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Excerpt
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Introduction

The historiography of Sudan is complex and long, spanning from the Kingdom of Kush (760 BCE–350 CE) to the present day, but the history of independent Sudan begins with the withdrawal of the British and Egyptian rulers on 1 January 1956. To be sure, the history of its ancient kingdoms – Kush, the Christian states, and the sultanates of Funj and Fur – have their own unique past that has captured the attention of archaeologist and historian alike, but any understanding of Sudan today is to be found in the events of the last 200 years. The coming of the Turks and the British before and after the Mahdist revolution (1881–98) not only added to the already dazzling diversity of the Sudanese peoples, but resulted in the creation of an artificial state controlled by new forms of governance. The Turks and Egyptians brought with them the civilizations and cultures from the Ottoman empire and the Arab world in the nineteenth century; the British introduced the imperialism, education, religion, and technology of the West in the twentieth. In their own way each of these invaders have left behind additional layers of alien institutions upon the deep indigenous themes that have been woven into the fabric of the Sudanese past.

The most enduring and compelling of these themes is the size and diversity of so vast a country as Sudan, which have been and remain a major ingredient in its history. Sudan is the largest country in Africa, nearly 1 million square miles spanning 18 degrees of latitude, the size of the United States east of the Mississippi, or nearly 2 percent of the total land mass of the world. The enormous size of the independent Democratic Republic of Sudan (*jumhuriyat al-sudan*), however, was only the eastern portion of the larger Sudanic plain, the *bilad al-sudan* of the medieval Arab geographers, that stretches from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, punctuated by plateaux and *jabals* and defined by the diverse highlands that surround it – the Congo–Nile watershed to the south, the Ethiopian escarpment and Red Sea Hills to the east, and the Sahara Desert to the north.

Stretching in every direction to the horizon, this plain appears to be a monotonous, homogeneous land mass, but that obscures its enormous diversity. In the far north this Sudanic plain becomes desert in Sudan. There are a few oases rich in salt but little water, isolated volcanic outcrops whose springs and caves have provided sustenance and shelter since Paleolithic times, and the *jizzu* (grazing in winter for camels from sporadic rains). Further south the *qoz* sand dunes and scrub become clay plains that support a mantle of savanna grasslands in the rains dominated in the east by the Nuba Mountains west of the White Nile that rise abruptly above the seemingly endless western Sudanic plain. Between the White and Blue Niles lie the fertile clay plains of the Gezira (*jazira*, island), whose natural slope from south to north has made possible vast irrigation schemes in the twentieth century. East of the Blue Nile below the Ethiopian escarpment the undulating grasslands of the Butana extend from the Ethiopian escarpment north to the Sahel on the borders of Nubia. Beyond are the arid, jumbled hills of the Red Sea that begin in Ethiopia and end in Egypt and whose rugged terrain overlooks a barren, narrow coastal plain of sand, rock, crystalline beaches, and thick coral reefs. These plains, east and west of the Nile, gradually rise southward and surround the shallow depression of the Sudd (*sadd*, barrier), the world's largest swamp.

One of the most formidable natural obstacles in the world, the Sudd is a labyrinth of 11,700 square miles of lakes, lagoons, and meandering channels. The lagoons and lakes rise and fall according to the amount of water from the equatorial lakes and seasonal rainfall to disgorge floating islands of aquatic plants, *sudd*, which coalesce into dams of aquatic vegetation that force the river to rise and cut a new channel around the obstruction, by which the process is repeated, forming new barriers in a never-ending cycle. Trapped in this vast expanse of swamp and lagoons enormous quantities of water are lost to evaporation and transpiration, so that whatever the volume flowing down from the great equatorial lakes or by rainfall the quantity of water that emerges from the Sudd remains approximately the same from one year to the next and is lost to both Sudan and Egypt. From the Sudd the land rises in the southwest to the ironstone plateau (*jabal hadid*) and the Congo–Nile watershed, whose many rivers flowing northeast across the ironstone cut deep ravines for the gallery forests and the beginning of the Congo tropical rainforest. Southeast of the Sudd the land rises to a series of mountains – Imatong, Didinga, and Dongotona, all 10,000 feet – and to the highest peak in Sudan, Mt. Kinyeti, 10,456 feet, on the Sudan–Uganda border.

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The longest river in the world, the Nile and its tributaries flow south to north, a riverine spine throughout the entire length of Sudan that has defined the way of living for those Sudanese who have settled by its banks and that distinguishes them from the rural farmers and herdsmen on the Sudanic plains far beyond the river. Beginning on the Lake Plateau the Nile, called the Bahr al-Jabal (the Mountain River), plunges 80 miles down the gorge of the Bedden Rapids to meander through the Sudd to Lake No, from which flows the White Nile (*Bahr al-Abyad*) with those waters from tributaries that have survived massive loss in the Sudd and with the substantial Ethiopian contribution from the River Sobat, which provides 14 percent of the total Nile flow, so that the White Nile can run majestically northward to its great confluence with the Blue Nile at Khartoum. Rising in the highlands of Ethiopia the Blue Nile (*Bahr al-Azraq*) contributes 86 percent of the Nile waters for Sudan and Egypt, and, now as one, the Nile flows grandly to the north, gathering its last drop from the River Atbara, 1,800 miles from the Mediterranean, before making its great S curve to reach the historic southern frontier of Egypt at Aswan and the first cataract.

No other country in the world has such a varied and inhospitable climate as Sudan, a hot country where temperatures in Khartoum during May and June will average 106°F and 120°F or more in the heat of summer. When the winter winds blow from the north, these same temperatures average 60°F and as low as 43°F, this annual variation being created by two global air flows. In winter the cool, dry, northeast winds from arid Asia blow across Sudan, pushing the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) as far south as the Tropic of Capricorn. By April the ITCZ begins to move north, propelled by a massive body of moist air from which the exhausted northeasterly winds can no longer prevail. The variability of rainfall in Sudan ranges from almost nothing on the Egyptian border to more than 47 inches on the Congo–Nile watershed. The rain clouds from the South Atlantic that arrive in southern Sudan in April diminish in strength as they move northward, reaching Khartoum in July, often creating violent dust storms (*habubs*), and then retreating before the revived northeasterly Asian air mass.

This enormous variation in rainfall in turn results in the great diversity of plants and animals from which the Sudanese derive their livelihoods in five distinctive belts of vegetation from north to south. The desert, with less than 3 inches of annual sporadic rainfall, can only support permanent vegetation in the wadis, intermittent dry watercourses, while the Sahel beyond receives from 3 to 11 inches of rainfall that can sustain a

mixture of grasses and acacia trees, one species of which, *Acacia senegal* (*bashab*), produces a major export, gum arabic. When the annual rainfall reaches 30 inches, the broad belt of savanna that spans Sudan from east to west is transformed into a mantle of succulent grasses broken by intermittent woodlands and reliable sources of water which rise to the ironstone plateau, the Congo–Nile watershed, and the mountains east of the Bahr al-Jabal.

If geography is one of the imperishable themes of the past 200 years of Sudanese history, Sudan's differing land mass and rainfall have sheltered an estimated 600 ethnic and linguistic groups, scores of which have consisted of only a few individuals. Historically, scholars have thus simply listed the various groups and their relationships, if any, of one to another. A more understandable method is to divide the Sudanese into two broad, encompassing categories – Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims in Sudan can, in turn, be partitioned into those who claim an Arab identity and those who do not. Despite a common language and religion, Sudanese Arabs do not constitute a cohesive group but have been divided into two rather artificial congregations – the Arabized Nubians and Ja'ali (pl. Ja'aliyyin), those claiming descent from Ibrahim Ja'al, a descendant of al-'Abbas, uncle of the Prophet, who live in settled communities along the Nile, and the Juhayna nomads or semi-nomads of the plains.

The Arabized Nubians live today along the Nile in an area between the first and third cataracts known as Lower Nubia and retain a fierce loyalty to their pre-Arab Nubian architecture, culture, and language. Above the third cataract the Danaqla (sing. Dunqulawi), "men of Dongola," settled. They claim to be Ja'aliyyin but take great pride in their Nubian origins, and many of them still speak a Nubian dialect. They are separated from the rest of the Ja'aliyyin by the Shayqiyya confederacy living along the Nile from al-Dabba to the fourth cataract who do not claim descent from Ibrahim Ja'al and today remain very conscious of their own distinctiveness. The Nile from the fourth cataract to the Atbara confluence is Ja'ali country of the Rubatab and Manasir, and those living beyond the Atbara to the Sabaluqa Gorge who have specifically taken the name of Ja'aliyyin. There are also smaller groups scattered throughout Sudan who, for one reason or another, have been uprooted from their traditional societies and sought safety and identity by rallying around a Ja'ali leader or holy man, and thus make the dubious claim to be Ja'aliyyin.

With one exception, the Rufa'a, the remaining conglomerate of groups not of Ja'ali origin claiming Arab descent, are known collectively as the Juhayna. The Juhayna came from southern Arabia and thence into Upper

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Egypt, from which they drifted southward into Nubia during the fourteenth century and from there south and west, absorbing indigenous non-Arab peoples comprising three dominant groups – Shukriyya, Kababish, and Baqqara. The Shukriyya are camel-owning nomads who in the eighteenth century established themselves in the pastures between the Nile, Atbara, and the Ethiopian foothills, known as the southern Butana, under the leadership of the Abu Sinn family. West of the Nile, Kababish roamed widely with their herds of camels, sheep, and goats across the Sahel of northern Kordofan. They were a loose confederacy of various Arab lineages who were forged together in the eighteenth century by a common way of life and amalgamated in the twentieth century under their famous Shaykh (Sir) ‘Ali al-Tom (1874–1937). South of the Kababish on the savanna grasslands of Kordofan and Darfur the Baqqara arrived in the eighteenth century with their cattle from Bagirmi and Wadai in Chad. Despite many generations of taking slaves, concubinage, and intermarriage with the non-Muslim Africans in the neighboring Bahr al-Ghazal, which has changed their physiognomy, they have not abandoned Arabic or Arab culture and are, in fact, a collection of distinct sub-groups, among whom are the Rizayqat, Missariyya, Humr, Habbaniyya, and Ta‘a’isha.

On the plains of southern Kordofan rise the Nuba Mountains, a 90-mile range of well-watered squat mesas, rocky outcrops, and mountains rising 3–4,000 feet. Here in their mountain massif the Nuba have lived in isolation since the beginning of memory. They represent over fifty distinct ethnic groups speaking more than seventy different languages and practicing their traditional African religions, and came collectively to be called the Nuba in the twentieth century; they are not to be confused with the Nubians of the riverine Nile in northern Sudan, despite the fact that both groups speak languages of the same Nilo-Saharan linguistic family. Their isolation began to crumble in the nineteenth century under pressure from Baqqara Arabs from the plains. Arabic became the lingua franca, but English was frequently used by educated Nuba as their incredibly complex ethnic and linguistic societies continued to cultivate corn, millet, and *dura* (sorghum) on the hillsides, valleys, and plains below.

There were many Muslim Sudanese who did not claim an Arab heritage – the Beja, a Cushitic-speaking people in the Red Sea Hills. Among them were the Hadanduwa, originally camel-owning nomads, many of whom became farmers in the rich deltas of the Gash and Tokar spate rivers during the twentieth century. The northern branch of the Beja, the ‘Ababda, have for centuries controlled the vital route across the Nubian Desert from Korosko to Abu Hamad. Other non-Arab Muslims were Africans who had come in

the distant past from the southwest on the fringe of the equatorial African rainforest to settle around the Jabal Marra massif in central Darfur (Land of the Fur). They were mostly farmers speaking Nilo-Saharan languages that related them linguistically to the Nubians and the Maasai of Tanzania. The Fur cultivated the fertile, well-watered valleys of Jabal Marra, as did the Dagu and Berti to the east and the Masalit to the west on the plains, with their spate wadis along the Chad frontier. North of Jabal Marra in the Sahel agriculture becomes marginal, and so the Zaghawa, of African origins, were camel nomads like their Arab neighbors, the Kababish, to the east.

If Muslims have dominated northern Sudan, non-Muslim Sudanese have prevailed in the South. Today they constitute one-third of the Sudanese and number some sixty distinct groups of Western and Eastern Nilotes, a generic and somewhat artificial term for those speaking Nilotic languages of the larger Nilo-Saharan family. The Western Nilotes constitute the Luo, Shilluk, Anuak, Acholi, Jur, and the two most powerful and dominant ethnic groups in southern Sudan, the Dinka and Nuer. These Western Nilotes command the grasslands that surround the Sudd, where the Dinka and Nuer are bound together by their cattle culture, while the Luo, Shilluk, and Anuak are primarily farmers with cattle. The Eastern Nilotes of Sudan, who also speak Eastern Sudanic languages, include a variety of modest-sized ethnic groups who number in the thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands – the Bari, Fajulu, Kakwa, settled farmers, and the Mandari, Toposa, and Turkana, cattle herders.

The homeland of these African Nilotic Sudanese was at one time in central Sudan, specifically in the Gezira, and the last of them to leave, according to their traditions of migration, were the Dinka (in their own language the *jiang* or *moinjiang*) some time in the fifteenth century who pushed the Luo, who had gone before them, further into southern Sudan. Their migrations to the South had been made possible by the acquisition of Zebu humped-back cattle about 1000 CE from the Ethiopian borderlands that were more resistant to drought and accustomed to long-distance transhumance. By the seventeenth century these Dinka had come into conflict with the Shilluk who, among the Nilotes, were the only people to establish a centralized state with a divine king (*reth*) who fiercely resisted all attempts by the Dinka to turn their agricultural lands into pasture. The history of Dinka–Shilluk relations during the next 200 years is one of interminable border wars punctuated by periods of fragile peace that did not come to an end until the reign of the Shilluk Reth Akwot (1825–35), who ended the Dinka threat to the integrity of his kingdom.

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When Dinka living east of the Bahr al-Jabal migrated across the river into the Bahr al-Ghazal during the latter half of the sixteenth century they discovered rich soils inhabited by the indigenous Luo and Luel. By the twelfth century the Luo had occupied large portions of southern Sudan, until the great droughts and famine in the middle of the fifteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries precipitated their dissolution. Some Luo went north to found the Shilluk kingdom; others settled as the Anuak on the upper Sobat and Pibor rivers. Not all the Luo had participated in the great migration, and a few remained behind in settlements along the ironstone plateau, where relations between Luo farmers and the incoming Dinka herdsmen were largely amicable and cemented by intermarriage, in which the prestige symbolized by Dinka cattle attracted Luo farmers only too happy to be incorporated into pastoral Dinka society.

The Luel were the indigenous inhabitants who had settled some time about the eighth century in southern Sudan, where they are remembered for building mysterious mounds. They were a martial people who momentarily stalled the advance of the Dinka across the Bahr al-Ghazal in the seventeenth century. The Dinka ultimately forced the Luel to flee before them as far as the Bahr al-Arab, known to the Dinka as the Kiir, where the survivors were integrated into the multiplicity of non-Dinka societies living in the western Bahr al-Ghazal; those who remained behind were either absorbed by the Dinka or lived in tiny discrete enclaves until well into the twentieth century. Having completed their migrations, the Dinka settled into southern Sudan in three confederacies – Padang Dinka, Bor Dinka, and Bahr al-Ghazal Dinka – with twenty-six major sub-groups.

The other great Nilotic group that dominated the *toic* plains east and west of the Sudd were the Nuer (in their own language the *naath*). Although many Nuer today insist they were offshoots from the Dinka, the more convincing evidence indicates they were originally part of the Luo Diaspora who made their way into southern Kordofan long before the coming of the Dinka. Their oral traditions claim they left an arid, southern Kordofan around 1700 to settle in their present well-watered grassland (*kwer-kong*) east and west of the Sudd, where they have warred with the surrounding Dinka over cattle, pasture, and women for the past 300 years. After the Baqqara arrived in southern Darfur and Kordofan early in the eighteenth century their subsequent raids drove the Bul Nuer on the Baqqara border eastward around 1750, precipitating a domino effect by driving other Nuer groups before them. By the mid-nineteenth century the Nuer had hewn a 100-mile wide swath from the Sudd to the Ethiopian escarpment, absorbing and killing Dinka, capturing their cattle and women, and expanding

Nuerland fourfold, leaving the Dinka divided to the north and south to nurse painful memories that remain to this day.

The most recent Africans to make their home in southern Sudan were the Azande (sing. Zande, also called Niam-Niam). They speak a language of the Adamawa branch of the larger Niger-Congo linguistic family to which the Bantu languages belong. Under the leadership of their Avungara aristocracy the feared and successful Azande warriors first crossed the Congo–Nile watershed into Sudan from the Mbomu river valley in the first half of the nineteenth century only to come into conflict with the Arab slave traders until Gbudwe (Yambio) established his kingdom, whose expansion brought him into an indecisive war with the Dinka. When he was killed by a punitive government patrol in 1905, his kingdom was divided under British supervision among his sons.

The enormous ethnic and linguistic diversity of Sudan has directly contributed to the third theme in modern Sudan – cultural racism. Racism is a complex and controversial subject, but its basic definition remains the belief that some ethnicities are superior or inferior to others. The deep-rooted racism in Sudan is more historical and cultural than based on color, and more individual and institutional than ideological. Throughout the millennia slavery in Sudan has been an historic and accepted institution justified by racial discrimination, which remains pervasive in contemporary Sudan through the use of the pejorative epithet *‘abd* (pl. *‘abid*), slave, for one having different cultural characteristics and either explicit or implied lower economic and social status.

Cultural racism has been less severe, the pretentious product of ethnic diversity in which the legitimacy of one group is defined at the expense of those with different cultural and linguistic characteristics. Thus, the people of the riverine Sudan, *awlad al-bahr* (people of the river), have long demonstrated their scorn for those ethnicities from the west, *awlad al-gharib* (people of the west), whom they regard as ill-bred, uncultured rustics. This has resulted in conspicuous political racism in which just three ethnic groups – Ja‘aliyyin, Shayqiyya, and Danaqla (the *awlad al-bahr*) – have monopolized virtually all positions in government, from cabinet ministers to the most junior civil servants, during the past fifty years of independent Sudan, and which has become one of the major obstacles to the search for a national identity.

A definition of what constitutes identity is as elusive as any interpretation of racism, but defining who is a Sudanese constitutes yet another ingredient in cultural racism. At the time of the Turco-Egyptian conquest an Arab Islamic identity had been widely adopted by the inhabitants of

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northern Sudan whose ingredients were the Arabic language, claims to Arab ancestry, and Islam. In the half-century of the Condominium (1898–1956) British officials introduced English and the Western notion of nationalism among the sons of the notable Arab families they were educating who, in turn, began the search for the Sudanese. Although the term “Sudani” had a pejorative connotation, the emerging Western-educated elite gave it a new meaning, a label of national identity defined as Arab and Islamic that made it narrow and exclusive and holding little or no appeal to one-third of the inhabitants of Sudan who were non-Muslim, non-Arab Africans. Moreover, the rest of the Arab world did not always share the elite’s belief that the Sudanese were authentic Arabs, while the elite themselves wrestled with the ambiguity that being Sudanese included Black Africans, with whom they did not wish to be confused, particularly when they were considered to be “Blacks” in Europe and North America. While most northern Sudanese would quietly acknowledge African ancestry, this fact paradoxically encouraged many of them to identify all the more fervently with their presumed Arab roots. Although this crisis of identity first emerged before the Second World War, after independence “Who are we Sudanese?” became a national debate among the intellectual elite that proved a principal motivation for the Islamist coup d’état of 30 June 1989 to establish a government committed to making all the Sudanese proper Arabs and fundamentalist (*salafist*) Muslims through a vigorous program of Arabization and Islamization.

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CHAPTER I

*The making of modern Sudan:
 the nineteenth century*

THE TURKIYA, 1821–1885

By 1820 Muhammad 'Ali, the Turkish Viceroy of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul, had established his uncontested, personal, and autonomous control of Egypt and was now free to conquer Sudan to acquire slave recruits for his army and gold for his treasury. His invading army, under the command of Muhammad 'Ali's third son, Isma'il Kamil Pasha, consisted of a mixed bag of some 4,000 Albanians, Turks, Maghribis from North Africa, and Egyptian Bedouins, and a detachment of artillery under an American from Massachusetts. The invaders represented the very ambiguities of alien rule they imposed on the Sudanese. The invasion was launched from Egypt by the ruler of Egypt, but that is the extent of the "Egyptian connection." Since medieval times Egypt had been governed by a Turkish-speaking, multi-racial elite. They owed only theoretical allegiance to the Ottoman sultan – as did the Sudanese throughout the sixty-four years of *al-Turkiya* rule in Sudan – and were simply called *al-Turk* (Turks), whatever their ethnic origins. Egyptian Arabs played little role in political or military affairs, their presence represented by religious figures, artisans, and conscripts in the army. They occupied the lower rungs of the clerical and financial administration, occasionally rising to be subordinate officials. Thus the language of government was Turkish heavily charged with Persian and Arabic words, but after the death of Muhammad 'Ali Arabic gradually replaced Turkish in official correspondence. By the mid-nineteenth century most of the correspondence with Sudan was in Arabic, and during the reign of the Egyptian Khedive Isma'il (1863–79) Arabic became the language of government, Turkish being restricted to correspondence with Istanbul, but the senior military officers continued to speak Turkish and Isma'il himself did not speak Arabic. Hence, neither "Ottoman" nor "Egyptian" can adequately describe the Turkiya, and the best appellation that modern scholarship has devised is the awkward, almost whimsical, *Turco-Egyptian*.