ISLAM AND ETHNICITY IN THE SUDAN

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Introduction

There are a variety of discourses that may be used to describe the recent history of the Sudan.[1] One approach would be to discuss developments in the context of the post-colonial state, doubly appropriate in the Sudan's case since the country experienced two periods of colonial rule—by Egypt between 1820 and 1885 and Britain, predominantly, between 1898 and 1956. Both powers and in both periods created the arena and the institutions that, at least for the moment, define the Sudan.

Another obvious way to analyse the Sudan's recent past is to see it as a struggle between different groups for control over resources. Here, 'group' can stand for a state, a religious brotherhood, a political party or a self-identified ethnicity. Conflict in and around the Sudan exists on at least three levels: (1) regional, between Egypt, Libya, Iran, etc. This level of conflict will not be my concern here, but it will, as the conflicts at the other levels intensify, become increasingly important and perhaps in the end decisive. (2) Within the Sudan, between North and South,[2] or between the Khartoum Government and organised rebellion in the form of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), and (3) also within the Sudan, interethnic conflict between, for example, Fur and Arab in Darfur, Arab and Nuba in Kordofan, Nilote and non-Nilote in the South.

The present paper seeks to analyse the latter two levels of conflict with reference to the Islamic factor, and by the latter I do not mean Islamisation in the sense that historians of Sudanic Africa have used the term but the organised expression of a specific religious and political ideology, 'Islamism' (*Islāmiyya*). In the Sudan especially, there is a constant need to remember the distinction between being a Muslim and being an Islamist; if both are labels, they carry very different implications.

To be a Muslim in a Fur-speaking village in Jabal Marra means something different than to be a Muslim in a Jaʿaliyyīn village near Shendi on the Nile; to be a Fur Muslim or a Jaʿalī Muslim in Khartoum has yet another significance. In turn, these meanings are different from deliberate adherence to a specific Islamist political ideology.

From one perspective, Islamism, as organised in the National Islamic Front (*al-jabha al-Islāmiyya al-qawmiyya*), is an expression of a Northern Sudanese ethnicity's determination to preserve its control over as much as possible of the Sudan, not least the Nile Valley. From its own perspective, Sudanese Islamism is a local expression of the Islamic resurgence, the determination to establish a social and political order based upon God's revelation.

The coup of 'Umar al-Bashīr of 30 June 1989, when the Islamists captured the Khartoum Government, has brought all these levels of conflict into the open. The effect of the 1989 coup has been to intensify and clarify the ideological divide between North and South. It has also introduced a new dimension into local interethnic competition over resources which are now increasingly defined in religious and racial terms.

Islam and the riverain Elite

By a Northern Sudanese ethnicity, I mean the riverain Northern Sudanese, i.e. the inhabitants of the Nile Valley between Aswan and Khartoum and those living in the Gezira between the Niles and to the east and west in the savannas. The riverain Sudanese are overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking (with the exception of some Nubians), wholly Muslim and to a greater or lesser degree identify themselves genealogically and culturally as Arab.[3]

The impact of Islam on the riverain northern Sudan was complex and cannot be simplistically reduced to a model of 'popular' or Sufi Islam in contrast to urban Azharī 'orthodoxy.'[4] The dominant state of the region between 1500 to 1800, the Funj Sultanate of Sinnār, was both an African 'divine kingship' state and an Islamic polity. Under its umbrella, specialised holy clans emerged, who mediated a Sufi-based Islam to the communities they served and who increasingly usurped the functions of the state.[5] The first colonial period (1820-81) coincided (there is no evidence of a causal connexion) with the implantation throughout the northern Sudan of new Sufi brotherhoods, Khatmiyya, Ismāʿīliyya, Rashīdiyya etc., most of which stemmed from the Moroccan mystic, Aḥmad b. Idrīs (d. 1837), one of the seminal figures in the

neo-Sufi movement of the nineteenth century (there are interesting parallels between nineteenth-century neo-Sufism and the contemporary Islamic resurgence). These new orders linked together the established holy families into supra-ethnic organisations and introduced a more 'complex' form of Islam.[6] Their success may be measured by the fact that they laid the groundwork for the movement, at once an anti-colonial rebellion and a social revolution, of Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Sudanese Mahdi.

The British interlude

A consciously institutionalised Islamic policy in the Sudan is a British invention. The British were obsessed by the fear of a rerun of Islamic messianism in a land whose conquest ('Reconquest' on behalf of Egypt in official parlance, to legitimise their actions) had taken them three years (1896-99) by contrast to the surgically-swift annexation of Egypt in 1882 in the face of a largely secular nationalist movement. Consequently, they watched over Sudanese Muslim leaders like hawks. Politically, the history of the British in the Sudan is a complex dance conducted by the colonial power, the revived Mahdist movement led by a son of the Mahdi, Sir Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī (d. 1959), the Khatmiyya led by Sir Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mīrghanī (d. 1968) and various lesser Sufi figures. In the early years of colonial rule, the Mahdists were suspect and the Khatmiyya favoured; in later years as the Khatmiyya turned to Egypt as a counterbalance to both the Mahdists and British, the latter looked with greater favour on the Mahdists. Historiographically it is important to note that most, if not all, the research done on this period has been based on the colonial archives. No one (Sudanese scholars included) has written on this period from the archives of the Mahdists or Khatmiyya, so we are dependent on British evaluations of the motives of the principal actors involved.

There are two comments that can be made in regard to the ideological position of Islam in the colonial period. First, the British brought to the Sudan policies fashioned in India. Ultimately the legal system in the Sudan as regards Muslims was derived from the Indian Penal Code of 1837 and the later Indian Civil Procedure Code.[7] To Muslims in matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance and the like), the Sharia was applied, but as under the Funj and Darfur Sultanates, in criminal matters secular or state law obtained. However, an important British legacy was the institutionalization of law; the creation of institutions for training *qāḍīs*, the formalization of distinctions between

state and private-status law, and a recognition of the potentiality for a conflict of laws.

The second point is that the political movements among the northern Sudanese as they emerged in the 1930s and 40s, be they the Umma party based on the Mahdists with its primary allegiance to the Mahdi family or the Unionists based on the Khatmiyya brotherhood owing loyalty to the Mīrghanī family, were thus based on supra-ethnic avowedly Islamic organisations. However, in the context of a, by 'normal' African standards, particularly complex anti-colonial struggle (because conducted against two colonial powers, Britain and Egypt), the Sudanese parties did not put foward overtly Islamic or 'Islamist' policies. Their strength derived from Islamic sentiments of solidarity, but these were used to articulate basically secular nationalist positions. This discontinuity between mobilisation at the grassroots and the policies advocated by the leadership, who successfully co-opted the graduates of the Gordon Memorial College (later, the University of Khartoum), was to provide an opening for a third group, the Muslim Brothers.

Before considering the Islamist factor, it is important to note that a dominant trend during both the colonial periods has been for the riverain culture described briefly above to be adopted and spread as the 'norm' of Sudanese identity. Merchants (*jallāba*) and minor government officials took this identity with them to the west, south and east. From the perspective of peoples of the peripheries, these riverain groups brought with them the Arabic language, new styles of dress (*jallābiyya* and *tōb*) and house-building (the enclosed *hōsh* in preference to the open hut, *tukl*) and restrictions on women, including the practice of Pharaonic circumcision.

Since independence, the Sudan has alternated between civilian and military rule. But whether they were soldiers or civilians, the actors were almost all members of the western-educated riverain elite, most of whom had their roots in the various religious or secular families that dominated/dominate Northern society. It is necessary to look at this elite's formation and history.[8] Historically, various strands can be seen within the elite's make-up; *makk* and *fuqarā'* families, that is families who trace their origin to tribal ruling groups or local holy families (the former president, Ja'far al-Numayrī is an example of the former; Ḥasan al-Turābī, the leader of the NIF, of the latter); families whose status arises from the neo-Sufi brotherhoods of the nineteenth century (the Mīrghanīs are the outstanding example), and a whole constellation of families grouped around the Mahdi family whose status derives from their leadership in the Mahdist Revolution (1881-98) and later. What

is striking about this elite is the ease with which it took to western education, centred on the University of Khartoum, and its cohesiveness socially, if not politically. Those from the peripheries aspiring to participate in the political game in Khartoum had to acculturate to the dominant riverain culture, and, above all, when the British left the Sudan in 1956 they left power in the hands of an elite recruited almost entirely from it. Just as African historians have discussed the quasi-secondary imperialism of the Baganda or the Swahili in Uganda and Tanganyika (especially under the Germans), so one can identify a riverain sub-imperialism under the Egyptians and British.

The return of Islam

The failure of the technocrats of the postcolonial state under the Numayrī regime (1969-85) was not simply a failure to transfer to that state Pan-Arab rhetoric and use it to solve the problems of civil war, urbanisation, more people and less water, it was also the failure of the westward-regarding elite to appreciate what was going on beneath them.[9]

Among the riverain Sudanese, new forms of Islamic expression were emerging; in fact, the Sudan has contributed and continues to contribute to the global Islamic debate out of all proportion to its relative weight within the Muslim world. New Sufi movements emerged, the Burhāniyya and Nyāsiyya are two examples. A very specific message was delivered by the nationalist turned extreme *mujtahid*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā (executed in 1985 for apostacy by the Numayrī regime), founder of 'The Republican Brothers' (*al-ikhwān al-jumhūriyyīn*).

The most extended and sophisticated study of the Islamist movement in the Sudan, is that of Abdelwahab A.M. Osman.[10] The author criticises both the sectarianism of Sudanese Sufi-based Islam, whether it be that of the orders or the neo-Mahdists, and that of the Westernised intellectuals [relatively, a powerful group in the Sudan, both north and south] by characterising them as the transient products of the utilitarian and alien colonial educational system. By contrast, Sudanese Islamists represent a return to authenticity.

Another interpretation is to see the Islamist movement in the Sudan as a derivative of its counterpart in Egypt. The *ikhwān al-muslimūn* of Egypt established in 1928 did not begin to spread in the Sudan either through missionary or *da'wa* activity or returned Sudanese students until the mid 40s, at about the same time as the foundation of the Sudanese Communist Party (1946). An independent Sudanese movement, uniting several smaller groups, was established in 1954, but it was in its

first years a propaganda rather than political movement. It only began to operate as an effective political movement when its present leader, Dr. Ḥasan al-Turābī, member of the other Sudanese Sufi family that had produced a Mahdi, returned from study abroad in 1962.[11]

The Islamist movement in the Sudan from the 60s until the present day has been essentially a political ideological movement. In the democratic interlude of 1964-69 between the military regimes of ʿAbbūd (1958) and Numayrī (1969-85), the Muslim Brothers were concerned with two issues, the struggle against the Communists, and the great issue in northern Sudanese politics, an Islamic constitution.[12] This latter issue has run like a thread through modern northern Sudanese politics since the early 60s. Why is a complex question; John Voll suggests an answer, 'As more Sudanese receive a modern style education, simple institution maintenance is not a sufficient expression of their Islamic identity. As a result it is possible to see a growing specifically Islamic content in the programs and platforms of groups in the Sudan. As this takes place, these statements take on a more explicitly fundamentalist tone.'[13]

The manifest aim of the Sudanese Islamists is to create a new Sudanese Islamic identity; their means are complex and include educational initiatives, control over money from Arab oil states, banking, and the acculturation of the influx of Southerners and Westerners into the north because of war and famine.[14] A central problem is that until July 1989 and the military coup of ʿUmar al-Bashīr, they were only one force within the complex of northern Sudanese politics. But the truth of Voll's observation may be seen impressionistically in the changing role of ideology in the North/South conflict in the Sudan.

To answer how this came about requires a deeper study of the modern urban social and economic history of the northern Sudan; surveys of the political highlights are not enough, and the former has yet to be undertaken. At a superficial level, the introduction of the 'September Laws' by Numayrī in September 1983 may be taken as a turning-point in that it placed the Sharia at the centre of the issue; the reasons that led Numayrī to take this step are less important than its consequences.[15] The failure during the years following Numayrī's downfall of Sudanese politicians, 'To devise a system that could satisfy the minority without disenfranchising the majority,'[16] ended in the NIF-inspired coup of July 1989.

The regime of ʿUmar al-Bashīr consolidated its Islamist nature by adopting on 22 March 1991 a penal code based on an interpretation of the Sharia. This code, presently in force in the northern provinces

including the capital, brings back the *ḥudūd* punishments first made part of Sudanese Law in Numayrī's 'September Laws.'[17] But the promulgation of an Islamic Law is only one aspect of a process whereby the Islamists are seeking to establish their hegemony over both the state and society. Their current means, given impetus by the 1989 *coup*, include *ad hoc* alliances with locally influential Sufi families or movements, the establishment of armed militias both in the cities and countryside, purges of academics, lawyers and journalists,[18] and perhaps most importantly, the creation of financial institutions and trading monopolies that are increasingly independent of outside financing.

North and South: organised government versus organised rebellion

The rejection of Northern hegemony by peoples of the periphery began already at the same time (in fact, a little before) as the British handed over power to the riverain elite when Southern elements in the armed forces began a mutiny in 1955. From small scattered outbreaks, perceived by the Northern rulers following British tradition as a breakdown in 'Law and order,' the conflict became between 1956-72 the First Civil War that was brought to an end through the Addis Ababa Agreement of the latter year. Several points can be made about the First Civil War, some of which are relevant to the second ongoing conflict; neither side was strong enough to defeat the other; a problem after the May 1969 Coup of Ja'far al-Numayrī brought to power a regime in Khartoum anxious to find a solution was that the Southerners were so divided that it was difficult for the Northerners to find a coherent Southern leadership with whom to negotiate a settlement.

The causes of the second ongoing North/South war are complex. During the First Civil War, 1956-72 (the latter the year of the Addis Ababa Agreement), the conflict was scarcely ideologically articulated at all. Southern spokesmen talked vaguely of the legacy of the slave trade (rebutted by Northerners who stressed European involvement in it), the dangers of Arab Islamic domination (denied by Northern liberals who argued for Arabic as a neutral national language). In sum, the Southerners blamed the Northerners, the latter the British. Much of the problem in the years following Ja'far al-Numayrī's take-over in 1969, when there was a will in Khartoum to try to find a settlement, was to establish the terms of reference within which the two sides could negotiate. Since its outbreak in 1983, the Second Civil War has been characterised by an altogether more sophisticated ideological debate on both sides, wherein on the Northern side the Islamists have effectively taken over the agenda

and Dr. John Garang and the SPLA have provided the first consciously articulated secularist opposition. In this debate, the Sharia has become a central issue.

Interethnic conflict: the Darfur example

If the boundaries, political, military and ideological, between North and South are relatively straightforward, they are far more opaque at the interethnic level, a level where the outcome of the interplay between Islam as interpreted by the Islamists and the forces of the periphery is as uncertain as in the North/South conflict.

Darfur is one region where interethnic conflict is now widespread. The modern province approximately covers the same region as the historical sultanate (c. 1600 to 1916). Like the Funj Sultanate, the Darfur state was an African polity that was increasingly exposed to Islamic influences. When the British conquered Darfur in 1916, they killed the sultan, replacing him by a governor, but otherwise left the sultanate's administrative system more or less intact. As Darfur was increasingly incorporated economically into the Northern Sudan, especially through labour migration, a sense of local identity re-emerged to find its expression in the Darfur Development Front in the 1960s.

As the new Darfur elite increasingly participated in national politics in Khartoum, their regional identity was taken over by wider party allegiances which in turn sharpened ethnic divisions in Darfur itself. These ethnic divisions—Fur, Arab (Baqqāra), Zaghawa and others—were to be simplified into Arab and *zurq* ('Black').[19] As the competition for resources (above all, water and grazing) sharpened in the early 1980s with the drought driving the nomads in on the settled areas, the racial element became more prominent.

A *de facto* alliance emerged between the Khartoum government (both before and after 1989) and the Arab nomads. The nomads were armed, ostensibly so as to be able to defend themselves against SPLA incursions from the south, but increasingly the nomad militias used their firepower to seize land from the Fur and other *zurq* groups. The result is now deepseated ethnic conflict throughout Darfur with constant raiding and counterraiding. Increasingly, the Islamist regime in Khartoum is perceived by the *zurq* as hostile, both racially and religiously.

The latest phase of Islamic hegemony in the Sudan has led to a polarisation of the country as it presently exists within the boundaries given by its Egyptian and British colonial masters between an Islamist Northern nationalism and an SPLA-led Southern nationalism. It may

be that the Islamists of the North in their quest to fulfill the Mahdi's dream of a pure Islamic theocracy, albeit under different terms, will also follow him in effectively abandoning the South. It may thus be necessary to redefine the Sudan as a state geographically; the conflicts within the North over racial and religious identity may prove much more difficult to resolve.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper I have used 'The Sudan' to mean the modern republic. What actually constituted the Sudan at any given point between 1820, the year the Egyptians began their occupation, and the present day is another matter. The present article is one of a series by the present writer on related themes. Three other articles are, 'Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,' in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Louis Brenner, London, 1993, 21-35; 'The Past in the Present? The issue of the Sharia in the Sudan,' in *Religion and Politics in East Africa*, ed. Michael Twaddle and Holger Bengt Hansen, London, 1994, 32-44, and 'Islamism and ethnicity in the Sudan,' in *al-Tanawwuʿ al-thaqāfī wa-binā' al-dawla al-waṭaniyya fī 'l-Sūdān*, ed. Ḥaydar Ibrāhīm 'Alī, Cairo: Markaz al-dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyya, 1995, 93-107. A forthcoming article is 'Defining the Community: the NIF, its opponents and the Sharia issue,' to be published in a volume of proceedings by Åbo Akademi University, Turko/Åbo, Finland. There is, inevitably, a certain degree of overlap within these articles.

2. Again what constitutes 'The North' and 'The South' is a matter of time and perspective. From the perspective of this level of conflict, the North includes the western provinces of Darfur and Kordofan, which are only to a limited degree part of the North from a cultural point of view.

3. The classic work on this process is Yusuf Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan*, Edinburgh 1967. For a critique, see Jay Spaulding and Lidwien Kapteijns, 'The Orientalist Paradigm in the historiography of the Late Precolonial Sudan,' in *Golden Ages: Dark Ages, Imagining the Past in Anthropology and History*, ed. Jay O'Brien and William Roseberry, Berkeley 1991, 139-51.

4. A weakness of the so far only survey of Islam in the Sudan, J.S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, Oxford 1949, is the author's (probably unconscious) assumption of an Azhari yardstick by which to measure Sudanese Islamic 'deviationism.'

5. This is the interpretation of Jay Spaulding in his *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, East Lansing 1985.

6. See further, Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, London 1992, which is an important corrective to Trimingham, On Ibn Idrīs, see my *Enigmatic Saint. Aḥmad ibn Idrīs and the Idrīsī Tradition*, London 1990. The pan-Islamic nature of neo-Sufism is discussed in R.S. O'Fahey and Bernd Ratdke, 'Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,' *Der Islam*, 70, 1993, 52-87.

7. G. Warburg, *The Sudan under Wingate*, London 1971, 124-36. See further, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Law and Society in the Sudan*, London 1985.

8. What follows is a very partial sketch of a complex story. The relative smallness of the elite in this century whose roots are described here make it amenable to detailed study. A starting point would be a prosopographical study of the graduates of the Gordon Memorial College (later University of Khartoum; founded 1902) and *al-Maʿhad al-ʿilmī* (later Omdurman Islamic University; founded 1903).

9. Both a personal *mea culpa* and an excoriation is provided by Mansour Khalid, *The Government They Deserve, the Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution*, London 1990. Cf. Abdelwahab El-Affendi's review in *Journal of Islamic Studies* (Oxford), 3/2, 1992, 294-7.

10. *Turabi's Revolution, Islam and Power in Sudan*, London 1990. See also, the same author's, 'The ideological development of the Sudanese Ikhwan movement,' *Proceedings of International Conference on Middle East Studies (BRSMES)*, Oxford 1988, 387-430, and, 'Discovering the South: Sudanese dilemmas for Islam in Africa,' *African Affairs*, July 1990, 371-89.

11. For an historical survey, see Susanne Wolf, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Sudan,' Magister thesis, University of Hamburg 1990. I am indebted to Miss Wolf for many stimulating discussions during the writing of her thesis in Bergen.

12. See further, Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, 'The elusive Islamic constitution: the Sudanese experience,' *Orient*, 3, 1985, 329-40.

13. 'The evolution of Islamic fundamentalism in twentieth-century Sudan,' in *Islam, Nationalism and Radicalism in Egypt and Sudan*, ed. G. Warburg and U. Kupferschmidt, New York 1983, 131.

14. Other aspects include the adoption of Western missionary and aid organisation techniques by Islamist organisations, for example, the African Islamic Centre established in 1972 and the Islamic African Relief Agency established in the early 1980s.

15. For a fascinating, if very personal, view of the event and its consequences, see Manṣūr Khālid, *al-Fajr al-khadhib, Numayrī wa-taḥrīf al-sharī'a*, Dār al-Hilāl, n.p. [Beirut], n.d. Some of the arguments in this book have gone into the same author's *The Government They Deserve.*

16. Abdelwahhab Osman, 'Discovering the South,' 380; throughout the article the author assumes that the views of Northern Sudanese Muslims are more or less coterminous with those of the Islamists.

17. For a succinct if hostile (i.e. because written on Western human rights premises), see, 'New Islamic Penal Code violates basic human rights,' *News from Africa Watch*, 9 April 1991. For a detailed study, see Olaf Köndgen, *Das islamisierte Staffrecht des Sudan, von seiner Einfürung 1983 bis Juli 1992*, MA thesis, Frie Universität Berlin 1992; Gabriel Warburg, 'The Sharia in Sudan, Implementation and repercussions,' in *Sudan, State and Society in Crisis*, ed. John O. Voll, Bloomington 1991, 90-107.

18. So far the University of Khartoum has been relatively unaffected although many staff members have been dismissed, but the creation of new universities in Darfur, Kordofan and in the north will help to undermine its pre-eminence.

19. Interestingly by the 1970s a form of historiographical revisionism came into play. The Darfur Sultanate came to be described by 'Arab' spokesmen as 'The Fur Sultanate.' Historically, although much of the sultanate's ruling elite were Fur ethnically, the state was never simply a Fur state.