

Background to the Making of Modern Sudan

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Introduction:

This article explains how the present Sudan comprises a cluster of diverse ethnic and cultural groups of African and Arab origins. This diversity is a product of a long process that dates back to pre-history. The article examines the present Sudan's past link with Middle East, then its link with Africa. It explains how the present Sudan was linked to the Middle East since ancient times. The Sudan, is deeply entrenched in Africa, has an old history of close contacts with the worlds of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, particularly Egypt and Asia minor. It believes that the Middle East dimension in the Sudan was strengthened by the advent of Islam. The coming of Islam eventually changed the nature of Sudanese society. Islam also fostered political unity, economic growth, and cultural development in the Sudanic belt. The article clarifies that the term 'Sudan' refers to the Savannah belt which comprises a mixture of Semitic and Hamitic groups (*Bilad al-Sudan* in Arabic = the Land of Sudan, i.e. the land of the black people). It includes trans-continental savannah belt stretching from the Red Sea coast to the Atlantic Ocean, and lying between the Sahara Desert and the tropical forests. Some scholars made a further distinction between the Sudan in general and the Nubian and the Beja of the Nilotic Sudan in particular. The term *Bilad al-Takrur* was used to describe the region between Dar Fur and the Atlantic Ocean in the West. The article explained how the Sudanese identity was formed through the course of history through this process on intermingling, intermarriage and cultural interaction to produce this multiplicity in the present (AfroArab) Sudan. It is worth mentioning here that the religious orders (the *Sufi Tariqas*) contributed to the process of "socialization and politicization, brought up elites, bureaucracies and institutions of modern Sudan. This process of socialization welded by these dynamics (trade, nomads and sufi missionaries) produced the most multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity of the present Sudan.

The Link to the Middle East:

The present Sudan was linked to the Middle East since the ancient times. The Sudan, deeply entrenched in Africa, has an old history of close contacts with the worlds of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, particularly Egypt and Asia minor.

Archaeological excavation of sites on the Nile above Aswan has confirmed human habitation in the river valley during the Paleolithic period that spanned more than 60,000 years of Sudanese history. The earliest inhabitants of the Sudan can be traced to ancient Negroid people who lived in the vicinity of Khartoum in neolithic (middle stone age) times. They were hunters and gatherers who made combed pottery and later stone grinders.⁽¹⁾ Towards the end of the neolithic they had domesticated animals and settled in sedentary way of life in fortified mud-brick villages.

These Negroid peoples were clearly in contact with pre-dynastic civilization to the North of Egypt. Skeletal remains suggest a blending of negroid and Mediterranean populations during the Neolithic period (eighth to third millennia B.C.) that has remained relatively stable until the present, despite gradual infiltration by other elements.⁽²⁾ At the end of the fourth millennium B.C. kings of the First Dynasty conquered Upper Nubia beyond Aswan, introducing Egyptian influence to a non-Negroid people who were scattered along the river bank.

Scholars admit that at the height of Meroitic power there was northward orientation of the culture of the Sudan which began in the Kerma period which emerged in the ninth and tenth centuries B.C. and survived into Napatan times whose influence reached as far south as Karima.⁽³⁾

Egypt's succeeding dynasty failed to reassert control over Cush. In 590 B. C., however, an Egyptian army sacked Napata, compelling the Cushite court to move to a more secure location at Meroe near the sixth cataract. For several centuries thereafter, the Meroitic kingdom developed independently of Egypt, which passed successively under Persian, Greek, and, finally, Roman domination. During the height of its power in the second and third centuries B. C., Meroe extended over a region from the third cataract in the north to Soba, near present-day Khartoum, in the south.

The Pharaonic tradition persisted among a line of rulers at Meroe. They developed a strong centralized political system and a Meroitic script. Northern Cush eventually fell into disorder as it came under pressure from the Blemmyes. However, the Nile continued to give the region access to the Mediterranean world. Meroe maintained contact with Arab and Indian regions. The use of Greek in liturgy eventually gave way to the Nubian language which was written using an indigenous alphabet that combined elements of the old Meroitic and Coptic scripts. Moreover, early inscriptions have indicated a continuing knowledge of colloquial Greek in Nubia as late as the twelfth century. After the seventh century, Arabic gained importance in the Nubian kingdoms, especially as a medium for commerce.⁽⁴⁾

The Christian Nubian Kingdoms achieved their peak of prosperity and power in the ninth and tenth centuries. However, Muslim Arab invaders, who conquered Egypt in 640, posed a threat to the Christian Nubian kingdoms. The structure of pharaonic and Nubian extraction of African resources encouraged Arab traders to explore mineral resources and promote distant trade and share in the trade between Asia and Europe. Late prospectors roamed as far south as Fazugli and Hufat Al-Nihass for gold and copper respectively. Other valued trading items include slaves, ivory, ebony, incense, oils, fany skins and livestock. ⁽⁵⁾

The peaceful Arab infiltration into Nubia helped by the Baqt truce which governed the relations between the two sides for more than 600 years.

The Arabs gained commercial advantages from those peaceful relations. They used the treaty to ensure that travel and trade proceeded unhindered across the frontier. Trade conducted between them included horses, ivory, gold, gum arabic, and cattle along with other commodities.

The Middle East dimension in the Sudan was strengthened by the advent of Islam. The coming of Islam eventually changed the nature of Sudanese society. Islam also fostered political unity, economic growth, and cultural development in the Sudanic belt.

Traditional genealogies trace the ancestry of most of the Nile Valley's mixed population to Arab tribes that migrated into the region during this period. Even non-Arabic-speaking groups claim descent from Arab origin. The two most important Arabic-speaking groups to emerge in Nubia were the Jaali and the Juhayna branches. Both showed physical continuity with the indigenous pre-Islamic population. The nomadic Juhayna comprised a family of tribes that included the Kababish, Baqqara, and Shukriyya. They descended from Arabs who migrated after the thirteenth century into an area that extended from the Savanna and semi-desert west of the Nile to the Abyssinian foothills east of the Blue Nile. In some instances, as among the Beja, the indigenous people absorbed Arab migrants who settled among them. Beja ruling families later derived their legitimacy from claims of Arab descent.

Although Nubia was linked to the Mediterranean, it was further influenced by the African environment and it nourished its interaction with Africa in trade and culture. It was superior in such a way similar to the position occupied by lower Nubia in that the Nubians were leaders of the mining civilization. It was a source of power for Meroe in Africa. In this area even the religions overlapped and flourished. This had resulted in socio-cultural intermingling.

Generally, the term Sudan refers to the Savannah belt which comprises a mixture of Semitic and Hametic groups. Actually Arab historians and geographers were the first to use precise terms designating African ethnic groups known to them. They called Bantu negroes of east Africa (the brown colour) extending to central Africa (Burundi). To those to the north they called Habash. They include present day

Abyssinians, Eritreans, and remain Sudanese between Atbara and the Blue Nile. Further to the north come the Beja and Bishariyyin. Regions to the west of the Red Sea and south of Sahara to central Africa and westwards to west Africa and the shores of the Atlantic they call the land of the blacks (*Bilad al-Sudan*).⁽⁶⁾

Bilad al-Sudan, there intermingled negroid, semitic and Hamitic elements. They established kingdoms in east, middle and west Africa particularly the Takrur. They are Hamitic but they claim that they belong to the Arab Peninsula. They seem to have relations with the Berber. The majority of the rest of Africa to the south of equator are negroid.

These formations had considerable impact on the making of Sudan, and have continued to affect its identity and position in the world.

Sudan in Africa

European writers reduce the African history to that of the colonial period. This cultural bias ignore the influence of the Arab-Islamic culture in Africa which had “constituted the most important component of African indigenous culture for centuries.”⁽⁷⁾

Islam penetrated into North Africa since its early phase and spread along the eastern and western coasts and extended along the internal rivers. This gave birth to Islamic African culture in East Africa (the Swahili) and total Arab vernaculars and African oriented Islamic practice..

In West Africa the Arab-Islamic culture managed to establish itself in the basin of the Niger River where literacy developed and many towns grew as Islamic centres. On the Eastern Coast of Africa, meanwhile, there “evolved a literate and urban African civilization ... Here, too, the influence of Islamic literacy penetrated deeply into African societies and produced a culture of the Swahili that has still to receive its due recognition from the rest of the world.”⁽⁸⁾

The Western powers became aware that the only power which encourages Africans to oppose the state of servitude is the beliefs and religions which are deep-rooted in the African culture. So that the Western slave traders used to prevent the slaves from practicing their African religions or talk their indigenous language.⁽⁹⁾ Islam gave the black a sense of identity.

As it has been indicated the early Arab geographers used the term ‘*bilad al-Sudan*’ (the land of the black people) to include the trans-continental savannah belt stretching from the Red Sea coast to the Atlantic Ocean, and lying between the Sahara Desert and the tropical forests. Some scholars made a further distinction between the Sudan in general and the Nubian and the Beja of the Nilotic Sudan in

particular. The term *Bilad al-Takrur* was used to describe the region between Dar Fur and the Atlantic Ocean in the West.

Confining the term *Bilad al-Sudan* to the sub-Sahara region indicates that the inhabitants were predominantly Muslim. "It witnessed the rise of the earliest Islamic Sultanates of the Sudan; it maintained commercial and diplomatic relations with North Africa and Arab Peninsula. The Islamic states that flourished, gradually adopted Islam as the basis of government, law and education."⁽¹⁰⁾

In recent times other scholars divided the Sudanic belt into two zones, namely Western and Eastern Bilad al-Sudan. The first zone comprises the lands west of Darfur, the second consists of the Nilotic Sudan or the eastern Sudan. However, other writers prefer to divide it into three regions: Western, Central and Eastern.⁽¹¹⁾

However, the consensus is that cultural ties existed among the people of Bilad al-Sudan for thousands of years and a great deal of interaction and influence radiated from Meroe into Africa notably through iron-making in this metal age. Also a considerable influence "radiated from Nubia in medieval times into the far West of the Nilotic Sudan. Christian traditions existed among the Garamantes, who are identified with the Goraan of Northern Darfur and Waday, since the sixth century AD."⁽¹²⁾ The language spoken by the Meidob of Northern Darfur is closely related to river Nubian. There are stories which suggest strong Nile Valley influence in the West.

Whatever the role of Meroe may have been the spread of culture amongst its neighbours of ancient Africa, "Meroe was an African civilization firmly based on African soil, and developed by an African population."⁽¹³⁾

Such claims inspired romantic ideas among African archaeologists such as the concept of Meroitic hyperdiffusionism of culture throughout sub-Saharan Africa. They claim that Meroe served as a bridge between Asia and the Mediterranean world on the one hand, and the sub-Saharan Africa on the other. To them Meroe was a very special blend of elements, Mediterranean and indigenous to the Sudan. The people lived in the region lived for centuries on Meroitic traditions such as facial marks which is now dying out. But other Meroitic traditions such as the Pharaonic circumcision of girls is still practiced by the majority of the Sudanese people.

Haycock also believes that it is very possible that knowledge of iron-making spread through Meroe to considerable areas in north-eastern Africa. He noted that like the later cultures of the Sudan, Medieval Nubia, the Funj state of Sennar, and indeed the modern Sudan, it was "an interesting example of a fruitful cross-fertilization of cultural elements native to this part of Africa, Egyptian, Mediterranean or Asiatic."⁽¹⁴⁾ Nevertheless, scholars welcomed Arkell's argument that Meroe formed a cultural bridge between Pharaonic Egypt and inner Africa.

The region of central *Bilad al-Sudan* witnessed the rise of several Islamic states such as Kanem and Bornu. They became prominent power in the eighteenth

century. To the West of Lake Chad were the Hausa states which became prominent in the second half of the fifteenth century.⁽¹⁵⁾ At the end of the eighteenth century Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio launched a *jihad*, which led to the conquest of the region known today as Northern Nigeria where he established the Sokoto Caliphate. Dan Fodio's Jihad (1200 – 1300H/1785 – 1883) coincided with the spread – in the Sudanic belt – of the idea of the 'expected Mahdi' (*al-Mahdi al-Munutazar*). This manifestation of al-Mahdi occurred in the Sudan in June 1881 when Muhammad Ahmed al-Mahdi made public his divine mission and declared *jihad* on the corrupt Turco-Egyptian administration.⁽¹⁶⁾ Mahdism was also revived in other parts in the Sudanic belt and reflected a unity of religion and system of belief all over the region. Leaders of Jihad in the region made use of the Mahdist ideology and symbolism.

This interaction reflects early cultural contact between the central and eastern Bilad al-Sudan. Beside this link with the Funj and Darfur – which was penetrated by Islam, large number of Arab tribes and the sufi tariqas (orders) – profound Arabization and Islamization process radiated from the Islamized and Arabized Nubians namely the Danaqla and the Ja'aliyyin. The two groups were forced over the centuries by economic necessity and political pressure to migrate to Kordofan and Darfur and further west. Those included traders and religious teachers.⁽¹⁷⁾

This had further strengthened ethnic interaction and social intermingling. Thus the Fur Sultanate (1640 – 1916) constituted a focal point in commercial transactions and occupied an intermediate position between the eastern and central zones. It was the centre of three main caravan routes that led to Egypt through *Darb al-Arba'in* (the Forty Days Road) to Tripoli via Fezzan and to Waday, Bornu and Western *Bilad al-Sudan* and eastward to Kordofan, Sinnar, via the port of Swakin and Massawwa' to the Hijaz. This was probably the oldest trade route between the Niger and the Nile. Besides its commercial transactions it also carried Muslim pilgrims to Mecca.⁽¹⁸⁾

Also trade routes carried slaves from central *Bilad al-Sudan* to Egypt through Christian Nubia.⁽¹⁹⁾ Kings of Darfur and Dar Bergo also traded on horses with Shaykh Hassan b. Hasuna through those routes.

In both Egypt and Nubia trade has been a royal monopoly in a state-controlled economy. "From ancient times up to the 'Turkiyya' high ranking officials in both countries engaged in private trade. Trade enhanced the power of rulers and tribal leaders. They collected tolls, taxes, and custom..."⁽²⁰⁾ Also through time trade contributed to the emergence of modern administration in the Sudan and "provided for infrastructure and communication and transport, system of accountancy, taxation and storage. It led to the geographical excavation of the sources of the Nile, the opening up of river navigation and inland water transport ..." ⁽²¹⁾

Moreover, prominent traders patronized Ulama and teachers. They encouraged missionary activities in the Sudanic kingdoms. Taj al-Din al-Buhari who introduced the Qadriyya order into the Sudan had been patronized by a certain Da'ud Abdul-Jalil a wealthy slave and ivory trader. The influence of the merchant class based in major trading towns has been growing hand in hand with that of the Ulama.⁽²²⁾ This merchant class had turned into powerful trading families. Hence, "major trading towns had chief merchants holding the official title of *Sirr at-Tujjar*. This trend eventually culminated into the rise of Zaribas (camps) of armed *Jallaba* and ultimately merchant empires of the type carved out by Zubayr Pasha and Rabih."⁽²³⁾

Thus trade supported the mobility of students and teachers through the Sudanic belt. Subsequently when the Nilotic Sudan was extensively Islamized, it produced a number of *fakis* or *fugara* (junior ulamas who teach at khalwa) and also produced shaykh of tariqas (sufi missionaries) whose centres of learning attracted students. Among these centres was that of Shaykh al-Zayn Saghayrun (d. 1695), Shaykh Muhammad al-Qaddal who had two thousands students of whom 1700 were from the Takrur (i.e. westerners coming from regions west of Darfur and includes Takrur, Fulani, Hausa and the inhabitants of Bornu and Dar Borgu).⁽²⁴⁾

These contacts were to assume great importance and become intellectually more dynamic as a result of three significant developments: the increase in the pilgrimage traffic, the start of the hijra and the beginning of the Mahdiyya. In all these contacts Islam occupied a central position. The tools of these contacts were in the wandering scholars, the *fakis* (or *fugara*) and the missionary sufism or tariqas (religious orders).

These religious orders contributed to the process of "socialization and politicization, brought up elites, bureaucracies and institutions of modern Sudan."⁽²⁵⁾ This process of socialization welded by these dynamics (trade, nomads and sufi missionaries) produced the most multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity of the present Sudan.

To sum up, the Arabization and Islamization of Sudanese communities were the direct result of links and interaction with the Middle East and Africa.

The Question of Identity:

The present diverse identity of the Sudan can be viewed as an outcome of a long process of socialization and acculturation developed through a process of historical, political and socio-economic adaptation. The most notable of this diverse socio-cultural fabric of the Sudan was a product of peaceful mutual co-existence and religious tolerance between Muslim Arabs and Sudanese indigenous groups. "This process has always been the backbone and social fabric of the Sudanese culture and

identity because it enabled different groups to mix and merge wishfully, thus forming wider groupings.”⁽²⁶⁾

However, the roots of the Sudanic culture could be traced further back to ancient times. This Sudanic culture came into existence in the land which lies between Aswan and Khartoum. “This area is the centre of the Sudanese civilization and the cradle of human civilization. The Nubian civilization interacted with the civilization of Egypt since the time of Ibrahim,⁽²⁷⁾ (*alayhi as-salam* : peace be upon him).

Prior to the Arab migration to the Nilotic Sudan this area was largely inhabited by Hametic-speaking peoples in the north and negroid tribes in the south and south-west. The nomadic tribes who overran the country over centuries settled and intermarried with the Sudanese peoples, many of whom adopted Islam, assimilated Arab genealogies, customs, and Arabic language. So the country witnessed much ethnic interaction between the Arabs, Hamites and negroids and cultural between Islam, Christianity and pagan beliefs ⁽²⁸⁾

Islam had first entered the northern Sudan (known as eastern Sudan) since mid seventh century through the emigrant Muslim merchants. Other waves of influx followed in mid fourteenth century as the political influence of the Nubia began to decline. With the increase of the Arab-Islamic influence, the ruling family gradually became Muslim with Arab blood.⁽²⁹⁾

In early sixteenth century, a treaty was signed by the pre-existent Arab tribes in the Sudan (led by Abdallah Jamma’, the Shaykh of the Abdallab) on the one hand and the Funj (in the Gezira and Sennar) on the other. The two allies jointly attacked the Christian Soba states and brought it to an end. This allowed the nomads (Bedo) to enter the area through *Wadi al-Nil* (the Nile Valley). They partly settled at al-Butana and other groups crossed the Nile to Kordofan and Darfur.

Under the Funj kingdom(1504 –1820) the active process of Islamization in the Sudan was spearheaded by the religious orders. The Funj and Abdallab rulers welcomed and encouraged the holy men who came from the Islamic heartlands: Egypt, the Hijaz, the Yemen, and – later on – Morocco. Islamized Funj gave the country “a measure of unity and political stability that paved the way and marked the beginning of the proper Islamization.”⁽³⁰⁾ This was carried out by individual scholars who brought Islamic learning and propagated sufi mysticism. Also traders and nomadic tribes accelerated the spread of Islam.

The Turko-Egyptian period in the Sudan marked the first signs of modernization where the Turkish ruling elite constituted a colonialistic instrument not only in the Sudan but also all over the Islamic world. However, this early phase of modernization promulgated the western style but without any spiritual content. It sought to “integrate the Sudan in the European modernity and opened the country for slave trade, Christianization and alien rule.”⁽³¹⁾ This process was obstructed by the

Mahdist revolution which managed to restore the continuity and revival of the Islamic dimension of the country's cultural identity. The British rule also failed to block the flow of this current of the Arab-Islamic culture, though they hindered it from going deep into the South by adopting the policy of 'closed-districts'.

According to the 1955/6 population census there are 56 separate ethnic groups, further divided into 597 subgroups. About 115 languages are spoken; Arabic is spoken by the majority and is at the same time the lingua franca of others. About 70% of the Sudanese are Muslims, 5% are Christians and 25% are of traditional African religions. In both the North and the South individuals and groups have multiple identities: "it is not uncommon to identify oneself in terms of an ethnic group and the nation and the wider Arab and African groupings."⁽³²⁾ This multiplicity of identities blended in the Sudan over a long period of time produced an overwhelming ethnic complexities that has put this vast country at crossroads: either positively interwoven through national integration to make a melting pot or otherwise weaken the country and jeopardize its national cohesion.

This ethnic multiplicity may be behind the scholars' claim that even the North (of the Sudan) is held up together by Islam and Arabic ties because the North is much influenced by the pre-existing tribal cultures to the North. In the South the people "are not pure Negro, Hamitic influences have also been said to exist,"⁽³³⁾ although Southerners are among the darkest in the world. There is a complex admixture between the Brown and the Negro races: "the Nilotics have Hamitic Caucasian elements in their admixture."⁽³⁴⁾ Professor Evans-Pritchard has observed that: "It is doubtful whether any peoples in the Sudan can be regarded as true negroes, and their non-negroid characters, their pastoral pursuits and to a certain degree the structure of their language, are attributed to Hamitic admixture and influence."⁽³⁵⁾

Although Arab settlers were only traders and not rulers, their advantageous position, "their more modern culture and their economic superiority, gave them an enhanced and envied status."⁽³⁶⁾ This, combined with the liberalism of their religion, opened gates to universal 'brotherhood' and made them a desirable class for intermarriage with the leading Sudanese families.⁽³⁷⁾

Ali Mazrui notes that: "One could see Sudan as a bridge between Arabic-speaking Africa and English-speaking Africa; between the Africa of the homogenised mass nation-states of the future and the Africa of the deep ethnic cleavage of the present; and finally between West Africa as a cultural unit and Eastern Africa."⁽³⁸⁾ So by virtue of such intermediary position the Sudanese constitute the most important point of contact between Arab and negro Africa. It is a crossroad of racial mixture and intermarriage. But some anthropologists maintain that "a large proportion of Arab Sudanese are in fact Arabised Negroes, rather than ethnically Semitic. For many of them Arabness is a cultural acquisition, rather than a

racial hereditary.”⁽³⁹⁾ Moreover, Ibn Khaldoun had already indicated an old settlement of Juhayna in ancient Sudan though the stamp of blackness on Arabism comes pre-eminently from the Sudan. It is not only the racial mixture and general acculturation that makes the Sudan an important point of contact between Arabism and negroism, but also the sharp division between the Northern Sudan and the South.⁽⁴⁰⁾

As a part of African set up anthropologists categorize the Sudan as comprising three out of four groups which make up the peopling of Africa. This include the negroid, the Bushmen and Caucasian. Languages in Africa are identified along this line. The four African languages families: “Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Kordofanian and Khoisan.”⁽⁴¹⁾ It is significant that all those families, except the Khoisan, are spoken and represented in the Sudan. Also, from a linguistic point of view Sudan falls in the “fragmentation belt which is a zone of diverse linguistic complexity extending from Senegal in the west to Kenya and Ethiopia in the east.”⁽⁴²⁾

Given such ethnic overlapping in the Sudan it is not surprising that there are 115 languages. So ethnic heterogeneity is paralleled by linguistic diversity. This heterogeneity dates back to early times. Sudan has been basically dominated by two types of people: “a darker negroid people and a relatively lighter population referred to in the literature as ‘caucasian’, ‘Hamitic’, ‘red’, Nubian’, ‘North African’, Mediterranean or ‘north-east African/West Asia’. This is enhanced by cultural variations and differences, specially languages which is a major parameter in the issue of identity”⁽⁴³⁾.

As this paper has indicated, the Arabs are not indigenous population; and so is the Arabic language – though Arab-Islamic culture gained supremacy later. This dates back to the time when three Christian kingdoms evolved in the Nile Valley. They were, thus, nurtured by diverse religious, linguistic and socio-political influences from Nubian, North-African/Mediterranean and North-East African/West Asian influences. Coptic Christian and Judaic influences came from Egypt, Ethiopia and the Mediterranean countries. Greek, Roman and Semetic cultural and linguistic elements from Axumite Ethiopia, Arabia, Rome and Greece found their way into the Sudanese Christian kingdoms. They intermingled with indigenous cultures ... spread through time ... and place ... eventually contributed towards shaping the subsequent picture of ethnic composition and national integration in the Sudan.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The changes brought at the period of the Islamic states produced a new kind of Sudanese people with their own cultural and ethnic religious identity. They are basically “African Muslims ... They assimilated and professed Islam but not Arabism. They are culturally (religiously and linguistically) related to Arabised Muslim neighbours in the North and East, and ethnically related to African non-Arabised neighbours in the South.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

So the penetration and settlement of Muslim Arabs into the Sudan has resulted, along other things, in major cultural changes specially in language and religion. One may suppose that if the Sudan had not had this Arabic supremacy, the country might have been a multi-lingual state possibly united only by the language of the colonizer (i.e. English), just like many former British colonies such.

It may be for this lingua franca (Arabic) and Islamic culture, gradual ethnic, social and religious interaction, within the context of mutual tolerance and co-existence, that cultural continuity has been maintained which – so far – has succeeded in sustaining the basis for common identity. The interplay of these multiethnic groups in the Sudan entails perceiving Sudan as a ‘melting pot’. This melting pot thesis suggests that the Sudanese socio-cultural system is “a unique blend of the multi-farious groups that compose it.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ But this depends on how far the unifying factors, such as language, are activated to contribute to a harmonizing process. Such a process, however, may not take place only in the long run where a high rate of assimilation could incorporate distinct or/and marginal groups into the larger Sudanese cultural totality. This is because from a socio-cultural point of view Sudan is characterised by pluralism. Some suggest that through the course of time “intensive rural-urban mobility have reduced ethnic uniqueness ...”⁽⁴⁷⁾

However, what is worrying here is not the scope and rapidity of assimilation but rather the persistence of unassimilated ethnic identifications of the Sudan.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Hence, the Sudan, it may be argued, is not yet a melting pot; and that the domination of the Islamic Afro-Arab culture does not underestimate the existence of great plurality of cultures, subcommunities and a variety of nationalities. These Sudanese communities live in tolerance and peaceful co-existence – a trait which has been inherited from previous generations up to the present and that hold this mosaic together despite sporadic inter-tribal conflicts.

The Sudanese are further united by: a- Islam, as of neo- Mahdism; and, b- by the colonial rule which constituted a common enemy. The central administration established by those colonial regimes fostered the national unity. This may explain why after independence ethnic problems erupted because the Southern Sudan was not yet assimilated in the core culture. The South, which has retained distinctions in language, customs and religion, challenged the thesis of the melting pot. However, some scholars hold that the assimilation process has been accelerated through education and urbanization and some even provided evidence that some Sudanese groups “disappear in a larger cultural totality, and in so far as members of these groups contribute to a distinct Sudanese life,”⁽⁴⁹⁾ the melting pot idea has empirical support.

To sum up, Bilad al-Sudan of which the present Sudan occupies the eastern part had been bestowed with a dynamism of ethnic and cultural interaction. The

Sudan is an offspring of intermingling between Nubians, Arab, Beja and black negroes. This characteristic qualified the Sudan to be a corridor of Islamic and Arabic culture to Africa. It has also become a melting pot of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural groups both from Arab and negroid origins. Moreover, it could be said that the making of the modern Sudanese identity was a product of a process of Islamization and Arabization peacefully diffused through nomads, sufists, traders and scholars, and intermarriage with the indigenous Hamitic elements.

This formation continued to have considerable impact on the Sudan and has affected its position in the world. It has produced the Afro-Arab formation of the present Sudan. This cultural hybrid was manifested in the nationalist movement and in the writings of the Sudanese literary figures.

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