

IDENTITY AND GENEALOGY THE CASE OF THE NILOTIC SUDAN

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One of the most momentous developments in African history is the gradual process through which the northern and central zones of the present-day Sudan and Chad were transformed from being an integral part of Sub-Saharan Africa into becoming an integral part of the Arab world, if only in a cultural sense. The result is that the Sudan (and partly Chad) is thought and spoken of as an ‘Arab country’ both on a popular level and in political and journalistic discourse¹. To be sure, this does not imply that the Sudan should no more be regarded as part of Sub-Saharan Africa, but the fact of a double identity – African and Arab at the same time – is far too manifest to be denied. The process that led to this situation is noteworthy for more than one reason. On the one hand, the transformation has taken place within a remarkably short period, a matter of a few centuries (since, apart from a few isolated places, Arabisation only began in the late 15th century); and on the other hand, it is all too obvious that much more was involved than simple ethnic intermarriage. The somatic features and general appearance of present-day northern Sudanese ‘Arabs’ clearly show that Arab immigrants must have been just a tiny numerical minority in comparison to the autochthonous black African population². That being so, the origin of the

¹ Henceforward I am going to use the term Sudan in reference to the area of the Republic of Sudan, rather than in the sense of the mediaeval Arab geographers’ *Bilād as-Sūdān*, ‘the land of the Blacks’, which roughly corresponds to the whole Sahelian and Sudanese belts of Western, Central and Northeastern Africa. Of great importance to the history of the Sudan in the narrower sense, the process of Arabisation is largely irrelevant for the history of west and central Africa.

² As William C. Young notes in his anthropological study of the *Rašāyda* (relatively recent Arab immigrants to the eastern deserts of Sudan who look strikingly unlike the rest of the Sudanese population): “On the average, northern Sudanese resemble black Americans”. Later he specifies that “[t]he overwhelming majority of Sudanese citizens have African features”. See Young 2002:108. These observations are as true of Arabic-speaking Sudanese as of those speaking other languages.

present situation cannot be taken as a matter of course; such a fundamental change of culture – the wholesale adoption of an Arab identity – by a population that meanwhile remained the same in its basic ethnic features calls for some explanation that goes beyond the usual dry statement that intermixing and intermarriage with the Arab immigrants has resulted in assimilation and a change of cultural orientation. Why so? And, to begin with, how was it possible given the negligible numerical strength that the Arab immigrants represented vis-à-vis the original African population?³

Parochial though the issue may appear to be, it is not so, since the assimilating potential of Arab culture has proven itself remarkably vigorous in quite a few other regions and other historical periods as well. What to make of this vigour then? What are the factors that contribute to the attraction and the adaptability of Arab culture in so many different societies? This is the issue that I will seek to address, using the case of the Sudan to find certain social and historical factors that may be relevant to other cases of local populations adopting the Arabic language, Arab culture, and an Arab identity. I remind the reader of such historical examples of the assimilating force of Arab culture and ethnicity as the Arabisation of the mediaeval *Nabaṭ* (Semitic but not Arabic-speaking) population of the Fertile Crescent after the Arab conquests, the Egyptian population in the same centuries, the Berbers of North Africa and the Sahara from the 11th or 12th centuries onwards, and so on. The process of ‘becoming Arab’ – that is to say the development of an Arab identity – is not complete even today in several regions, including the Sudan.

It is precisely in such regions that one can observe, as in a laboratory, many of the factors that shaped the assimilation process. Apart from its own intrinsic interest, the case of the Sudan can thus serve as a particularly appropriate illustration of the abandonment and disappearance of older ethnic identities and the adoption of a new one. In a significant part of the area one can only observe the end result of the process; however, there remain regions that offer striking contemporary examples of the process of Arabisation while it is taking

³ In his book on Sudanese Islam, Trimmingham estimates the proportion of the Arabic-speaking immigrants within the whole Sudanese population at a maximum of 5 to 10 percent – and this at the peak of the Arab immigration into the Sudan. He adds that Arabic / Semitic somatic features account for one to two percent, at most, of the physical appearance of the Sudanese population. The great Arabic-speaking *Ġʿaliyyīn* subtribes of Kordofān province (e.g. the *Ġawābra*, *Bidayriyya*, *Ġamūʿiyya*, *Ġimīʿ*, *Ġawāmʿa*, *Dawālīb*, *Šuwayḥāt*, *Ġōdiyāt*, etc.) are distinctly unlike Arabs in their appearance. While the cattle-raising Arab nomads of Kordofān, Dārfūr and Chad (*baggāra*) have heavily Negroid features, the supposedly ‘purer’ Arab camel nomads of the Saharan fringes (e.g. the *Kabābīs*, *Kawāhla*) are also more Hamitic than Semitic, not to speak of their black African ancestry. See Trimmingham 1949:17, 25, 30.

place. This has special importance because in matters of descent and origins the available historical sources tend to obfuscate, rather than clarify, the factors and processes involved. The reason is that the primary goal of the numerous Sudanese genealogies, Šūfī hagiographies, tribal chronicles, oral traditions of origin and similar internal sources is precisely to mask past processes of assimilation into Arab ethnicity and to emphasise – one might prefer to say forge – genuine Arab origins. Such documents therefore cannot be relied on as sources of factual information on the issue of Arabisation, even though they are definitely very interesting from other points of view and can in fact prove helpful, if handled with sufficient caution, for our present discussion as well. The accounts of most outsiders – such as Arab historians and geographers and European travellers and explorers – are also problematic in that they tend to repeat without criticism all kinds of old and often fictitious information, accept local informants' claims without further investigation, and record conditions at a given historical moment without providing data on the processes of change taking place. Again, taking these problems into consideration one can of course cautiously utilise such sources as well. Be that as it may, the most reliable and helpful way of studying the phenomenon of a newly emerging Arab identity is to observe it where it is taking place *now*, before our eyes as it were, despite the possibility of false back-projections. Among the various regions in which such a phenomenon can be observed⁴ the most convenient one to observe is the Nuba Mountains area of southern Kordofān province: on the one hand, there is quite a number of sources that address the phenomenon of conversion and ethnic identity change in this place, and on the other hand this area offers the advantage of various phases of Arabisation coexisting almost literally side by side, running the whole range of possibilities from non-Muslim and non-Arab groups to Muslims with a full Arab identity, and all shades in between. This essay will, then, focus on the population of the Nuba Mountains, but the reader should keep in mind that the tendencies and processes described here are likely to parallel closely those that took place – in various historical periods, beginning in the late 16th century – in other areas of the Sudan and Chad.

The first thing to clarify is what one means by the term 'Arabisation' and the more general concept of 'ethnic identity change', both terms being almost unhelpfully general and vague. It seems to be beyond doubt that in most cases the emergence of a new ethnic identity is a sort of continuum instead of an abrupt change; in other words, 'non-Arab' tends to become 'Arab' gradually, whether the process requires several generations' time or just one generation. Various

⁴ E.g. Dārfūr, the hilly areas of the upper Blue Nile (*Dār Funḡ*), the eastern desert areas and Nubia, parts of Baḥr al-Ġazāl province in southern Sudan, etc.

typical phases within the process can be distinguished, among which only the first one appears to represent an abrupt, sudden cultural change, whereas each of the further phases can be reasonably conceived as a gradual process in itself. However, on further reflection one can appreciate that even the first step, religious conversion, typically involves more than a simple profession of a new faith and may thus be a quite lengthy sequence of partial cultural adaptation.

Total assimilation and identity change in the Sudan tends to proceed through the following stages:

1. Conversion to Islam

As elsewhere in the Muslim world, this does not presuppose Arabisation at all, as the cases of such profoundly Islamised ethnic groups as the Beġa, the Nubian groups (Barābra, Maḥas, Danāġla) and the non-Arab ethnicities of Dārfūr attest. However, it seems to be the first and most important step towards Arabisation – a necessary but not sufficient condition thereof. Conversion to Islam goes hand-in-hand with a number of other religious developments, such as the phenomena of Islamic popular religion (e.g. cults of holy men) and Šūfism, as well as the adoption of certain patterns of Islamic magic (e.g. holy ‘Qur’ānic water’, written charms, etc.).

2. Adoption of elements of Arab material culture

In the Sudanese context, this was not always and necessarily a one-way process: Arab immigrants would also often adopt superior elements of local material culture (architectural styles, cuisine, everyday objects, instruments and utensils, etc.).

3. Adoption of the Arabic language

It is important to note that this is a gradual process too. Arabic tends to be used in the beginning only as a lingua franca, to facilitate communication between different ethnic groups, then the use of local languages is increasingly restricted to the family home and finally discontinues there as well. Linguistic assimilation is closely linked to the next – fourth – factor; linguistic change may indeed require a parallel societal development along the lines described below.

4. Adoption of an Arab tribal structure

This transformation involves the dissolution or forceful destruction of traditional kinship structures and social relations as well as the collapse of previous local states. The result is either the formation of totally new tribal groupings (which will typically have an Arab identity) or attachment to, or merger into, the

newly arrived, numerically small but politically dominant Arab tribes (through assimilation, patron-client relations, slavery, intermarriage, etc.).

5. *Manufacture of genealogical documents and Arab family pedigrees* through various conventional methods of genealogical forgery. In many instances this phase may be conceptualised as the ‘scholarly’ substantiation of the newly adopted identity, an after-the-fact rationalisation (or obfuscation) of the completed process of assimilation by means of a typically Arabic cultural discourse, that of *‘ilm al-ansāb* (the knowledge/discipline of genealogies). However, it is important to note that the stage of genealogical fabrications and forgeries would often precede, rather than follow, some of the previous steps. A group would not need to be Arabic-speaking to claim Arab genealogies, as countless examples from Africa and elsewhere attest. Pertinent cases from Sub-Saharan Africa include the Swahili of East Africa, as well as Danāgla and Maḥas Nubians of the Nile valley around and south of the Egypt-Sudan border. Specifically within the Nuba Mountains, however, the forging of Arab genealogies does seem to take place as the final step in assimilation into an Arab ethnic identity.

The extensive ranges and isolated peaks of the Nuba Mountains are located in the southernmost part of Kordofān Province, due south of the provincial capital al-Ubayyīd (El Obeid). These mountains rise sharply from the savannah plains of Kordofān and form a formidable natural redoubt of high ranges and boulder-strewn hilly areas. Receiving somewhat more abundant precipitation than the lightly wooded savannah lands of the plains, they have a marginally lush vegetation. The plains have for centuries been dominated by Arabic-speaking tribes of cattle nomads whose migrations are determined by the seasons (more precisely, a more or less predictable succession of rainy and dry seasons). These tribes are collectively known as the *baggāra*, a term derived from the dialectal Arabic *bagar*, ‘cattle’. The *baggāra* occupy the whole wet savannah zone from northeastern Nigeria to the Nile, with the most important – because most numerous – *baggāra* tribes of the Nuba Mountains region being the *Missīriyya*, the *Ḥumr* (around al-Muglad), the *Kināna*, the *Ḥawāzma* (around the eastern mountain ranges), the *Awlād Ḥimayd* (in the southeast), and so on. These nomadic tribes are Arabic-speaking but their physical appearance is as a rule practically identical to that of the Nuba population of the hills and mountains. The term Nuba (Arabic *Nūba*, an ethnic appellation also applied to the Nubians of the Nile valley) is a collective label describing a population of extremely varied origins⁵. Every Nuba group (that is to say the inhabitants of every hill or even

⁵ Sudanese Arabs use the term *Nūba* in reference to the Muslim Nubians living around Aswān (Egypt) and south of the border, while Egyptians often refer to this Nubian-speaking population

a smaller area within a mountain range) tends to speak its own language. The languages of the Nuba have been classified as falling in three larger language families: 1. Hill Nubian (these being languages related to the dialects of the Nilotic Nubians); 2. Sudanic Languages; and 3. Prefix Languages (these being languages that show marked grammatical similarities with the Bantu languages and which are sometimes described as Bantoid)⁶. This situation of extreme linguistic diversity offers a clue as to the varied origins of the individual Nuba groups; many of these ethnicities were originally immigrants from afar to their present land, and having settled there, they have preserved their distinct ethnic identities, traditions of origin and languages⁷. The mountain people known collectively as the Nuba are thus an amalgam of over fifty small different ethnic groups whose cultures are extremely diverse despite the presence of shared cultural features. Even the physical appearance of neighbouring yet unrelated Nuba communities may differ considerably. An example is the two strikingly dissimilar subgroups comprising the population of the Masākīn mountain range, the names of which give a clear indication of the obvious physical difference between them: *Masākīn Guṣār* ('Short Poor Men') and *Masākīn Ṭuwāl* ('Tall

as *Barābra*. The population that these umbrella terms denote include such groups as the Maḥas, Danāgla, Kenūz, Sukkōt, etc. Arabic-speaking Sudanese often use such general terms to refer to a variety of non-Arab ethnicities; for instance, small Muslim ethnic groups of the Gezira and southern Blue Nile region would often be called *Hamaḡ*, while non-Arabic languages of the Sudan are commonly referred to as *raṭāna*, 'unintelligible talk, gibberish'.

⁶ This division is based on Meinhof's classification. Following are some examples of each linguistic group (corresponding to Meinhof's system but taking note of some corrections proposed by Stevenson): 1. Hill Nubian: Dair, Dilling, Dulman, Garko, Ġulfān, Kaderu, Koldāgi; 2. Sudanese: Nyimang, Afitti, Dāgo, Temein, Katla; 3. Prefix: Kadugli, Kawālīb, Krongo, Miri, Elīri, Otoro (Kawārma), Kanderma, Tira, Tegali. For his part, Stevenson prefers to use a five-fold division of the languages of the Kordofān Nuba: 1. Bantoid noun class languages (using alliterating prefixes): Kawālīb, Heiban, Šwai, Moro, Laro, Tira, Fungor, Otoro, Talodī, Masākīn, Elīri, Lafofa, Tegali, Tumale, Moreb, Rašād, Kaḡākḡa, Tagoi; 2. non-Bantoid noun class languages: Tullishi, Keiga, Kanga, Miri, Kadugli, Kacha, Tumma, Krongo, Tumtum, Kamdang; 3. classless (Sudanese) languages: Nyimang, Afitti, Temein, Keiga-Jirru, Katla, Tima; 4. Dāgo languages (spoken by Muslim immigrants mainly originating in Dārḡūr): Dāgo, Šatt (Arabic 'scatterings'), Liguri; 5. Nubian: Dair, Kaderu, Ġulfān, Ḥuḡayrāt (Arabic 'small hills'), Dilling, Karko, Wali. As can be observed from the list, names of languages are typically derived from those of hills and mountains, and are not infrequently Arabic words. See Stevenson 1956-7:78, 97-114.

⁷ For example, the Dāgo people arrived here from the west, more specifically from Dār Sila and southern Dārḡūr, while the Dāgo subgroup called Šatt came from the region of Malakal on the Nile. The original homeland of the Nyimang is northern Kordofān, that of the Dilling is Ġōdiyāt (Ġabal al-ʿAyn), while the Kaderu group traces its descent back to the territory of the Funḡ Empire (near the confluence of the White and Blue Nile to the east). There is evidence showing that the Tira and the Moro had always lived in southern Kordofān near their present land, but they used to inhabit the plains in lieu of the mountains. See Nadel 1947:1, 5-6.

Poor Men')⁸. Today it is a widely accepted view that the Nuba largely represent remnants of the unassimilated autochthonous population of Kordofān⁹ who, after the Arab nomadic immigration into the region, took refuge in the relative safety of the mountains and, driven by their all-too-reasonable fear of the warlike nomads, built their new settlements in the most inaccessible parts of the area. This means that the rest of Kordofān province is inhabited by people who are closely related to these Nuba refugees but who converted to Islam long ago and most of whom exchanged their original languages for Arabic and their original tribal background for an Arab tribal identity. In the greater part of Kordofān this process took place during the 16th and 17th centuries but in a few isolated mountain ranges of northern Kordofān (e.g. Ġabal Ḥarāza, Ġabal Katūl, Ġabal Abū Ḥadīd, Ġabal Umm Durrāg, Ġabal Kāga) the conversion of the Nuba population to Islam and the development of an Arab identity took longer and was not complete before the end of the 18th century¹⁰. (Incidentally, here the impact of the Arabised Nubians of the *Danāgla* ethnic group, immigrants from Dongola town on the Nile, was more decisive than that of genuine nomadic Arabs.) Today Arab identity is omnipresent in those regions and the only 'authentic' autochthonous groups of Kordofān to preserve their original culture to a large degree live in the Nuba Mountains of southern Kordofān. The endurance of indigenous cultures in these remote mountain ranges of all places is hardly surprising, since it is precisely the remoteness and inaccessibility of the place that made these refugee communities to choose it as their homeland, and their main motive was the desire to avoid social dislocation, Arabisation (and possibly enslavement too)¹¹.

⁸ See Nadel 1947:267.

⁹ The ancestors of the Muslim 'black' (read non-Arabic-speaking) indigenous population of Dārūr were also a heterogeneous collection of peoples similar to the Nuba. Mediaeval Arab authors referred to all these autochthonous peoples by various general ethnic labels instead of precise ethnic names. Mediaeval geographers would use the term *Tukna* in speaking of the savannah peoples of the Sudan who went naked (as the Nuba did up to relatively recent times). In addition to *Nūba*, one also occasionally finds the (somewhat pejorative) appellations 'Anaḡ and Hamaḡ in reference to the autochthonous populations. See for instance Yāqūt, *Buldān* IV, 820; Seligman and Seligman 1932:366, 448.

¹⁰ These people are called the Dawālīb Nuba; see Trimmingham 1949:245; Seligman and Seligman 1932:366.

¹¹ There are no perfectly reliable statistics on the number of the Nuba at present owing to the catastrophic impact of civil war in the Sudan, as well as the effects of outmigration and ethnic identity change. While the rate of the natural increase of the population, as in much of Africa, is high among both Nuba and Arabs, intermarriage with Arabs and other Sudanese Muslims and assimilation must have reduced the ratio of Nuba. In the forties and fifties of the twentieth century the number of 'pure' Nuba was estimated varyingly at 300,000 (Stevenson 1956-7:77; Nadel 1947:1) and 250,000 (Murdoch 1959:164).

The Nuba Mountains are an integral part of northern Sudan in spite of the continuing existence of small pockets of animists (and since the colonial period a small number of Christians too) among the mountain population, as the Muslim population of the plains – composed of Arabic-speaking *baggāra* nomads, Muslim Nuba and Muslim immigrants from West Africa known as Fellāta – at least equals that of the mountains, itself divided between a growing Muslim majority and a non-Muslim minority. In the towns of the region, such as Dilling, Talodi, Kadugli and Rašād, the overwhelming majority is Muslim and speaks Arabic either as a mother-tongue or as a convenient second language.

As noted above, virtually all gradations between indigenous identities and Arab identity can be found in the Nuba Mountains region, not only as differences between one community and the next but also within communities. There are certain groups of mountain Nuba who have traversed all the five stages described above and have now come to sport elaborate family and lineage pedigrees (*šağarat nasab*) in Arabic and on that basis claim an Arab identity and divide themselves into tribes and lineages with Arabic names. At the other extreme, there are hills only superficially influenced by Islam - let alone any claims of Arab identity – where Muslims are only a minority. And there are many communities somewhere between these two extremes, showing some but not all signs of cultural assimilation. The tendency is towards the adoption of Islam and perhaps Arab identity as well, although increasing ethnic consciousness and pride among the Nuba means that Islamisation no longer has to involve Arabisation too. In the following paragraphs various stages of Arabisation will be illustrated with concrete examples.

The political turmoil of the recent decades (which included civil war, incidents of ethnic cleansing, mass dislocation of Nuba and human rights abuses by both government troops and rebel groups) makes the present situation very hard to assess. The Nuba Mountains have been the scene of actual war as well as the focus of propaganda wars. The Sudanese governments have of course sought to paint a rosy picture and deny ethnic discrimination, and there is no reason to suppose that sources hostile to the Sudanese fundamentalist government (especially American government sources and US-based Christian NGOs) are above distorting the facts as befits their interests. Since this essay is concerned with historical processes rather than contemporary politics, it seemed reasonable to base the analysis on sources that appeared prior to the 1970s. Thus most of the following observations can be safely considered to be valid for that period but are not necessarily applicable to the present situation. As a general rule, however, one may say that Arabisation and especially Islamisation are pervasive tendencies of growing importance in the whole Nuba Mountains region.

A perceptive observation by Sanderson describing ethnic boundaries in the Nuba Mountains since the arrival of Arabic-speaking immigrants centuries ago serves as a good starting-point for our discussion. She characterises that boundary in terms of a kind of vague and permeable contour instead of a proper delineation (Sanderson 1963:243). However, this contour seems to have been far more sharply defined in certain Nuba communities than in others, whereas in a number of Nuba groups it has all but disappeared, allowing for total assimilation. I will begin my survey with the communities least touched by the influence of Arabic culture and Islam, these communities having the least relevance for our present discussion.

Such staunchly conservative communities in the 1940s and 1950s included the people inhabiting the Krongo, Masākīn, Moro and Tulliši ranges. At the beginning of the 40s the inhabitants of these mountains still went naked or very scantily dressed, and intermarriage with either Arabs or other Nuba communities was rare and frowned upon. Arabs of the Missīriyya tribe and Nuba of the Tulliši range used to fight each other almost permanently, and this traditional hostility later continued in a different form: the herds of the Arab nomads would often trample over the fields of the Nuba, Arab farmers would occasionally use force to take the fertile lands of the Nuba and silence the Nubas' complaints with physical force including brutal beatings. It is safe to assume that such an atmosphere of exploitation and unmitigated hostility is barely conducive to ethnic mixing and assimilation. And yet, from the forties onwards many features of Arab culture have been increasingly fashionable among these Nuba communities, even the Tulliši. For instance, they would give their children Arabic names and eagerly buy Islamic amulets and charms sold by Arabic-speaking, Muslim itinerant peddlers. Arab influence was therefore palpable even in these remote and highly conservative Nuba communities (Stevenson 1966:212; Nadel 1947:322, 487).

In the period that constitutes the focus of this study the vast majority of Nuba communities belonged to an intermediate category between the aforementioned two extremes. Here some degree of cultural Arabisation – especially a partial adoption of the rudiments of the Islamic religion – had taken place, yet these communities did make a clear distinction between themselves and the Arabs, with the majority being still pagan and highly selective in their adoption of certain elements from the folklore and the material culture of the Arabs. Of the five stages of assimilation specified above, these Nuba communities were characterised by the first three at most, i.e. the initial phase of linguistic assimilation where part of the population – in particular the men – do speak a (perhaps simplified) version of Arabic as a *lingua franca* but they never do so within the community, and there remain many who do not speak any Arabic at all. (None-

theless, the use of Arabic personal names became fashionable and ever more widespread from the 40s onwards.) The Arabs' material culture influenced all these communities to some extent, although in several fields – for instance the architecture of their houses and household objects – the Nuba were quite aware of the superiority of their own material culture and accordingly unwilling to adopt the far inferior techniques of the *baggāra* Arabs. Conversely, ironworking techniques being rudimentary among the Nuba, Arab blacksmiths often settled in Nuba communities and brought their more developed technology with them. Likewise weaving and the production of textiles were primitive among the Nuba, which made them borrow these products and the techniques associated with them from the neighbouring Dāḡo, a people having a higher level of proficiency in this field. The twentieth century saw the rapid spread of the custom of wearing clothes in the Nuba Mountains; thus for instance the Dilling and Kaderu groups – people of both sexes – went dressed in the usual north Sudanese Arab style by the 1940s, and it was only at the religious rites of the old pagan religion that women would revert to the traditional garb, or more precisely the lack of one. The influence of the Islamic religion (stage one) was considerable in all Nuba settlements belonging to this category: even though converts to Islam were still a minority¹², Muslim beliefs and legends, and especially Islamic magic and amulets, were a daily presence in the lives of the Nuba. A particularly obvious sign of the impact of Islam was the abandonment by many Nuba communities (e.g. the Dilling, Krongo and Tira groups) of their pig herds and the consumption of pork, despite its previous importance in the diet of the Nuba. This development was facilitated by the circumstance that various dietary taboos were common in Nuba cultures, and therefore the imported Islamic prohibition was easily 'translated' into concepts familiar to the Nuba and absorbed into local culture. On the other hand, attachment of local lineages to Arab tribes – let alone the adoption of a new, Arab-style tribal structure – was rare, as was intermarriage with Arabs¹³. Genealogical fabrications along the lines common among the Arabised population were virtually unknown in these communities¹⁴.

The communities that had advanced farthest along the path of Arabisation included, first and foremost, Tegali (Arabic: Taqālī), as well as Rašād, Kamdang, Šeybun, Miri, Elīri, Tira Mande, Koldāḡi and Abū Hāšim, and the Dāḡo ethnic group. To the same category tend to belong the inhabitants of villages built at

¹² The first converts were typically men who had temporarily left their local community and later returned: soldiers, members of the colonial police force, former slaves, servants, etc.

¹³ This despite the usually cordial relationship between the Arab nomads and the Nuba population of the more northerly mountain ranges such as Dilling, Kaderu and Nyimang.

¹⁴ For a summary of cultural and social changes in this *milieu* see Nadel 1947:60, 70, 483–485.

the foothills of the mountains and populated by former slaves; these people usually identify as Arabs and consider themselves members of the particular Arab tribes whose slaves their forbears used to be. The vast majority of these Nuba communities are Muslim; many elements of Arab material culture are a natural part of their daily life; and the Arabic language is used on a daily basis among them, with the use of indigenous Nuba languages continuing to some extent but gradually losing ground. The Nuba people who belong to these communities maintain regular contacts with the Arabic-speaking *baggāra*, intermarriage between the two categories has a long history, and in certain groups even fabricated Arab genealogies, designed to emphasise Arab descent and membership of particular Arab tribes, have appeared to complete the long process of assimilation. The most important such group of Muslim and gradually Arabising Nuba is the Tegali. Continuing to exist since about the 17th century up to colonisation, the Islamic state of Tegali was probably the most powerful nucleus of Islamisation and Arabic cultural influences within the Nuba Mountains. As a result of that history, the population of Tegali is often spoken of as not being Nuba in the proper sense, although it is evident that they were originally a typical Nuba group speaking a typical representative of the category of prefix languages. (However, the widespread use of the Arabic language has now altered that linguistic situation.) Two short passages that follow illustrate the process of Arabisation among the Tegali Nuba; the first one is from the 1940s and the second from the late 60s:

“In some of the eastern hills, Tagalle [i.e. Tegali] for example, the people have been Mohammadan for a generation or two, they wear clothes, they speak a god deal of Arabic and some of them pretend to Arab pedigrees, they have given up keeping pigs, they talk with contempt of the ‘Naked Nuba’. Such Mohammadan culture as they have adopted, circumcision and wedding rites, the practice of infibulation and so forth, comes from the riverain tribes or from the Kināna and Kawāhla settled in ther midst, not, curious as it may seem, from the Baggāra tribes with whom they have been in much longer contact. The Arab tribes accept them as Mohammadans and brothers while smiling at their pretensions, and I have heard a Kaḥli at Kollogi describe the inhabitants of a neighbouring hill as ‘Nūba who have become Kawāhla’. In reality, these eastern Nūba are beginning the same metamorphosis which most of our Arabs’ African ancestors began a few centuries ago, and the change, which is not complete in the latter case yet, has not gone very far with the Nūba”¹⁵.

¹⁵ The words of J. W. Crowfoot cited in Trimmingham 1949:83.

“Today the people of Tegali do not like to think of themselves as ‘Nuba’ – ‘we are Tegali’ they say; their nearest neighbours, the Koalib [i.e. Kawālīb], are ‘Nuba’ and different” (Stevenson 1966:215).

Similar to the case of Tegali, the Nuba community of Tira Mande is another good example of the changes brought about by cultural Arabisation, even though the process has not advanced as far here as in Tegali. Nevertheless, here too the local population has long ceased to keep pigs, speak good Arabic, believe in one single God whom they customarily call Allāh, have borrowed Arab funerary rites and the custom of male and female circumcision¹⁶. On the other hand, the old kinship system with its clan-specific dietary taboos and similar features was still intact in the 1950s (Nadel 1947:196-7).

The Nuba community of Šeybun illustrates the process of the gradual displacement of the Nuba tribal system by a new one based on Arab tribes, a development that goes parallel with intermarriage with outsiders settling here. A group of Nubian (*Danāgla*) traders settled in Šeybun in the eighteenth century to exploit the gold mines of nearby Tira. Intermarriage between the Nubians and the local Nuba inhabitants has given rise to the ethnic group called *Šawābna* (people of Šeybun), which in its turn has exercised an influence over the Nuba population of several other mountain ranges as well (Stevenson 1966:210-211). Remarkable is the typically Arabic form of the new ethnic name, *Šawābna* – derived from the toponym Šeybun – that may well provide the basis of later genealogical forgeries trying to trace the name back to some ancestor figure. Such a development would certainly not be unique in the Sudan, witness the numerous Arabic-sounding ethnic labels derived from local toponyms, such as *Danāgla* (in Dongola and elsewhere) and *Dawālīb* in northern Kordofān – this last ethnic appellation already having an Arabic genealogy-based folk etymology.

The above examples may well be seen as representing the last stage of Arabisation, yet this view would lose sight of an even more advanced stage of such assimilation that can be observed within the area of the Nuba Mountains. I am referring to the *baggāra* Arab nomads and the Arabic-speaking peasant population of southern (and indeed northern) Kordofān, who closely resemble the Nuba in everything but their language and culture, and whom it is justified to regard largely as Arabised descendants of peoples similar to the present-day

¹⁶ The latter is referred to in Arabic as *ṭahāra firʿawniyya* (‘pharaonic circumcision’), and as the very name suggests, the custom is likely to be of Hamitic origin. Islamic law disapproves of the more drastic version customary in the Sudan, yet despite this fact it is a widely held misconception (both in the Sudan and in Europe) that the custom is an Islamic tradition. Accordingly, locally it is often as a result of conversion to Islam that the custom is adopted by indigenous communities.

Nuba. Of course, these Arabic-speaking tribes, whether nomadic or sedentary, fully display all the five elements of assimilation in their culture: they are Muslim, have a material culture similar to that of other Arabic speakers (especially of the Nilotic Sudan), speak Arabic, are divided into tribes and lineages having Arabic names, and pride themselves on having intricate genealogies showing their putative Arab descent. Yet, despite all those signs of Arab identity, there are *baggāra* groups that can be said to be of practically pure Nuba stock, such as the *Awlād Ḥimayd* and *Ḥawāzma baggāra* nomads and the ‘Arab’ farmers inhabiting the foothills of many mountain ranges. It is surely these groups that represent the final stage of the assimilation process.

This takes us back to the initial question raised at the beginning of this essay: what forces and factors cause a group of peoples heterogeneous in origin but equally deeply conservative and tradition-bound to abandon, if gradually, constituent elements of their original identity and become part of a new people and a new culture? It is obvious that a combination of various factors must have been at play. In the following paragraphs I will survey a number of such factors. Here the order of the items on the list is quite haphazard and could well be arranged otherwise, as there is no way of determining which factor might have been stronger and more important than the others. Nor should one lose sight of the likelihood of several factors coexisting and interacting at the same time, mutually reinforcing one another’s influence. The list is certainly not complete; there must be further factors that affected the course of Arabisation in the Nuba Mountains area. At any rate, here are some factors that were probably particularly decisive:

*1. The impact of Muslim holy men and teachers*¹⁷

This factor was of course mainly responsible for the spread of Islam rather than for ethnic changes, but the peculiarities of Sudanese history – some of which I have already mentioned – meant that Islamisation was often accompanied by a subsequent process of Arabisation as well (see point 2 above). The conversion of the Sudanese population was undoubtedly the work of Muslim religious teachers and member of the *Ṣūfī elite*, instead of the nomadic Arab tribes, the

¹⁷ The Sudanese dialectal noun designating the local, village-level religious intelligentsia – literate men with some level of education in the religious disciplines – is *fakī* (from classical Arabic *faqīh*, ‘jurisprudent’). Other words sometimes used in Sudan in the same sense were *alfa* (also from classical Arabic *al-faqīh*; a noun more common in the languages of the western savannah zone like Songhay and Yoruba), *sātī* (a Nubian word) and *qūnī* (in Dārūr). Such rural Muslim intellectuals were, as a rule, members of one of the *Ṣūfī* brotherhoods – unsurprisingly given the decisive role of the *Ṣūfī* groups in spreading Islam throughout the Sudan.

latter being far more interested in slave-raiding than in proselytising, which means that they in fact had a vested interest in the continuing presence of non-Muslim populations that would serve as reservoirs of slaves (Holt 1961:28). This being so, it is hardly surprising that the majority of ‘holy men’ were not nomadic Arabs but members of the Nubian – and mostly non-Arabic-speaking – tribes of the Nile valley, such as the Maḥas, Sawārda, Awlād Ġābir, °Abābsa, and so on. In later periods, many holy men were also recruited from among the local ethnic groups of Kordofān and the peoples living to the west of Kordofān (Dārfūrians and Fellāta)¹⁸. In the Tira Mande Mountain, for instance, it was Nuba emigrants who later returned as educated, literate Muslims that began the work of converting the local population to Islam¹⁹. Muslim religious teachers contributed to the progress of Islamisation mainly through the founding of rural Qur’ānic schools (known as *masīd* or *halwa* in Sudanese Arabic), but with the passing of time they frequently drew to their settlements a huge *clientèle* composed of slaves, escaped slaves, students, individuals and groups in search of patrons and protection, etc.), and thus such local holy men often ended up being the founders of sizeable village settlements as well as quasi-tribes or quasi-lineages. The descendants of a respectable *fakīr*’s students, slaves and clients would later on routinely claim descent from the holy man himself, and in a cultural sense they were not altogether wrong. The founding of Qur’ānic schools began in a relatively late period in the Nuba Mountains, but in the immediate vicinity of the mountains *halwa* schools had existed previously and may have occasionally been reached by converted Nuba men from the mountains. The first Islamic school of the Dilling range, called Qa’r al-Ḥaḡar, was founded at the end of the 19th century; the Nyimang range saw the founding of its first Qur’ānic school only in 1947; but the Islamised state of Tegali has had quite a number of such institutions for centuries (Stevenson 1966:221; aṭ-Ṭayyib 1991: 244. The British colonial administration sought to hinder the spread of Islamic

¹⁸ *Fellāta* (and *Takārna*, *Takārīr*) is the Sudanese dialectal word designating immigrants coming from the western part of the savannah zone, from countries to the west of Sudan and Chad (Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, and other countries, especially Nigeria and Niger). Having arrived as pilgrims on their way to or returning from Mecca, these communities chose to settle in the Sudan and became part of the local ethnic mosaic. The lingua franca of these groups is Hausa and increasingly Arabic, but some groups of pure Fulani extraction speak Fulfulde as well. The name *Takārīr* is derived from the word *Takrūr*, which was originally the name of an Islamised mediaeval state south of the Senegal River, and was later generalised to refer to the whole of Muslim West Africa.

¹⁹ Starting around the year 1891, when a local Nuba man who had been captured and taken to Umm Durmān during the wars of the Sudanese Mahdi returned to open his Qur’ānic school in Tira Mande. See Stevenson 1966:225.

religious education in the Nuba Mountains but met with no success. While interest in attending the Christian mission schools was very limited, there was a mass demand among the Nuba for the teaching of the Arabic language and the Islamic religion²⁰. To the Nuba Muslim ‘holy men’ were not an unfamiliar sight, since in many respects they resembled the Nuba’s own shamans, sorcerers and medicine-men (known as *kuṣūr* in many Nuba languages). Thus for many non-Muslim Nuba, a Muslim *fakī* was just a particularly powerful medicine-man; the more so as Muslim holy men were ready purveyors of (presumably ‘Islamic’) talismans, amulets, magic substances and ‘magic roots’ (*ḥirz*, *ḥiḡāb*, *tamīma*, *urūg as-siḥr*, *ugda*) among the Nuba. As an accompaniment to magic objects and substances, the Nuba would absorb many – though superficially understood – Muslim customs as well (Nadel 1947:485; Martini 1961: 124). Many of the celebrated holy men of the Sudan – such as Muḥammad Tāḡ ad-Dīn al-Baḡdādī al-Bahārī in the 16th century, Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna in the 16th century, and others – visited the Nuba Mountains area and spent some time there, especially in the state of Tegali (Stevenson 1966:210). However, the most famous Muslim ‘saint’ of the Nuba Mountains region was the Kordofānian Badawī wad Abū Ṣafiyya (ca. 1767-1848). He conducted his proselytising work around many of the mountain ranges, but the focus of his activity was Tegali. His famous schools he established in the vicinity of al-Minzafa (west of al-Ubayyid [El Obeid]) – that is to say outside the Nuba Mountains area – yet the majority of his students were Nuba converts to Islam, whom he later sent back to the mountains to spread the teachings of Islam in their homeland²¹. A comparably im-

²⁰ The British colonial administration decided in 1923 that areas with a non-Muslim majority population should be given Christian mission schools instead of Muslim schools, whilst areas with a mixture of Muslims and pagans should receive secular education with no Islamic content in the curriculum. Because of the irrepressible needs of the local population, the teaching of Arabic writing and language was allowed in 1935, but for obvious missionary purposes such instruction was entrusted to Coptic Christian teachers from Egypt instead of Muslims. The all-too-evident failure of the missionary project and especially its main component, Christian religious instruction, led the government to give up on this subject. In the 1940s, realising the futility of trying to curtail the influence of Islam, the government allowed the Nuba to choose for themselves the type of school they preferred to attend. After independence (1956) most mission schools closed their doors, and the teaching of the Islamic religion came to be an integral part of the curriculum, as in the rest of northern Sudan. See Sanderson 1963:236-245.

²¹ The full name of this teacher is Aḥmad al-Badawī b. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd aṣ-Ṣamad b. Badawī ar-Raqīq al-Ḥiḡāzī, while his popular nickname was Abū Ṣanab. Having studied for 16 years at Katrānḡ, a famous Islamic educational centre on the Blue Nile, he returned to Kordofān and started to tour the Nuba Mountains as a teacher. After he founded his school, he sent his younger brother Muḥammad Ṣaraf ad-Dīn to Tegali, where the latter settled on the Tāṣīn mountain range and married the daughter of the local Nuba ruler. See aṭ-Ṭayyib 1991:244.

portant role in Islamising the Nuba region was played by a Šūfī brotherhood of local (Kordofānian) origin called the Ismā‘īliyya. The brotherhood considered the conversion, through peaceful means, of the Nuba population to Islam to be its primary goal. The founder of the brotherhood, Ismā‘īl wad ‘Abdallāh, was already actively engaged in this endeavour (Abū Salīm 1412 / 1992:25).

2. *The high prestige of Arab ethnicity and culture*

This aspect is of course fast interwoven with the previous one, since conversion to Islam inevitably heightens the – already considerable – prestige of links to Arabia, the Arabic language, and Arab culture. Surely Islamic and Arab identity are two very different things, but they are more closely interlinked in the Sudan than they are in almost any other parts of the Muslim world. Here the exceptionally marked prestige of a special group of supposed ‘Arabs’ (although not necessarily Arabic speakers) must be mentioned briefly, namely the category of *ašrāf*, the real or (more often) putative descendants of the prophet Muḥammad, whose numbers are remarkably high in almost all Sudanese ethnic groups. The immensely high esteem in which these people have been held in the Sudan for centuries, and the attendant privileges, are in themselves sufficient to explain the frequency of claims of belonging to this prestigious category²². The prestige of being an Arab was further enhanced by the status of the immigrant Arab tribes as victorious conquerors; the *baggāra* tribes have always tended to be more aggressive, powerful and warlike than the local Nuba agriculturalists. And what Ibn Haldūn stated in the 14th century has a more general validity:

“[The defeated people] borrow all of the conqueror’s traits and become assimilated to him. This is by way of imitation, or it may be due – but God knows it best – to the [defeated people’s] perception that the conqueror owes his conquest not to his tribal solidarity or warlike nature but to his customs and traits. [...] Just observe any country [and see] how in most cases the clothes of the army and the ruler’s troops become widespread among the people, precisely because [the victorious troops] are in the dominant position. So much so that should a people living next to another people make the latter their vassals, [the defeated people] will be assimilated to

²² In the perilous period of the Arab invasion and population movements known in the Sudan as the age of *qīmān* (lit. ‘peoples’; 15th-16th c.), members of the *ašrāf* category would be spared the ravages of intertribal raiding, and their livestock and property would be returned to the owners in case it had been taken by error. For that reason the *ašrāf* would apply a special brand (resembling a big inverted Z letter and called *‘arġ*) to their beasts to warn all potential raiders. See aṭ-Ṭayyib 1991:111.

[the victorious people] to a large extent and imitate them ...” (Ibn Haldūn, *Muqaddima* II, 510-511).

As if wishing to give substance to Ibn Haldūn’s assertion, the Nuba indeed eagerly borrow a great number of aspects from the culture of the powerful *baggāra* tribes. In many Nuba groups Arab-style garments were regarded as prized possessions in the 1940s, and self-respecting Nuba hosts would offer their guests strong, heavily sugared tea *à l’arabe*. To be sure, the various Nuba groups would also borrow elements of one another’s culture, yet it was only Arab culture that *all* Nuba groups would generally deem as worthy of being emulated (Nadel 1947:81-82, 483; Martini 1961:124). This is a key development, indeed a turning-point: a defeated culture that brute force has subdued and reduced to a position of resistance has all but internalised a sense of being inferior. That this is a function of power relations and not of intrinsic cultural values and objective comparisons must be obvious. It would be hard to argue that the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the *baggāra* is in its entirety more advanced than that of the Nuba – suffice to compare the architecturally impressive housing compounds of the Nuba with the primitive shelters of the *baggāra*.

3. Linguistic diversity

This factor obviously helps spread the Arabic language among the indigenous population and thereby indirectly furthers Arabisation. I have already commented on the incredible linguistic variety to be found in the Nuba Mountains region. Practically every mountain range or hill have their own languages, sometimes even more, which means that a Nuba leaving his or her immediate social milieu will need to use a lingua franca, typically Arabic. In the towns of the Nuba region Arabic is the primary language. Owing to these circumstances bilingualism – in the sense of using Arabic as the lingua franca – has increasingly become the norm in the area of the Nuba Mountains. The situation is different from that observed in southern Sudan (now an independent state): whereas numerous Arabic-speaking tribes live in the plains of the Nuba Mountains and their Arabic dialect naturally serves as the common language of the region, southern Sudan has no substantial Arab population and has been more resistant to Arab influences, and thus an extremely simplified Arabic pidgin has been used there as a lingua franca instead of a genuine Arabic dialect (Abū Salīm 1412/1992:21). Not incidentally, the impact of linguistic diversity upon the process of Arabisation in the Sudan is observable in various historical periods and outside the Nuba Mountains as well; some authors propose that the *Funğ* ethnic group (the dominant ethnicity of the Sennār – or Funğ – state) was also a group of hetero-

geneous origins that came to use Arabic as a lingua franca, adopting it later as their mother tongue²³.

4. *Political turmoil and instability: political factors*

The history of southern Kordofān (and Kordofān in general) was anything but peaceful from the arrival of the nomadic Arab tribes. Political turmoil, wars and insecurity were all important factors that contributed to the advance of Arabisation in various ways; and in more recent times – especially from the time of colonisation – administrative measures also furthered this process, since the Nuba Mountains region continued to be, apart from brief intervals in the colonial period, treated as an integral part of Kordofān province²⁴. For the progress of Arabisation, the following three periods (as well as the postcolonial period, which will not detain us here) had particular importance:

a. The ‘age of peoples’ (*qīmān*)

This era (15th to 16th century) saw the immigration of groups of genuine Arab nomads into the central savannah zone of the Sudan. Moving westwards, the Arab nomads found good pasture for their livestock. Although relatively few in number in comparison with the autochthonous population, they were extremely warlike and aggressive, and waged continuous wars both against indigenous groups and among themselves and ended up totally disrupting the existing political structures and ethnic tableau. For instance, they drove the Nuba groups into the mountain ranges where they live today, and assimilated the communities that chose to remain on the plains²⁵. The *baggāra* Arabs, having by then adopted cattle herding instead of camels and merged into the conquered African population while keeping their Arabic language, pushed eastwards from Chad again in the 18th century and at the end of this migration they re-entered southern Kordofān (Cunnison 1954:50). Unsurprisingly, Sudanese popular memory remembers the age of the *qīmān* as a dark period. As the very word *qīmān* (a dialectal plural of classical Arabic *qawm*, ‘a group of people’, also ‘a raiding

²³ Seligman and Seligman 1932:415. The heterogeneous origins of the Funḡ included countless indigenous African ethnicities of the southern Gezira and Blue Nile regions but did not include Arabs. An implicit recognition of such origins is the usual Sudanese reference to the Sennār state: *as-Saltāna az-Zarqā*’ (lit. ‘Blue Sultanate’, ‘blue’ being the Sudanese equivalent of ‘very dark black’, ‘Negro’).

²⁴ Even though the Nuba Mountains region was declared a separate province in 1914, it was reintegrated with Kordofān Province in 1929; see Sanderson 1963:238.

²⁵ Trimingham 1949:244. On the situation prior to these developments and on the history of Arab immigration into the Sudan, see Hasan 1967.

party') suggests, this was an age of ethnic displacement, re-arrangements and migration on a vast scale in the savannah zone.

b. The era of the Mahdi Uprising (*al-Mahdiyya*)

The history of the Mahdi's movement has many points of connection with the Nuba Mountains. The mountainous region was often the scene of battles and skirmishes, and it is to be noted that the Nuba, insofar as they were willingly involved in any of these wars, tended to side with the Mahdi's followers against the foreign forces²⁶. For instance, the so-called *Ġihādiyya* troops of the Egyptian government, composed in the main of Nuba slaves, deserted to the side of the Mahdi and would thereupon maintain their loyalty to him. However, after the death of the Mahdi Muḥammad Aḥmad the Nuba population was exposed to a lot of suffering at the hands of the troops of the Mahdi's successor the caliph ʿAbdallāh at-Taʿāyiṣī, and the *baggāra* tribes of the region. Slave-raiding was resumed in full force, instability became chronic, and no Nuba settlement could feel secure from attack. The population of whole villages, indeed whole mountains, were carried away to the capital Umm Durmān (Omdurman), and not all of these displaced people would return to their homeland after the final defeat of the Mahdist forces. For instance, the greater part of the inhabitants of Kaderu, Ġulfān, Debri and Miri could only return to their mountains after 1898 (Trimingham 1949:245; Stevenson 1966:212); it is probably not coincidental that the population of these ranges are among the most Islamised and Arabised Nuba communities. This forced displacement was referred to by the Mahdists as *hiġra*, 'emigration' – a word originally used in reference to the Prophet's emigration from pagan Mecca to Medina – and it affected, in addition to the Nuba, most ethnic groups of the western provinces Kordofān and Dārfūr, whether Arabic-speaking or otherwise. As a result, Umm Durmān in this period came to be a veritable melting-pot of Sudanese ethnicities. So many people were carried

²⁶ Having defeated the Egyptian government's troops in Abbā island, the Mahdi sought refuge in the Nuba Mountains from the government's reprisals, a move suggested to him by the ruler of Tegali, Ādam Umm Dabālō. The Mahdists first settled near az-Zamzamiyya, then moved on to a formidable mountain redoubt known as Baṭn Ummak ('Your Mother's Belly') in reference to the safety it offered, of which the local population habitually availed themselves whenever the need arose. The mountain-dwelling Nuba helped the Mahdi by warning him of the movements of his enemies by fires ignited on the mountain peaks. During the rainy season the Mahdi moved again, this time to the an-Nagāra range, and thereafter they kept moving to other Nuba-populated mountains such as Gadīr, Karan, Alodi and al-Ġarāda. Both *baggāra* Arabs and Nuba hillsfolk joined the Mahdi's followers in great numbers. In 1881 the Mahdi exchanged gifts with the Nuba chiefs and shamans of Gadīr Mountain, and promised to refrain from attacking the Nuba, a commitment he kept to his death but his successor the caliph ʿAbdallāh did not. See Šibīka 1964:242; Faris 1972:3.

away to Umm Durmān from one single southeastern Nuba village, Fungor, that a quarter of the capital is still called *Hillat Fungor* ('Settlement of Fungor') for that reason, albeit the Nuba living there have either returned home long ago or 'become Arabs' (Faris 1972:5).

c. The colonial period

As the economic interests of the colonial government were no more served by slave raiding or continuing local warfare, it suppressed these phenomena, and consequently the process of Arabisation would be fuelled by other factors. Of course the colonial administration was quite hostile to Islamic conversion and Arabisation, but soon came to realise that it had little influence over these processes; what is more, certain administrative decisions taken by the government even facilitated them. For instance, they tended to employ Muslim, Arabic-speaking clerks in the local administration, and to make governance easier, they would sometimes merge Arab-majority and Nuba-majority subdistricts into larger units. Other factors that under colonialism greatly facilitated ethnic mixing and assimilation included paid work, temporary agricultural labour migration and taxation. A good example of the unwitting support of the Arabisation of Nuba populations by the colonial government is the tendency of ascribing ever larger areas under the jurisdiction of the Tegali state, which – as noted above – had been strongly Islamised for centuries²⁷. After a number of largely unsuccessful attempts to force Christian mission education and Christianity upon the Nuba, the British government more or less abandoned these efforts and let the Arabic language and Islamic religious instruction progress in the Nuba Mountains region in their natural course (Sanderson 1963:239-45).

5. Slavery

Slavery and the slave trade tend to be factors facilitating ethnic and cultural mixing, and typically it is the culture of the slave-owners that will be in the dominant position. It is well-known that the traditional Anglo-Saxon (colour-based) patterns of racism are very rare in the Islamic world; and high-status Arab men in particular would frequently take concubines, and even wives, from among their female slaves. Slavery within the Sudan was a primary factor contributing to the rapid fusion of the few genuine Arab immigrant tribes into the local population on the one hand, and it was also instrumental in destroying many old

²⁷ Areas merged with the larger Tegali administrative unit included Balūla, Abū Girays and Umm Ṭalḥa in 1930, Tukam and Moreib in 1932, Turḡuk and Tagoi in 1933, Elīri in 1937 and Talodi in 1945. By 1947 virtually the whole eastern part of the Nuba Mountains region had been placed under the jurisdiction of the *makk* (king) of Tegali. See Kenrick 1948:144-50.

rural communities exposed to slave-raiding (like the plain-dwelling Nuba) on the other hand; both phenomena gave boost to the process of Arabisation. The Sudan was considered one of the most important sources of slaves in the eastern part of the Arab world, especially the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt²⁸. The Nuba Mountains in particular were the place of origin of a large part of Sudanese slaves, owing to the activity of the local *baggāra* tribes. Slave-raiders (called *nahhāḍa*) were active within the mountains region from the time of the rise of the Funḡ state; Nuba slaves converted to Islam played a prominent role within the armies of both the Funḡ rulers and the Egyptian ruler Muḥammad °Alī (Holt 1961:20-21; Šibīka 1964: 105. That most of the indigenous tribes of the Sudan were at first non-Muslim provided the Arabs with an excellent excuse for raiding them ruthlessly (Islamic law prohibiting the enslavement of Muslims), yet with the passage of time there remained fewer and fewer non-Muslim populations. By the late 19th century the only regions within northern Sudan that were still considered legitimate targets of slave-raiding were the Nuba Mountains (*Dār Nūba*), the southernmost reaches of *Dār Funḡ*, and Baḥr al-Ġazāl province. It is little surprise then that the attention of the slave traders increasingly focused on the theretofore inaccessible regions of southern Sudan (Upper Nile and Equatoria). In certain areas slave-raiding resulted in a wholesale collapse of traditional ethnic patterns and gave rise to Muslim and Arabic-speaking groups of slave ancestry with a heterogeneous tribal background and an Arab identity. Of such groups are composed the inhabitants of the foothills of many of the Nuba mountain ranges, whose mother tongue is Arabic and who are Muslim; the majority of the Nuba of the Elīri range represent this category²⁹. It is probably needless to point out that slaves returning to their homelands were almost without exception Muslim and tended to speak Arabic fairly well.

6. *Collective assimilation: patron-client relationships (walāʾ)*

This process has operated in the Sudan – and in the Nuba Mountains – in precisely the same way as it had in the Middle East directly after the great Arab conquests (Trimingham 1949:99). A collective patron-client relationship is a form of alliance between unequal partners, whereby a weaker tribe places itself collectively under the guardianship of a stronger one and will in time lose its

²⁸ For instance, the *Tihāma* (the coastal lowlands of western Arabia) encompassed a district called Nūba in the Middle Ages, a reference to the origin of the inhabitants as slaves from (or arriving through) Nubia. See Yāqūt, *Buldān* IV, 820. For more on the slaves exported from Nubia, see Hasan 1967.

²⁹ The latter consider themselves Arabs of the *Kawāḥla* tribe. A similar group is the *Farūt* of Baḥr al-Ġazāl, composed as it is of scattered fragments of local ethnicities displaced because of the slave trade. See Murdock 1959:412; Trimingham 1949:103.

own separate identity. Such an alliance can be entered into in various ways, but in all cases a kind of quasi-kinship emerges between the two groups³⁰. In the context of the Sudan after the Arab immigration the stronger party was virtually always an Arabic-speaking tribe, as the autochthonous communities, however more numerous, were simply no match for the aggressiveness and military might of the warlike Arab nomads. By concluding an alliance both sides stood to gain: the indigenous people gained the protection of a powerful, warlike tribe at the cost of losing their independence and former identity, whereas the Arab tribe gained considerable numerical strength. The reason the weaker party had to give up its identity is that the Arab nomads could conceive of no type of enduring solidarity between allied groups other than kinship relations (no matter how fictitious in character)³¹. The creation of patron-client relationships was often taken for granted in the Sudan: every tribe of Arab nomads gained possession of the area in which they pastured their flocks (their *dār*) and the indigenous population living within that area would thereupon be regarded as their clients (Šibīka 1964:82). The operation of patron-client relationships within the Sudanese context is described by Trimingham (1949:251) in the following manner:

“Islamization in the Eastern Sudan usually meant eventual absorption into the Arab tribal system. The broken-up groupings and the detribalized always join some ‘Arab’ tribe either as clients or actual members. Thus most of the sedentary tribes in the Jezīra, Kordofān, and Dārfūr, with little Arab blood, claim it. The process is natural since it offers protection. It can be seen in progress in the Nūba Mountains [...]”

As a more general rule, it has been observed that stateless tribal societies – such as that of the Arab Bedouin – tend to be characterised by a combination of conquest and assimilation instead of simply conquest and rule, the latter being more characteristic of expansionist states³².

³⁰ Pre-Islamic Arabs distinguished several forms of alliance between unrelated people, including *tabannī* (adoption, with the weaker party borrowing the full genealogical identity of the stronger one and even being entitled to inheriting), *ǧiwār* (lit. ‘neighbourhood’, meaning primarily a relationship based on protection), *walā’* (patron-client relations), *mu’āhāt* (taking someone as a brother, pseudo-brotherhood). See Conte 1987:127.

³¹ Robertson Smith identified two underlying principles governing all types of alliances, fusion and fragmentation of Arab tribes, namely 1. the notion that the only effective links between people can be kinship links (whether real or fictitious), and 2. the notion that the goal of social organisation is cooperation for defence or offence. Cited by Ashkenazi 1946-9:661.

³² Sahlins 1961:341, where the example of the south Sudanese Nuer people is mentioned. Among the Nuer captives taken from among enemy tribes – typically the Dinka – would usually be assimilated as members with full rights of the victorious Nuer clan. For more on this, see Evans-Pritchard 1968:154.

7. *Individual assimilation: mixed marriages*

Mixed marriages (between Muslim ‘Arabs’ and non-Muslim indigenous people) have been quite common in the Sudan since the beginning of Arab immigration, and they invariably resulted in assimilation into the Arab community. The main reason of this – apart from those already mentioned – was that such marriages were always concluded between an ‘Arab’ man and a non-Arab woman, with the opposite being quite unheard-of, and the patrilinear and patriarchal society that became typical after conversion to Islam was based on the dominance of men in politics as well as in family matters. Arab immigrants very smartly took advantage of the matrilinear social organisation formerly dominant among many Sudanese peoples, including the Nubians. Local rulers would often give their daughters in marriage to the chiefs of the warlike immigrant Bedouin tribes, and according to the indigenous matrilinear rules of inheritance and succession political power would be inherited by the (Muslim) children of such mixed marriages. However, from the next generation onwards, Islamic patrilinear rules of succession and inheritance would be applied in matters of political leadership. By this process Arabic-speaking dynasties of mixed origin rose to power in quite a few Sudanese states and ethnic groups shortly after the arrival of Arab immigrants³³. According to oral traditions, such a development took place in the Tegali kingdom of the Nuba Mountains, where an Arabic-speaking Nubian immigrant from the land of the *Rubātāb* tribe along the Nile married a daughter of the local ruler (*makk*), and the descendants of this couple – the Ğīlī dynasty – would reign thereafter (aṭ-Ṭayyib 1991:163). Mixed marriages were normally perceived on both sides as mutually advantageous. Albeit it is often emphasised that Arab tribes strongly favoured endogamy, preferably in the form of parallel cousin marriage, exogamy has always been rather common in practice – indeed even the most extreme form of exogamy (to borrow the apt phrase of Lévi-Strauss /1969:10/), interracial marriage. Furthermore, given the higher frequency of polygamy, divorce and remarriage among nomadic populations of the Sudan as compared to sedentary groups, the possibility of varying marriage alliances – including mixed marriages – is accordingly higher (Henin 1969:243, 247). As for the other side, indigenous Sudanese peoples have shown little opposition to the idea of marrying off their daughters to outsiders. Among most ethnic groups of the Nuba Mountains immigrants – both ‘Arabs’ and members of other Nuba groups – were usually received without hostility, and the cause of

³³ This is what happened among the Nubian-speaking ethnic group now called Kunūz, a name derived from that of an immigrant Arab ruler of the Mamlūk period, Kanz ad-Dawla. This man married into the old Nubian ruling dynasty, and his descendants would inherit the throne by the process described above. For more on this topic see Holt 1967:148; Trimmingham 1949:71-2.

the relative infrequency of mixed marriages was the isolation and inaccessibility of most Nuba communities rather than hostility. Up to the 1940s marriages between ‘Arabs’ and Nuba were not common, but the situation is likely to have changed considerably since then (Nadel 1947:29, 269, 395, 488-489).

8. *Strong tribal solidarity and unity among Arabs versus fragmentation of indigenous communities*

The Arabisation of the Sudan may also be understood in terms of a conflict between two different types of tribal organisation, in which the social structure represented by the Arab tribes has proven more powerful and resilient. The structure of Arab tribes can be characterised by the term *segmentary*, while the society of the Nuba and a host of other indigenous Sudanese ethnicities can be said to be *fragmentary* in contrast. The key to the success of the Arab nomads is their typical social organisation, which is typical of expanding, aggressive, ‘predatory’ tribal communities. It is usually called segmentary lineage organisation in the ethnographic literature. In this structure, every tribal unit is conceived as the descendants of a single male ancestor. When the number of the members of such a unit grows large enough, it tends to be divided into smaller segments, and these in turn will also be divided into yet smaller segments, and so on. Genealogical segments on the same level of segmentation may well have a hostile relationship with each other over any issue (usually rivalry over natural resources), but when any of the segments are attacked by an outside group – or when a segment plans to attack an outside group – all segments tend to unite and form a common front against all outsiders. In other words, despite all the internal rivalry and hostilities that normally exist between subgroups, any attack from outsiders will immediately set off tribal solidarity among all segments to the highest level. The more foreign (less related) the attacker, the higher the level of internal segmentation to which all tribal units will automatically unite. For example, if a conflict arises between two subtribes, all related clans and lineages will unite on both sides to fight the other bloc. If the aggression originates from outside the tribe altogether, all lineages and clans of the whole tribe will close ranks, regardless of any possible previous (or current) conflict within their tribe. A famous and very old Arabic dictum expresses this principle eloquently: “Me and my brother against my paternal cousin, me and my paternal cousin against a stranger (*anā wa-ahī ‘alā bni ‘ammī, anā wa-bnu ‘ammī ‘alā l-ġarīb*).” That being so, the deep segmentation of the tribe does not equal fragmentation and the disappearance (or indeed weakening) of solidarity within the tribe – and by the same token, within the subtribe, clan, lineage, family – because that solidarity immediately reappears when the larger unit is attacked by or plans an attack against outsiders. (The mediaeval Arab scholar Ibn Ḥaldūn used the

much-discussed term *‘aṣabiyya* in reference to this tribal solidarity.)³⁴ In the case of the Nuba Mountains, this meant that Arab nomads would easily form a common front against the Nuba villagers, despite their own internal divisions, which were many and frequent. Facing the segmentary tribal organisation of the Arabs were smaller or larger but always fragmented rural Nuba communities lacking any unifying principle comparable to the aforementioned system. It bears mention that a segmentary type of tribal organisation resembling that of the Arabs could be found among some other Sudanese peoples as well, the best-known case being the Nuer of southern Sudan, a people who were as successful in conquering and assimilating neighbouring ethnic groups within their sphere of influence as were the Arabs in northern Sudan (Sahlins 1961: 338-339). So formidable was this type of tribal organisation in the Sudan that a host of local ethnic groups also had to reorganise along similar lines to survive, witness the cases of many – now Arabic-speaking – Nubian tribes living along the Nile and in central Kordofān, such as the *Ġimi‘*, *Ġamū‘āb*, *Ġawām‘a*, *Ġa‘aliyyīn*, *Šāygiyya*, *Manāšīr*, etc. Another interesting example is the case of the Nuba slave soldiers captured by the Funḡ ruler Bādī Abū Daqn in the 17th century and settled in separate villages around the capital Sennār. Naming their villages after the mountain ranges from which the inhabitants had been carried off, these Nuba soldiers became an important contingent within the army of the Funḡ state. By the 18th century they became Arabic speakers and formed a distinct tribe called *Anwāb*, the plural form of the Arabic ethnic name Nūba. As an ‘Arab’ tribe they were able to continue as a corporate group and represent their group interests; many members of the *Anwāb* tribe came to be highly influential and rose to prominent positions in the Funḡ administration (Šibīka 1964:62-3, 76-7).

9. *Leaving the village community: migration and urbanisation*

Emigration from the village community is an obvious catalyst of assimilation to an Arab identity, combining as it does several prerequisites of such a process. When a Nuba person leaves his own mountain, he will be obliged to communicate in Arabic if he is to be understood, he will downplay or abandon altogether his non-Muslim customs to fit in, and so on. From this point of view, the motive of his departure from the village is largely irrelevant, as is the distinction

³⁴ *‘aṣabiyya* is one of the most problematic *termini technici* of Ibn Ḥaldūn, but this being a marginal issue for the present discussion, I will be content with rendering it as ‘tribal solidarity’ here. Sahlins’s term *segmentary sociability* (which he specifies further as the ‘love thy neighbour’ principle) is another close equivalent; see Sahlins 1961:331. The most general equivalent of *‘aṣabiyya* may be ‘group solidarity’, while *esprit de corps* appears a bit too generalised, since *‘aṣabiyya* tends to be associated with a sense of kinship or pseudo-kinship. On these terms, see Hamès 1987:113.

between voluntary and forced emigration. It has already been noted that Nuba farmers settled at the foothills of the main ranges tend to be overwhelmingly Muslim and to have an Arab identity. Likewise slavery, paid work, military or police service, employment as a domestic servant, schooling (whether at *halwa* or state schools), trading, visits to towns, and number of other factors will involve departure from the village community and thereby strengthen Arab cultural influence. Another very strong influence – if only affecting those already professing Islam – is the pilgrimage to Mecca³⁵. It can be stated as a nearly general rule that the more outside contacts a Nuba community has the more advanced the state of Arabisation among them³⁶. It is not only in the Nuba Mountains region that departure from the village has been observed enhancing the impact of Arab culture but in quite a few other regions as well in which a great number of small ethnic groups live side by side. A pertinent example is the Dango ethnic group of Dārfūr. Originating from the Ġabal Dango mountain near Nyālā in southern Dārfūr, this group had first moved to Baħr al-Ġazāl province and later, around 1930, back to their original homeland; during these migrations contact with other ethnicities resulted in their adoption of the Arabic language and near-total cultural Arabisation (Santandrea 1950:60-1). As for an urban environment, its assimilatory impact is so evident as to need no comment, suffice it to say that factors 1 to 3 and 7 in my list above work in combination, hence with especial force, in a town. It is unsurprising then that the mountains in the immediate vicinity of towns (Dilling, Delāmi, Talōdi, Rašād, Kādugli) within the Nuba Mountains region tend to be inhabited by heavily Arabised Nuba (Trimingham 1949:246).

10. The emergence of local nuclei of assimilation

The cultural impact of an already Arabised Nuba group can be likened to the waves set off by a stone thrown into water and is understandably strongest among neighbouring groups of pagan Nuba. The growth of ever more local ‘Arab’ centres further increases the intensity of the process. The most important such cultural centres within the Nuba Mountains have already been mentioned: Tegali, Sheybu and the mountains of the Dājo ethnic group, who arrived here

³⁵ The partly Arabic-speaking *Fellāta* or *Takārna* communities of many regions in the Sudan – including the Nuba Mountains – emerged as a result of mass pilgrimages from West Africa to Mecca. As noted above, many of the pilgrims chose to settle in the Sudan instead of returning to West Africa.

³⁶ For instance, frequent contacts were maintained between the Nuba of the Dilling mountain range and the related *Ġōdiyāt* ethnic group living south of al-Ubayyīd (El Obeid), Arabised at a very early time. Predictably, the Dilling Nuba are indeed one of the most Arabised Nuba communities. See Nadel 1947:360.

as Muslims from the west. In fact, the history of the whole Nuba Mountains area illustrates the effect of a stone thrown into water, given that Muslim immigrants into this region were not ‘genuine’ Arab tribes at all but previously Arabised indigenous Sudanese such as the *Ġaʿaliyyīn*, *Danāġla*, *Ġōdiyāt* and the *baggāra* tribes. The first nucleus of Arabisation in the Sudan was the Nubian areas along the Nile (e.g. around Aswān and Dongola). One of the most permanent population movements in Sudanese history is the continuous emigration to the south of the excess population of Nubia, since the limited extent of arable lands in Nubia can only sustain a limited population, the surplus periodically emigrating to the more fertile and humid savannah zone. Thus the cultural Arabisation of Kordofān largely reflects the influence of immigrants of Nubian ethnic background (e.g. the Maḥas and Danāġla) as well as of local populations converted to Islam and ‘become Arabs’ (e.g. the *Ġaʿaliyyīn*, *Rikābiyya*, *Bidayriyya*, *Dahmašiyya*, *Dawālīb*)³⁷.

After surveying all the above factors it can hardly be either doubtful or odd that such a potent combination of cultural and social influences should lead to a relatively rapid process of assimilation and identity change. Indeed, the question that begs to be asked is exactly the opposite one: considering the strength of the above factors, how could a number of regions (such as the Nuba Mountains) continue to have non-Arab – indeed in some cases non-Muslim – majorities up to the modern period? The answer can be summarised in one word – isolation. With the growth of modern communication and transport, this factor decreases in importance, but in premodern circumstances certain geographical features formed a very effective barrier to cultural and social contacts and gave refuge to culturally conservative populations. Throughout the savannah zone of Africa mountainous areas provided shelter to similar groups of miscellaneous non-Muslim populations composed of a variety of small ethnicities, each with their own language. Examples include the Ingessana, hill Burūn and Berta of the southern Dār Funġ, the Ḥaġerāi (dialectal Arabic: ‘rock-dwellers’) of central Chad, and the Kirdi population of the Mandara Mountains of northern Cameroon. (All of these populations have recently begun to be Islamised, indeed in many cases now have a Muslim majority.) In other cases mountains proved to be a cultural barrier to an Arab ethnic identity but not to Islam; the Fūr of the Ġabal Marra and Ġabal Sī of Dārfūr are a pertinent case. The significance of mountains as cultural refuges was already noted by Ibn Ḥaldūn in the mediaeval period:

³⁷ Cf. Holt 1961:7; Stevenson 1966:208, 210.

“[...] They [i.e. Arab nomads] are a people eager for plunder and destruction because of their inherent savagery. They will rob whatever they can snatch with little combat and peril and then they retreat to their desert pastures. They will not engage in battles and severe fighting unless they have to defend themselves. Thus they prefer to leave alone every impregnable and inaccessible place, avoiding assaulting it and preferring easier [terrain]. Tribes who would resist them in impassable mountains will be safe from their depredations and destruction, since [nomadic Arabs] will not follow them to the top of the plateaus, nor will they enter impassable mountain paths and thereby expose themselves to danger. The plains, however, are a free loot and a quick bite to swallow [for the nomadic Arabs]; they will continue raiding them, plundering and marching here and there, for this is an easy terrain for them. Finally the population will come to be under their dominion and will be ruined by [the nomads’] constant changes of leadership and their terrible policies until civilisation will disappear...” (Ibn Haldūn, *Muqaddima* II, 513-5).

One important subject remains to be discussed in some detail if we are to understand the process of Arabisation in Sudanese history – the social role of Arab genealogies. Genealogical forgeries are as widespread in the Sudan as in other regions of the Islamic world, providing an ideological basis for claims of Arab identity. Instead of the above factors and historical processes, most Sudanese will account for their Arab identity by recourse to the concepts and general discourse of (Arabic) genealogical science and its folk versions. As I indicated above, such explanations are the last phase of Arabisation that completes the process of cultural assimilation.

Just as the development of an Arab identity goes through several phases, so does the emergence of the ‘genealogical basis’ – that is to say genealogical explanations – proceed through several possible levels. All of these levels are observable in the Sudan. In general it is fair to say that the higher the level of literacy in a society and the more firmly rooted the techniques of writing, the more sophisticated, detailed and complex the genealogical traditions and pedigrees. Accordingly, the Nuba Mountains, where the scope of literacy in Arabic has until very recently been extremely restricted, shows only the very rudiments of the fabrication of Arab genealogies – as corresponds to a society at only the initial stage of Arabisation. By contrast, the huge Arabic-speaking farming populations of the Nile valley (such as the *Ġa’aliyyīn*, *Rubāṭāb*, *Mīrafāb*, etc.) have long manufactured the precise and intricate genealogies designed to ‘prove’ their supposed Arab origins. These genealogies may take the form both of regular pedigrees and of traditions telling the origins of a certain ethnicity, lineage or family; they may be either written or oral. In keeping with Arab so-

cial conventions, genealogies mostly mention ancestors only on the patriline, although very rarely prestigious mothers might also be remembered. As was customary in the mediaeval Arab scholarly milieu, Sudanese family genealogies too tend to go beyond the level of the family or the lineage and link the lineage group to larger, more general pedigrees representing the overall genealogies of the Sudanese population. And further beyond that, Sudanese genealogies are connected to the standard scholarly genealogical tradition that emerged in the mediaeval Middle East and has been handed down in the great mediaeval Arab genealogical manuals³⁸. The genealogies of the Sudanese ethnic groups can be divided into two main categories on the basis of the choice of old Arab tribe to which to link the Sudanese pedigree. Sudanese 'Arab' nomads almost invariably trace their descent to the west Arabian (and later Egyptian) *Ġuhayna* tribe. This claim does have some historical basis, as the *Ġuhayna* was indeed the most important, albeit not the only, element among the late mediaeval Arab Bedouin immigrants to the Sudan³⁹. Contrastingly, the majority of the Arabic-speaking sedentary population of the Sudan claim descent from the lineage of the Prophet's uncle al-^ʿAbbās, hence the frequent use of the ethnic label *ʿAbbāsiyya* in reference to this category of Sudanese 'Arabs'. Again, there might be a kernel of historical fact behind these traditions of origin in the case of a few groups, but as a generalised claim of descent among a vast and heterogeneous group of people it is of course utter fiction. The link between the family of al-^ʿAbbās and

³⁸ For a typical example, see Holt 1981:262-3 (the genealogy of a family of the *Ġāʿaliyyīn* tribe). The linking of the newly designed genealogies of the Sudanese ethnicities to the old Arab genealogical tradition was the handiwork of a hazy figure known in the Sudanese historical tradition as al-Imām as-Samarqandī. Characteristically, we know practically nothing about the person of as-Samarqandī, apart from the fact that he was an immigrant scholar active in the mid-16th century at the Funḡ royal court. See Hill 1967:331.

³⁹ A branch of the vast *Quḍāʿa* tribal bloc, the *Ġuhayna* had their original homeland in the region of Medina and Yanbuʿ in the northern part of the coastal Tihāma plains. Later they migrated to Upper Egypt (from Asyūt to Manfalūt and Aswān), whence many of them moved southwards into the Sudan. Although the most sizeable Arab tribe of Upper Egypt, and later on the Sudan, was the *Ġuhayna*, a number of smaller tribes joined them in their new lands, such as the *Ġudām*, *Banū Hilāl*, *Ballī* and *Banū Kilāb*. In addition, a few groups claiming to be related to the Prophet's descendants (*šuraḡāʿ*) also lived in the borderlands of Egypt and the Sudan, including the *Ġāʿāfra* (supposed descendants of Ġāʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib), *Awlād Qāsim* (descendants of Ismāʿīl b. Ġāʿfar aṣ-Ṣādiq) *Banū l-Ḥasan* (descendants of al-Ḥasan b. Alī b. Abī Ṭālib). And finally, several lineages of the Meccan Qurayš (the Prophet's tribe) are said to have been present in southern Egypt: *Banū Ṭalḥa*, *Banū z-Zubayr*, *Banū Šayba*, *Banū Maḥzūm*, *Banū Umayya*, *Banū Zuhra* and *Banū Sahn*. See al-Balāḍūrī, *Ansāb* I, 245-7; Ibn Haldūn, *Ibar* VI, 5; al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik* III (4), 115, 167-170. Two important tribes of Arabic-speaking Sudanese nomads did not claim descent from the *Ġuhayna*, namely the *Fazāra* of northern Kordofān and the *Rufāʿa* of the Gezira and Blue Nile. See Holt 1961:8-9.

his putative Sudanese descendants' local pedigrees (in Kordofān and along the Nile alike) is always the – probably entirely fictitious – ancestor called Ibrāhīm Ġaʿal (Holt 1961:6).

The manufacture of genealogies was a thriving activity in the Sudan, producing all sorts of pedigrees ranging from very crude and obvious fabrications to deceptively sophisticated family, lineage or ethnic pedigrees. On a popular level, one frequently encounters cases of local groups linking themselves to a celebrated Arab historical figure yet lending little attention to elaborating the genealogical details. Another common phenomenon is a Sudanese ethnic group placing an actual Arab immigrant who indeed married into their community into the centre of their ethnic genealogical tradition and naming him as their common ancestor. In other words, the point at which the genealogical tree branches off will typically be occupied by a famous Arab personage (Trimingham 1949:82). The genealogical tradition of the Sudan – indeed of most societies in general – is further characterised by selective historical memory, consisting of the omission of all less than illustrious ancestors from stories of origin and pedigrees and maximising prestige by the selective inclusion of certain types of ancestors – in the Sudanese context, this tends to mean Arab men. It has already been noted that matrilineal descent is considered largely irrelevant in the Sudan. However, memory of female forbears and the matriline in general may be preserved in cases when these ancestors are particularly prestigious, which is often tantamount to saying that they are Arabs. Should a mother have belonged to an autochthonous ethnic group – especially if she had been a concubine into the bargain – her name and origin will certainly be dropped from historical memory⁴⁰.

Quite a few Sudanese 'Arab' tribes are in fact conglomerates of heterogeneous origins, and despite the often elaborate tribal genealogies the actual origins are often betrayed by the very name of the tribe. Take for example the *Kabābīš* tribe of northern Kordofān, which – as their name indicates – came into being 150 to 200 years ago as an amalgam of numerous small groups of sheep (and camel) herders⁴¹. Heterogeneous origins are even more obvious in the case of a number of tribes living along the White Nile and eastern Kordofān (e.g. *Ġawām^ca*, *Ġimi^c*, *Ġamū^cāb*, *Ġamū^ciyya*, etc.) whose names are all derived

⁴⁰ Of course, this tendency is observable in other Arabic-speaking regions as well and is of long standing. See Conte 1987:120. On a more general plane, the perceived social distance of the same kinship relation on the matriline and the patriline respectively is never identical in any society. This despite the fact that from a biological point of view the distance between an uncle and his nephew is exactly the same whether it is a paternal or a maternal uncle. See Davis-Warner 1968:68.

⁴¹ *Kabš* means 'ram' in Arabic. On the emergence of the *Kabābīš* tribe, see Asad 1972:128-129.

from the Arabic root that denotes the concept of ‘gathering, assembling, coming together’ (ǧ-m-ʿ)⁴².

In the initial phase of the manufacture of tribal or lineage genealogies no real efforts are made to create an impression of authenticity; at this stage pedigrees are mere sketches and sometimes even glaring inconsistencies are tolerated⁴³. A good example is the genealogical tradition that is supposed to give evidence to claims of Arab descent by the rulers (*mbang*) of the Chadian Bagirmi state. While asserting that the ruling dynasty has its origins in the Yemen, the tradition also identifies al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī (one of the Prophet’s grandsons) as the first ancestor of the family and creates a genealogical link to the neighbouring (more ancient and prestigious) Borno state’s rulers by making the latter descend from al-Ḥusayn, the famous brother of al-Hasan. Needless to say, the whole tradition is a bundle of genealogical impossibilities⁴⁴.

The recently Arabised inhabitants of the Nuba Mountains are at a comparable stage of manufacturing genealogical proofs of their claims of Arab origins. Their genealogies being of a rudimentary kind at best, these people are content with simply stating that they are Arabs, and perhaps specifying the Arab *baggāra* tribe to which they claim to belong. The most remarkable exception is the genealogical tradition of the ruling dynasty (and of some of their subjects) in Tegali, since these people attach themselves genealogically to the great Sudanese genealogical tradition of descent from the ʿAbbāsids. Having grafted their own pedigrees onto this genealogical stump, they also have elaborate and detailed genealogical records of their internal branches as well as of their (fictitious)

⁴² Trimmingham 1949:16, 82. The emergence of tribal conglomerates and their assumption of a common tribal identity and name is by no means a Sudanese peculiarity; the same phenomenon can be observed in pre-Islamic Arabian society. Such composite tribes often chose an animal species for their tribal name (e.g. *Anmār*, ‘Leopards’ or *Kilāb*, ‘Dogs’). In time the heterogeneous origins of the tribe would be forgotten and an eponymous male ancestor would be invented. See Ashkenazi 1946-9:664.

⁴³ In this phase it may be felt sufficient simply to identify by name a famous Arab person or group as the supposed ancestor. Thus the Funḡ rulers traced their descent to the Umayyad dynasty; the monarchs of the Kānem state (around Lake Chad), first to the caliph ʿUṭmān b. ʿAffān, and later to the Yemenite hero Sayf b. Ḍī Yazan; the Islamised Nubian rulers of Dongola, to the Yemenite monarchs’ Ḥimyar tribe. See Hill 1967:347; al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik* III (4), 31; Yāqūt, *Buldān* IV, 820.

⁴⁴ Especially revealing is the name that creates a link to the remote Arab ancestors. This man is called ʿAbd at-Tukrūrū, which literally means ‘Slave of the Fulani’, while sounding like a Muslim Arabic name. The very name of Bagirmi state is popularly derived from an Arabic phrase (equally fancifully): in dialectal Arabic *bagar miya* means ‘a hundred heads of cattle’, the number the legend says were slaughtered to celebrate their ancestor’s birth. See Pâques 1967:186. Likewise, the genealogy of the Nubian Rubāṭāb tribe features an ancestor called Rubāṭ b. Ġulām Allāh; in most probability this name was transformed from the phrase *ṣāḥib ar-ribāṭ* (‘frontier fighter’). See Holt 1967:147.

links to other Sudanese Muslim ethnicities. As noted above, these genealogies start at the Prophet's uncle al-°Abbās and connect with the peoples of the Sudan through the person of a certain Ibrāhīm Ğa°al. Practically all Arabic-speaking sedentary inhabitants of Kordofān trace their descent to Ibrāhīm Ğa°al. In the genealogies of the individual ethnic groups one can observe a great number of obviously fictitious personal names, such as Sumra (lit. 'darkness, dark complexion'), supposed ancestor of many ethnic groups of central Kordofān, such as the *Bidayriyya*, *Ṭirayfiyya*, *Šuwayhāt* and others. The Nuba of Tegali trace their origin to the Rikābiyya subgroup of the °Abbāsiyya bloc of tribes, with the fictitious figure of Rikāb b. Ğulām Allāh serving as their common ancestor. The same subgroup is supposed to include such distant groups as the Arabic-speaking Dawālīb Nuba of northern Kordofān⁴⁵ and the Šukriyya nomads living east of the Blue Nile. On the other hand, the ruling dynasty of Tegali claimed descent from the °Abābsa, one of the leading lineages of the *Rubātāb* tribe (living along the Nile). According to their genealogical traditions, their immediate ancestor was a certain Muḥammad al-Ğa°alī, who arrived in the Nuba Mountains around the year 1530 and married a daughter of the local Nuba king. The offspring from this union has continued to reign over Tegali up to the twentieth century⁴⁶.

Having reviewed many of the factors contributing to the spread of Arab identity amongst the Sudanese population, the nature of that ethnic and cultural identity may be better grasped. At the beginning of this essay the observation was made that the simple statement that ethnic mixing in the Sudan over the last few centuries has produced a mostly Arab identity masks a very complex process of interrelated factors that cannot in fact be reduced to the concept of 'mixing'. Despite the immigration of (relatively small) groups of Arabs from the Middle East, the process was more like one of culture change subsequently rationalised through the discourse of kinship and genealogy (taking the form of family, lineage and ethnic pedigrees). Such explanations were sophisticated in proportion to the level of literacy in the community that produced them, the manufacture of intricate pedigrees being a typically 'scholarly' kind of activity. Accordingly, the most impressive genealogies one finds amongst the lineages and groups from which most of the Sudanese religious élite tended to be recruited, such as the

⁴⁵ The self-chosen ancestor of this group is a Muḥammad wad Dūlīb ar-Rikābī, who lived in Dongola and was a famous holy man there. According to Dawālīb traditions, one of his descendants, called °Abd al-Hādī wad Dūlīb, went to northern Kordofān and settled amongst the Nuba of the Ḥarāza mountain range. He founded one of the most famous Islamic religious schools of Kordofān in Hursī village. See aṭ-Tayyib 1991:241-242.

⁴⁶ Cf. Holt 1967:149; Stevenson 1966:209; aṭ-Tayyib 1991:163, 234.

Awlād Ġābir, Ġubš, Maḥas, Mağādīb, and so on. A closer scrutiny of Sudanese genealogies almost invariably reveals the unmistakable signs of learned manipulation for ideological ends, yet it would be an immense mistake to conclude that the Arab identity of the Sudan is a hollow fabrication. Identity is not a biological fact but a cultural self-image, and actual descent is just one aspect among many that determine it. As argued above, in Africa and elsewhere the knowledge – and indeed often the fiction – that an Arab immigrant married into the group at some point in the past is often sufficient for an Arab identity to emerge. What is more, a group may even have Arab identity without being Arabic-speaking. That being so, it is neither here nor there for social purposes whether the edifice of Arabic genealogies is largely fictitious, since the genealogical model is widely accepted and influences social life, with members of the groups concerned conceiving of their ethnic and kinship relations on the basis of such genealogies. There is a huge potential of intercultural misunderstanding owing to the very different meanings associated with the modern western concept of ‘descent’ and Sudanese (and in a wider sense Arab) *nasab* respectively. As has been argued throughout this essay, the ‘Arab origins’ of much of the Sudanese population is best understood not as a biological, genetic fact but as an assumed yet very strong identity rationalised through a genealogical discourse. In this sense, it might even be argued that the term *nasab* in the Sudanese context – indeed probably in other places too – could perhaps be more accurately rendered in western languages as ‘sense of origins, sense of belonging’ than by the usual terms ‘descent, genealogy’.

It goes without saying that the usual primitive dichotomy of an ‘Arab’ North versus an ‘African’ South often encountered in journalistic treatments of the ethnic makeup of the Sudan is a useless and baseless claim; but equally misleading would it be to neglect the very real Arab identity of Muslim Sudan. In a sense, the Sudan *is* an Arab country, but in a very different sense from most Middle Eastern Arab countries. ‘Arab’ means different things in the different countries of the Middle East and North Africa. What it means in the Sudan has been the main subject of this study, but it will be instructive to cite, by way of a summary, the apt words of a contemporary Sudanese scholar with regard to this issue:

“The Maḥas tribe is one of the ancient Nubian lineages (*usar*), a branch of the ancient Nubians. Later on, after the Arab conquest, several waves of Arabs arrived, and the custom of mixing and mixed marriages began. They are right if they say, “we are Nubians”, since they live in the land of the Nubians, speak that language, and share many of their customs. Yet if they say, “we are Arabs”, they are again right, for Islam has long been the common religion of all of them, the features of it [i.e. Islam] having been totally absorbed by them, and there is a bit of Arab blood as well in their veins...” (aṭ-Ṭayyib 1991:102).

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