milk of a donkey may also be drunk as a remedy for coughing. Animal skins are used to make clothing and leather items, and the meat is eaten as a part of their diet.

Tubers (starchy root vegetables) and millet are grown in the fields, while vegetables such as onions, tomatoes, and okra are grown in small gardens surrounding the homes. The women are responsible for cultivating these small vegetable gardens. They also gather wild grasses, seeds, berries, and other fruits. Small groups of women set out for journeys that last about a month, taking with them all that is necessary for their gathering expedition. They sleep under shelters built from branches and bundles of grass. After the gathering is complete, the various grains are stored in earthen jars, for cereals are not mixed within the same granary. In addition to the products gathered by the women, the Zaghawa may also gather honey, certain leaves, and locusts for consumption.

Many Zaghawa are merchants, traveling southward and eastward to find food supplements and manufactured goods that they lack in their own region. Cattle, sheep, wild grasses, and the gum of the Acacia Senegal are exchanged for sugar, tea, oil, blankets, dried dates, soap, and aspirin.

Some of the Zaghawa work as blacksmiths (as these craftsmen are collectively called). Their craft involves making metal tools, weapons, and jewelry; making pottery; and carving wooden stools and musical instruments. A few of the blacksmiths also tan hides, make various leather items, weave cotton, and hunt. In times past, the blacksmiths depended primarily on hunting for survival. However, since the introduction of firearms in the area, there is a limited amount of game in the region. Among the Zaghawa, blacksmiths are considered to be the lowest caste.

Most Zaghawa villages contain Islamic mosques, which are used for prayer. There is also a 'men's tree,' where the men gather to discuss the affairs of the village. Inside the villages, young girls may be seen grinding grain and making porridge, while the young boys help with the herds or the harvest. From the time a child is very young, he is taught the way of life that his caste will offer them." (Bethany World Prayer Centre (1997) *The Zaghawa of Central Africa*)

The Introduction to a United Nations Development Programme report on the blacksmith caste of the Zaghawa states:

"Although the blacksmiths refer to themselves as 'Zaghawa' – a dominant group in Darfur – the blacksmiths are from a traditionally neglected and marginalized group associated with Darfur's lower castes. They form a sub-group of the Zaghawa known as 'Hadaheed' (plural of 'Hadadi', which means 'blacksmith', and derived from 'Hadeed' which means 'iron'). Within the Hadaheed, men practice traditional forms of iron work and women pottery. They have done so as long as their history recalls, passing their knowledge and skills from generation to generation. Centuries ago, this group is thought to have been thrallled by the Zaghawa, who had entered and settled into their territory." (United Nations Development Programme (2011) *Forging Through Adversity: The Blacksmiths of North Darfur and Practical Action*, p.2)

In a paper on the Zaghawa language Dr. Suleiman Norein Osman of Al-Fasher University, in a section headed "Background", states:

"Zaghawa is one of the biggest tribes in Darfur. They call themselves Beri and their language 'Beria' and the name Zaghawa itself is the term other tribes use to identify this ethnic group. Zaghawa language, which belongs to the Saharan family, was originally spoken in Dar Zaghawa, the northern most zone of Darfur by desert nomads but due to adverse ecological conditions a wide scale diaspora has taken place since the 1960s. Waves of migrations to the southern regions led to the reshuffle of Zaghawa within the territories of other ethnic groups. Now they live in almost all parts of Darfur and Sudan, but they are densely populated in Al-Fasher, Nyala, Omdurman El-Dein, Hufrat Al-Nahas, Marla, Labado, Mahagria, Shaeria, Khazan Jadeed, Abuzirega, Mileet, Taweela, Kabkabia, Sagel Naam and Donki Dreesa." (Osman, Suleiman Norein (Al-Fasher University) (19 February 2004) *Phonology of Zaghawa Language in Sudan*)

In a section headed "Dialects of Zaghawa Language" this paper states:

"Probably the main dialects of Zaghawa (Beriaa) in Sudan are Wegi , Kobe and Toba (Bedeyat), besides Dorong in Chad. Jakobi (1999) in her paper entitled 'Current research on languages of Darfur' said in the introduction, 'Darfur is an area where various people live: For, Zaghawa (Beri), Bideyat, Berti...' This statement seems to suggest that Bideyat and Zaghawa are different languages. But in fact Bideyat is the word non-Zaghawa speakers use to refer to the speakers of "Toba" dialect, which is simply another variety of Zaghawa." (ibid)

See also paper authored by Dr. Suleiman Norein Osman which, in a section titled "Zaghawa Language(Beri-a)", states:

“Beri divide their language into four main branches according to clan classification:

1. Wegi, numerically the largest of the four branches remains mostly within Sudan, where they used to have eight sultanates. With Kube, they share the name Zaghawa, but they have their distinctive Arab names also, the most commonest among them Twer, less common ones include Gala and Artag. Wegi essentially maintains uniformity in its native lexicon, although further east people have borrowed profusely from Arabic. Two sub-clans, the Unai and the Eni, are recognized to have some minor variations.

2. Kube stretches out the border between Sudan and Chad but most Kube-ra (Kube people) live in Chad. The present political boundary reflects the division of two Kube sultanates, one based at Hiri-ba in Chad and the other based at Tine on the borderline between Sudan and Chad.

3. Tuba used to live in the area north of that of Kube but draught cycles compelled them to drift away, mixing at times with Kube, at times in separate communities, and at times even entirely south of the Kube in land traditionally attributed to the neighbouring Tama people. Their nomadic nature led the Arabs to give them a separate name, the Bedyat. Tuba also comprises two main dialects: the majority Biria and the smaller Brogat. The latter has intermarried with the adjacent Gorane people (linguistically known as Daza). Most also speak the Gorane language (Daza-ga), with the younger generation increasingly proficient in their mother tongue. Brogat contrasts minimally with Biria, mostly in consonant voicing, where Borogat seem to retain some earlier contrasts.

4. Dirong is another unique dialect, sharing common aspects with Guruf, towards the south west of and centered around the town of Martibe. In the larger Kube community, this dialect has disadvantaged status. (Osman, Suleiman Norein (Al-Fasher University) (undated) *Proverbs and Idiomatic Phrases in Zaghawa Language*)

An entry on the Zaghawa in the Ethnologue Languages of the World, in a paragraph headed “Alternate names”, states:

“Beri, Beri-Aa, Berri, Kebadi, Kuyuk, Merida, Soghaua, Zagaoua, Zagawa, Zauge, Zeggaoua, Zeghawa, Zorhaua” (Ethnologue Languages of the World (2009) *Zaghawa: A language of Sudan*)

See also paragraph headed “Dialects” which states:

“Wagi (Twer), Kube, Tuba (Bideyat). Wagi is the main dialect in Sudan. Ethnic subgroups are Kobe, Dor, Anka, with slight dialect differences.” (ibid)

A document published by Physicians for Human Rights, in a section titled “Tribes, Location, & Language”, comments on the effects of Sudan's Arabization policy on the Zaghawa as follows:

“The Sudanese government's ‘Arabization’ policy affected tribal languages in certain parts of Darfur severely. The Zaghawa of El Bain province, an area of eastern Darfur dominated by Arabs, no longer speak the Zaghawa language

due to generations of forced communication in Arabic. Similarly, in other areas of Darfur, school children were only allowed to speak Arabic in school, and were beaten or verbally accosted by their teachers if they spoke a tribal language. There are also several instances of adults being bullied, taunted, or physically harmed on the street because ardent followers of 'Arabization' heard them speaking tribal languages." (Physicians for Human Rights (undated) *Darfur: The Culture and the People*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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