

## The Question of Identity in the Sudan

Abdalla Ahmad Galaledeen Mohamed

*PhD student,  
Institute of Social Sciences, majoring in Sociology,  
Istanbul University - Turkey*

---

**Abstract:** This paper will conclude that the formation of the Sudanese nation began in the current geographical framework of the country since the beginning of the ancient state of Kush and the subsequent civilizations in the Middle Ages. In addition, that the current Sudanese overturn the African element in their ethnic composition, just as the processes of intermarriage and assimilation with the incoming Arabs produced generations of ideological Arabists. That the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula do not consider the Sudanese to be Arabs, and that the Sudanese have different cultures and customs than the Arabs. Thus, Sudan can be accepted as an Arabic-speaking country (Arabophone).

**Keywords:** Sudan - identity - Africanism – Arabism

---

### Background:

Since the time of the Pharaohs, Northern Sudan (the country of Nubia) was a center in which states were established and nationalities were formed. The state of Kush in the Nubia region of northern Sudan is the first state that was formed when local leaders and princes were able to establish an independent rule from the Egyptian state. Archaeological finds indicate that Kerma was a city with an area of about twenty-five hectares, and a thirty-foot-high wall surrounded it. In the center of the city, there is a temple, a palace, a large reception hall, and the homes of the upper class in society. This was the capital of the first Sudanese state (the state of Kush), which flourished around 2200 BC. M. It is the oldest known city in Africa outside of Egypt (Bonnet, 1997 :). Where the rich history of Kush begins in its second phase, in which Egyptian influences prevail, such as language, architecture, arts, and religion, despite the ambiguity surrounding the way in which this country was founded. The Kushites restored the ancient glory of Egyptian civilization when they ruled Egypt for seventy years full of achievements, foremost of which was the realization of the first political unity in the Nile Valley. In addition to their expansion in building temples and cities and reviving the Egyptian language after its deterioration during the period of decay at the end of the second millennium BC. M. Kush continued as an independent state in its third phase when the capital moved south to the ancient city of Meroe. And at the time when Meroe flourished and expanded in the Sudanese regions, Egypt had been subject to the rule of the Persians, then the Ptolemies, then the Romans (Ibid, 1997:).

The Meroitic civilization flourished (300 BC to 350 AD) and was known for its original features mixed with the cultural currents coming from the north. The first thing that its rulers achieved was the preservation of their state and the resistance of the Ptolemies and the Romans. It is difficult for us to enumerate the characteristics of that civilization, and it suffices to refer to its most important creations, such as the Meroitic writing, which was described as semi-alphabetic and has two lines, one hieroglyphic and the other abstract, both of which are of Egyptian origins. God (Abdullah, 1986).

The Meroites continued to follow the well-known Egyptian religions and added to them local deities, the most important of which was Abadmak (the lion god). To whom temples were erected in more than one place, and for them he was the god of creation and war. By the end of the fourth century AD, the state of Meroe disappeared from the scene of events. Moreover, the details of the extension of the state of Meroe in eastern and western Sudan are not known. Thus, the state of Meroe centrally ruled a large region of the area of present-day Sudan, and its material heritage was as diverse as its regions (Adams, 1977: 324-326).

Between the sixth century and the fifteenth century, several Christian kingdoms took over the country of Sudan, namely Nobatia and Makuria in the north, Alwa with its capital, Soba, south of Khartoum, and later Nobatia and Makuriawere united in one state with its capital in Dongola. The country enjoyed political stability for about six hundred years. During this period, the cohesion of local cultures with the new incoming religion yielded a distinctive cultural balance, the result of which was prominent in the decorative arts and the wonderful colorful paintings that adorn the churches and in the Bible written in the ancient Nubian language. We also find it in various crafts and artifacts that affect people's daily lives (Ibid. 1977; 246-381).

The Christian Mamluks (Nobatia and Makuria) fell in northern Sudan in 1323 AD. Then the second state (Alwa) at the end of the fifteenth century, and this was the result of successive Arab migrations to Sudan from Egypt. Then other regiments came from North Africa. The Muslim Arabs initially faced fierce resistance from the Christian state in Dongola, which waged a defensive war against them. The Muslims concluded a peace

agreement with it in 651 AD. Known as the Al-Baqt agreement. The rights of both parties to movement, the payment of tribute, and the cessation of mutual aggression shall be preserved. The inhabitants of northern and central Sudan gradually embraced the Islamic religion, with the passage of time they adopted Arabic as a language that brought together the different groups of society, and intermarriage processes began to cast a shadow on the ethnic composition of the Sudanese (Hassan, 1967).

The Christian Mamluks were overthrown by Muslim Arab invaders in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These invaders established the Funj Sultanate of Pesnar in central Sudan (1504-1821). They also established the Fur Sultanate in western Sudan (1650-1874). There are also other Islamic Mamluks, such as Al-Abidlab in northern Khartoum and Al-Msaba'at in the Kordofan region. With regard to the unity of the Sudanese regions, none of the aforementioned Islamic kingdoms was able to extend its influence over all or most of the Sudanese regions (Ibid. 1967; 230).

It can be said that the relationship of the Ottomans with Sudan began clearly in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, when the Ottoman army led by Sultan Selim I was able to enter Cairo in 1517, ending the rule of the Mamluk state. That is, the Ottoman Empire controlled a large part of North Africa, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. Perhaps her interest in the integrity of the state of Egypt, on the one hand, and the policy of controlling the Arabian Peninsula and the shores of the Red Sea, on the other hand, and trade with India, were among the most important reasons that led to the conquest of Sudan (Alexander, 2000: s, 15). Among the other reasons that prompted Muhammad Ali Pasha to conquer Sudan was the quest to discover the gold, diamond, iron and copper mines that people have reported to be in Sudan, especially in the Sennar and Kordofan regions. In addition to eliminating the rest of the Mamluks who were refugees in Sudan. And the discovery of the sources of the Nile, the expansion of trade, and the import of slaves (Shukair, 1981, 192-194).

One of the results of this rule, which lasted sixty years, was the unification of all the current regions of Sudan and subjecting them to central rule. The new government laid modern foundations for local administrations and introduced new systems in managing the economy and society and linking the regions of Sudan with each other and with the outside world. He made Muhammad Ali Pasha over Sudan a ruler called "Hakmdar al-Sudan" who gathers military and civil authority in his hand and returns in his administration to the Interior Ministry in Egypt. When Muhammad Ali Pasha conquered Sudan, they did not choose one of its existing cities, such as Berber, Sennar, or Omdurman, as its capital. Rather, they established a new capital, which is Khartoum, and its place before the Turkish conquest was only a small locality for fishermen. In the year 1822, a fixed camp was established for the soldiers there, and in the year, 1839 Khurshid Pasha made it his headquarters, due to the importance of its location. It was named "Khartoum" because it is the confluence of the two Niles in a shape similar to the head of an elephant's trunk (Ibid. 1981 ;).

Muhammad Ali Pasha was able to establish the modern state of Sudan, which lasted until 1885. However, in 1881 an important political development in the history of Sudan was witnessed, which was represented in the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution against the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha and his British allies (Cengiz, 1996). The Mahdist revolution is the first liberation revolution in the African continent based on a religious philosophy that seeks to unify the word of Muslims and remove foreign rule. It was successful in 1885. Among the reasons that led to the outbreak of the revolution were the exorbitant taxes and the new administration represented by the central rule that the Sudanese tribes were not familiar with. In addition to the tight autocratic rule, the wards of the main military garrisons that supervised the heads of the Bedouin tribes (clans) who were entrusted with the responsibility of their tribes. These and other reasons were among the most important factors that made the tribes of Sudan rally around the Mahdi and his revolution (Kadal, 2002: 36).

Al-Mahdi took advantage of the state of discontent among the tribal leaders that they had lost their political authority to Turkish-Egyptian rule. Where his main concern was how to stop tribal conflicts, and direct all the energies of the tribesmen to serve his call (Mahdawiya), benefiting from his relations with the tribal leaders. Imam al-Mahdi succeeded in dissolving tribal fanaticism and bringing together the diaspora of the different tribes and social groups in Sudan under his banner (Ibid, 2002 :). Therefore, the period of the Mahdist revolution, which extended from 1881 to 1898, represented the stage of abolition of tribal differentiation, the integration of the majority of Sudanese tribes to a large extent into one crucible, and the establishment of a Mahdist state (Holt, 1982: 7).

Al-Mahdi was able to defeat Hicks Pasha in the Battle of Shikan in October 1883. The Battle of Shikan gave a strong impetus to the Mahdist revolution from the political, military and moral points of view. After this battle, the revolution began to spread throughout Sudan, such as Darfur, Bahr al-Ghazal in southern Sudan, and eastern Sudan, from Suakin to Qalabat. In addition, the strength of the revolution is growing day by day, in contrast to the emergence of signs of the collapse of the dual rule (Turkish-Egyptian). Britain has followed a new policy of evacuating Sudan from the Egyptian and Turkish garrisons, and General Charles Gordon was chosen to implement this policy. After Gordon came to Sudan, he issued a three-point proclamation to the Sudanese: appointing the Mahdi as ruler of Kordofan, halving taxes and allowing the slave trade. But these

measures did not save the situation, and on January 26, 1885, the Mahdi forces managed to seize Khartoum and kill Gordon (Shabika, 1991:).

After the murder of Gordon, the British governor of the Sudan, in 1885, the shock reverberated throughout England, Europe, Turkey and other centers of power in the world. Moreover, in the nineteenth century *The Times* of London noted on February 6, 1885, "Among the new generation the shock caused by the news of the fall of Khartoum is unparalleled." The British government publication, *The Daily News*, agrees: "Seldom in man's living memory has news brought such a catastrophe to England" (Churchill, 2006: 40).

In March 1898, the British government issued orders to Commander Kitchener to march towards Sudan. Public opinion in Britain had fully prepared for this campaign. Turkish-Egyptian interests in Upper Nile (Sudan) were of little consideration to the British government, and the conflict over the waters of the Nile only became an important element in the last stages of the reoccupation. The military offensive that overthrew the Mahdist state began in March 1896 and ended in November 1899. (Warburg, 1971: 28) In the year 1899, Britain occupied Sudan, after its victory over the Mahdist forces in Omdurman. This was the result of the situation imposed by engineering planning to divide Africa between England and France and their competition over Egypt and the Upper Nile (Sudan). The British did not prepare for any real purpose behind their occupation of the Sudan, other than to ensure that the French were removed from the Nile. The money and army that Britain used to occupy Sudan were Egyptian money and armies. After that, the British flag was raised alongside the Egyptian flag to indicate that it was under the control of Britain and Egypt (Bakhiet, 1987:18-20).

Britain and Egypt signed a Condominium Agreement in January 1899, which gave Sudan an international personality separate from Egypt. The agreement placed civil and military power in the hands of a British governor-general appointed by decree of the Khedive. Because the British were in control of Egypt, the Khedive was bound to accept the advice of the British on all political matters. British colonialism continued to rule Sudan until 1955, the year in which Sudan gained its independence from within the parliament until independence was officially achieved on January 1, 1956, and thus the modern Sudanese state was formed (Ibid. 1987; 25).

After independence, ideological conflicts arose over the nature of the Sudanese identity. There are those who believe that the identity of the Sudanese state is "Afrikaans" with an African civilization, and there are those who see that the identity of the Sudanese state is "Arab" with an Islamic civilization. Nevertheless, the question here: What is the identity of the Sudanese state?

### **Afro-Arab identity:**

Identity has always been a central issue in the Sudanese political/social framework. Discussions about the identity of the Sudanese nation began on a large scale since the early years of independence. That is, after the colonizer left Sudan. Among the most famous of these debates in the country's political and social history are the dialogues of the Arabism and Ifriqiya group. Later, the school of realists, known as the "jungle and desert"<sup>1</sup> school, stated that Sudan is an African-Arab country. However, after the independence of Sudan, the state apparatus was dominated by ideological politicians who were defenders of pan-Arabism (Sudan is an Arab country), such as Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahjoub<sup>2</sup> and Ismail al-Azhari<sup>3</sup>. This led to a distorted and exclusionary state. Thus, the political crisis of the Sudanese nation is caused by those who led the country after its independence. When independence was declared in early 1956, the then foreign minister described Sudan's role in the global political arena in the following words: "Sudan represents, basically, part of the Arab world, and this is the reason why we hastened to join the League of Arab States immediately after declaring independence. Moreover, our relationship with Brotherly Arab countries do not mean ignoring our relations with African countries. Our gaze will constantly extend towards the south, towards Africa, strengthening our relations with the various African peoples and assisting them in their march towards freedom and a dignified life" (Deng, 1995: 20).

This compromise position has been widely welcomed internationally. The United States of America expressed its appreciation for Sudan's declared position, as it affirmed: "Sudan, as a new African country, will be deeply linked to the future of Africa, but as a Middle Eastern country, it will also represent a bridge to Africa,

---

<sup>1</sup>The School of the Forest and the Desert is a poetic cultural movement founded in the early sixties of the last century, and is considered one of the most prominent currents of cultural and literary modernity in Sudan in the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup>Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahjoub is considered one of the most important leaders in the Umma Party and fought for the independence of Sudan under the slogan Sudan for the Sudanese. He assumed the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1957, and assumed the position of Prime Minister in 1967.

<sup>3</sup>Ismail Al-Azhari is a Sudanese national and political figure. He was the first Prime Minister of Sudan between 1954 and 1956.

conveying to it ideas, philosophies and forces that may have a significant impact on the fate and future of Africa." ". Although this dualism has always been viewed as a latent feature with great potential, in practice it was fraught with conflicts and problems. In order for the Sudanese to recognize his potential, he must develop a comprehensive identity enriched by the diversity and multiplicity of its composition, rather than threatening it with disintegration and division (Ibid. 1995: 14).

Today, no one disagrees on the centrality of cultural and ethnic diversity in Sudan, nor on the need to search for radical solutions to problems that have been unresolved for many years. The literature of political parties and civil society organizations all agree on the essence of this matter, but they differ in the solutions and paths leading to it. The debate that has been going on for years has become frank and bold, as it deals with the details of the foundations upon which modern Sudanese society was based and touches on its regional relations at the same time. On the one hand, Sudan's Arab relations, some have noticed that the dialogue of hobbies has historically existed between groups of society, in which the brothers among the Arab thinkers did not participate in it in a way that amounts to the level of Sudan's affiliation with the system of Arab states. Sudan was left alone, and if there was participation, it is one of the starting points of Arab national security and preserving Sudan as "the Arabs' gateway to Africa" and "the crossing point of Arab culture..." etc. These are slogans that many describe as missionary and harmful to the fate of internal relations between the various ethnicities of Sudan, not to mention that they express old concepts that are not appropriate even out of concern for the spread of Arab-Islamic culture. Achieving the last goal in our current time does not require crossings or geographical gates through which the cultural impact is transmitted. They go on to say that, the lack of positive Arab participation is due to the marginalization that Sudan has experienced in its Arab relationship for a long time. This marginality is rooted in the lack of knowledge about the specific social composition of Sudan, and the Sudanese historical and cultural data are not sufficiently known to the Arabs.

Perhaps this case expresses itself in the works written by the Sudanese on various topics, and seemed to be pleadings to prove the Arabism and culture of Sudan. Muhammad Omar Bashir discussed the issue of the specificity of cultural and ethnic diversity in Sudan in the context of his talk about the Arab and African dimensions in Sudan's relations. He mentioned that Sudan did not participate sometimes in some Arab organizations because of its peripheral situation or because the question of Arabism was not resolved in it (Bashir, 1991: 84-110).

Sudan has tremendous racial/ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. This diversity, which constitutes the composition of the country, is often described within two main frameworks: North Sudan and South Sudan. The north represents two-thirds of the land and population and is inhabited by indigenous African tribal groups. These groups intermarried with the Arab merchants who flocked to Sudan over the centuries, but these ties intensified with the introduction of Islam in the seventh century AD. This intermarriage resulted in dynasties (Arab-African) in race and culture. The ethnic characteristics resulting from that mixing are very similar to the characteristics of the African groups extending across the continent south of the Sahara, from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia in the east, to Chad, Niger and Mali in the middle, and Mauritania and Senegal in the west. Citizens of these countries acknowledge their belonging to Africa, except for Mauritania and the Sudanese (Deng, 1995 :).

Many researchers refer to Sudan as a microcosm of the African continent (Arab Africa / African Africa - Muslim Africa / Christian Africa) and a crossroads between the African continent and the Middle East. Sudan reflects Africa in a way, and this is what distinguishes it among other African countries. In the sense that he is Arab and African at the same time. This puts Sudan internally in a very confusing and critical situation, as the dominant elites of Arab origin want Sudan to be Arab. As for the African elites, they want Sudan to be African (Harir&Tavidt, 1997: 11). Francis Mading Deng says that the intertwining of challenges represented in the racial, ethnic, religious and cultural makeup of Sudan can perhaps best be depicted in my personal experience, soon after my arrival as Sudan's ambassador to Washington in 1974. A senior State Department official asked me how I would classify Sudan. For administrative purposes. If given a choice, is Sudan classified as a Middle Eastern or African country? Within the framework of the African continent. Is it considered part of the Arab Muslim north or within black Africa south of the Sahara? My answer was: "I propose not to classify Sudan in the group that seems more obvious, but to classify it in the other group. Because in this way we can enlarge our identity and benefit from the African and Arab groups" (Deng, 1995: 9).

Sudanese around the world face similar questions about their national identity within the African and Arab frameworks. Despite this situation, it is considered a source of enrichment and glory, but visions from within the country (Sudan) do not agree at all about the reality of what Sudan is. These external visions are superficial perceptions that are far from the reality of the huge and complex internal composition of differences, contradictions and violent confrontations. The area and location of Sudan alone reflect the enormous dimensions of its composition and the crisis of identities it embraces. Sudan is geographically the largest country in Africa

(before the secession of South Sudan). Sudan derives its name from the word Bilad al-Sudan, which means the country of the blacks or the land of the blacks.

The Sudanese identity is based on the principle of mixing and fusion between the Arab tribes and the local population, who were absorbed by the Arab-Islamic culture. The first thing to notice about them is that they rarely discuss the processes of cultural change and do not offer an objective explanation for the diversity in the levels of Arabization or Islamization of local ethnic groups. Many writers mention the processes of mixing the Arab element with the African according to a mechanical method that eventually leads to a new biological element called "Sudanese" and after that another equation occurs, which is not entirely clear, linking the biological and the cultural. The new culture is the natural equivalent of the hybrid race (African-Arab). "Through this cross-pollination, a new creature came into being, the Sudanese, who does not constitute pure Arab blood or pure Negro blood, but certainly combines in his tissues the two types of blood and carries in his brain the product of the strongest culture..." (Al Makki Ibrahim, 1989: 12). In addition, about the same process of mixing between the incoming Arabs and the local population, Abdul Ghaffar Muhammad Ahmed says: "All of this resulted in a distinctive element in his personality, culture, and belonging. Arabs, as the Franks say (Mohamed Ahmed, 1987: 31). John Garang says that the identity of Sudan is a mixture of Africans and Arabs, and goes on to say, "Arabism cannot unite us, anti-Arabism cannot unite us, political Islam cannot unite us, Christianity cannot unite us, but Sudanism can unite us." In other words, let us be Sudanese. What is wrong with that (de Mabior, 2005: 73-76). Thus, ethnicities are African and culture is Arab because the definition of the latter here is limited to language and religion and does not pay attention to its other (material) elements that may bear part of the local African culture.

### **Conclusion:**

There are those who see the existence of purely Arab groups in the north and the center, and other purely African groups, such as what is the case in the south of the country (the state of South Sudan), which was not affected by Arab culture, did not mix with it, and remained outside the circle of influence and cultural influence. The south of the country, in general, continued to be ethnically and culturally distinct, as many see (Deng, 2000 :). While this view is true in its generality, there is also evidence of a long-standing cultural overlap between the ethnic groups in Sudan. Talking about races and races and linking them to culture is a very complex matter that cannot be dealt with in this simple way. In the case of Sudan, there are not yet sufficient studies in natural anthropology that allow delving into the connection of a particular race with a particular culture. The information published on this issue in northern Sudan does not indicate a sudden or major shift in the biological characteristics of the population structure since the Kushite era (the state of Kush) until after the fall of the Christian kingdoms.

The elites that ruled the Sudanese state after independence imposed the Arab identity, which greatly affected Sudan's unity and stability. So what is the addition that Arabism has added to Sudan? Arabism itself has not been renewed in Sudan; rather it has not added anything to the existing African civilizations in Sudan. Arabism in Sudan is only a margin of the center of Arabism in the Arabian Peninsula. That is, as the Arabs see, Sudan is the Arab gateway to Africa. That the duality of identity - Afro-Arab - is a source of social and cultural richness and not a source of conflict and disintegration if it is managed effectively.

### **References:**

- [1]. Abdullah, Abdul Qadir Mahmoud, (1986) *the Meroitic Language*, King Saud University Press.
- [2]. Adams, William Y. (1967), "Continuity and change in Nubian Cultural History" *Sudan Notes and Records*, vol. 48.
- [3]. Alexander, (2000) "The Archaeology & History of the Ottoman Frontier in the Middle Nile Valley 911-1233 AH/1504-1820 AD", Adumatu. Vol.1.
- [4]. Al-Makki Ibrahim, Muhammad (1989), *Sudanese thought, its origins, and its development*, Khartoum.
- [5]. Bakheit, Gaafar M. A. (1965) *British Administration and Sudanese Nationalism, 1919 – 1939*, University of Cambridge.
- [6]. Bashir, Mohamed Omar (1991), *Sudan between the regional groupings and the grouping of the Nile Basin countries*. In: *Sudan's foreign relations (the Arab and African dimension)*. Edited by Hamid Osman Ahmed and Madani Mohamed Ahmed, University of Khartoum Publishing House.
- [7]. Bonnet, Charles (1997) *the Vine of the Kingdom of Nubia: An African Heritage from the Pharaohs' Era*. Translated by: Ahmed Mohamed Ali Al-Hakim, House for Printing and Publishing, Khartoum.
- [8]. Cengiz Orhonlu, (1996), *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti Habiş Eyaleti*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara.
- [9]. Churchill, Sir Winston, (2006) *History of the Mahdist Revolution: The British Occupation of Sudan*, translated by Ezz El-Din Mahmoud, Dar Al-Shorouk, Cairo.

- [10]. De Mabior, John Garang (2005), *The New Sudan Vision: Rebuilding the State*, edited by Al-Wathiq Muhammad Haj Al-Khidr, Sudan: National Library.
- [11]. Deng, Francis Mading, (1995), *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*, Brookings Institution Press.
- [12]. Harir, Sharif & Tavid, Tarji (1997) *Sudan Collapse or Renaissance*, Translated by Mubarak Ali Othman, Cairo: Center for Sudanese Studies:
- [13]. Hassan, Yusuf. F, (1967), *the Arabs and the Sudan*: Edinburgh.
- [14]. Holt, B. M. *The Mahdist State in Sudan*, Dar Al-Jil, Beirut.
- [15]. Kadal, Muhammad Saeed (2002), *Modern History of Sudan 1820-1955*, second edition, Abdul Karim Mirghani Center, Khartoum.
- [16]. Mohamed Ahmed, A. G. (1987), *Sudan and Unity in Diversity*, The Arab Library, Berlin.
- [17]. Shabika, Makki (1947) *Sudan in the Century 1819-1919*, Cairo: Authorship, Translation and Publishing Committee Press.
- [18]. Shukair, Noam (1981), *History of Sudan*, Beirut: Dar Al-Jil, the new edition.
- [19]. Warburg, Gabriel, (1971), *the Sudan under Wingate: Administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1899 - 1916*. Haifa University, Israel.