

ARAB IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY IN SUDAN: THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY, AND RACE

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ABSTRACT

In what is now Sudan there occurred over the centuries a process of *ta'rib*, or Arabization, entailing the gradual spread of both Arab identity and the Arabic language among northern peoples. After the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1898, British colonial policies favoured a narrow elite from within these 'Arab' communities. Members of this elite went on to develop a conception of a self-consciously Sudanese Arabic national identity, in the process adapting the term 'Sudanese' (*sudani*), which derived from an Arabic word for blackness and previously had servile connotations. At decolonization in the 1950s, these nationalists turned *ta'rib*, into an official policy that sought to propagate Arabic quickly throughout a territory where scores of languages were spoken. This article considers the historical diffusion of Sudanese Arabic-language culture and Arab identity, contrasts this with the post-colonial policy of Arabization, and analyses the relevance of the latter for civil conflicts in Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and, more recently, Darfur. Far from spreading Arabness, Arabization policy sharpened non-Arab and, in some cases, self-consciously 'African' (implying culturally pluralist) identities. Arabization policy also accompanied, in some quarters, the growth of an ideology of Arab cultural and racial supremacy that is now most evident in Darfur.

There is an exceptionally strong urge for Arabism among the Northern Sudanese people; everybody wants to be an Arab.

— Deng D. Akol Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans: The South and North* (1994)

[F]or the 'Arabs' at least, they are not completely sure of what and who they are. In the Sudan they are 'Arabs', but in the Arab world they are seen as mongrels who hardly deserve that name. They desperately strive for recognition of their 'Arab' status

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by other Arabs, who tend to look down on them – even using for them the dreaded name of *abd* (slave) that they use for those more black than they are.

— Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: The ambiguous genocide* (2005)

IN WHAT IS NOW SUDAN, THERE OCCURRED OVER THE CENTURIES A PROCESS OF *TA'RIB*, or Arabization, entailing the gradual spread of both Arab identity and the Arabic language. As a long-unfolding cultural process, *ta'rib* in Sudan has been remarkably successful, particularly in its linguistic guise. In some parts of Sudan even now, Arabic continues to spread at the grassroots as a lingua franca and literary language. By contrast, Arabization as a post-colonial policy of national integration has been a failure. By provoking hostility and resistance, the top-down policy of *ta'rib* has undermined the very national unity that its proponents sought to achieve in the years that followed decolonization in the 1950s. At the same time, the policy of *ta'rib* has contributed to Sudan's woeful history of civil strife, in Southern Sudan from the 1950s and more recently, from 2003, in Darfur.

Historically, *ta'rib* in Sudan began in the early Islamic era with the influx of Arab Muslim nomads. The process accelerated after the fall of Nubia's Christian kingdoms in the early fourteenth century, and, following the sixteenth-century rise of the Funj sultanate of north-central Sudan, reached a state of consolidation along with Islamic culture more broadly.¹ As Islam spread in Sudan, knowledge of Arabic spread, too, both because Muslims sought to study the Arabic Qur'an, and because Arabic offered a welcome 'technology of literacy'² for recording land deeds, significant events, mercantile and budgetary transactions, and biographical accounts of remarkable figures.³

Until decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, when officials in Khartoum made Arabization into a government policy, the acquisition of Arabic as a primary language had often led to the acquisition of Arab identity,

1. Yusuf Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan, from the Seventh to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1967); R. S. O'Fahey and J. L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (Methuen, London, 1974); Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnar* (Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, 1985); Neil McHugh, *Holy Men on the Nile: The making of an Arab-Islamic community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500–1850* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1994). The later development of Sudanese Islamic culture is studied in Lidwien Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: History of Dar Masalit, 1870–1930* (Kegan Paul International, London, 1984); and Janet J. Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves: State formation and economic transformation in the Greater Nile Valley, 1700–1885* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1990).

2. Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2000).

3. Jay Spaulding and Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim (eds), *Public Documents from Sinnar* (Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, 1989); Ahmad Ibrahim Abu Shouk and Anders Bjørkelo, *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly budgets of the Mahdist state in the Sudan* (Brill, Leiden, 1996); P. M. Holt, *The Sudan of the Three Niles: The Funj Chronicle, 910–1288/1504–1871* (Brill, Leiden, 1999).

as families constructed pedigrees through the ‘invention of tradition’⁴ to assert descent from illustrious male forebears of Arabian origin.⁵ Arabization in Sudan occurred in two other notable ways: first, as slaves (drawn from Ethiopia, Southern Sudan, and western regions as far as Lake Chad) and their descendants were slowly incorporated into free Arabic-speaking families and communities; and second, as some members of non-Arab communities, such as Fur and Fulani in Darfur, acquired large herds of cattle and formed alliances with Arab pastoralists like the Baggara, in the long run changing communal affinity through patterns of settlement, intermarriage, and language assimilation.⁶ The term *ta’rib* is capable of covering a spectrum of linguistic and ethnic change, and this is appropriate for the Sudanese case, given that it is so hard to pin down the moments among individuals or groups when linguistic and ethnic change converged.

By the time Sudan gained independence in 1956, Arabic was by far the most widely spoken language in the territory. Yet Arabic was still only one language among scores of others that were found in the young republic. The 1956 census, the last for which ethnic and linguistic data was collected, identified 3,989,533 out of 10,262,536 (some 38.8 percent) Sudanese as ‘Arab’, but identified 51.4 percent as primary speakers of Arabic (thereby hinting at a probable Arabization-in-progress).⁷ Scholars have repeated the numbers from the 1956 census ever since – sometimes conflating the figures for Arabs and Arabic-speakers, rounding the numbers up or down, or attributing them to other researchers, but ultimately depending on them as authoritative in the absence of subsequent data.⁸ Nevertheless, Sudan’s linguistic composition has clearly changed in the half-century since 1956.

This article analyses the historical development of Arab identity and ideology in Sudan by focusing on the colonial, Anglo-Egyptian (1898–1956) and post-colonial Sudan republic (1956–present) eras. It begins by explaining the broad issues that make this history relevant for present-day

4. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983).

5. Jay Spaulding, ‘The chronology of Sudanese Arabic genealogical tradition’, *History in Africa* 27 (2000), pp. 325–37.

6. Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and labor in colonial Sudan* (University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 1996); Stephanie Beswick, *Sudan’s Blood Memory: The legacy of war, ethnicity, and slavery in early South Sudan* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2004); R. S. O’Fahey, ‘Darfur: a complex ethnic reality with a long history’, *International Herald Tribune*, 15 May 2004; G. Haaland, ‘Ethnic groups and language use in Darfur’ in Robin Thelwall (ed.), *Aspects of Language in the Sudan*, Occasional Papers in Linguistics and Language Learning, 5 (New University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1978), p. 188; and Paul Doornbos, ‘On becoming Sudanese’ in Tony Barnett and Abbas Abdelkarim (eds), *Sudan: State, capital, and transformation* (Croom Helm, London, 1988), pp. 99–120.

7. Republic of Sudan, *First Population Census of Sudan, 1955/56*, Final Report, Vol. 3 (Government of Sudan, Khartoum, 1962), pp. 2, 184.

8. See, for example, Al-Amin Abu-Manga, *Fulfulde in the Sudan: Process of adaptation to Arabic* (Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, Berlin, 1986), p. 26; and Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Sudan: Contested national identities* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1998), p. 17.

politics – issues of language and identity politics, civil conflict, Arab ideology, and racism. Next, it considers how conceptions of Sudanese Arab identity changed in the first half of the twentieth century, reflecting indigenous attitudes towards slavery and assumptions about social hierarchies that were associated with the Arabic term *sudani* ('Sudanese'), which derived from a word for black (*aswad*, pl. *sud*). It then traces the career of Arabization as a post-colonial policy, initiated in Khartoum, which aimed to undo divisive British policies by spreading Islam and Arabic while simultaneously enhancing the cultural credentials of weak regimes. The article also considers how Arabization policy affected the course of civil wars fought in Southern Sudan from 1955 to 1972 and later, after 1983, in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. Finally, the article assesses Arab identity and ideology in the light of recent events in Darfur, and addresses the claim that an ideology of Arab racial supremacy has gained momentum in Sudan. Ultimately, the strong-arm Arabist ideology of successive post-colonial Khartoum regimes has stimulated the formation of an oppositional, if still inchoate, Africanist ideology stressing connections to a plurality of African cultures and languages rather than to the cultural singularity that Arabism (*'uruba*) implies.

The political relevance of Arabization

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, linguists and other social analysts suggested that the linguistic map of Sudan was changing in three ways. First, many of Sudan's languages were claiming fewer than 2,000 speakers and were facing potential extinction (such as Bongo, once spoken in the Southern region of Bahr al-Ghazal).⁹ Second, English, the mother tongue of the British colonizers, was no longer the chief language of post-primary school education, having been replaced by Arabic through successive government decrees.¹⁰ Third, Arabic was continuing to spread as a spoken language. This was evident in Darfur, in Southern Sudanese towns such as Juba and Wau, and in greater Khartoum among Southern Sudanese refugees. Arabic was also spreading among Hausa- and Fulani-speaking immigrants, most of whom came in the early twentieth century from what is now northern Nigeria.¹¹

9. B. G. V. Nyombe, 'Survival or extinction: the fate of the local languages of the southern Sudan', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 125 (1997), pp. 99–130.

10. Liza Sandell, *English Language in Sudan: A history of its teaching and politics* (Ithaca Press, London, 1982); Qasim 'Uthman Nur, *al-Ta'rib fi al-watan al-'arabi, ma'a ishara khasa lil-Sudan* (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1988); and Tagelsir H. Elrayah, 'Arabic and English in Sudan: 1821–1985', *Islamic Studies* 38, 4 (1999), pp. 603–20.

11. Ushari Ahmad Mahmud, *Arabic in the Southern Sudan: History and spread of a pidgin-creole* (Fal Advertising and Printing, Khartoum, 1983); Catherine Miller, 'Les enjeux de l'arabisation au Sud-Soudan', *Peuples méditerranéens* 33 (1985), pp. 43–53; Catherine Miller, 'Juba Arabic

However, even while Arabic was spreading as a lingua franca, the Arabization policy of the post-colonial central government was backfiring by eliciting resistance. Modes of resistance varied by region. After the resumption of civil war in 1983, rebel leaders and intellectuals in Southern Sudan rejected the idea of Arabic as the country's sole official language and called for official Arabic-English bilingualism, or multilingualism, in matters of state and education.¹² At the same time, Southern civilians turned to Christianity in droves, partly as a way of resisting a regime that was trumpeting Islamist credentials.¹³ In Sudan's predominantly Muslim eastern and western peripheries, meanwhile, local leaders and intellectuals increasingly resented the central government's monopoly on wealth, power, and resources, as well as the patronizing way that riverine Northern Arabs seemed to treat non-Arabs.¹⁴ This resentment translated into the formation of regional political blocs. A prime example was the Beja Congress, founded in 1957 among Beja-speaking intellectuals of the Red Sea Hills region in north-eastern Sudan, whose leaders called for a federalist (less Khartoum-centric) system of government.¹⁵ All of this meant that, as the twentieth century ended, the spread of Arabic was not ineluctably leading to the spread of Arab identity.¹⁶ In an article entitled 'Racism in Islamic disguise?', Sharif Harir wrote in 1993 that Khartoum's heavy-handed

as a way of expressing a Southern Sudanese identity in Khartoum', in A. Youssi *et al.* (eds), *Aspects of the Dialects of Arabic Today* (AMAPATRIL, Rabat, 2000), pp. 114–22; Catherine Miller and Al-Amin Abu-Manga, *Language Choice and National Integration: Rural migrants in Khartoum* (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1992); Al-Amin Abu-Manga, *Hausa in the Sudan: Process of adaptation to Arabic* (Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln, 1999); C. Bawa Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims: The role of pilgrimage in the lives of West African Muslims in Sudan* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1995).

12. Steven Wöndu and Ann Lesch, *Battle for Peace in Sudan: An analysis of the Abuja conferences, 1992–1993* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 2000), pp. 33–6.

13. Sharon Elaine Hutchinson, 'Spiritual fragments of an unfinished war', in Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Richard Gray (eds), *Religion and Conflict in Sudan* (Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2002), pp. 136–61; Roland Werner, William Anderson, and Andrew Wheeler, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The history of the Sudanese Church across 2000 years* (Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2000), p. 432 (regarding the Nuba Mountains) and pp. 9–11 (regarding Southern Sudan, in Foreword by Francis M. Deng). See also Nyombe, 'Survival or extinction', and Elrayah, 'Arabic and English in Sudan'.

14. Sharif Harir shared an anecdote along these lines: 'A university vice-chancellor of riverine origin told [the Darfur intellectual and leader, Ahmed Ibrahim] Draige, "We love the simple Westerner, but we cannot stomach the educated ones (*Muthaggafin*, Arabic)."' Sharif Harir, 'Recycling the past in the Sudan: an overview of political decay' in Sharif Harir and Terje Tvedt (eds), *Short-Cut to Decay: The case of the Sudan* (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 1994), p. 45, footnote 55.

15. Tim Niblock, *Class and Power in the Sudan: The dynamics of Sudanese politics, 1898–1985* (Macmillan Press, Houndsmills, 1987), pp. 143–58 on the formation of post-colonial non-Arab regionalisms; Haaland, 'Ethnic groups and language use in Darfur', pp. 194–5; and, by an activist from the Beja Congress itself, Suliman Salih Dirar, 'The plight of the Beja people in eastern Sudan', SudaneseOnline.Com, 29 July 2005, <<http://www.sudaneseonline.com/earticle2005/jul30-67972.shtml>> (10 April 2007).

16. Miller, 'Juba Arabic as a way of expressing a Southern identity', p. 117.

policies were leading, if anything, to a retreat for Arab identity and for national identity in the face of ‘upsurging ethnicity’.¹⁷

In 1994, B. G. V. Nyombe, a linguist at the University of Nairobi who specialized in Southern Sudanese linguistics, sharply criticized the Arabization policy of successive post-colonial Khartoum governments, but described this policy as an open door. ‘According to this policy,’ Nyombe wrote, ‘if a non-Arab became a Moslem, and acquired a Moslem name and culture, he became an Arab.’¹⁸ Islam, he implied, offered a rapid transit to Arab identity and Arabic culture, though Southerners were not necessarily interested in taking that route. Nyombe expressed the sense that Sudanese social borders might be negotiable and that Arabism was not genealogically exclusive. He recognized, perhaps, a strain of inclusive idealism that was found within some pan-Arab discourses, and especially Egyptian pan-Arab discourses – an idealism that emphasized loyalty to the Arabic language as sufficient for membership in the Arab world community.¹⁹

Nyombe began his article in 1994 with an explanation of Sudan’s social landscape.

In the Sudan, issues of language, culture, religion and race are so closely interlinked as to be inseparable. For the Northern Sudan Arab government which constitutes the de facto central government, there has been an obsession since independence with the political need to project the Sudan to the outside world as a homogeneous Arab nation; a nation with one language (Arabic), one religion (Islam), one culture (Arab-Moslem culture), and most importantly, one race (Arab). The reality is of course far different.

Later he used the linguistic assessments of the 1956 census to bolster his claim that ‘The Sudan is a nation of two races, African and Arab.’²⁰ In fact, the 1956 census did not distinguish between ‘Arabs’ and ‘Africans’ *per se*, but rather between ‘Arabs’ and others. The census also assumed a distinction between the Sudanese North and South (as indeed British policy makers had done). Nyombe read an endorsement of an Arab-African racial

17. Sharif Harir, ‘Racism in Islamic disguise?’ in Hanne Veber *et al.* (eds), *Never Drink from the Same Cup* (IWGIA and the Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, 1993), pp. 291–311.

18. B. G. V. Nyombe, ‘The politics of language, culture, religion and race in the Sudan,’ *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter* 6 (1994), p. 10.

19. One can see this strain, for example, in the works of ‘Abd al-Majid ‘Abidin, an Egyptian specialist in Sudanese Arabic literature, such as his *Tarikh al-thaqafa al-‘arabiyya fi al-Sudan, mundhu nashatiha ila al-‘asr al-hadith; al-din, al-ijtima’, al-adab*, 2nd edition (Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, 1967). Reflecting a similar idealism is the following work, by an Egyptian author, which emphasizes the inextricable links between Sudanese Islam and Arabism: ‘Abd al-Fattah Muqlid al-Ghunaymi, *al-Islam wa’l-‘uruba fi al-Sudan* (Al-‘Arabiyya lil-Nashr wa’l-Tawzi’, Cairo, 1406/1986). It was also expressed by an Egyptian who was a leading official in the Arab League: Mohie Eddine Saber, ‘Foreword: relations between Arab culture and African cultures’ in Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), *Afro-Arab Cultural Relations*, ed. Yusuf Fadl Hasan (ALESCO, Tunis, 1985), pp. 5–28.

20. Nyombe, ‘The politics of language, culture, religion and race’, pp. 9–10.

binary into the census's summary volumes, and that itself testifies to how these discursive categories were becoming internalized.

The Darfur conflict, raging since 2003, has given new urgency to questions about Arabism, Islam, and race in Sudan. Darfur challenges the linkage between Arab and Muslim identities that outsiders have so often projected onto Northern Sudan. At the same time, Darfur either fortifies claims for an extant divide, or is helping to create or widen a divide, that means something real to people on the ground – a rift variously described as separating 'Arabs' and 'Africans', 'Arabs' and 'Blacks', or even 'Arabs' and *zurq*²¹ (a Sudanese Arabic adjective for colour that is used pejoratively in Darfur to mean 'blue [dark-skinned] people').

The Darfur situation has also drawn new scholarly attention to race as a factor in Sudanese conflicts. Amir H. Idris, R. S. O'Fahey, Alex de Waal, Gérard Prunier, Sharif Harir, and others have argued that, since the early and mid-1980s, Arabism has become sharper as a racial ideology in Sudan.²² De Waal, for example, points to the 'ascent of Arab supremacism' that has been 'manifest [since 2003] in a racist vocabulary and in sexual violence', and suggests that an ideology of non-Arab and anti-Islamist 'Africanism' has sharpened in response.²³ With his colleague Julie Flint, de Waal traces the origin of Arab supremacist ideology in Darfur to 1981, when a Libyan-supported group called *al-Tajammu' al-'Arabi* ('The Arab Alliance') distributed pamphlets declaring that 'the *zurqa* [blacks] had ruled Darfur long enough and that it was time for Arabs to have their turn', if necessary by resorting to force.²⁴ Prunier agrees that a reactive Africanist ideology has sharpened, but dates its provenance earlier, to decolonization in the mid-twentieth century.²⁵ In this way the Darfur conflict has increased the tendency of scholars to emphasize an Arab-African binary in Sudan, and to move further away from an interpretation, much-favoured among Sudanese intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, which stressed Sudan's unique Afro-Arab hybridity, cultural tolerance, and capacity for internal coexistence.

These scholars agree that Arabism in Darfur is increasingly *racial* or *racist* in the sense that it assumes a certain hierarchy of peoples, which

21. On Sudanese attitudes towards colour, see Al-Baqir al-Afif Mukhtar, 'The crisis of identity in Northern Sudan: the dilemma of a black people with a white culture' in Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban and Kharyssa Rhodes (eds), *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley* (Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, 2004), pp. 207–40.

22. Amir H. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2005); Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: The ambiguous genocide* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2005); Alex de Waal and Julie Flint, *Darfur: A short history of a long war* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2005); Harir, 'Recycling the past in the Sudan', pp. 10–68, R. S. O'Fahey, 'Islam and Ethnicity in the Sudan', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26, 3 (1996), pp. 258–67 – and see especially p. 265.

23. Alex de Waal, 'Who are the Darfurians? Arab and African identities, violence and external engagement,' *African Affairs* 104, 415 (2005), pp. 181–205.

24. De Waal and Flint, *Darfur*, p. 51.

25. Prunier, *Darfur*, p. 5.

in turn reflects histories of unequal power relations, and that it is ‘reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power and privilege within the economic, social, and political institutions of the state’.²⁶ Together with historians of the Nile Valley such as Jok Madut Jok and Eve M. Troutt Powell, they agree, too, that in Sudan’s case racial assumptions are inextricably connected to internal histories of slavery.²⁷ On an everyday level, this racism is manifested by Arabs’ derogatory use of the term ‘*abid*’ (‘slaves’) – and what the Northern Sudanese writer Mansur Khalid called ‘a series of [other] unprintable slurs’ – to apply to western and southern peoples.²⁸ This Arabism is *ideological*, meanwhile, in the dictionary sense that it has inspired and justified a scheme of actions or policies that are implicitly or explicitly adopted and maintained ‘regardless of the course of events’.²⁹

Amir H. Idris draws a line between what he regards as the racist ideology of Sudanese Arabism, the Arabization policies that were applied in Southern Sudan at decolonization, and the Khartoum regime’s current policies towards Darfur – and notably, its use of Arab Janjaweed as proxy forces to attack Darfurian rebel groups and civilians. What Idris calls the policies of a post-colonial ‘racialized state’ is what Harir and Nyombe, writing in 1994 and 1997 respectively, described as the outgrowth of ‘Sudanization’. Sudanization, in turn, was the process that replaced British colonialism in Sudan with hegemonic rule by Northern riverine Arabs and that led to what the Southern Sudanese historian Deng D. Akol Ruay called ‘a change of masters’ entailing the rise of a new, internal colonialism.³⁰

The making of the Sudanese Arab

The fact that Sudanization became so closely associated with the country’s Arab elite reflects one of history’s surprising turns. When British and Egyptian forces overthrew the Mahdist state in 1898 and established the

26. Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American politics* (Verso, New York, NY, 1995), p. 186, cited in Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*, p. 97; and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Race and Racism: An introduction* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2006), p. 4 and *passim*.

27. Jok Madut Jok, ‘The legacy of race’, in Fluehr-Lobban and Rhodes, *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley*, pp. 187–206; Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the mastery of the Sudan* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003).

28. R. S. O’Fahey, ‘“They are slaves, but yet go free”: some reflections on Sudanese history’ in Hasan and Gray, *Religion and Conflict in Sudan*, pp. 48–57; and Mansur Khalid, *The Government They Deserve: The role of the elite in Sudan’s political evolution* (Kegan Paul International, London, 1990), p. 135, cited in Harir, ‘Racism in Islamic disguise?’, p. 296.

29. ‘Ideology’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989 edition online.

30. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*; Harir, ‘Recycling the past in the Sudan’, pp. 38–9; Nyombe, ‘Survival or extinction’, p. 100; and Deng D. Akol Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans: The South and North, 1821–1969* (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 1994), p. 72.

Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, there was no such thing as a self-identified ‘Sudanese Arab’ among the riverine region’s Muslim elites. At that time, to be Arab was to be Muslim, to be Arab was to be free, and, ideally, it was to claim an Arab pedigree. Arabs, in short, were not slaves and the term ‘Arab’ (*‘arabi*, pl. *‘arab*) connoted high status. That is because in the northern regions of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, where both Islam and the Arabic language prevailed, Arabness was associated with Muslims who claimed Arab clan and tribal affiliations (that is, genealogical credentials) and who styled themselves as the local heirs and bearers of Islam. By contrast, a deeply entrenched slave trade had bestowed servile connotations on the adjective Sudanese (*sudani* in Arabic), which derived from the Arabic term *sud*, meaning ‘black people’, and which was related to the term that Arab geographers had used for the region of Africa stretching from what is now Senegal to Ethiopia (*Bilad al-Sudan*, meaning ‘lands of the blacks’). In the view of high-status Muslims who regarded themselves as Arabs, being Sudanese meant being black, as the Arabic root of the term denoted, and being black, in turn, meant having low social status.³¹ In other words, Northern Sudanese society was highly stratified and had its own internal peripheries.³²

British colonial authorities preserved much of this stratification, for while they abolished the slave trade in 1899 (and slave holding itself, incrementally thereafter),³³ they did not promote egalitarianism. On the contrary, British officials respected local status hierarchies and reinforced them through education policies. They did so by favouring high status ‘Arab’ males for the academic educations that would lead to administrative jobs, in the process co-opting these men and thwarting their resistance to the regime.³⁴ Meanwhile, they guided those of slave descent, whom the British in the early years of the twentieth century variously called ‘Sudanese’ or ‘detrribalized blacks’, into army careers and manual jobs. In fact, these ‘Sudanese’ soldiers and officers, assigned to Sudan’s rural peripheries, also played an important role in propagating Arabic culture. That is, by establishing outposts of spoken

31. Local understandings of ‘Sudanese’ and ‘Arab’ status are discussed in Chapter 2 of Heather J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003), pp. 16–32. On slavery, see Peter F. M. McLoughlin, ‘Economic development and the heritage of slavery in the Sudan republic’, *Africa* 32, 4 (1962), pp. 355–91; Jay Spaulding, ‘Slavery, land tenure and social class in the northern Turkish Sudan,’ *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, 1 (1982), pp. 1–20; O’Fahey, “‘They are slaves, but yet go free’”, pp. 56–7.

32. On internal stratification in Northern Sudan, see Ahmed S. al-Shahi, ‘Proverbs and social values in a Northern Sudanese village’ in Ian Cunnison and Wendy James (eds), *Essays in Sudan Ethnography* (C. Hurst and Co., London, 1972), pp. 87–104.

33. Taj Hargey, *The Suppression of Slavery in the Sudan, 1898–1939* (University of Oxford, unpublished DPhil thesis, 1981).

34. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*.

Arabic, they helped to 'fortify' what is now known as the Juba Arabic of Southern Sudan and the 'Ki-Nubi' of Uganda and Kenya.³⁵

The most influential British proponent of Arabist policies within the Anglo-Egyptian regime was Sir Harold MacMichael (1882–1969). He wrote a landmark text, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan and Some Account of the People Who Preceded Them and of the Tribes Inhabiting Darfur* (1922), which, by purporting to record authentic Sudanese Arab genealogies, increased their aura of legitimacy among Sudan's self-defined Arabs.³⁶ In the words of Jay Spaulding, MacMichael's

motives were practical rather than academic, for as a racist he believed that to a considerable degree the behavior of the people entrusted to his governance was determined by their ancestry; for example, the political conduct of twentieth-century Northern Sudanese could be inferred from the inherited animosities of their putative pre-Islamic Arabian forbears of a millennium and a half before.³⁷

These policies for education and colonial government employment had long-term political consequences. By favouring self-defined Arabs at the expense of everyone else, including not only Arabic-speaking former slaves or their descendants, but also non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims (such as the Dinka), the British cultivated a group of men who had the literacy and the political know-how to develop and articulate nationalist ideologies. Not surprisingly, these men defined a nation in their own social image, as an Arab Muslim community.

The only group that eluded British policies of preferential treatment for Arabs were the Nubians, who came from villages located north of Khartoum, up to the border with Egypt. While Nubian males spoke Nubian languages at home, they tended to have a strong command of Arabic since they came from communities in which economically motivated migration to Egypt, and later to Khartoum and other Sudanese towns, was common. Writing in 1979, Sondra Hale called Nubian men a 'stranger elite' in Sudanese towns: so socially and linguistically at ease were they when operating within Arab and Arabic cultural milieus that some of them, in the Anglo-Egyptian and post-colonial eras, were able to slip into the emerging Sudanese urban intelligentsia to a degree that other non-Arabs were not.³⁸

35. Abdon Agaw Jok Nhial, 'Ki-Nubi and Juba Arabic: a comparative study', in Sayyid H. Hurreiz and Herman Bell (eds), *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore* (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1975), pp. 81–93.

36. H. A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan and Some Account of the People Who Preceded Them and of the Tribes Inhabiting Darfur*, 2 vols (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922).

37. Spaulding, 'The chronology of Sudanese Arabic genealogical tradition', p. 327.

38. Sondra Dungan Hale, *The Changing Ethnic Identity of Nubians in an Urban Milieu: Khartoum, Sudan* (University of California, Los Angeles, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1979), pp. 93, 157, 197, 214 and *passim*. Hale and others have noted a gender discrepancy that enabled Nubian men to avoid full-scale assimilation and Arabization: namely, they were en-

It was really the nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, expressed through new approaches to Arabic literature, that made it possible to speak for the first time of a ‘Sudanese Arab’. The meaning of ‘Sudanese’ had started to change under British rule after 1898 – it had started to become, in certain contexts, a simple adjectival form of the colony’s name, and a useful way of distinguishing the residents of the Anglo-Egyptian territory from those of Egypt and neighbouring colonies. Nationalists adopted this usage and expanded it, seeking to ennoble the term ‘Sudanese’ as a badge of national identity, without necessarily destigmatizing the legacy of slavery to which the term had originally referred.

A major breakthrough for Sudanese nationalism came in 1927 when a poet argued in the pages of a Khartoum journal that Sudan could and should have a distinct Arabic literature – a literature that would be ‘Sudanese’ through its reference to local settings, customs, and concerns. Strikingly, the poet who made these claims – a man named Hamza al-Malik Tambal – was an ethnic Nubian, whose Arabic compositions, according to a later Egyptian critic, were marred by grammatical flaws.³⁹ Readers were initially outraged or alarmed by Tambal’s essay – for here was the adjective ‘Sudanese’ being applied, for the first time, to the noble Arabic language.⁴⁰ Despite initial reservations, the idea caught on within the small audience of newspaper readers, who as a result of their employment in the colonial administration and their job postings throughout the colonial territory had begun to develop a sense of Sudan as a geographic whole.⁴¹

In the 1930s, it became fashionable among these young educated Northerners not only to identify themselves as Sudanese, but to write and speak openly of Sudanese nationalism. Their usage helped to popularize use of the term in the years before decolonization. To make the term more appealing, nationalists coined a new plural form for the Arabic adjective *sudani*: instead of using the Arabic plural *sud* (literally meaning ‘blacks’) to describe

dogamous and left wives and daughters in rural villages where Nubian was spoken, or insisted on speaking Nubian in their urban homes. Females thereby became the primary guardians of Nubian language and culture. The historical context and cultural consequences of Nubian out-migration are discussed in William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1977) and Heather J. Sharkey, ‘Globalization, migration, and identity: Sudan, 1800–2000’ in Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg (eds), *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, religion, and modernity* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 2004), pp. 113–37.

39. ‘Abidin, *Tarikh al-thaqafa al-‘arabiyya fi al-Sudan*, pp. 284–5.

40. Hamza al-Malik Tambal, *al-Adab al-sudani wa ma yajibuh ‘an yakuna ‘alayhi* (introduced by Muhammad Ibrahim al-Shush), second edition (Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1972). See also Heather J. Sharkey, ‘Arabic Poetry, nationalism, and social change: Sudanese colonial and postcolonial perspectives’ in Yasir Suleiman and Ibrahim Muhawi (eds), *Literature and Nation in the Middle East* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 162–78; and Khalid Husayn al-Kid, ‘al-Affandiyya wa-mafhum al-qawmiyya fi al-thalathin sana al-latti a’qabat al-fath fi al-sudan, 1898–1928’, *Majallat al-dirasat al-sudaniyya* 12, 1 (1992), pp. 44–76.

41. See Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, especially pp. 16–39 (‘Being “black”, being “Sudanese”’).

themselves, they adopted a new plural form: *sudaniyyun*, to mean Sudanese nationals. Notwithstanding these efforts to redeem the term for nationalism, associations between Sudanese-ness and slavery were hard to expunge, so that the term did not gain universal acceptance among high-status Arabs of the North. After independence in 1956, a few Arabs initially refused to apply for a passport, because they would have to register themselves as ‘Sudanese’ to get one. Some older Arabs hated the idea of being called Sudanese so much that they later proposed changing the name of the country to Sennar – after the capital of the Funj Sultanate.⁴²

Meanwhile, in the 1930s and 1940s, the search for local authenticity forced early Sudanese Arab nationalists to seek out and praise indigenous folk customs. By asserting that the folk customs of Northern Sudan, and particularly those of the Bedouin Arabs, derived from pre-Islamic Arabian customs, they suggested that Sudan preserved cultural legacies that other parts of the Arab world had lost.⁴³ Thus urban intellectuals relied on Bedouins for Arabist credentials (for example, by romanticizing Sudan’s Bedouins in poems and travel accounts),⁴⁴ even though Sudan’s Arab pastoralists never gained direct power in Khartoum’s corridors. The same inclination to prove Arab authenticity prompted some nationalists to declare that the Sudanese dialect of Arabic was among the most pristine.⁴⁵ This idea has endured in the post-colonial period as a kind of local wisdom. In a work published in 1979, for example, a literary scholar maintained that the Sudanese dialect, ‘though surrounded on all sides by African languages . . . has maintained its linguistic purity intact . . . [Various factors] have contributed towards making Sudanese Arabic one of the closest forms of Arabic to the classical, particularly in the field of vocabulary.’⁴⁶

42. Khalid H. A. Osman, *The Effendia and Concepts of Nationalism in the Sudan* (University of Reading, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1987), pp. 122–5.

43. On the conflicted concerns regarding Sudanese Arab cultural authenticity, folk customs (and especially women’s customs), and national modernization, see ‘Abidin, *Tarikh al-thaqafa al-‘arabiyya fi al-Sudan*, pp. 141–79; and Hasan Najila, *Malamih min al-mujtama’ al-sudani*, third edition (Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, Beirut, 1964), pp. 277–85.

44. The most influential Sudanese nationalist poet to draw upon Bedouin motifs was Muhammad Sa’id al-Abbasi (b. 1881) who published an anthology of his poetry, entitled *Diwan al-Abbasi*, in Cairo in 1948. Another notable work is the memoir-cum-travel account of the Sudanese nationalist poet, Hasan Najila. In 1931, Najila served for a time as the schoolmaster to the powerful al-Tom family of Kababish nomads in Kordofan; later, he recorded his experiences in *Dhikrayati fi al-badiya* (meaning ‘My Reminiscences of the Desert’) (Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, Beirut, 1964). The relationship of Tambal, ‘Abbasi, and Najila to the formation of Sudanese nationalist thought *vis-à-vis* Bedouins and Arabic culture is discussed in Heather J. Sharkey, ‘Arabic literature and the nationalist imagination in Kordofan’ in Michael Kevane and Endre Stiansen (eds), *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral incorporation and social transformation in Islamic Africa* (Brill, Leiden, 1998), pp. 165–79.

45. Muhammad Ahmad Mahjub, *Nahwa al-ghad* (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1970), p. 216.

46. Yousif Omer Babiker, *The Al-Fajr Movement and Its Place in Modern Sudanese Literature* (University of Edinburgh, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1979), pp. 2–3.

By the 1940s, nationalists also began to emphasize the country's cultural distinction by positing a theory of ethnic hybridity for the Sudanese Arab. The timing of this theory was significant: it arose because independence was appearing on the distant horizon, and the educated Northern Sudanese – as 'Arabs', nationalists, and colonial government employees – needed to justify their claims for the future assumption of power. They needed to show, in other words, that they had a vision for the entire colonial territory, as well as a mission for leadership.

In 1941, Muhammad Ahmad Mahjub, a leading nationalist and future Prime Minister, articulated this theory of hybridity by describing Sudan as 'the legacy of successive generations of the inherited and the commingled' resulting from the fusion of indigenous blacks (*sud* and *zumu*) with immigrant Arabs, as well as Turks, 'Asians', Abyssinians, Egyptians, Nubians, and Maghribis. In his view, this mixed population owed its cultural superiority, acquired through reason, intelligence, and courage, to the 'Arabs'. Mahjub declared that, to build upon these merits for the sake of national progress, embracing the Arab Islamic heritage was 'inevitable'.⁴⁷ 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali Taha, the nationalist who became the first Sudanese Minister of Education, declared in 1949 that, 'as the Sudan is one country sharing one set of political institutions it is of great importance that there should be one language which is understood by all its citizens. That language could only be Arabic, and Arabic must therefore be taught in all our schools.'⁴⁸ When the British authorities began to withdraw from Sudan in the early 1950s, nationalists like Taha, who had for long been the colonial regime's heir apparents, set out to transform their ideas into policies.

Arabization in practice: post-colonial identity politics

In 1950, as decolonization loomed, Northern Sudanese nationalists formulated plans for introducing Arabic into all Southern Sudanese schools. They were eager to dismantle three British policies that they viewed as having been nationally divisive. The first was the Closed Districts Ordinance of 1922, which had restricted Northern traders and others from entering Southern districts without a permit. The second was the language policy for Southern Sudan that emerged from the Rejaf Language Conference of 1928, which identified six 'vernaculars' (Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari, Latuko, and Zande) for development as languages of primary education, along with English for advanced study. The third was the policy of ceding educational development to Christian missionary organizations, each of which, according to a 'sphere system', had enjoyed a virtual monopoly over particular

47. Mahjub, *Nahwa al-ghad*, p. 212.

48. Quoted in Sandell, *English Language in Sudan*, p. 66.

regions to establish schools. These policies had worked to the detriment of Arabic and Islam, and Northern Sudanese nationalists resented them deeply.⁴⁹ The Northern Sudanese linguist, Sayed Hamid A. Hurreiz, went so far as to describe these language policies as a 'war on Arabic' that justified the subsequent policy of Arabization.⁵⁰

But it proved impossible to introduce Arabic education overnight. In the early 1950s, an Egyptian linguist from Cairo University named Khalil Muhammad Asakir, who was hired to help Arabicize the Southern schools, found that among eight hundred Southern Sudanese school-teachers, 'knowledge of Arabic was nil'. Thus, as Northern Sudanese educators began to teach Southern teachers how to read the Arabic script, Asakir began to devise systems for rendering Southern languages into Arabic script.⁵¹ Northern Sudanese policy setters hoped that use of Southern vernaculars rendered in modified Arabic script would be a first step towards learning literary Arabic, and that 'a unification of the alphabet would tend to reduce linguistic diversity and consequently bring South and North socially close together'.⁵²

In 1975, in a study of rendering the Shilluk language in Arabic script, the linguist Yves Le Clézio compared Sudanese policy to the Soviet Union's. Le Clézio pointed out that in the USSR, 'the Cyrillic alphabet, a traditional element of the dominant Russian culture, was felt to be a factor of integration for the non-Russian-speaking peoples, and . . . was imposed onto most of their languages'.⁵³ In retrospect, the comparison does not bode well for Sudanese national unity. Consider that when Moldova secured its independence from the Soviet Union in 1989, one of the first things it did was to drop the Cyrillic alphabet that Stalin had imposed and to restore the use of Latin orthography; other post-Soviet republics, such as Azerbaijan, switched to Latin orthography, too.

Arabization policy gained a sharper edge after 1955 when there occurred in Torit, Southern Sudan, an army mutiny that observers later identified as the start of civil war. Months later, on 1 January 1956, Sudan gained independence, declaring Arabic its sole official language and Islam its religion of

49. M. W. Daly, *Empire on the Nile: The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898-1934* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986); Robert O. Collins, *Shadows in the Grass: Britain in the Southern Sudan, 1918-1956* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1983); Lillian Passmore Sanderson and Neville Sanderson, *Education, Religion, and Politics in Southern Sudan, 1899-1964* (Ithaca Press, London, 1981).

50. Sayed Hamid A. Hurreiz, *Linguistic Diversity and Language Planning in the Sudan* (Sudan Research Unit, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1968), p. 18.

51. Yusuf el Khalifa Abu Bakr, 'Orthographical experiments in the Southern Sudan,' in Thelwall, *Aspects of Language in the Sudan*, pp. 200-10.

52. Abu Bakr, 'Language and education in the Southern Sudan,' p. 13. He expressed a similar idea in Abu Bakr, 'Orthographical experiments in the Southern Sudan,' p. 209.

53. Yves Le Clézio, 'Writing Shilluk with an Arabic script' in Hurreiz and Bell, *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore*, p. 42.

state. In 1957, Northern Sudanese politicians announced the nationalization of Christian missionary schools. In 1957, too, a 'Southern Federal Party' issued a manifesto calling for recognition of English along with Arabic as an official language; Christianity along with Islam as a state religion; and 'the transfer of the Sudan from the Arab world to the African'. The central government responded to the manifesto by sentencing its author to seven years in prison for sedition.⁵⁴

In 1958, a military coup brought to power General Abboud, who proved to be an even greater hardliner on Arabization and its partner, Islamization. Abboud's government immediately opened six intermediate-level Islamic *ma'hads* (akin to seminaries) in Southern Sudan. Four years later, in 1962, his regime expelled foreign Christian missionaries, on the grounds that they were standing as a 'bulwark in the path to national integration', in the words of a government report, and that they were guilty of various infractions including sheltering, supplying, or otherwise abetting 'mutineers' and 'outlaws', meaning Southern rebels.⁵⁵ The year 1962 also witnessed a strike among Southern Sudanese students, who staged a protest against the government's policies of Arabization and Islamization. Some Southern Sudanese activists later submitted a petition of protest to the United Nations, claiming that authorities had retaliated against the strike's leaders by pulling their teeth out with pliers. The petitioners complained that Muslim Arab teachers from Northern Sudan 'engage too much in politics – unity of the Sudan, Islamic history, Arab League – and such other irrelevant subjects that make the children confused and lose interest in the teaching'. They also complained that Christian students who refused to attend Qur'an studies were expelled from school, and described the government's policy as an attempt 'to create a subservient race dwelling in ignorance but embracing Islam and those who preach it'.⁵⁶

Writing in the 1970s, Yusuf al-Khalifa Abu Bakr, Asakir's successor in the project to Arabicize Southern vernaculars, acknowledged that language politics were helping to fuel the civil war. 'Far from the eyes and control of the Government,' he wrote, 'the Anyanya [Southern Sudanese guerrillas] were running their schools in the sixties in the jungles of the South according to the old system (vernaculars as media in classes 1 and 2 with English as

54. Sandell, *English Language in Sudan*, pp. 75–6.

55. Republic of the Sudan, Ministry of the Interior, 'Memorandum on reasons that led to the expulsion of foreign missionaries and priests from the southern provinces of the Sudan (Government of Sudan, Khartoum, March 1964), p. 3 and Appendix B ('List of contraventions committed by some missionaries'). See also Heather J. Sharkey, 'Missionary legacies: Muslim-Christian encounters in Egypt and Sudan during the colonial and postcolonial periods' in Benjamin F. Soares (ed.), *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa* (Leiden, Brill, 2006), pp. 57–88; and J. O. Voll, 'Imperialism, nationalism, and missionaries: lessons from Sudan for the twenty-first century,' *Islam and Christian Relations* 8, 1 (1997), pp. 39–52.

56. Sandell, *English Language in Sudan*, pp. 77–9.

a subject in these two years and as a medium of instruction from the third year on).⁵⁷ Language policy became a mode of resistance.

Why were the policies of the Islamic and Arabic-medium government schools so distasteful to the Southern Sudanese rebels? The question seems relevant since Christian missionary schools in the Anglo-Egyptian period had engaged in similar policies, such as pressing children to adopt new names and offering educational advancement as an inducement to conversion.⁵⁸ The major difference after 1956 was that the national government was no longer officially colonial, and educated Southerners aspired to a share in national power. Moreover, what Northern politicians regarded as policies of national unity, many Southern intellectuals regarded as cultural colonialism, precisely because they had no choice or voice in the matter. There appears to have been a sense among Southerners, too, that Arabized education was cheating them – that standards were low and falling, that teachers were weak, unmotivated, or merely propagandistic, and that Southerners, educated in Arabic, were left unable to compete with educated native Arabic-speakers.⁵⁹

In 1972 the civil war ended when President Numayri signed the Addis Ababa Accord. This treaty recognized Southern demands by agreeing to a more equitable distribution of political power and economic resources; it also tacitly accepted English as a language of regional administration in Southern Sudan. The Accord held out the possibility of a new and more inclusive Sudan, but its promises for sharing went unfulfilled. In 1983, after Numayri proclaimed Islamic Shari'a the law of the land, war resumed as John Garang assumed command of the Southern resistance known as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A). Numayri's regime fell in 1985, but the regimes that succeeded him continued to uphold Shari'a law and to insist on Arabic and Islam as national unifiers.⁶⁰

But this time Southern Sudanese were not the only ones poised to resist. In the late 1980s, civil war spread to the Nuba Mountains, where a locally led branch of the SPLA was formed. After 1989, the military-Islamist regime of General Beshir nevertheless held firm, by skilfully manipulating factionalism among its rivals (a technique that analysts have compared to the colonial

57. Abu Bakr, 'Language and education in the Southern Sudan', p. 14.

58. Compare Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans*, p. 100, Nyombe, 'Survival or extinction', p. 112; and Michael Kevane, 'Lako Tongun discusses his life and the situation in Sudan,' *Sudan Studies Association Newsletter* 22, 1 (2003), pp. 3–11.

59. Sudan African National Union, 'The memorandum presented by the Sudan African National Union to the Commission of the Organisation of African Unity for Refugees' (typescript, Kampala, November 1964), pp. 7, 43, 57. See also Nyombe, 'Survival or extinction', pp. 108–9, 114; Sandell, *English Language in Sudan*, pp. 76, 80, 93–4, 105, 111; Elrayah, 'Arabic and English in Sudan', p. 615.

60. Peter Woodward, *Sudan: The unstable state, 1898–1989* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 1990); and Lesch, *The Sudan*.

strategy of divide and rule) and, after 1999, by dipping into new oil export revenues in order to bolster its military arsenals.⁶¹

In 1989, the French linguist, Catherine Miller, issued a bleak verdict on Sudan's post-colonial policies of Arabization and Islamization as they related to war in the South. These policies amounted to a series of 'successive failures', she wrote, and 'testify to the difficulty of applying preconceived ideologies without accounting for facts on the ground'. Ultimately, she wrote, 'abusive centralization and the non-recognition of ethnic minorities have cancelled out the capacity for potential integration that [the government's policies] of Islamization and Arabization may have held'.⁶² Reflecting on Arabic culture in Southern Sudan, the Sudanese linguist Ushari Ahmad Mahmud was equally blunt. 'International and indigenous professionals acting as linguistic specialists will get nowhere,' Mahmud wrote, 'as long as they continue to avoid the real issues of political power distribution and social inequalities. . . .'⁶³

Given the failure of Arabization policy to promote national unity and concord, why, then, did successive post-colonial regimes cling to the policy so fiercely? The answer is that historically Arabic-Islamic culture has enjoyed so much prestige in Northern Sudan that politicians in Khartoum seized upon it to prop up their credentials in moments of weakness. Lip service to promoting Arabic and Arab culture also proved useful as a means of winning political and financial support from countries like Saudi Arabia and Libya. As a policy, *ta'rib* thereby functioned as both a tool and a cudgel – enhancing political legitimacy and power at the centre and drawing support from abroad, while supplanting local languages with Arabic and quashing claims to peripheral autonomy.

Sudan's civil wars: when does ethnic identity turn into racism?

In 2003, as the current round of war was erupting in Darfur, the historian Douglas H. Johnson published a book called *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. His use of the plural – 'wars', not 'war' in his title – was significant. Johnson argued that the civil war that plagued Sudan from 1955 to 1972 (usually called the 'first' civil war); the war that afflicted the country from 1983 until, arguably, the signing of a Sudan Government-SPLM/A treaty in 2005 (usually called the 'second' civil war); and other internal conflicts in modern Sudan, had all been related to each other organically.⁶⁴ His

61. Heather J. Sharkey, 'Sudan: oil and war' in Colin Legum (ed.), *Africa Contemporary Record* 27, 1 (January 1999 – 31 December 2000) (Holmes and Meier, New York, NY, 2004), pp. B651–B67.

62. Catherine Miller (in collaboration with Hashim M. Salih), 'Langues et identité' in Marc Lavergne (ed.), *Le Soudan contemporain* (Karthala, Paris, 1989), pp. 106–7.

63. Mahmud, *Arabic in the Southern Sudan*, p. 2.

64. Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2003).

framework has made it easier for scholars to situate the current Darfur conflict within the plurality of Sudanese civil conflicts, and to show linkages between Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and Southern Sudan.

Two connections are salient. First, many observers suggest that the political rhetoric of John Garang inspired and emboldened the Darfurian rebels of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), whose attack on government garrisons in El Fashir 2003 are said to have precipitated the current violence. Garang extolled the possibility of a 'New Sudan' – a Sudan that would be ethnically pluralistic and socially inclusive, and inherently 'Africanist' rather than 'Arabist'.⁶⁵ Darfurian rebel leaders later envied what Garang and the SPLA secured in the 'Comprehensive Peace Agreement' with the Beshir regime in 2005: promises of a sharing of power and wealth, and of a degree of political decentralization (much as in the accord of 1972), but this time with an escape clause – namely, a planned future referendum on whether Southern Sudan should remain part of the whole or secede.⁶⁶ De Waal and Flint have suggested that Garang's death in an apparently accidental helicopter crash in 2005, a mere two weeks after the signing of the treaty, was a blow for Darfur as well; had Garang lived, he might have placed a check on the Khartoum regime's efforts to egg on and abet the Arab militias.⁶⁷

The second salient connection is that the conflicts in Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and Darfur also occurred within the context of Arab militarization. In the mid-1980s, the Northern Sudanese government decided to arm Arab tribal militias in order to wage proxy wars against Southern Sudanese and Nuba 'rebels' and civilians. These militias were the forerunners of the Janjaweed who now ravage Darfur, even though the exact tribal composition of these armies has differed. Similarly, in the late 1980s and the 1990s in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains, as now in Darfur, militias on the ground were supported by the central government's military intelligence and aerial bombardment campaigns.⁶⁸ But Darfur's militarization was aggravated by another, external factor: in the 1980s, the Libyan government began to arm Darfurian Arabs, in this case with the idea of using them to topple the Chadian regime of Hissène Habré.⁶⁹ Reflecting the offbeat pan-Arabist ideology of Mu'ammār Qadhafi, who had a vision of creating an Arab Muslim belt in Sahelian Africa, the Libyan government also recruited some Darfurian Arabs into the Tajammu' al-'Arabi, which

65. Kevane, 'Lako Tongun discusses his life and the situation in Sudan'; and Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*, p. 89.

66. Alex de Waal, 'I will not sign: reflections on the Darfur peace agreement', *London Review of Books* 28, 23 (30 November 2006).

67. Flint and de Waal, *Darfur*, pp. xii–xiii.

68. Flint and de Waal, *Darfur*, pp. 24–5.

69. J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Africa's Thirty Years' War: Libya, Chad, and the Sudan, 1963–1993* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1999).

de Waal described as a crucible for Arab racial supremacist ideology.⁷⁰ In 2004, under the leadership of Musa Hilal (whom de Waal and Flint call one of the most powerful leaders of the Janjaweed militias) Tajammu' al-'Arabi issued a directive that called upon its supporters to 'change the demography of Darfur and empty it of its African tribes'.⁷¹

When does Arab ethnic identity become Arab racism? Amir H. Idris has pointed out that racism in the Sudanese context has been rooted in local histories of slavery and in the unequal distribution of wealth and power between regions and social groups. But in the post-colonial period, and now especially in the context of Darfur, Idris has argued that racism has sharpened within the climate of fear surrounding Arab pastoralists – who are buffeted by drought and desertification, awash in guns but not in well-watered grazing lands, and abetted by a regime that is determined to retain its power by crushing internal rebellions.⁷² Racism has been flourishing amidst violence, among disproportionately well-armed Arabs who can kill with impunity. One could perhaps extend the adage that 'a language is a dialect with an army' to say that, with regard to Sudan today, Arab and African 'races' are ethnicities with armies.

However, not every expert on Sudan is ready to accept the argument that Arab racism or racial supremacy is a real factor in the current Darfur conflict, or in Sudanese internal politics more broadly. In 2005, in a review of Gérard Prunier's recent book on Darfur, for example, the development economist Michael Kevane expressed scepticism about Prunier's contention that 'the Arab vs African clash [in Darfur] is not a *local* and *ethnic* one' but rather 'a *national* and *racial* one'. Prunier 'lays it on thick', he wrote, in claiming that 'the northern elite has been deepening its self-conception as a racial group, characterized by Arabness', Kevane also expressed scepticism about what he called Prunier's pop-psychologizing tendency to ascribe the intensity of the Sudan government's Arabization agendas to a sense of inadequacy within the larger Arab world – that is, to a sense that Sudanese Arabs, because of their dark skins and their experiences of facing discrimination in the Middle East, were somehow not Arab *enough*.⁷³

Many scholars and activists nevertheless agree with Prunier in contending that a kind of racial self-consciousness lurks behind the Sudan government's Arab ideology. Al-Baqir al-Afif Mukhtar made this claim about Sudan's Arab identity crisis particularly strongly. 'Northerners think of themselves

70. See also Amnesty International, 'Beyond any doubt: Sudan uses and supports the Janjawid in Darfur' (AI Index No. 41/028/2006, 8 December 2006).

71. Flint and de Waal, *Darfur*, pp. 38–9.

72. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*, p. 80; see also Burr and Collins, *Africa's Thirty Years' War*, pp. 243–4, 259.

73. Michael Kevane, review of Gérard Prunier's *Darfur: The ambiguous genocide*, in *Sudan Studies Association Newsletter* 24, 1 (October 2005), pp. 15–18.

as Arabs, whereas the Arabs [sic] think otherwise. Northerners' experience in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf [where many have migrated for work], proved to them beyond any doubt that the Arabs do not really consider them as Arabs, but rather as 'abid, slaves Almost every Northerner in the Gulf has had the unpleasant experience of being called 'abd.' Northern Sudanese aspire to full inclusion in the Arab community, Mukhtar concluded, but their experiences in the wider Arab world, combined with their experience of being categorized with 'blacks' when they migrate to Europe or North America, have compounded their anxieties.⁷⁴ The unease of Northerners may be deepened by first-hand awareness of Arabic's non-hegemonic status in Sudan – a reality that one can apprehend merely by spending time on a public bus in Khartoum, and listening in on a multiplicity of languages.

In their introduction to a volume on *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley* (2004) Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban and Kharyssa Rhodes noted that the study of racism in the Nile Valley has been so sensitive a topic that it has been largely avoided. Those accused of being racist tend to deny it, while those who claim to have experienced racism feel its barbs sharply and testify to its relevance in day-to-day life on the streets in Cairo and Khartoum.⁷⁵ Even a cursory look at Sudanese post-colonial writings in Arabic and English shows that this subject warrants much deeper study, since discourses about race as a social category in Sudanese post-colonial society (generally between 'Arabs' and 'Africans'), and about the high position of Arabism in Sudan's cultural hierarchy, are very common.

References to Arab cultural superiority abound in Arabic works. Consider, for example, the work by a respected Northern Sudanese intellectual, Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim. In a study of Sudanese thought written in 1965 and published in at least two subsequent editions (in 1976 and 1989), Ibrahim described Sudanese Arab culture as the product of historical 'cross-pollination' through which there 'emerged a new creature who was the modern Sudanese, who was formed neither of pure Arab blood nor of pure African (*zanni*), but who certainly combined in his tissues the two kinds of bloods, and carried in his brain the product of the more powerful and more perfect culture: Arab culture'. In Ibrahim's view, Arabization had proceeded historically as Africans either 'exchanged their idolatrous and Christian religions for entering into Islam', or 'as Africans withdrew into the equatorial forests, [so that] the echo of their national cultures died

74. Mukhtar, 'The crisis of identity in Northern Sudan' in Fluehr-Lobban and Rhodes, *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley*, pp. 213–24.

75. Fluehr-Lobban and Rhodes, *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley*, pp. xiii–xiv (see also the essay in this volume by Maurita Poole, regarding Cairo, pp. 265–77); Zeineb Eyega, 'Sudanese black identity' (talk given at the Darfur Symposium, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1 March 2007).

down'.⁷⁶ Metaphors of Arab cultural conquest are also common. In 1979, one Northern Sudanese historian described the country's rural peripheries as zones where, in the early twentieth century, educated Northern Sudanese Muslims carried out a 'conquest' (*ghazw*) for the spread of Islam, while in the early 1990s another praised Northern Sudanese government employees who, upon being posted to Sudan's peripheries, 'rushed into battle unsheathing the weapons of modern science amidst surroundings ... like something from the Stone Age'.⁷⁷

Discourses about race are also abundant, even in cases where writers dismiss its relevance. In the late 1960s, for example, the historian Muddathir Abdel Rahim made a plea for the irrelevance of the Arab–African divide, and argued that Sudan should be understood as an Afro-Arab composite. 'Both [Arab and African], according to popular conception, are indicative of certain racial groups and are therefore regarded as being mutually exclusive,' he wrote. 'In fact, however, Arabism is a cultural, linguistic and non-racial link that binds together numerous races: black, white and brown.' In a similar vein, the Egyptian scholar of Sudanese Arabic literature, 'Abd al-Majid 'Abidin, reflected in 1972 on Sudan's Arab–African hybridity and averred that Arabs are simply those who speak Arabic, that there is no difference between a pedigreed and assimilated Arab, and that Blacks can be Arabs as well. 'Abidin argued that Arabism transcended tribalism or racism, while Arab identity was the only force capable of binding Sudan's diverse groups together. 'Abidin stated, further, that embracing Africanism (*tazannuj*) would be divisive precisely because Africans (*zunuj*) were so heterogeneous and, he claimed, lacked a basis in language or civilization. 'The call to Africanism ... would lead to a call for division, fragmentation, and tribalism in this country.'⁷⁸

What counts, of course, is not what Arabism *should be* according to its theorists; what counts is rather what Arabism and Arabization *have been*, on the ground, in Sudan. In this spirit, Nyombe remarked, regarding the Northern Sudanese nationalists' desire to spread Arabic and Islam, that 'These were not bad objectives in themselves, but immoderate northern zeal to convert southerners into Moslems and Arabic language speakers in the shortest time possible often drifted into extreme and intolerant policies. ...'⁷⁹ Idris remarked in a similar spirit that successive post-colonial Sudanese regimes have treated non-Arabs and Arabs as though they have different 'entitle-

76. Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, *al-Fikr al-sudani: usuluhu wa-tatawvuruhu*, second edition (Matba'at Aru al-Tijariyya, n.p., 1989), pp. 11–12.

77. Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahim Nasr, *al-Idara al-baritaniyya wa'l-tabshir al-islami wa'l-masihi fi al-Sudan* (Wizarat al-Tarbiya wa'l-Tawjih, Khartoum, 1979), pp. 25–6; Mirghani Hasan 'Ali, *Shakhsiiyyat 'amma min al-Mawrada* (n.p., [Omdurman, early 1990s?]), p. 43.

78. 'Abd al-Majid 'Abidin, *Dirasat Sudaniyya: majmu'at maqalat min al-adab wa-al-tarikh*, second edition (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1972), pp. 38–40.

79. Nyombe, 'Survival or extinction', p. 109.

ments'. 'Those who are considered Arabs by the racialized state are treated as citizens,' he wrote, 'and those who are perceived as non-Arabs are treated as subjects.'⁸⁰ Still others have rejected Arabism's totalistic claims: some have not wanted a Sudan with cultural unity; some have preferred a Sudan that recognizes and tolerates difference. This rejection of monoculturalism and assimilation is what prompted John Garang, in the end, to call for a New Sudan that would be a 'united, secular, democratic, multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious Sudan'.⁸¹

Successive Sudanese governments – parliamentary and dictatorial alike – have cherished the ideal of the Sudanese Arab so much that they have insisted on assimilation, rather than pluralistic inclusion and acceptance of difference, as the only approach to national unity. In trying to pursue their agendas in the context of civil wars, they have turned Arabization and Islamization into martial policies. The Beshir regime has been particularly clear on this score: Beshir declared in the 1990s that his regime was 'fighting for [the] Sudan's Arab-Islamic existence', that its policies to impose Islamic law and Arabic were merely a reflection of divine will, and that its war against dissidents was a jihad.⁸² But the policies that Beshir ascribed to God's will have bred only ill will, particularly since his regime has supported Arabization in a country that has had a post-colonial political and economic culture of Arabs-take-all. In May 2000, an anonymously authored and distributed 'Black Book' made the rounds in greater Khartoum, eluding government censorship: it purported to show 'what everyone knew but never articulated: that the vast majority of government positions in Khartoum, from cabinet ministers to their drivers and all the bureaucracy in between, were held by members of three [Arab] tribes which represented only 5.4 percent of the population'.⁸³ Some claim that the book's authors had ties to the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), one of the two rebel groups that took to violence in Darfur in 2003.⁸⁴

Such is the depth of ill will that many non-Arab Sudanese today appear to look upon Northern riverine Arab elites as outsiders, enemies, colonizers, and usurpers – certainly not as compatriots. In 2007, the Arabic language continues to spread as a lingua franca, particularly in Darfur (including in displaced people's camps),⁸⁵ among Southern Sudanese refugees, and in

80. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*, p. 83.

81. Wöndu and Lesch, *Battle for Peace in Sudan*, pp. 33–4.

82. Lesch, *The Sudan*, p. 22.

83. Flint and de Waal, *Darfur*, pp. 17–18.

84. Abdullahi Osman El-Tom, 'The Black Book of Sudan: imbalance of wealth and power in Sudan', *Journal of African National Affairs* 1, 2 (2003), pp. 25–35, at <<http://www.ossrea.net/publications/newsletter/oct02/article9.htm>> (1 May 2007).

85. Consider the emergence of the Arabic monthly newspaper *Afiya Darfur*: launched in 2006, with the financial support of European governments, this periodical targets a readership of Darfurians in displaced people's camps. Simon Haselock, 'Overview of the Albany Asso-

southern towns, though the appeal of Arab identity and ideology appears more limited than ever. This kind of alienation recalls the words of Karin Willemse, who embarked upon ethnographic fieldwork among Fur women in Darfur in the late 1980s,

When I would explain that my country was overseas and that Sudan was supposed to be their country, they would laugh at my naivety. What had the Sudanese government ever done for them, but take things from them? . . . No, Sudan was not their country.⁸⁶

Amidst the rancour of post-colonial conflict, *ta'rib* is likely to proceed as a linguistic process, but without the attendant adoption of Arab identity. The spread of Arabic, in sum, will offer Sudan no shortcut to national unity and no guarantee for survival within present-day borders.

ciates project in Darfur' (unpublished paper presented at the Workshop on 'Methodologies and Approaches to Public Opinion Research in Sudan,' Center for Global Communications Studies, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 4 April 2007).

86. Karin Willemse, *One Foot in Heaven: Narratives on gender and Islam in Darfur, West-Sudan* (University of Leiden, Leiden, 2001), p. 17.